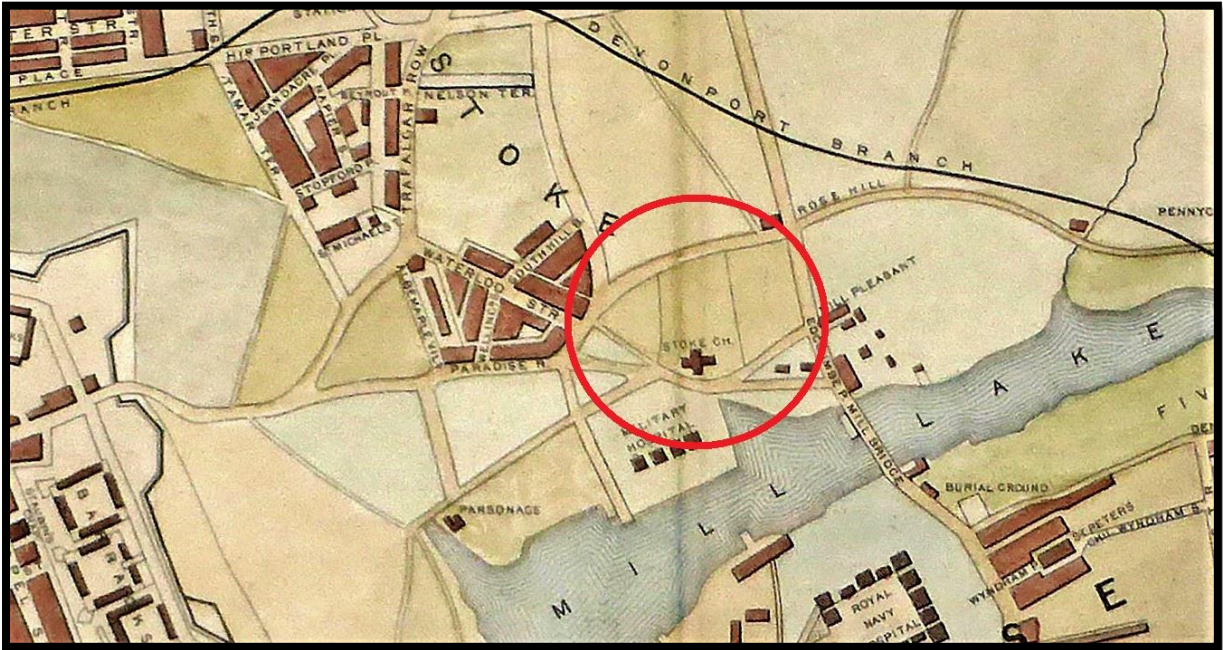


FROM THE ARCHIVES (1)
STOKE DAMEREL PARISH CHURCH –
A BUILDING WITH
“...SO LITTLE PRETENTIONS TO
ARCHITECTURAL DISTINCTION...”



STOKE CHURCH AND CHURCHYARD - 1850 MAP BY RAPKIN & BIBBY
(SOURCE – WIKIMEDIA – COPYRIGHT FREE)

The following extract describing ‘Stoke Church’, without much enthusiasm, comes from a guidebook published two hundred years ago, in 1821 and titled: -

Rowe’s Panorama of Plymouth
Or
Tourist’s Guide
To The
Principal Objects of Interest
In
The Town and Vicinity
Of
Plymouth, Dock and Stonehouse

By Samuel Rowe

“The parish church of Stoke Damerel, tho inconveniently situated at the southern extremity of the parish, is generally attended by large congregations. Few public buildings possess so little pretensions to architectural distinction; it contains 3 aisles, which appear to have been constructed at different periods, according to the dictates of convenience. The original edifice is supposed to have consisted of a single aisle, and the tower, which doubtless presented a regular and pleasing appearance, but as its relative situation with regard to the whole structure has been altered by subsequent additions, so has its venerable aspects been destroyed by the white-washings which the “taste” of the churchwardens occasionally bestow, by way of ornament. The principal entrance on the south, has been greatly improved by the recent erection of a commodious porch.

The area of the interior is laid out to best advantage, for the accommodation of the greatest possible number of persons. A spacious gallery occupies the western side of the church; there is no organ, but a good choir of singers, assisted by musical instruments. The presentation of this living which is considered the most valuable in the whole Diocese belongs to the Lord of the Manor. The Reverend John Hawker, who resides at the Rectory, is the present Curate. In discharging the sacred duties of so populous a parish this gent has a most arduous task to fulfil.

The burying ground, though very extensive, has not been found adequate to the mortality of the increased population of the parish; in consequence of which a piece of ground adjoining the churchyard, has been enclosed and consecrated as a churchyard. Neither the inscriptions, nor the sculptural efforts, numerous as they are; deserve particular notice; and the same observation may be applied to the memorials in the interior of the church.”

In the whole of Samuel Rowe’s description, the author’s only positive comments seem to relate to the size of the congregation, the design of the South Porch, and the quality of the choir. Now, in the twenty-first century, we may have to work at the first of those points, but at least the statements about the porch and choir are still valid.



MODERN SATELLITE IMAGE OF STOKE DAMEREL PARISH CHURCH

(SOURCE – GOOGLE MAPS)

In the ensuing years, since the publication of Rowe's guidebook, the church building has not changed in size, although the external walls, now rendered, may then have been finished with vertical slate hanging. The adjacent Parish Centre is a modern extension to the north of the church and the older Boiler House may have been added at some time after Rowe's visit.

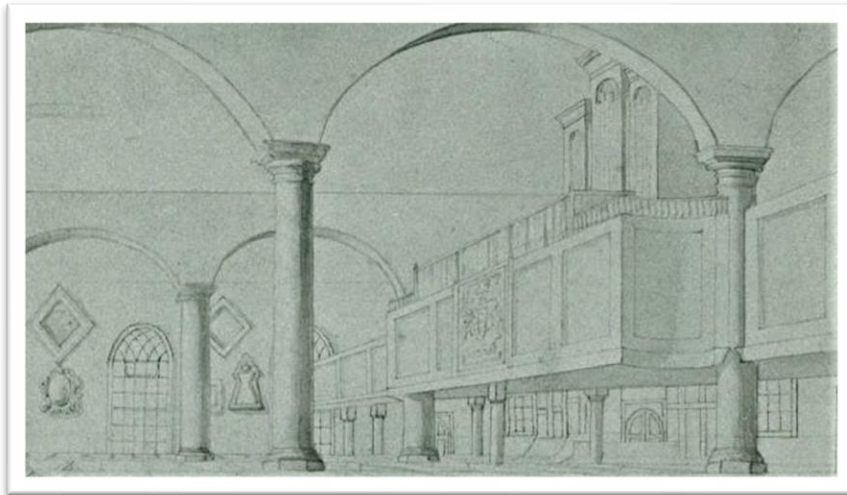
The churchyard, which filled up many years ago, was closed for burials and is now under the care of the local authority. Most of the slate gravestones have been taken down from their original positions. These are now either fixed to the external churchyard walls or laid out as paths, which are now mostly fenced off with low railings as they can be very treacherous when wet and slippery. For anyone carrying out research, Plymouth City Council does have a database containing photographs of all of the inscriptions.

The road to the south of the church was widened about 100 years ago and the remains in those graves were all re-located in an overspill cemetery at Milehouse, since moved, again, to Efford Cemetery. Inscriptions from the Milehouse gravestones are also on the database.

The area around the churchyard has changed considerably. The open areas of land have mostly been built on and the Mill Lake has been filled in to create sports grounds and Victoria Park. The 'Parsonage', where Reverend Hawker was based, is no longer. This area, still known as The Rectory, is now occupied by streets of terraced housing and the United Services Rectory Rugby Ground.

It is interesting to look at all of the other points raised in Rowe's guidebook: -

Internally, the "*white-washings*" to the internal walls has long gone. Various colour schemes have been applied since using more modern types of paint which do not powder to the touch. However, some areas are not looking as good as when the latest coat of paint was originally applied.



THE WEST END GALLERY AND ORGAN BEFORE REMOVAL

(FROM STOKE DAMEREL CHURCH ARCHIVES)

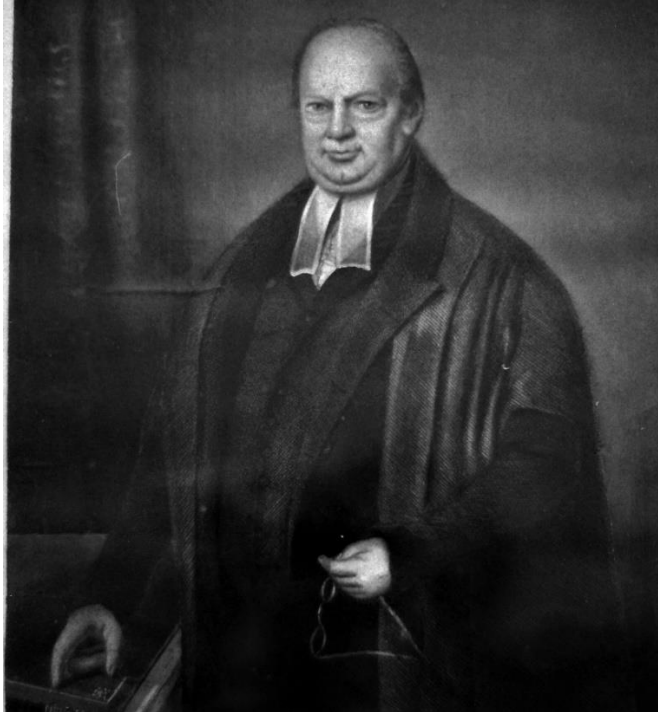
The gallery at the west end of the building was removed some years ago. Prior to its removal, the first church organ was built in the centre of the gallery. This was subsequently relocated to its present position. Over the years, many talented organists have played the instrument, alongside what is still "*a good choir of singers*".



THE ORGAN IN ITS CURRENT LOCATION

(PHOTOGRAPH BY TONY BARNARD)

Reverend John Hawker is noted as being the curate in charge at the time of Rowe's visit. He undertook this role for about 30 years before becoming the vicar of what is now St. Peter's church in Wyndham Square, Stonehouse.



REVEREND JOHN HAWKER

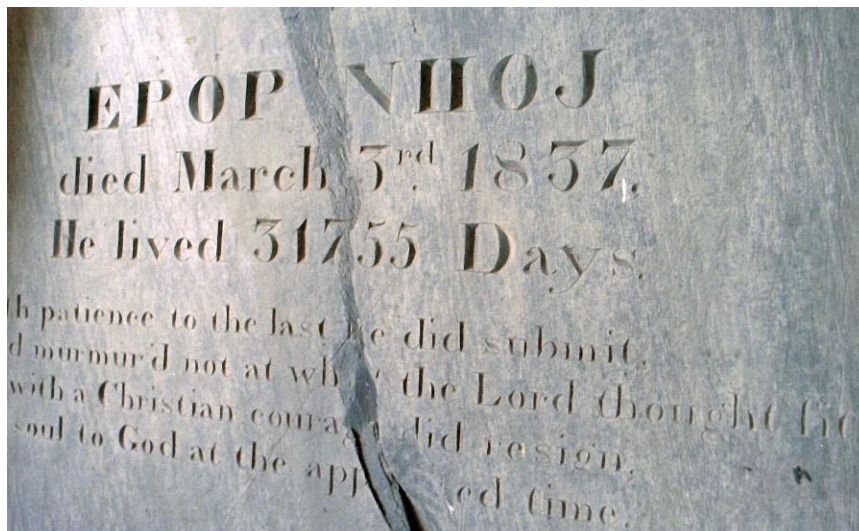
(FROM STOKE DAMEREL CHURCH ARCHIVES)

Rowe was not impressed by any of the memorial stones in the churchyard. Admittedly, there are no “*sculptural efforts*” of note, but there are a number of interesting tombstones which he probably would not have seen on his fleeting visit.

Opposite the north porch is the grave of Tobias Furneaux of Swilly House, the first person to circumnavigate the world in both directions. However, the modern memorial tablet we see today would not have been there in 1821.

In the lower section of the churchyard, against the churchyard wall is the tombstone of John Boynes, a stonemason in the dockyard, who drowned whilst returning from a boat trip to see Napoleon Bonaparte, who was then being held prisoner on a ship in Plymouth Sound.

Now fixed to the west wall within the church is the tombstone of John Pope who was buried vertically, somewhere in the churchyard. His name is spelt backwards, and his age is recorded in days. He believed that this would confuse the Devil and that being buried vertically would allow him to rise first on Judgement Day.



TOMBSTONE OF JOHN POPE

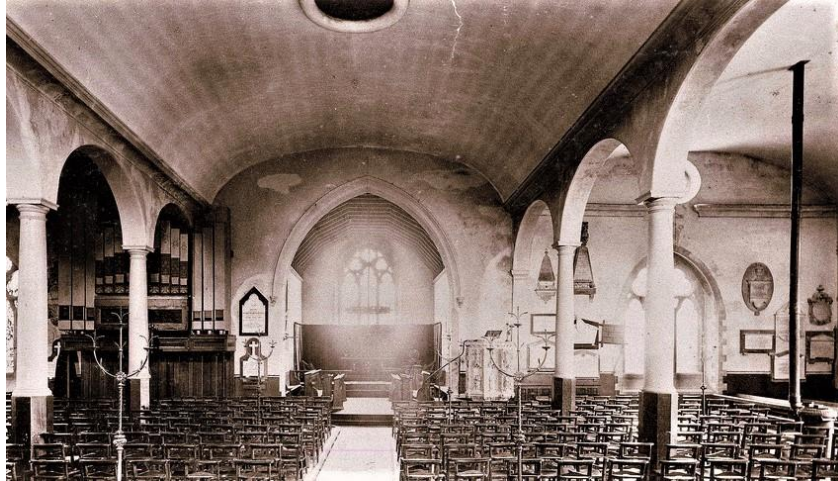
(PHOTOGRAPH BY TONY BARNARD)

Many would argue that within the church, the numerous memorials set into the walls and floor tell some wonderful stories. Even though Rowe would not have gleaned any of this information during his visit, he might have noticed the Bacon family memorial with a sculptured golden pig on top; the tablet to Thomas Taylor whose confusing date of passing appears to relate to the differing methods of dating then being used in England and on the continent; or the family memorial which includes Richard Dunning who coined the word 'vaccination' for his friend Edward Jenner, who had perfected the first treatment against Smallpox.

Even though a large amount of money has been spent on the alterations to the church building in recent years, should Mr. Rowe have been able to re-visit, it is perhaps unlikely that he would have formed a different opinion. Perhaps he visited on a cold winter's day, long before there was any form of heating! With the recent installation of modern underfloor heating as part of the major project to lay a new limestone floor, all on one level, the warmth of the building is now vastly improved. The church is no longer a cold place in which to worship during inclement winter weather.

There have been various types of heating to the building over the years since 1821. The oldest form of heating can be seen in a photograph taken in the latter years of the nineteenth century, whereby just one small stove can be seen close to the south aisle of the church, with an unbelievably long unsupported flue pipe, which is venting through the

roof slope above. That photograph is reproduced below, with the flue pipe prominent on the right hand side. The stove was probably coal or wood fired and no doubt unable to provide any heat beyond someone holding their hands close to the warmed surface.



LATE NINETEENTH CENTURY PHOTOGRAPH OF INTERIOR

[FROM STOKE DAMEREL CHURCH ARCHIVES]

Regardless of the comments made 200 years ago, the building, in the twenty-first century, is much loved by those who know it. There are many fascinating stories to be told of its past and many more stories still to be discovered. Most of all though, anyone visiting for the first time is guaranteed a warm welcome by those who worship here, even someone as critical as Samuel Rowe!



STOKE DAMEREL CHURCH IN SPRING

(PHOTOGRAPH BY TONY BARNARD)

Tony Barnard (March 2016) (Revised February 2021)