

A church for a saint and a king

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History

Patron saint was a global citizen

BY JOHN RENNIE

IT'S a date that had fallen off the calendar until recent years. While the Irish proudly paint the town green and sink countless pints of stout to celebrate St Patrick, the Welsh hoist leeks and daffodils aloft to remember St David, and the Scots even get a Bank Holiday for St Andrew, St George has been pushed to one side, with flag and saint unfairly associated with the far right and beery English football fans on tour.

Things seem to be changing though. Perhaps it's to do with a reassertion of Englishness as the United Kingdom seems to be fragmenting into its national elements.

Where once the Union Jack would have flown, we now frequently see the Cross of St George, with the Prime Minister even flying it above his official residence during Euro 2012 (much good it did us).

Pubs around the East End will be bedecked with the red-on-white standard and many pints will be downed in his memory. Meanwhile, Tower Hamlets Council has organised a series of events to welcome back our neglected martyr.

It's especially appropriate as the East End has a long association with the mysterious St George. Anglican churches are of course permitted to fly the distinctive red cross on a white background from their towers, and in St George in the East we have a church (and former parish) dedicated to the fearless dragon slayer.

Or do we? As we will see, the provenance of the parish's name had as much to do with politics and power as it does beatific acts.

But first, who was George? He certainly wasn't an Englishman and we can be fairly sure he didn't slay a dragon. We do know with near certainty that he died in 303AD, martyred with the imaginative cruelty that was the hallmark of the Roman emperors.

George was probably born in Lydda, Palestine sometime between 275 and 285AD. His parents were Greeks, and his father, Gerontios, was a highly ranked officer in the Roman army.

After the death of Gerontios, George headed for the imperial capital of Nicomedia, presenting himself to the Emperor Diocletian and asking to be made a soldier. With his impeccable pedigree, he was accepted, and by his late twenties, George was a tribune in the imperial guard of the Emperor.

His seamless rise through the ranks came to a sudden halt, though, when



St George slays the dragon

Diocletian ordered a crackdown on the growing cult of Christianity among his soldiery.

George was a Christian, but Diocletian, anxious not to lose a good soldier and the son of a personal favourite, desperately tried to get him to change his mind, offering lavish gifts of money, land and slaves if he would just recognise the Roman gods. But George was immovable and prepared himself for the sentence of death, giving his money and lands to the poor.

Death didn't come quickly to early martyrs. The soldier was tortured, lacerated on a wheel of swords (and resuscitated three times so the punishment could continue) and then beheaded before Nicomedia's city wall on 23 April, 303.

George's remarkable self sacrifice (and the effect it had on onlookers including the Empress Alexandra and Athanasius, a pagan priest, both of whom converted to Christianity) were responsible for his widespread recognition as a saint.

The Roman Catholic, Anglican, Lutheran, Oriental Orthodox and Eastern Orthodox Churches all venerate our man, and he is recognised and respected in Islam. The

influence spread. England has George as its patron saint of course, but he is recognised across Europe – with 365 dedicated churches in Georgia, an order of chivalry in Russia, statues in the Czech Republic and Portugal just a few of the many dedications to the man.

And the legend grew, with medieval elements of courtly love and heroism being grafted on to the early story.

So George is often portrayed in knight's garb, slaying a dragon (possibly representing Satan), while a fair maiden looks on (possibly the Empress).

George is now holy, heroic and handsome – the perfect patron saint for a country that fancies itself as both bold and imperial, while decent and Christian. Late medieval England adopted him with enthusiasm. And what better name for a new church in the fast growing London of the early 18th century?

St George in the East was one of 50 churches planned for the cities of London and Westminster (and the areas nearby) under two acts of parliament, passed in 1710 and 1711.

There were a number of spurs to the acts. London had seen many of its churches destroyed in the Great Fire a half-century earlier, and the order had gone out that the capital should be rebuilt in stone not wood, a sensible rule but costly and slow. London planning, it seemed, ground just as slowly in the 17th century as the 21st.

Secondly, the Government was keen to increase the influence of the Anglican Church upon the people: Catholicism was ever a fear and the Church of England was of course established, with the King as its head, and its bishops sitting in the upper chamber of government, the House of Lords.

And third, London had a swiftly growing population and more places of worship were needed to accommodate the people. Areas that had once been unpopulated marshland (such as those around Wapping, Ratcliffe and Stepney) were becoming increasingly populated – eventually they would join up to form the urban sprawl that is today's East End.

Just such an area would become the new parish of St George in the East, lying within the ancient Hundred of Ossulston. (Hundreds were land divisions introduced by the Saxons from the seventh century on, the idea being that there were roughly 100 households in each division).

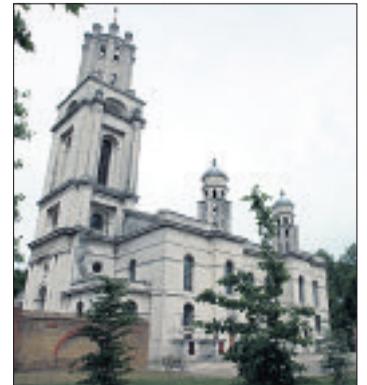
The new parish was an appendix of unassigned Middlesex, bounded by the existing parishes of St Mary, Whitechapel, St John, Wapping, and by the hamlets of Ratcliffe, Mile End Old Town and Stepney.

British History Online records that: “The land, not occupied by buildings, is now of

very small extent, consisting of a few grassfields on the north side – the inhabitants are employed, for the most part, in rope-making, and the manufacture of other articles for the rigging of ships. There is no other considerable manufacture in the place.”

The job of designing the parish church went to Nicholas Hawksmoor, who would also build Christ Church in Spitalfields and St Anne's Limehouse. He had anticipated a lifetime's work out of the dual Acts of Parliament and expressed his disappointment when the grand plans for 50 didn't come to fruition, though the maverick architectural genius did build six churches.

St George in the East rose in classic Hawksmoor style, its interior dressed in Dutch



St George in the East

oak, and Doric pillars soaring to the roof.

Just one thing – the church isn't entirely named after our St George at all. Sydney Maddocks, writing in the Co-Partnership Herald in 1933, revealed the real story of the building's naming, writing: “The church was dedicated to St George as a delicate compliment to the King [George II], and the new parish thereby became designated that of St George, Middlesex.

“To distinguish it from other places of the same name in the Metropolis, it was soon called St George's-in-the-East.”

And so the myth took another twist, as the canny Londoners flattered their monarch, associating him with Church, chivalry, sacrifice and the long, heroic past of Old England. St George, as English as roast beef (yet a Greek who served Rome) was being adapted once again to flatter a German king.

■ FURTHER READING:

St George in the East at British History Online: <http://www.british-history.ac.uk/report.aspx?compid=45416>

St George in the East parish from the Co-partnership Herald: <http://www.mernick.org.uk/thhol/stgeorge.html>