

55 ALIE STREET  
LONDON  
E1 8EB

HISTORIC CHAPELS TRUST

TRADITION: GERMAN LUTHERAN

BUILT: 1762-3

CONGREGATION ACTIVE  
UNTIL: 1996

LISTING: GRADE II\*

OS GRID REFERENCE:  
TQ340812

THE OLDEST GERMAN CHURCH  
IN THE UK

# ST GEORGE'S GERMAN LUTHERAN CHURCH



## TRANSPORT

St George's German Lutheran Church is 3 minutes from Aldgate East Underground and 5 minutes from Aldgate Underground; 10 minute walk from Fenchurch Street and Liverpool Street stations. Many bus routes pass nearby. Parking is severely restricted, including on Sundays, so public transport is recommended.

There are two steps into the Church, a ramp is available for wheelchair access to ground floor. There is no lift to gallery and organ on first floor.

## VISIT US

We welcome visits and groups by prior arrangement, contact [chapels@hct.org.uk](mailto:chapels@hct.org.uk)



## HISTORY & BACKGROUND

Founded in 1762-3, making it the oldest surviving German church building in Britain, St George's German Lutheran Church served the German community in the area who fled to London from the German lands.

German immigration to London was substantial both as a result of religious persecution and in light of business opportunities, and in the first half of the 18th century there were around 4,000 congregants in London's German churches.

Many were employed as sugar bakers, a sugar refining process that had been developed in the Hanseatic towns of Germany. The areas around Whitechapel were close to the Port of London, where huge quantities of raw sugar were being imported from the West Indies. The principal founder of the church was sugar refiner Dederich Beckmann, who put £650 towards the £1802 10s 9d cost of the lease and construction of the church. His nephew, Dr Gustavus Anthony Wachsel, was the first pastor. Wachsel married the daughter of another of the original trustees of the church, Mr John Arney. Soon Wachsel got into conflict with trustees and elders by preaching sermons in English, and introducing English hymns, English singers and musical instruments into the choir. Performers were said to have been accompanied by the eating of 'apples, oranges, nuts, etc, as in a Theatre', leading the church to obtain the name 'St George's Playhouse.' He also did not give the offering collected at services to the congregation, who took him to court over it.

Wachsel's successor, Dr. C. E. A. Schwabe, had been chaplain to the Prussian embassy, and was also chaplain to the Duchess of Kent, who in 1819 became patron of the school Schwabe had built next door to the church in 1805, and which was rebuilt under his successor, Louis Cappel, in 1877. In the years up to 1914 St George's was said to have been the most active German parish in Britain, with average congregations of around 130. During WWI, internment of many German men as 'enemy aliens' and the expulsion of women, children and older men (including the pastor) led to the congregation dwindling.

Finding purpose in the 1930s as a relief centre for German refugees under pastor Julius Rieger (1930 to 1953) an associate of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the theologian and opponent of National Socialism active in the parish from 1933-35, following the war attendance declined, until the church fell out of use in 1996 following a merger with a congregation in Bloomsbury.



*Dr Gustavus Anthony Wachsel, the first Pastor of St. George's.*

## ENQUIRE & HIRE

ST GEORGE'S IS REGISTERED FOR MARRIAGES IN THE GERMAN LUTHERAN TRADITION AND CAN BE HIRED FOR OTHER EVENTS

To find out more visit [www.hct.org.uk](http://www.hct.org.uk) or contact [chapels@hct.org.uk](mailto:chapels@hct.org.uk)

THE HISTORIC CHAPELS TRUST | ST. GEORGE'S GERMAN LUTHERAN CHURCH,  
55 ALIE STREET, ALDGATE, LONDON E1 8EB, UK | REGISTERED CHARITY NO. 1017321



### THE EXTERIOR

A charming eighteenth century church, the façade faces Alie Street. In the centre is a renewal of an inscription, which reads *Deutsche Lutherische St Georg's Kirche Begründet 1762* (St George's German Lutheran Church, founded 1762). The church had possessed a bell tower and weather vane, but this was taken down in 1934 owing to its poor condition. Both the bell and the weather vane, depicting St George slaying the dragon, can be found in the church. A door at the foot of the vestry leads to a small courtyard that was used as a cemetery until 1855. Above the first floor vestry window can be seen the names of the founders carved into the brickwork.



Left: The Bell Tower and Weather Vane, taken down in 1934.

Below: image courtesy Chris Baltzer.



### THE INTERIOR

The interior is largely unchanged since the nineteenth century, and reflects the Lutheran focus on scripture, evidenced by the prominence of the commandment boards and pulpit.

On entering the church, to the left are stairs leading to the organ and gallery, while on the right is the Mätzoldzimmer, the committee room named after Georg Mätzold, pastor from 1891 to 1917 and 1920 to 1930. The room contains the church bell and a strong box in which the archives were kept, while on the walls can be found images of all the pastors who had led the congregation in worship.

A stained glass window by Powell & Sons depicting the Crucifixion was moved here from the north wall in 1912.

In the main body of the church are three columns of original box pews divided by two aisles and the gallery, supported on eight Tuscan timber columns.

On the east wall is the focal point of the church, the pulpit, altar and commandment boards. The pulpit's raised position allowed the pastor to address the gallery as directly as the rest of the congregation. On either side are the 1763 commandment boards, written in German, while above are the Royal Arms of George III, most likely dating from the 1760s. Unique in a German church in England, the arms reflect the German community's loyalty to the Crown.

Another royal connection is evident on the benefaction board on the south side of the church, which records a £50 donation by King Frederick William IV of Prussia in 1842.

Many monuments and memorials can be found around the church, notably a tablet in English to Dederich Beckmann and his family. He is also commemorated by a slab in front of the altar. The present organ was installed in 1866 and built at a cost of £353 by the Walcker firm from Germany.

### SUBSEQUENT HISTORY

St George's was taken on by Historic Chapels Trust in 1999. The church library of German publications recording the community's life, were transferred to the British Library, and archives deposited at the Tower Hamlets Local History Library. An extensive £900,000 restoration programme was undertaken in 2003-4.