

FROM THE ARCHIVES OF STOKE DAMEREL PARISH CHURCH

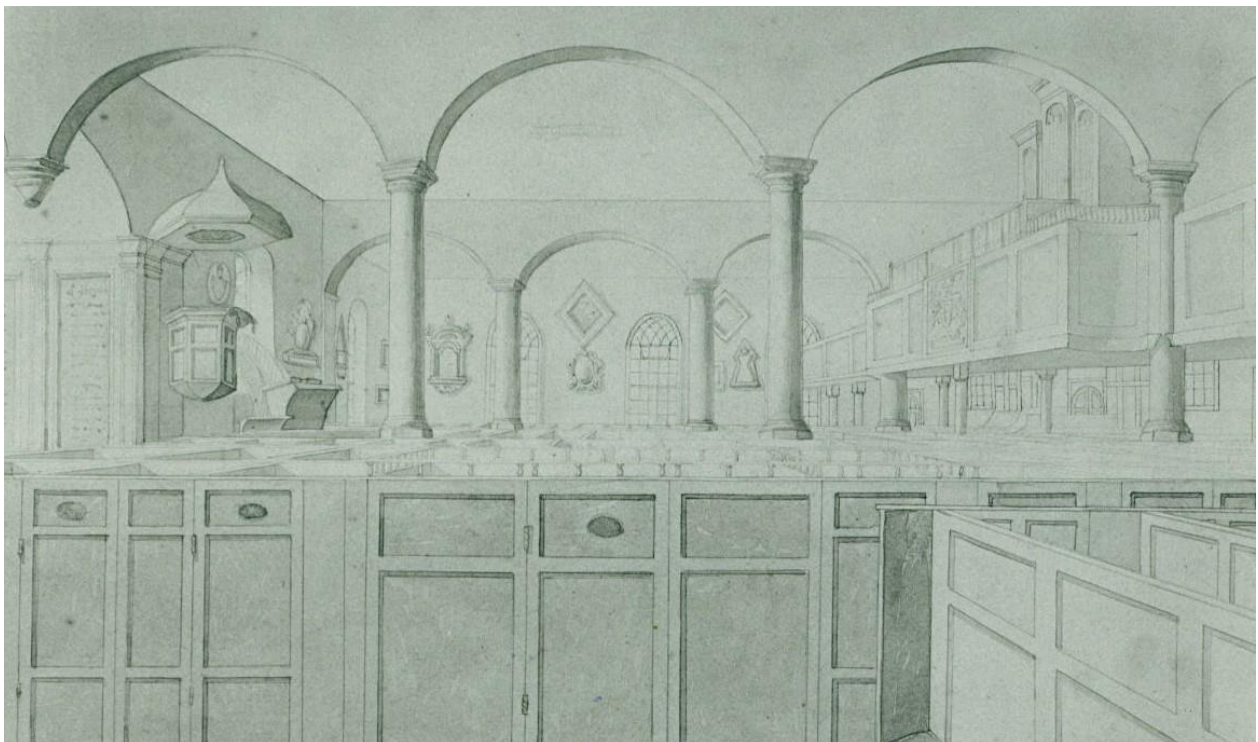
THE REVEREND EDWARD BLACKETT

The Reverend Doctor Edward Bridges Blackett was Rector of Stoke Damerel parish church from 25th. May 1753 until his death in 1791.

During extensive works carried out to the church floor in recent years, a ledger stone was discovered, which we presume marks the location of his grave within the building. The stone, which is ‘mirror’ polished black slate, was found close to the Organ Loft, in the north-east corner of the floor. Perhaps because it had been buried and untouched for 225 years, when inspected, the stone was found still to be in pristine condition – just a little dusty. Apart from the unworn condition of this gleaming stone, its position is extremely puzzling, as it is below current and, to our knowledge, any previous floor level.

Further research may discover more about The Reverend Doctor but, from recorded events in the church’s history, we know that, during the 38 years that he served the Parish, there were a number of occurrences which make fascinating reading to us, all these years later.

Reverend Blackett became Rector only a few years after the church building had been extended for a second time in thirty-five years – a southwards extension of 36 feet and 6 inches, along the whole length of the building, increasing to its current width. Since that extension, the width of the church has been greater than its length. An 80’-0” gallery was also constructed across the west end of the church. The gallery no longer exists, having been removed some years ago.

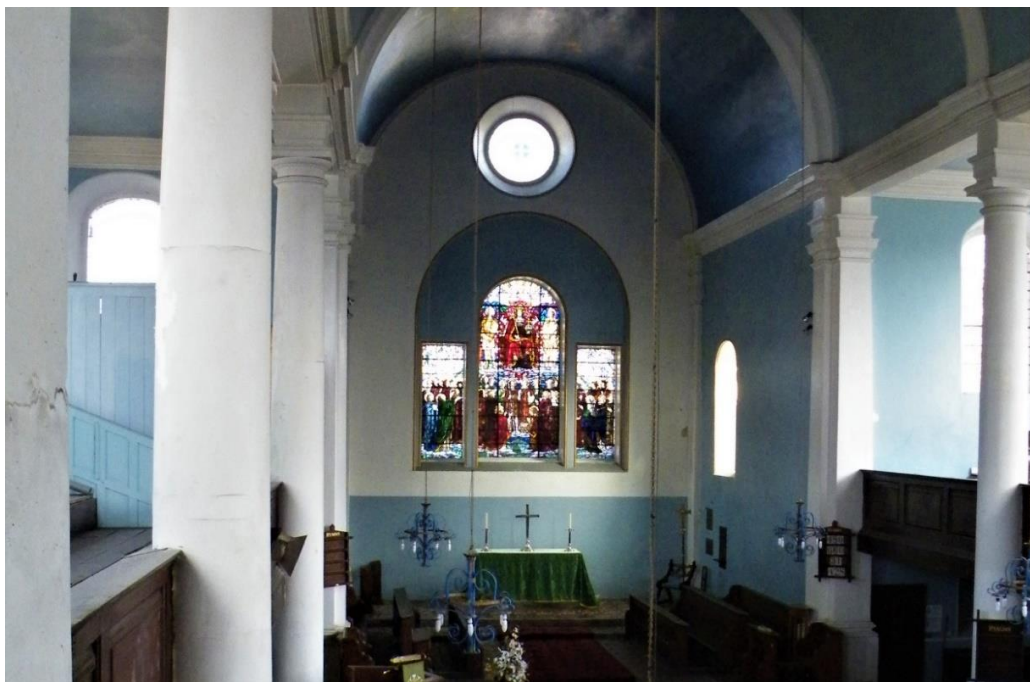


THE EXTENDED CHURCH, WITH REAR GALLERY

(DETAIL TAKEN FROM AN ORIGINAL WATERCOLOUR IN STOKE DAMEREL PARISH CHURCH ARCHIVES)

In the 18th. Century, the acreage of the parish was probably at its greatest, covering an area of land stretching from St. Budeaux in the north, along the River Tamar in the west, across to Pennycross in the east, and down to Stonehouse in the south. Stoke Damerel Parish Church, alone, served the fast-expanding town of Dock (later to be re-named Devonport). Over the years, as other parishes were formed from within its boundary, Stoke church became known as the *“Mother Church of Devonport”*. Back in the 1700’s, Dock was larger and probably more important than the adjacent town of Plymouth, having first been developed as a naval base, in preference to Dartmouth, during the reign of King William and Queen Mary. On the other hand, Plymouth was mainly a location for the local fishing fleet. Congregations for Sunday services at Stoke Damerel parish church were exceptionally large, thus necessitating the increase in building size.

Eighteen years into Reverend Blackett’s incumbency, in 1771, even more space was needed for the ever-increasing numbers attending church services. However, rather than carrying out further enlargement to the church building, a new “Chapel of Ease” was built nearby. St. Aubyn’s church, the only typical Georgian church in the Plymouth area, was the first of many new parishes to be ‘carved-out’ of the extensive parish of Stoke church. Two interesting facts can be reported about the church of St. Aubyn. It was named after the St. Aubyn family, who donated the land, and not after a saint of that name. Secondly, the boundary between the parishes of Stoke Damerel and St. Aubyn runs along the wall line at the east end of the latter church building. At a later date, an extension was constructed to the worship space on the east side of St. Aubyn’s church. The parish boundary was never altered so, even now, the altar and chancel of St. Aubyn’s church are still located within the adjacent parish of Stoke Damerel.



EAST END OF ST. AUBYN'S CHURCH PRIOR TO RECENT RE-ORDERING
(ORIGINAL PHOTOGRAPH BY TONY BARNARD)

Many local people will know that a notorious murder took place in the churchyard during Reverend Blackett's time as Rector. On 21st. July 1787, Philip Smith, 2nd. Clerk of The Dockyard Survey Office was set upon and killed. Two men, John Richards, and William Smith, were apprehended, tried, convicted, and hanged for the crime.

The execution of the two men took place, in Exeter, on the Tuesday of the following Easter week, and their bodies were returned to Stoke. A reported crowd of two thousand assembled opposite Stoke Church, to witness them being placed in iron cages on a transvers gibbet – as depicted in the well-known etching which normally hangs in the church link-corridor.



CONTEMPORARY DEPICTION OF THE GIBBET NEAR TO STOKE CHURCH
(ORIGINAL ETCHING IN STOKE DAMEREL PARISH CHURCH ARCHIVES)

It was more than seven years before the last of their remains disappeared. Reverend Blackett would have walked past the grizzly scene every time he journeyed between his home at The Rectory and the church building – quite a few times each week! The last pieces of the gibbet were reported to have been blown down in 1827, having been there for nearly 40 years. It may seem appalling to us now, but commemorative snuff boxes were made from the wood by a local carpenter. Even worse, Christmas Cards, depicting the event, were later sold to the public, one of which we now have in the church archives.

It was during Reverend Blackett's tenure at Stoke church that Tobias Furneaux sailed around the world with Captain Cook. There are a number of locations in South Australia and Tasmania which they named, and which are familiar to us in Devon and Cornwall. These are easily spotted on a map of the area. Tobias went on later to become the first person ever to sail around the world in both directions.

He died at his home in 1781, at the age of forty-six, reputedly from Gout. His grave and memorial stone are located outside Stoke Damerel parish church, opposite the North Porch.



GRAVE AND MEMORIAL TO TOBIAS FURNEAUX, IN STOKE CHURCHYARD
(ORIGINAL PHOTOGRAPH BY TONY BARNARD)

The Furneaux family resided at Swilly House, now demolished. However, a number of memorials to other members of the family still exist and can be seen in the North East corner of the church, not far from Reverend Blackett's recently discovered ledger stone.



SOME OF THE FURNEUX FAMILY MEMORIALS IN STOKE CHURCH
(ORIGINAL PHOTOGRAPH BY TONY BARNARD)

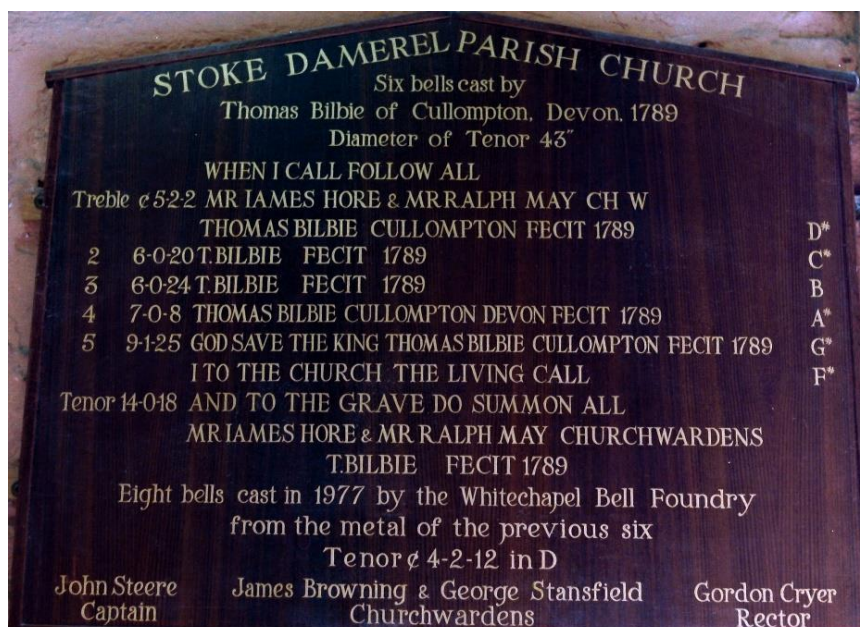
One thing we do know about Reverend Blackett is that he was renowned for his comments on the church bells and bellringers. In 1788, three of the bells in the tower were cracked and in need of re-casting. At a Vestry Meeting in June of that year a proposal was put forward to have the bells re-formed as one large tenor bell. The proposal was subsequently put to the vote the following month. There were only four votes in favour, including that of the Rector, whereas there were thirty-three votes for a peel of six bells to be cast.

Reverend Blackett wanted nothing to do with the alternative suggestion, even commenting that *“Six bells would be productive of more idleness and drunkenness than is in the Parish already...”*.

His comments were ignored, and the six bells were cast and hung in the tower in 1789. They first rang out when King George III visited Plymouth Dock, with Queen Charlotte and three Princesses. The royal party was driven past Stoke church in a horse-drawn carriage and would have heard the newly cast church bells peeling. A commemorative board still hangs in the Ringers Chamber containing the *‘Ringers Rhyme’*, which records the occasion. The rhyme also includes the rules to be obeyed by ringers with regard to their behaviour, mode of dress and quality of ringing. It seems unbelievable that a fine as severe as 6d. should be imposed for transgressions. This would be worth about £60 today. Surely no ringer in 1789 would have that sort of money, and who would want to be the Sexton, who could be fined the equivalent of £120 for each misdemeanour?

*“LET AWFUL SILENCE FIRST AMONGST US REIGN
THEN LET THIS USEFUL LAW, EACH ONE MAINTAIN,
WE RING THE QUICK TO CHURCH, THE DEAD TO GRAVE
OUR USE IS GOOD, SUCH USAGE LET US HAVE
WHO'S SWEAR'S OR CURSE, OR GET IN ANGRY MOOD
QUARREL OR STRIKE, ALTHOUGH HE DRAW NO BLOOD –
WEAR'S HAT BOOTS SPUR, OR OVERTURNS A BELL –
OR BY UNSKILLFUL HANDLING, MARS A PEAL
LET HIM PAY A SIXPENCE, FOR EACH SINGLE CRIME
TO MAKE HIM CAUTIOUS, AT ANOTHER TIME
WHEN IT IS THE SEXTON'S, FAULT TO CAUSE DELAY
WE CALL FROM HIM, A DOUBLE PENALTY.
MAY CONCORD REIGN, AMONGST US AS WE RING
PRAY GOD PRESERVE OUR CHURCH, COUNTRY AND KING
ON WHOSE ACCOUNT THESE BELLS WERE FIRST RUNG HERE
WHEN GEORGE THE KING, DID IN THE WEST APPEAR.”*

The bells were re-cast again, as a peel of eight, in 1977, as another more recent commemorative board in the tower records.



COMMEMORATIVE BOARD IN RINGERS CHAMBER, STOKE CHURCH
 (ORIGINAL PHOTOGRAPH BY TONY BARNARD)

And so, back to the mystery of the ledger stone. Perhaps Reverend Blackett upset the bellringers with his remarks, made only three years before his death. If so, they may have been responsible for ensuring that the stone was set below floor level and out of sight. This might also explain why there is nothing more than his name and the year of his death recorded on the ledger stone. We will probably never know the reason. However, if the proposal for just one tenor bell were to be put forward today, no doubt our (BELLRINGING!) Rector, Father Keith Robus, and every parishioner, would wish to retain the full peel we have all enjoyed hearing, in recent years, from the current band of campanologists. No doubt all of the bellringers, including the current Rector, would also strongly refute any accusation of *“idleness and drunkenness”*. Well, they would - wouldn't they?



LEDGER STONE AS FIRST UNCOVERED DURING THE 2016 BUILDING WORKS
 (ORIGINAL PHOTOGRAPH BY TONY BARNARD)

Tony Barnard (For Stoke Damerel Parish Church) May 2016
 REVISION B (May 2021)