

Architectural and Social History of St. George's Anglican Church, Brigus



Heritage NL

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Fig. 1. St. George's Anglican Church from the north.
Source: Eddy O'Toole, Heritage NL.

Architectural History

St. George's Anglican Church Registered Heritage Structure (figure 1) was built circa 1876 by builder George Churchill Jerrett (1835-1904), a native of Exeter, Devon, England, who immigrated to Newfoundland with his wife, Charlotte Prowse, in the 1850s. The couple had six children before Charlotte died in 1872. George soon married Newfoundland-born Miriam Nuttall with whom he had another child. Though George was listed in local directories of the mid-1890s, the Jerretts were also recorded in Lancashire, England, in 1891 (England and Wales Census 1891), and some of the family were later buried in Slough, Berkshire, England (Griffiths 2015).

During his time in Brigus, Jerrett was recorded as a builder in *Hutchinson's Newfoundland Directory* for 1864-65, a general dealer in *Lovell's Province of Newfoundland Directory* of 1871, and a general

merchant in *McAlpine's Newfoundland Directory* of 1894-97. He assisted with the construction of stages and fittings for several local events and dramatic productions (figure 2) and may be the Mr. Jerrett listed as builder of several steamships in Brigus in the late 1880s (*Harbor Grace Standard* 1887 and *Evening Telegram* 1889). He was also involved in the Labrador fishery (Charlie Jerrett 2021) and was listed in the 1891 *Year Book and Almanac of Newfoundland* as postmaster of Smokey Run in Labrador.

Nothing could be prettier than the arrangement of the stage, for the decoration of which much credit is due to G. C. Jerrett, Esq., who kindly superintended its erection. But of course

Fig. 2. Review of play at Brigus.

Source: *Harbor Grace Standard*, May 15, 1889.

Though he seems to have been known more for dealing than building in later years, Jerrett did come from a woodworking family. His father, James, was a master cooper and his brother, William Henry, was a builder who immigrated to Newfoundland alongside him. William opened a shingle mill at Brigus Gullies with William Frederick Horwood (later of the Horwood Lumber Company) circa 1880 (Thoms 1967) and operated in St. Johns in the 1890s as part of the Jerrett & Searle building firm (*Evening Telegram* 1898).

According to family Jerrett was brought to Brigus by the Church of England, but St. George's was not his first local ecclesiastical work (Charlie Jerrett 2021). Due to delays upon his arrival, George was free to take on other commissions and in 1874 he was the successful bidder on the second Methodist church in the community (figure 3). At a cost of £1,030 he erected, over 15 months, "one of the finest churches in

Newfoundland” (Lench 1925). He is also known to have travelled to British Columbia with his brother to add a spire to a church there (Charlie Jerrett 2021).

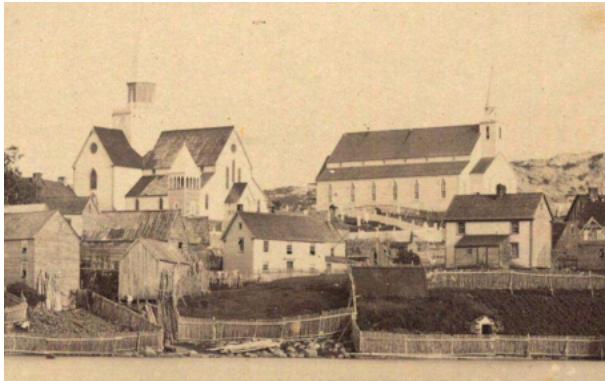


Fig. 3. Detail of a photo by Simeon H. Parsons depicting Jerrett's 1874 Methodist church (right) alongside St. George's (left).

Source: Centre for Newfoundland Studies, MUN.

St. George's Anglican Church was built starting in 1876, the year of Bishop Edward Feild's death, though it was not consecrated until November 1878 (figure 4). Feild had been a committed ecclesiologist and St. George's is a fitting memorial. Ecclesiologists, starting with the Cambridge Camden Society and its journal, *The Ecclesiologist*, identified English Gothic as the morally superior style for Anglican church

"The Church at Brigus is one of a noble and commanding appearance. It is cruciform in shape and surrounded by a massive octagonal spire, and reflects the greatest credit on the faithful and laborious Missionary in charge, as well as upon all who were instrumental in its erection.—Communicated.

Fig. 4. Excerpt from an article published upon the consecration of St. George's.

Source: Harbor Grace Standard, Nov 30, 1878.

architecture and were undeniably successful at shaping church design in England and its colonies. In contrast to the simple “preaching boxes” of the early 19th century, ecclesiologically correct churches exhibited raised chancels, soaring, open roof structures, and aisles with the absence of balconies. Such churches are sometimes referred to as “High Anglican” in design, and several local examples have been recognized as Registered

Heritage Structures. At the time of its construction St. George's was “probably the most architecturally ambitious wooden church yet attempted in Newfoundland” (Coffman 2008).



Fig. 5. Open, stained timber roof structure.

Source: Michael Philpott, Heritage NL.

St. George's exhibits a cruciform plan with nave, chancel, and transept forming a cross. One enters the western end through the side door of a porch and proceeds to the nave with its soaring roof structure of stained wood rafters, purlins, and decoratively milled boards (figure 5). The church was originally constructed with a large octagonal tower and spire above the crossing of the transept (figure 6), however this feature appears



Fig. 6. St. George's with tower and spire circa 1885.

Photo by S.H. Parsons.

Source: Virtual Museum of Canada.

to have been short-lived as it is absent in turn-of-the-century photos. The once significant load is indicated by the more substantial roof beams of the transept.

Below the roof are quatrefoil clerestory windows above an arcade (a succession of arches supported by columns) with solid spandrel panels. Most of St. George's gable-end windows are large, cusped lancet arches with diamond-shaped lead camework and borders of coloured glass. Roundel (circle) windows are located in the gables of the transept. Aisle windows are compound windows made up of two lancet arches topped by a coloured quatrefoil. Most include operable, hinged panels for ventilation (figure 7). Local windows were typically made of wood and the windows of St. George's were almost certainly imported.



Fig. 7. Detail of the operable panel in one of the leaded-glass aisle windows.

Source: Michael Philpott, Heritage NL.

The interior walls of St. George's were originally lathe and plaster but were replaced at some point with drywall and layers of finish plaster. Most of the church's woodwork is stained except for column capitals in the arcade which are marbleized. It is unusual for these alone to receive a different treatment so this may indicate a change of plans during construction. The choir and sanctuary contain a substantial amount of original woodwork including screens, benches, and altar rails. These are adorned by trefoil, arch, and *fleur-de-lys* motifs tying into the rest of the church (figure 8). Floors are mostly carpeted

today, though several sections of plank flooring fastened with cut nails remain in the transept.



Fig. 8. Woodwork of the choir. Note the fleur-de-lis finials above.

Source: Michael Philpott, Heritage NL.

St. George's is notable for the large amount of original, functional hardware and ironwork. Door handles are heavy, ornamented rings attached to cross fleury or *fleur-de-lys* crosses. Doors are secured by rim locks, heavy iron bolts and more decorative latches (figure 9).



Fig. 9. Iron latch and rim lock with wood enclosure.

Source: Michael Philpott, Heritage NL.

Clapboard and trim, with the exception of that around windows and doors, appear to have been replaced during restoration in the early 2000s. St. George's exhibits a variety of doors including rectangular plank service doors, a plank door with cusped top at the main entry, and three large, pointed-arch double doors. Two of the latter, to

the west and north, are inaccessible and appear to be fully functional decorative elements (figure 10). Photos indicate this was the case as early as the late 1800s. The top of the main entrance is unusual and suggests modification over time.



Fig. 10. Several large, arched doors are functional but appear unused even in early photos.

Source: Michael Philpott, Heritage NL.

St. George's exhibits a fine stone foundation characteristic of Brigus. Though it is mortared on the exterior, this appears to be a later intervention and the interior walls of the basement are dry-laid. Several distinct stones are set in the foundation including two cornerstones: one from the 1876 dedication and another from the previous church dating to 1851 (figures 11-12).

Social History

Mary Jerrett of Brigus has a deep connection to St. George's. As a young woman visiting Brigus with a friend, she was introduced to a local fellow who was in a garden digging worms. He was Charlie Jerrett, great grandson of George C.



Figs. 11 & 12. Cornerstones of St. George's.

Source: Michael Philpott, Heritage NL.

Jerrett. They started courting, were married, lived in St. John's for a while, and moved to Brigus in 1968 (figure 13). Mary was Anglican and started attending the church her husband's great grandfather built.

Over the years, Mary served as warden and treasurer for the church. She also sat on many church committees, including the Ladies' Guild. Her daughter was baptized in the church and her son was married there. Mary recalls that St. George's "would have the regular Sunday service,



Fig. 13. Mary and Charlie Jerrett, 2021.

Source: Jerrett Family.

but the ministers had four parishes, and we would have the minister or lay reader" (Mary Jerrett 2021). Most people walked to church as there was little available parking. People entered the church grounds through the iron gates on the north corner of the property (figure 14).



Fig. 14. Gates leading to church property, 1954.
Source: VirtualMuseum.ca.

Mary notes that the Ladies' Guild played a vital role in supporting the work of the church. Members cleaned the church in preparation for Sunday service, washed and ironed altar cloths, polished brass candlesticks, and decorated the church for special occasions such as Christmas (figure 15). Mary remembers that "the Ladies' Guild...they would have teas probably four times a year, or probably corned beef and cabbage supper" (Mary Jerrett 2021). These socials would be held in the old church hall. As she remembers "you'd make your cookies, or your soup, and the Ladies' Guild ...would raise money to probably buy the coal for the furnace or the oil...and the money would [also] go to the upkeep of the hall plus to the church" (Mary Jerrett 2021).

One of the special aspects of these socials was that everyone in the community, regardless of what religion they were, supported other church socials. As Mary notes, "whoever had their church social, everyone went to it. Lots of times the RC church probably would send something down to ours. That was the way the people operated I

suppose in a small town, that was the way you lived" (Mary Jerrett 2021).



Fig. 15. Altar cloths and candlesticks, 2005.
Source: VirtualMuseum.ca.

Mary had been a member of St. George's congregation for almost 35 years when it was closed in the early 2000s (figure 16). Anglican churches in South River, Makinsons, Cupids, and St. George's in Brigus were closed as part of a reconfiguring of the parish in response to dwindling attendance. Generations had been baptized, married, and buried from the church (figure 17). Mary observes that "when the older



Fig. 16. Last baptism before closing, 2002.
Source: VirtualMuseum.ca.

generation died, churches started to die" (Mary Jerrett 2021),

St. George's Heritage Committee Incorporated was formed in 2003 with a mandate to keep the church from falling into private hands. Mary was



Fig. 17. Wedding at St. George's, 1956.
Source: VirtualMuseum.ca.

one of many who joined the group. By 2004, enough funds had been raised to buy the church and it was reopened as St. George's Heritage Church (figure 18). It has served as a cultural venue ever since. It has been the site of concerts and theatre performances, and people are still getting married there, despite it being deconsecrated.



Fig. 18. Heritage Committee Chair Don Burrage addresses audience at reopening, 2004.
Source: VirtualMuseum.ca.

St. George's Heritage Committee Incorporated completed exterior restoration projects and they

rebuilt the bell tower that had been destroyed during a storm in 1955.

In 2020 St. George's required funds to pay bills through the winter. A group called "Friends of St George's" came together with a renewed vision to repurpose St. George's into a space to celebrate musical heritage. Both full-time and seasonal residents of Brigus generously donated much needed funds to support this vision. Many have embraced the concept of revitalizing the building and the new Friends group is also called upon for volunteer support through the off-season.

Covid-19 saw the cancellation of local music festivals in 2020 and 2021. In 2021, the Friends of St. George's worked in partnership with Music NL to present a "Music on the Lawn" series. Each Saturday during the summer and fall, visitors and locals alike could enjoy a free concert presented by a member of MusicNL (figure 19).



Fig. 19. Music on the Lawn promotional poster.
Source: Friends of St. George's.

An outdoor stage was erected and people were encouraged to bring a chair or a blanket and enjoy a series of mainly young Newfoundland & Labrador artists performing for free. The

partnership enabled the performer to be compensated and the facility readily accepted donations from the audience.

Managing and maintaining a heritage building the scale of St. George's is no small feat, but almost 20 years later, groups such as St. George's Heritage Committee Incorporated and Friends of St. George's are committed to the task.

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