

St Werburgh's In Context

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[Title slide]

St Werburgh's is one of the best documented of Dublin's city churches. Its relevance goes far beyond the Church of Ireland, and into the life of the city To put it in some context today, I propose to look briefly at its history under these broad headings: [Slide 2]

1. The origins of the parish
2. Its historical geography
3. Population and people (including clergy)
4. And finally, the parish's more recent context

1. Origins

St Werburgh's was among the earliest of the Anglo-Norman churches created within the walls of the city. First mentioned in a papal letter dated 1179 it is parish belonging to the Episcopal see of Dublin. Having arrived just five years before in 1172, Norman settlers included people from the trading centres of Bristol and Chester, so it is no surprise that they chose St Werburgh [Slide 3] a Saxon princess who was already patron of the city of Chester when they dedicated their new church in Dublin. Until the late 17th century regular gatherings of "Chester men" for services and meetings in St Werburgh's church - indicating that a Chester identity for some in the city lingered and in association with this particular church.

The first Chester men's dedication of their new Dublin is evidence that the newcomers were stamping their mark on the newly-acquired city landscape. They had in fact used the site of a more ancient church of St Martin which before their arrival had enjoyed prebendal (or benefice) status under St Patrick's Cathedral. This prebendal status was continued for St Werburgh's whereby the chancellors of the cathedral were also rectors of St Werburgh's.

The connection provided an invaluable source of income for one of the key dignitaries in the cathedral - the chancellor is second in the cathedral precedence to the dean. Local taxes or tithes were permitted to be levied from the owners of property situated within St Werburgh's to provide income for the rector and

chancellor of the cathedral. This prebendal connection with St Patrick's continued until the disestablishment of the Church of Ireland in 1869,

Because the parish's income was siphoned off for the use of the cathedral chancellor, it had a negative effect on the church. With successive office holders more preoccupied by cathedral business it is not surprising that the church's physical conditions was poor: [Slide 4] the early proctor's or churchwarden's accounts which miraculously have survived from the 15th century have been skilfully edited by Dr Adrian Empey. They have and recently published and show that the absence of an active rector resulted in poor upkeep of the church. One repeated particular feature revealed by these sources was the poor condition of the chancel – the part of the church for which the rector of a parish was alone responsible. Poor repair followed by re-building would become a recurrent feature the church's history through the centuries.

By 1605 for example, St Werburgh's was reported to be 'down and ruinous'. However, proceeds from the sale of a property lease were used to rebuild it – most likely to the shape depicted here in Speed's map of the city of Dublin, by 1610 – the first visual impression we have of the building. [Slide 5] It has a western tower with steeple, and a squat nave. At this point the church is not aligned by the street but buttressed and imposed by adjoining houses in Werburgh Street.

If we look at Speed's map, [Slide 6] we can see walls of old city with St Werburgh's at 41 here. IT was one of just six medieval parish churches clustered around Christ Church Cathedral no. 35, a former Augustian priory used by the Anglo-Normans for the diocesan headquarters of the archbishop of Dublin.

Of the other five in the area were St Audoen's on High Street – no. 31
No. 32 St Michael's a little nearer the cathedral – the tower of which is now Dublinia,
At no. 37 is St John's right beside north-eastern end of the cathedral, the parish which served the Corporation of Dublin,
The large parish of St Bride's which spread to the easterly environs of the city – is located at no. 64 just outside the walls of the city,
while the tiny 8-acre parish of St Nicholas' Within is inside the walls at no. 43. Like St Werburgh's this parish was closely associated with St Patrick's cathedral situated just outside the walls (at no. 63) but unlike it was eventually absorbed as part of the corps of the cathedral.

St Werburgh's was a small compact parish throughout its history. According to John Gilbert's mid 19th history of the city, it comprised just 15 acres, 2 roods and 4 perches. It included lands to the east and north acquired at the Reformation

from another ancient parish of St Mary La Dame, the church of which had stood at the Dame's Gate to the east of the old city (on the area later known as Cork Hill). If we look at this slightly later map based on the 1738 Street Directory, I've highlighted its basic shape and modest extent [Slide 7]. In particular, these include two prominent features:

- The entire extent of Dublin Castle
- Also, significantly, and lying to the north leading to the river at the point where the Poddle emptied into the River Liffey on Custom House Quay - opening the parish and its parishioners up to direct access to the river and important trading areas such as then Custom House and Essex Street.

2. Historical Geography

St Werburgh's proximity to Dublin Castle - the centre of British rule in Ireland, and official seat of the royal representative, the lord lieutenant - was key to its prominence in the city's historical geography.

Its two principal thoroughfares were and are Castle Street (which took its name from the castle) and St Werburgh St (which took its name from the church). Both enjoyed the protection of the Castle.

On Castle Street the original entry via drawbridge to the castle from the city was situated

At southern end of adjoining St Werburgh Street one of the original gates into the medieval city - the "Pole gate" was situated.

From at least the 16th century, the Main City Guard was located right beside the church, from where entry into the old city was controlled again suggesting **strategic importance**.

It was in the interests of the administration to ensure that the immediate environs of castle were populated by people that would be loyal to it - hence a Protestant population. One population account recorded in 1630 was pleased to report that St Werburgh's comprised 239 households, all of which were "Protestant" with the exception of 28 Roman Catholic households. (*1100 people*.)

Unfortunately the early parish registers were destroyed in the fire in the church in 1754. Those that do survive - from 1704 onwards (fifty years before the fire suggesting the current registers were rescued) - were kept to an unusually high standard including as we can see in this sample of baptisms for the year 1807 [Slide 8] vital details such as the streets where people lived, enabling a sense of the parish's social geography to be recreated:

It is important to remember that the parish was the fundamental unit of local society until the end of the 19th century. Other parish administrative records also

give an unusually detailed insight to the nature of that society, and its historical geography. These show how the parish carried out key functions of local government – burying the dead, providing welfare for the poor, lighting cleaning the streets, and overseeing parish security through employment of constables and watchmen.

Emphasising again a high standard of record-keeping, the early surviving entries of burial from 1704 **[Slide 9]** show how seriously parish officers took this responsibility. All inhabitants of the parish had a right to Christian burial in the parish graveyard, irrespective of religion, and the early entries include fascinating details not only of where people came, but even the causes of death.

The size of the burial ground is still the same today as it was then **[Slide 10]**, and with a high death rate, the parish grave-diggers must have struggled to find room for coffins. Given the growth of the local population – by the 1830s the parish contained 3311 people – it is not surprising to learn that the burial ground was closed as early as 1843.

The parish's provision for the poor is captured in a range of documents. This receipt for coffins **[Slide 11]** provides evidence that the parish would make provision for the burial of people whose families could not afford it.

To raise money **[Slide 12]** to support the living poor, parish records build up a picture of how taxes were levied on property owners on a street-by-street basis in relation to the value of their properties and then “disbursed onto the poor”, as we see from the account of poor money dated 1641 on the left.

The parish's responsibility for lighting and securing the streets is captured by the parish watch book **[Slide 13]** from 1785, where 10 new globes of light were ordered by be hung at various strategic points in the parish, the cost of which was further levied through a watch tax.

It is fair to speculate that the high-standard of record keeping in St Werburgh's parish may have derived from its links with Dublin Castle. Over the centuries the records show that parishioners and vestry members included officers of the crown directly involved in record keeping, such as Sir Philip Percival, Clerk of the House of Lords and Keeper of the Records until 1677. The Record Tower where Percival worked was located in Lower Castle Yard, next to the Office of Arms – the chief heraldic and genealogical office of the state. Again successive holders of that office, the Ulster King of Arms and their assistants were parishioners. It seems likely that such influential record keepers officers would have kept a close eye on record-keeping and emphasised the importance of keeping records safe to members of the parish committee or vestry. During

medieval times, the proctor's accounts reveal its records were stored in a chest in the vestry. In the 1850s this was replaced by a sturdy fireproof safe a plan of which is still in the parish archive, and which physically still survives in the vestry room today. [Slide 14] It was from this safe that the records were safely transferred to the RCB Library by Canon David Pierpoint in the 1990s.

The records reveal how St Werburgh's fortunes fluctuated depending on political stability - or lack of it - in the Castle. After much uncertainty, with the Restoration of the monarchy in 1660, the parishioners of St Werburgh's celebrated by enlarging their church, widening and lengthening the aisle, repairing timbers and installing an organ and bell for the first time.

Fortunes were to change again however by the end of the 17th century, when St Werburgh's was reported as being in 'a dangerous state of decay'. This reflected less certain times for Dublin's Protestant minority and the Castle administration as in 1685, the Catholic King James the 2nd had ascended the throne, appointing a Catholic Lord Deputy in Dublin.

In 1688, the Revd William King, Chancellor of St Patrick's Cathedral and incumbent of St Werburgh's was corresponding that 'our folk here seem a little uneasy. Perhaps all is not well at court', and he went on to report that in his 'small parish...only Catholics remained - the Protestant housekeepers and lodgers having departed'. King was later to be imprisoned in Dublin Castle, after the defeat of King James at the Boyne in 1690 was released and returned to St Patrick's as the new dean, preaching before King William of Orange on this triumph through the city. The fortunes of the Protestant minority in Dublin were reversed, and St Werburgh's appears to have been reoccupied by Protestants as the parish vestry set about improving their which had become

'so decayed and ruinous that the parishioners could not with safety assemble therein for the performance of divine service'

Evidence of how Castle favour helped the process is clear with a generous government grant c. 1712 of £2000 plus the favour of an act of parliament passed in 1715 which enabled a tax to be imposed on all head rents of all properties in the parish to raise further building funds. Commissioners of building were soon appointed, and none other than Thomas Burgh, Surveyor-General was appointed as overseeing architect.

Links between Castle and parish church become a recurrent theme in the minutes of the vestry. For example, in 1733 a resolution is passed to set up a flag on the steeple of the church, [Slide 15] which was to be 'displayed everyday that the flag of the Castle of Dublin was displayed'. Contemporary visual images of the Upper Castle Yard show clearly the church's steeple bearing such a flag.

The six-peal of parish bells erected in 1748 were rung for official Castle events, and important anniversaries in the life of the city.

[Slide 16] This random bill to the vestry for ringing records the following events between October 22nd and 5th Nov. 1754

‘ 22nd Oct. King George the second crowned; 23rd Oct. the Irish Rebellion, Novrb the 4th King William 3rd born, 5th Nov Gunpowder plot’.

The bells must rarely have been silent! When the sitting viceroy the Earl of Nugent died in 1788, the bells of St Werburgh’s tolled as his body was conveyed out of the Phoenix Park, and along with the bells of St Andrew’s Church and Christ Church cathedral, rang the ‘mournful peal’ for 16 consecutive days.

In his little parish history of St Werburgh’s, published in 1889, the Revd Samuel Hughes, then rector, pulled no punches when he stated that St Werburgh’s was simply Dublin’s parochial chapel royal. Although the Castle had had its own Royal Chapel since the 13th century, served by a chaplain resident within the Castle household, this place of worship had no status within the Church of Ireland: it was not part of the diocesan structure nor subject to the authority of the archbishop and it had no registers – baptisms and marriages that took place there were in fact recorded in the registers of St Werburgh’s being the parish where it was located. In the parish registers for example we find the following:-

In 1834 **[Slide 17]** Frederick Wills of Lancashire being married to Elizabeth Louisa Gossett of Dublin Castle, by special licence. The ceremony was performed by the 1st Chaplain to the Lord Lieutenant. And in 1880, **[Slide 18]** the Earl of Ranfurly’s daughter, Annette Agnes, was baptised by R.P Graves, sub-dean to the Chapel Royal. The important thing in both examples is that the entries appear in the sequence within the parish registers.

Because of the Chapel Royal non-diocesan status, a tradition began at the Reformation that it was used for the consecration of new Church of Ireland bishops, who by seal of their ecclesiastical office also became senior members of the government and took seats on the Privy Council. When that chapel was destroyed by fire in the 1680s, St Werburgh’s was used for several consecrations of bishops instead, and even after the chapel in the castle was repaired, it was the parish church that tended to be favoured for other “Castle-associated” services.

With the opening up of Parliament Street by the Wide Streets Commissioners **[Slide 19]** by the 1750s as this early 19th century map shows, the old defensive priorities of the medieval city gave way to a new graceful approach ran through the parish linking Essex Bridge to Cork Hill, where the magnificent Royal Exchange building would be completed by the 1770s. Complimenting the spacious developments going on in its environs, the completion of St Werburgh’s re-building by 1767 **[Slide 20]** when the special pew for the use of the lord

lieutenant in the gallery in front of the organ was fitted and decorated with the royal arms, the church had probably reached its highpoint in terms of prestige and advantage - the cluster and buttressing of the medieval city giving way to more spacious grandeur that justified its contemporary description (Waburton, Whitelaw and Walsh's *History of the City of Dublin*, 2 volumes, London 1818), as one of the 'principal ornaments of the city'.

3. Population and people (including clergy)

Given the prominence of St Werburgh's in the strategic history of Dublin, it is not surprising that many prominent families were among its early parishioners. Probably the parish's most famous early son was the antiquary and later Auditor General Sir James Ware, who was born in the family home in Castle Street in 1594.

Another famous son Jonathan Swift was born in the house of his uncle Councillor Galvin Swift, in 9 Hoey's Court in 1667. Both Hoey's Court and Darby's Square on the western side of Werburgh Street (highlighted here on this detail from Roque's mid-18th map of the city **[Slide 21]**) were inhabited by the chief lawyers and notaries public in Dublin during the 17th and 18th century. Their presence is explained by proximity to the original Four Courts situated in front of Christ Church Cathedral since 1608, as well as the Chancery courts situated in Chancery Lane nearer the Castle.

An unusually high number of booksellers, printers and stationers are recorded as parishioners underlining the demand for their services from castle and the court. They included George Faulkner Swift's publisher and editor of the *Dublin Journal*, who served on the vestry in the 1760s, also Henry Saunders, publisher of *Saunders' News Letter*, and William Sleater, who produced some of the early street and trade directories of the city.

To meet the demands of the administrative and legal hub, numerous taverns, coffee houses and places of entertainment sprang up in the streets of the parish. One of the most fashionable in the 18th century was the Phoenix Tavern, located on a site almost directly opposite the church in Werburgh's Street. It was owned by James Hoey, a parishioner, and a popular location for society diners and meetings there. In 1754, the vestry minutes record following the calamitous fire in the church, Hoey permitted the parishioners to hold a meeting to 'enquire into the case of burning in their church', when it was found that the fire had started accidentally, as a result of some of the servants leaving a candle burning after Evening Prayers'. **[Slide 22]**

In the days when banks were institutions of repute, some of Dublin's most prominent such as those of La Touche and Kane and Newcomen's Bank were located along Castle Street seen here in this line drawing published in the *Gentleman's Magazine* in the 1770s [Slide 23]. The La Touches were parishioners: David La Touche junior who later became first Governor of the Bank of Ireland, played a leading role in overseeing in the restoration of the church, and saw his daughter baptised in the church soon after the work was completed in 1769.

La Touche was also a generous supporter of charitable causes, ensuring that charity sermons preached to collect contributions for the poor. In 1787 he organised a special concert to commemorate the music of Handel, in aid of the Irish Musical Fund for the support of decayed musicians and their families, held in St Werburgh's. According to newspaper accounts, the concert was a spectacular affair with 300 performers, and far larger other church concerts demonstrating the church's capacity and civic commitment.

Given the high and varied calibre of the local population, it is not surprising that these were matched by its clergy. Significant chancellors and rectors of St Werburgh's during the turbulent 16th and 17th included Dr John Travers, executed in 1535 for supporting the rebellion of Silken Thomas, Nicholas Walsh, later bishop of Ossory 1578-85, who began the translation of the New Testament into Irish, Adam Loftus, later Archbishop of Dublin 1567-1605 and James Usher, provost of Trinity from 1610 and later Archbishop of Armagh 1625-56. Later clerics included Theopolius Bolton who was chancellor and rector 1714-22, during the first significant re-building of the church in the early 18th century. Bolton's later benefaction of his library in Cashel would result in another heritage landmark [Slide 24] – the Bolton library – initially provided for the clergy of Cashel where Bolton was archbishop 1729 to 1744, but today open to all and another national treasure.

As previously explained the chancellorship duties of these men in the cathedral meant that their daily presence in the parish church could not be counted upon. For the remainder of the ecclesiastical calendar, divine services were served by more lowly curates. From the Report of the Ecclesiastical Commissioners of Ireland published in 1838, we find that the incumbent Canon Hosea Guinness as “non-resident, in consequence of ill-health” two curates were employed at a stipend of £75 each, the more senior of whom as allowed an additional 20£ in surplice fees.

The high society character of the Castle environs notwithstanding, the parish records reveal that the majority of parishioners and officeholders in St Werburgh's were in fact “the middling sort of people” – the silk and cloth merchants, notaries public, bankers, book dealers and printers, publicans and grocers & inn-keepers who lived and worked in the parish, and played key roles

in the parish administration. A sense of pride in the tradition of their significant voluntary contribution to local society is underlined by this relatively rare book [Slide 25] of officeholders. Dating back to 1694 it provides a continuous roll-call of the various lay officeholders- the churchwardens, sides-men, and constables - who served their parish up to 1888.

4. The church's context in recent times

Today, St Werburgh's is one of only two of the original medieval parishes of the area clustered around Christ Church cathedral continuing as a place of worship. Whilst the other, St Audeon's, retains many of its medieval features, by contrast St Werburgh's reflects the optimism and stability of the mid-18th century that gave rise to its re-building. As a Georgian gem, it remains a most important part of the city's fabric.

St Werburgh's survived the church closures of the later 19th-and early 20th centuries when the Church of Ireland population of the inner city declined. Following disestablishment of the Church, the parish was united with those of St John and St Brides, in 1877. Whilst both of those churches closed, St Werburgh's continued, absorbing their boundaries and also acquiring their furnishings, including bells and monuments from St Bride's and the former pulpit of the Chapel Royal, which had been transferred to St John's church in the 1860s.

Further administrative change and consolidation of inner-city parishes in 1976 resulted in St Werburgh's becoming part of a group of parishes based on Christ Church cathedral. The dean of Christ Church is rector, and day to day service and pastoral care is provided by the vicar assisted by a curate. Other parishes in this arrangement included St Andrew's, St Paul's and St Mary's, since closed, and both St Michan's and All Saints Grangegorman north of the Liffey, which continue to thrive.

In addition to regular services in the church's calendar, St Werburgh's has been innovative in its efforts to reach out to the city. Found amongst the more recent parish records, for example, are posters for summer concerts, [Slide 26]

Appropriately in June 2010, St Werburgh's was the location for the launch of online access to all the pre-1900 inner city parish registers of Dublin, including its own baptisms, marriages and burials. [Slide 27] The original registers, together with all of the parish records are preserved and available to the public in the RCB Library - the Church of Ireland's archival repository. We have listed this most extensive parish collection which includes detailed building records especially in relation to the mid-18th century rebuild in particular. A copy of the list is available here for consultation during the day. **THANK YOU.**