

The Three Churches of St George

Bristol Times Articles

by Dave Stephenson



Troopers Hill is in the St George area of Bristol. The parish of St George was established in 1751 and took its name from the saint to which the parish church was dedicated. The new St George Church was completed in 1756.

Sadly you will not find a St George Church in the area today. Its site was where 'St Georges House' now stands on Church Drive, just south of Summerhill Road, east of the Fountain at the junction of the A420 and A431.



There were in fact three different St George churches built on the same site, none of which saw its 100th anniversary.

The first church was demolished and rebuilt in a more modern style in 1846. This second church burnt down in 1878; its replacement was then demolished in 1976.

Dave Stephenson, who Friends of Troopers Hill met through the Barton Hill History Group, wrote a series of three articles about the churches and their bells for the Bristol Times supplement to the Bristol Post.

Dave has been kind enough to share the articles with us and to allow us to publish them here.

With the exception of the drawing of the second church; the illustrations were included in the original articles.

‘Memories are now all that’s left of fine church’

by Dave Stephenson

Despite the use of explosives, this church in Summerhill Road, St George, only came down after the fourth blast. If it had to go, it would have been nice to have had someone like Fred Dibnah, say, the famous steeplejack, to take it down with dignity. Today, I'm sure that it would have been a listed building, perhaps turned into flats like St Matthew Moorfields - which has at least survived, with the conversion work done with elegance and good taste.

St George church started life on 1 June 1751, when King George II went to the House of Peers to give his royal assent for the division of the Pip 'n' Jay parish and to the construction of new church, a church that would give its name to a new Bristol suburb (although for many years it was known as the New Church, Kingswood).

This royal charter, 13 pages long, gives details of its new boundaries, who gave monies, that two petty constables were to be appointed at the Michaelmas Court and that its commissioners were to hold meetings to discuss all aspects of its building in the Lamb Inn outside Lawfords Gate (West Street).

The foundation stone was laid with some pomp in 1752. Several pieces of that year's coins were buried under the stone and five guineas (more than £5) given to the workmen so that they could enjoy a meal at the Lamb Inn. The church finally opened its doors on 6 September 1756. But in 1845 it was pulled down, rebuilt and enlarged, and then, a year later, reopened again.

Then, just before 4am on Sunday, 22 December 1878, tragedy occurred. The chancel was already in flames when the vicar sent a telegram to Bristol for the fire brigade. They arrived quickly - even though the church was outside the city boundary (in Gloucestershire) - but it was too late, the building had already been gutted. The brigade had trouble locating water and two bells in the tower came crashing down, no doubt waking those neighbours who were not already at the scene. The cause of the fire was believed to be a stove overheating.

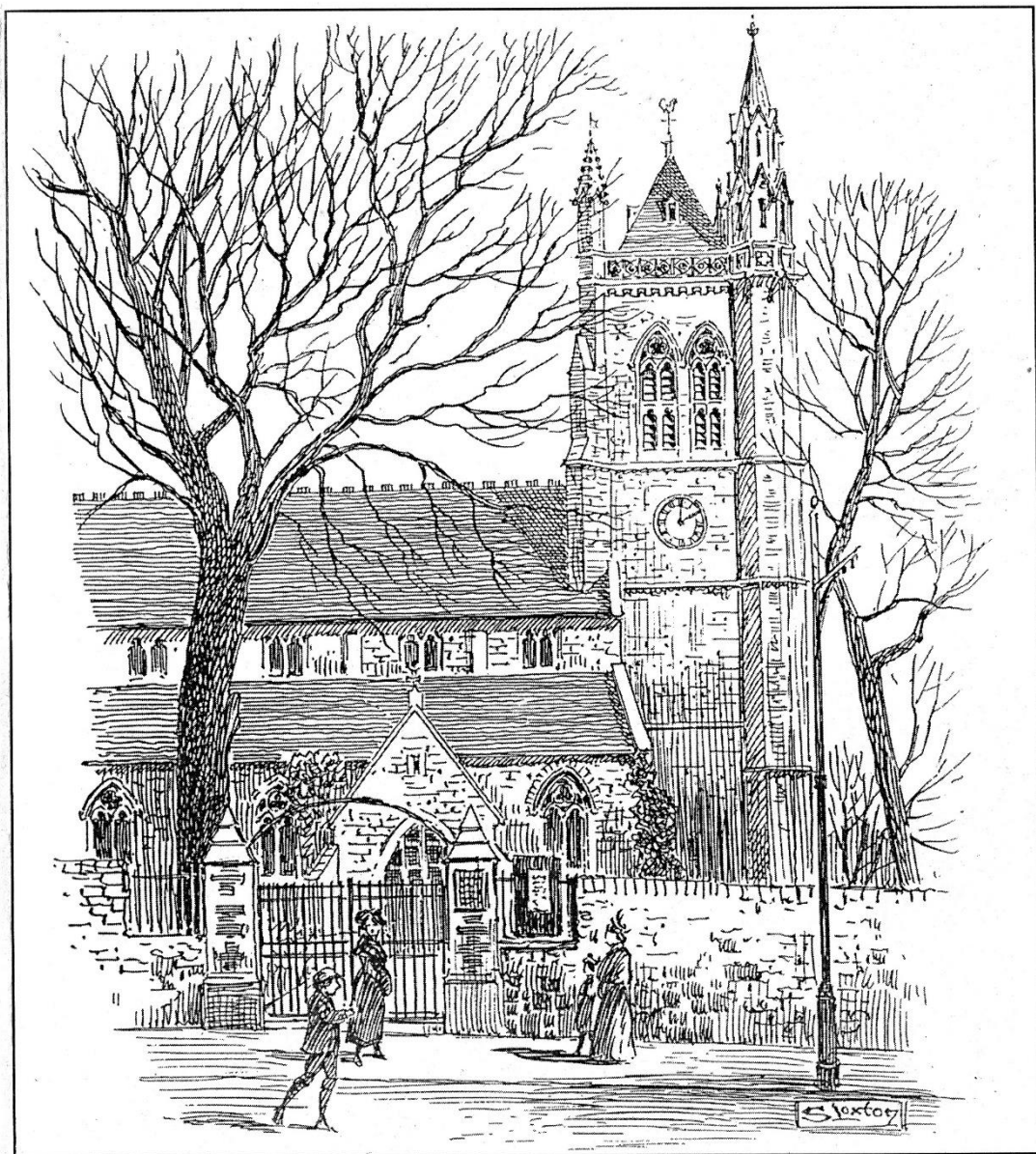
St George reopened on 8 May 1880. The Lord Bishop, presiding over a public luncheon costing 2/6d each, announced that from now on all the seats in the church would be free.

The church had two well known vicars. The first was the Rev John Emra (1809-1842), a poet and gifted painter, who married Elizabeth Bastone Blake, a descendent of the great admiral Robert Blake.

The other vicar, more infamous than famous, was the Rev George Henry Willmott Elwell (1913-1970). He had intended to go into the law but a hearing problem caused a rethink.

Instead, his wealthy wife bought him what is known as an advowson - the church and all the land around it. It was like being Lord of the Manor, and he certainly lived up to the title, collecting ground rents on houses in St George,

Redfield, Brislington, Redland and Keynsham. If you didn't pay up you were taken to court.



Light and Shade: A drawing of the 3rd St George Church by the well-known local artist Samuel Loxton

The eccentric Rev Elwell would sit on his lawnmower in the nude, cutting the grass. Couples getting married would spot his tennis clothes underneath his cassock.

And when one young couple turned up to find the church doors closed, the guests discovered him slightly "under-the-weather" and had to sober him up. But they were the lucky ones. He refused to marry some couples on the grounds that one of them didn't live in the parish. The vicar was described as autocratic, arrogant and pompous - he even parked his Rolls-Royce anywhere he wanted.

He tried several times to block other churches being built, on the grounds he would lose some of his parishioners. Then he upset his own parishioners by marrying again "too quickly" after his first wife died. He upset them even more when he was caught in a compromising position with women - not once, but twice, by two very prominent members of the community. He answered his

critics by telling his flock: "My job is to preach the gospels to you on a Sunday. What I do in my own life during the week is my own business. If you don't like it, you are free to leave." Most of them did.

I am not aware of any bombs falling anywhere near the church, but in 1950 Mr R. J. Phipps, of the building family who erected many of St George's finest buildings, was paid £320 to put right "war damage". In spite of this, the building was not at its best and when the Rev Elwell died in 1970, the church authorities had an excuse to close it down.

Father Todd, a former missionary, carried on for a few years, as did a few priests-in-charge. After the last service in 1976 the congregation moved, for a short time, to the Old School House in Glebe Road.

After demolition, about 20 lead coffins were found under a second floor, certainly from the earlier church. Do any readers know what happened to the organ, bells and furniture? Were the graves removed, or are they still there? What happened to the war memorial?

St George Church – Part 2 – Published Tuesday 10th October 2006

‘For whom the bell tolled – at a price’

by Dave Stephenson

I decided to follow up my recent article on St George's church by looking at the burial registers, which are held at the Bristol Register Office, and add some research of my own.

The first interment in "God's Acre" was of a Betty Milsom in September 1756. It cost her family £5. Beside her name is noted, "Bells not up" — obviously the church was not quite finished then. When they were finally in place, the sexton would ring them for one hour after a burial at an extra charge of one shilling (5p).

The next three people to be buried were very poor and the parish paid the bill. Only the small bell was rung for them.

In 1758, Ken Wetherby, a poor man, was found drowned, possibly at Crews Hole. The following year an unknown man was washed ashore there. Both burials were paid for by the parish.

Over the years a lot of people have been found drowned at this bend in the treacherous River Avon. The bodies were usually taken to the Lamb Inn and laid out in the cellar to await the arrival of the coroner.

By 1780, with a change of vicar, more information was included in the register. The age of the deceased and such additions as, "son or daughter of, "wife of, or "husband" and/or "widow of" are all very helpful, especially if you are trying to trace your family tree.

By 1820, the place where the deceased lived was included, such as London Road or Marshfield Road (Clouds Hill Road), or the Bath Road (Summerhill

Road). Sometimes it stated "near the church", "near to the sign of the fire engine" or simply Pilemarsh or Mooresfield.

In 1824, an unknown man was found on the road to Bristol. He was taken to the workhouse, which was just off Plummers Hill. There he died, to be buried in St George cemetery the following day Who was he? Where was he going? Where did he come from?

If someone had come forward at a later date then his name, I'm sure, would have somehow been added to the register. Instead he remains one of the forgotten. Although very little is known about the place, the poor house is mentioned frequently. The records have long since disappeared but we know that an Isaac Ford died there in 1827, aged 72.

In 1838, a girl named Mary St George died at just five months old. She appears to have been given the surname of the district, a custom that was quite common if a parent was not known or the child was "born on the parish" i.e. illegitimately.

In this case, no mother or father's name appears on the register so we must assume that she had been abandoned by a distressed mother who probably had no choice.

In 1839, John Ball, who at least had a surname, died there, aged three months. Later the workhouse was joined with others under the Clifton Union. There are people buried in the churchyard who came from the Stapleton Road, Penny well Road and Eastville workhouses.

By the 1850s, people were buried here from further afield, such as Hanham, Barton Hill and The Dings. Landmarks recorded include "near the Ship" (World's End) and "near the Turnpike" (Fire Engine).

The record of burials continues until 1958 and then stops — I assume because the graveyard was full.

But in 1961 there was another interment, followed by two more in 1970. Leonard Alfred Taylor, from Weston-super-Mare, appears to be the last, but the church probably had plots which were still empty.

I noticed the surname Phipps came up time and time again in the registers. There seemed to have been hundreds of them in the district. Many were market gardeners; others were masons and builders.

The Phippses ran Avonview Cemetery just around the corner and continued to run it for many years — but that didn't stop others with the same name dying poor.

But what happened to all the graves when the church was demolished? I know that those close to the church and those actually in the church were removed to Avonview cemetery. I also know that K.H. Smith of Stoke Bishop — nurserymen, landscape gardeners and sports ground contractors — put in an estimate to take down all the trees and overgrowth, lift the gravestones and then stack them aside. They then bulldozed over the area to give an even, graded surface.

Today the site of the church is a mixture of houses and flats.



Fascinating history: The now demolished St George Church

St George Church – Part 3 – Published Tuesday 15th November 2022

‘Bells’ towering achievement was to survive’

by Dave Stephenson

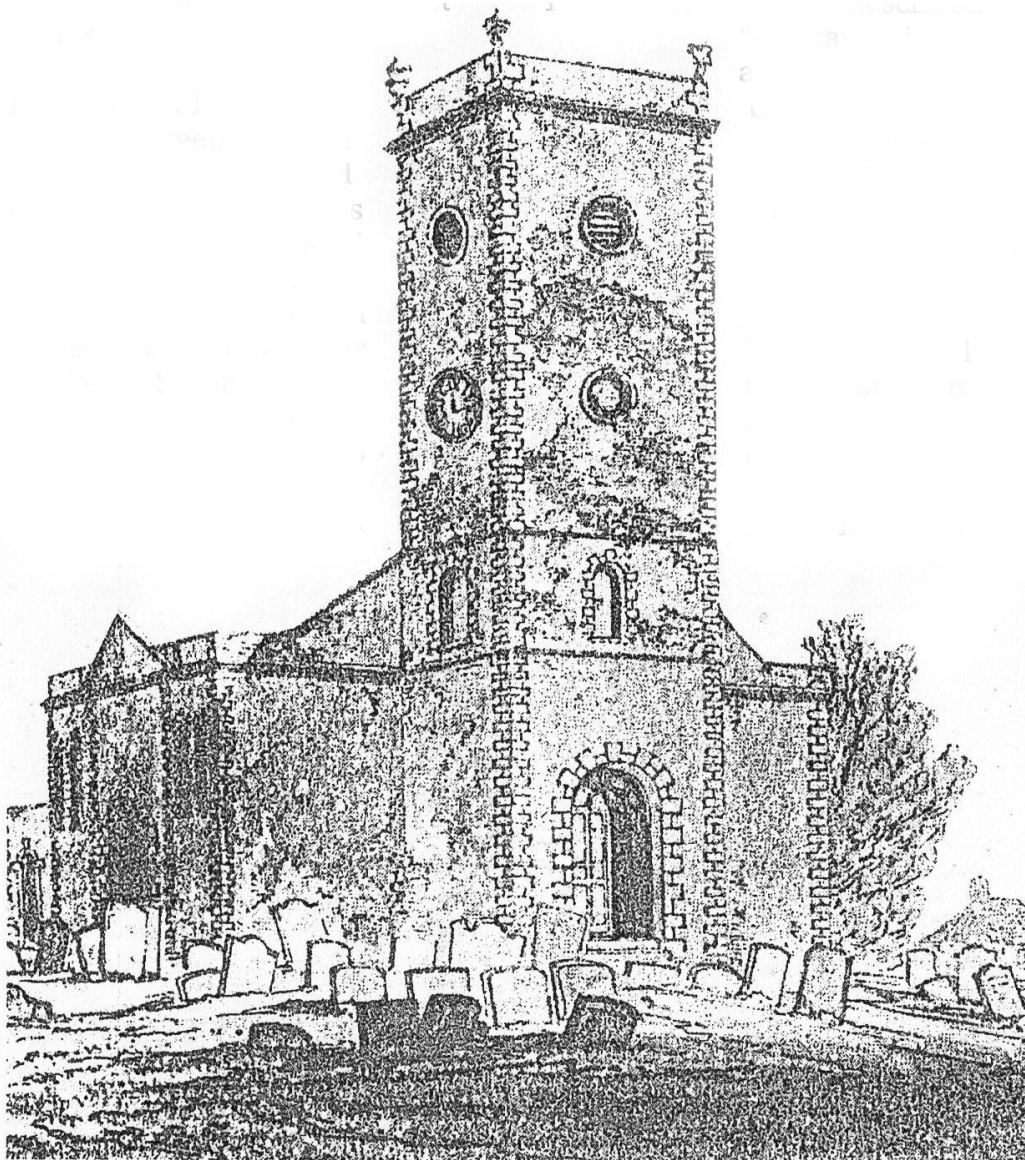
The old parish of St George is now long gone; now it's all a part of Bristol.

The parish church was built in 1756, standing almost adjacent to what is now the fountain at the road junction, one road going to Kingswood and the other to Hanham.

The church may be gone, but its bells have survived, only in another church. This is the story of those bells and the stories those bells must have witnessed. When the church opened its bells were not yet up. Betty Milson, the first person to be buried there had no bells rung for her, as was the custom. After they were hung, the sexton rang them for an hour, and the cost was a shilling.

The first bell must have been second-hand as its date is recorded as 1711. It had been cast by Abraham Rudhall of Gloucester. Two more bells were added in 1815, the first a tenor and a smaller one by James Wells of Wiltshire.

The church was built because of John Wesley. He had come through the district like a tornado; thousands of people came to hear his open-air sermons - outside because there was no building big enough to hold all these people. The authorities saw Wesley as a threat, even though he was an ordained minister of the Anglican Church.



A drawing of the original St George Church

A few years later, Wesley was riding past the church, as he often did, and heard the bells tolling for a funeral. He saw a number of boys from the local school, carrying the coffin of one of their friends up to the church, and so he resolved to speak to them about death and what it means.

Elizabeth Emra (1804-43) was one of the daughters of John Emra, Vicar of St George from 1809 to 1842. She married Marcus Holmes, a celebrated artist and wrote a book: 'Scenes in Our Parish, by a Country Parson's Daughter', now considered such a good book that it has been reproduced. It is a little gem.

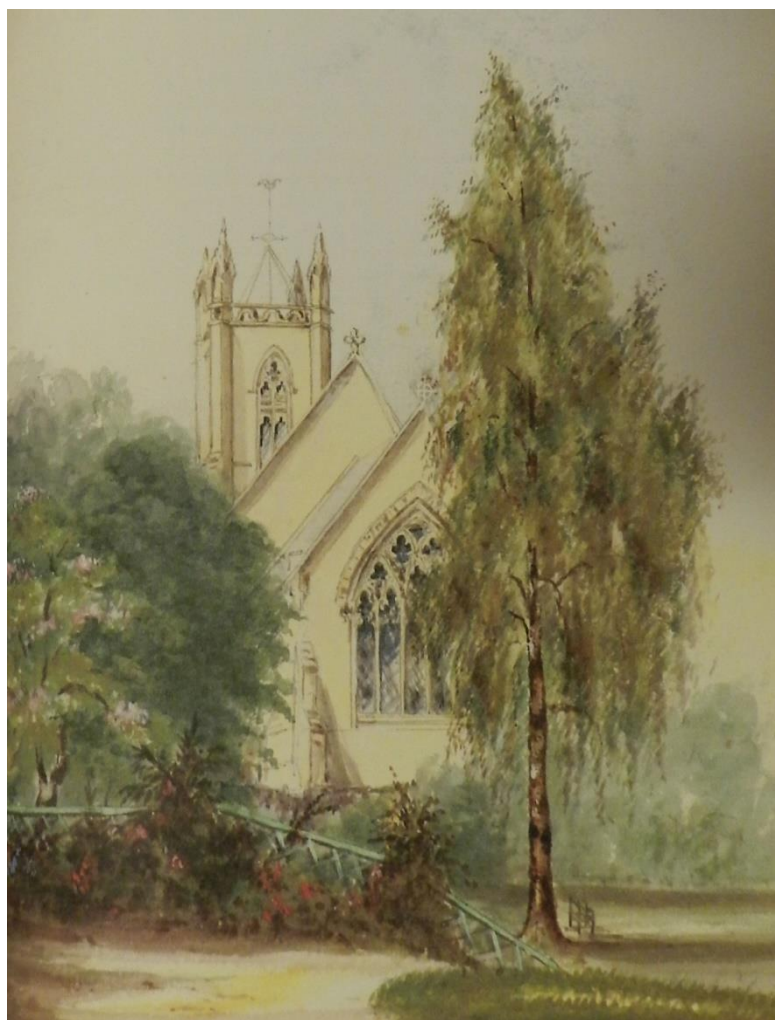
She writes a lot about the district without mentioning the actual place, and mentions the bells a few times, such as the melancholy bell on the death of a king, and this of an elderly man she remembered from childhood:

"I have his figure before me now, as on one bright Whit-Monday, when the clubs and their bands of music were coming across the green to church, he stood pulling the bell outside the belfry-door; for, amidst his many avocations, he was bell ringer; at least if ours may be called bell-ringing, when we boast but of two bells — one great and one small. He was tolling the little bell then, to call the congregation to church; and hearing the glad sound of the procession and the loyal music, and wishing to be there to spy, he wisely bethought him of the expedient of pulling the bell-rope, which fortunately was long enough, through the door into the church-yard.

"And there he stood in the sunshine, the fresh wind blowing his long silver hair, pulling with all his might, and his head turned quite the other way, to gaze at the floating flags and the thronging people ; and no doubt he complimented himself at thus having found a plan to combine duty and pleasure."
(Download the book at [https:// tinyurl.com/2mmyj78s](https://tinyurl.com/2mmyj78s))

In July 1839 my four-times grandparents married at the church. Joseph Jones and Susan Llewellyn, both from Upper Easton and both able to read and write their own names, the ceremony officiated by John Emra himself.

In 1845, with a new vicar, following the death of John Emra, the original church was pulled down, rebuilt and enlarged, and then, a year later, reopened again.



The 2nd St George Church, by a member of the Emra family

On December 22 1878 tragedy came to St George. A heater left on to warm the church for the Sunday service caught fire. It was visible for miles around.

St George did not have its own fire brigade and they called the Bristol brigade for help. The engine coming from town passed Law-ford's Gate police station within 12 and a half minutes of getting the call, but it was too late. The fire was already out of control and the beautiful edifice could not be saved.

Also the wind was blowing sparks towards the vicarage and to the Cherry Orchard pub across the road. Inspector Bird of the local police took charge and directed people in the firefighting effort and saved those buildings, but the church was not so lucky. The roof fell in and between four and five o'clock that very cold morning two of the bells in the tower descended with a terrible crash. The small bell was broken in pieces, the large one was cracked. Several hours later the bell clock fell upon it and shattered into pieces.

The fabric of the church was destroyed, but the north porch was reasonably undamaged and soon cleaned up so that the marriage of Joseph Bryant and Harriet Woodington could take place - though with no bells. There were also some funerals that day, but it was not the custom then to take the coffin into the church; the service was always held at the graveside, but again, no bells.

A new church was built, complete with six brand new bells, made in Bristol by Llewellins and James at their foundry in Castle Street. The new church opened in 1880, with the bells described as "pleasant in tone and the peal a capital one."

After the First World War, most of the local men who had died were remembered on many memorial tablets in schools, halls and most churches. St George's church did it slightly differently; they added two more bells, making it a full peal. The new bells would commemorate the men who had died, and they were also remembered on a marble tablet with 75 names on it.

On the afternoon of Saturday 11 December 1920, the church was full as Canon Dickinson dedicated the bells. As he entered the church he was met by a guard of Girl Guides. The Rev G.H. Wilmott Elwell, the vicar at this time, and who had himself served at the front in the war, conducted the service - the choirs of St George & St Philips led the singing, and then the six old bells rang a muffled peal, then the two new additions rang out as well.

Everything happening at the church from now on was down to the Rev Elwell. On Saturday 26 June 1921 the bell ringers went on an outing without telling the vicar, something which angered him. This selfish action, he said, disqualified them from church work, and he sacked them all.

They pleaded their case to him, to his superiors and to the press, but the vicar would not budge, and from then on until his death in 1967 he would upset and push most of the congregation to other churches.

The church closed in 1974. The bells were not in the best condition - the weather and the pigeons had all played their part. It was decided to remove the bells and give them to St Barnabas church in Warmley, but before that, the final bell-ringing was recorded for posterity.

At least the bells survived. The church tower which once held them would not be demolished so easily. It took three attempts to blow it up, much to the delight of local spectators. I think the tower was angry that someone had pinched its bells.

Find out more about the Emra family on the Friends of Troopers Hill website at www.troopers-hill.org.uk/emra/

Dave Stephenson also wrote two articles for the Bristol Times about the St George Workhouse which he has also given us permission to publish, see:

www.troopers-hill.org.uk/history/Workhouse.pdf

For more information on the history of St George see:

Friends of Troopers Hill - www.troopers-hill.org.uk/history.htm

Barton Hill History Group - www.bhhg.co.uk/

For more about the St George Churches:

Church Crawler - <http://www.churchcrawler.co.uk/bristolchurches/geogeo.htm>

Stained Glass of Percy Bacon & Brothers –
<https://celestial-light.org.uk/gazetteer/bristol/st-george/bristol-st-george.html>

*Friends of Troopers Hill
December 2024*