

ST. PETER'S CHURCH, PETERSHAM



The earliest record of Piterichesham (later Petersham) is in AD 666 when certain lands were endowed to the Benedictine Abbey of St. Peter at Chertsey which they held until 1415, thereafter it reverted to the Crown and the Manor of Petersham was created in 1550. These lands included Kingston Parish Church which held several dependent chapelries namely East Molesey, Piterichesham, Sheen, and Thames Ditton. It is known that a cell of Benedictine monks was based in Petersham where they farmed the land and river to support the food supply to St. Peter's Abbey.

The 1086 Domesday Book entry for Petersham suggests by its phraseology that there was a church which had been restored, and records the harvests of the monks. The stone work of the chancel at St. Peter's Church dates from at least the 1100's. In 2018 the chancel walls were uncovered during conservation work to the Cole monument when traces of Norman wall painting were found. A Norman window can still be seen in the exterior north wall of the chancel, bricked up when the Cole monument was built inside the chancel in the early 1600's.

Further repairs were done to the chancel in 1266, and in 1505 the church was enlarged when the nave was extended westwards, north and south transepts were added, and the tower built with a wooden steeple above. Tudor brick work is visible in the exterior walls of both transepts, the chancel, and within the tower belfry.

In 1700 – 1714 the north wall of the north transept was rebuilt and the church interior was refurbished in the Georgian style. The Tudor lancet shaped windows were

fashioned into domed arches, the north gallery, the Musician's gallery and the present box pews were all installed at this time. The box pews were rented by the owners of the larger houses in Petersham, the income went towards the upkeep of the church. However this practise stopped with the end of the 2nd World War and today the pews are available to anyone. The present font dates from 1740 and has an earlier wooden Jacobean cover. The priest's desk, reading desk, and pulpit were installed in 1796. The embroidered panels on the pulpit and priest's desk date from that time and were conserved in 2011. We do not know the date when the vestry was built but it existed prior to 1715 when the Churchwardens Accounts record that the floor was raised, a fireplace and chimney were added later.

The Royal Arms on the chancel arch are those of George III dated 1810. The adjacent shields are the Attribution to St. Peter (the crossed keys), the Arms of the Diocese of Canterbury (the blue priest's pall), and the Diocese of Rochester (the gold scallop shell). The Hatchment in the north gallery is that of Mr Gordon Forbes Esq., son of General Gordon Forbes.

In 1840 the south transept was extended and the Agricultural Benches were installed in the centre to provide seating for farm workers who until then had been expected to stand. A barrel organ had been installed in the Musician's Gallery above the west door by 1838; this was replaced by pipe organs in 1840 and 1914. The present St. Martin organ was installed in 2009 and consists of three keyboards, 16 stops, 1052 pipes, and a 30 note pedal board.

In 1874 the chancel was refurbished by John Gilbert Scott (son of Sir George Gilbert Scott) and a Rood Screen was built in 1899. Nothing remains of this refurbishment.

Restoration work was carried out between 1941 – 1951 due to the church having sustained damage to the roof and windows in the 2nd World War. During this time services continued as normal with scaffolding supporting the roof, music was provided by piano because the organ pipes were blocked by debris, the choir had been disbanded. Vancouver City, British Columbia donated a substantial amount towards the restoration costs, and maintains a close relationship with St. Peter's Church today.

In 1972 the chancel again underwent refurbishment when two box pews were removed to create more space around the altar. These pews were the property of the Earl of Dysart, Ham House (on the right of the nave) and the owners of Montrose House (on the left side). A brass plaque on the wall marks the position of the Ham House pew.

The last extension to St. Peter's Church was in 2019 when the Parish Room was built and was dedicated by the Bishop of Kingston.

The Churchyard:

The churchyard has been in use since 666, in modern times it has been enlarged three times. No graves prior to that of Mary Karze in 1686 can be identified today, but the Burial Registers date from circa 1538 when Thomas Cromwell under Henry VIII introduced Parish Registers for Baptisms, Burials, and Marriages.

The burials at St. Peter's Church reflect the social history of Petersham and are too many to list in this document. Special mention however must be made of –

Elizabeth Duchess of Lauderdale d. 1698 (interred in the Ham House vault under the altar).

Captain George Vancouver (1758 – 1798), the famous explorer and cartographer of North America (buried in the churchyard).

Rear Admiral of the Blue Henry Lidgbird Ball (1756 -1818), Captain of HMS Supply in the First Fleet to Australia who discovered Lord Howe Island and Ball's Pyramid in the Pacific Ocean (buried in the churchyard).

The church is open to visitors on Sunday Afternoons from April – September when the churchyard records can be consulted by interested visitors.

Bibliography:

1. Guide to St. Peter's Church, Jean Allsopp, Church Historian
2. Heritage Collection Report 2015, Kaypso Kampani, St. Peter's Church archives
3. History of St. Peter's Church, Charles Warren, revised edition 1978
4. May Berkouwer Textile Conservation Report, St. Peter's Church archives, 2011
5. Petersham Papers, edited by Vicars of Petersham, 1949 – 1968, St. Peter's Church archives
6. Petersham People and Stories, Rev. R. S. Mills, 1949, St. Peter's Church archives
7. St. Peter's Church Burial Registers, Surrey Records Office, Woking

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