

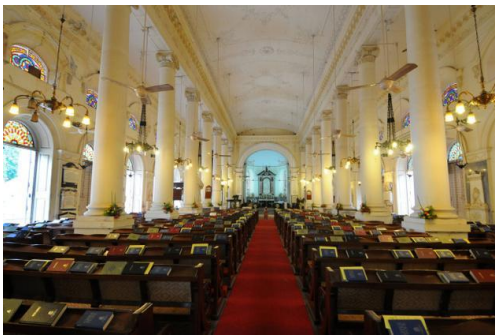
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## A church chronicle



The Hindu

The Neoclassical edifice was designed by Col. J.L. Caldwell, senior Company engineer, and Maj. Thomas de Havilland. Photos: R. Ragu



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An inside view of the cathedral.

## As the iconic St. George's Cathedral turns 200 this year, Deepa Alexander explores its history

A posse of policemen steps aside and the car swings into the cathedral that lends its name to the road on which it has stood for two centuries now. Past the queue snaking round the bend at the consulate next door and beyond the landscaped garden, the bold steeple of CSI St. George's Cathedral soars high above a sea of shivering green.

The turret clock, set up on three faces of the steeple and gifted to the church by the East India Company, chimes the half hour, sending great flocks of screeching parrots into flight. Cicadas call out to one another from the dense woods, as the breeze carries the ecstatic strains of the organ that signal the end of the morning service. It's as if the world is elsewhere — which was how it was when the cathedral was built on the Choultry Plain in 1815.

A day earlier, on the first Sunday of September, the church grounds were packed with the congregation celebrating the harvest festival. “The Inगत festival is a tradition of the church,” says Rev. S. Immanuel Devakadatcham, Presbyter-in-charge, when I meet him in the vestry. “It's more than just a fund-raising exercise — it's a day of thanksgiving.” Visitors patronise the stalls selling food and games. The trill of a merry-go-round outside competes with a rich baritone voice singing Jim Reeves' ‘My Cathedral’. “The funds support the church's activities — our leprosy project, the alms house (now known as Nimmadhi Illam), a clinic for the poor and other activities,” says Rev. Devakadatcham. “We inaugurated the bicentenary celebrations on July 19, and they will culminate in January 2016.”

Later this month, on September 27, the cathedral will mark yet another milestone. It was on this day in 1947 that the Church of South India was founded here, bringing together the Anglican, Presbyterian, Methodist and Congregational denominations. But, CSI St. George's Cathedral had established its place in the city's history long before.

With the end of the Napoleonic Wars in Europe and peace in the Carnatic at the turn of the century, an increasing number of British left the relative safety of Fort St. George to reside in the great garden houses that were built across the Plain. St. Mary's at the Fort, the oldest Anglican church east of the Suez, was no longer patronised by those who lived here, and the need to build another church in the vicinity arose. When the directors of the East India Company paid little attention to this, the people decided to raise the funds.

The Neoclassical edifice was designed by Col. J.L. Caldwell, senior Company engineer, and Maj. Thomas de Havilland. Inspired by the works of London architect James Gibbs, who designed St. Martin-in-the-Fields, the parish church of the British royal family, Caldwell and de Havilland replicated his design.

The building is history in stone, and despite its solidity, appears as a weightless dream in pale white. Its Ionic columns at the entrance and on the sides soar above, the scroll-like volutes darkened by moss and time. The massive portico leads to the main entrance, with a plaque dedicated to the Glover brothers, who died in the Tauranga campaign in New Zealand and Col. John Impett, who at 15 fought at Waterloo and died in 1866 as Sheriff of Madras. On the other side are bibles, in the four South Indian languages, placed on stands. This is flanked by the vestry on one side and the choristers' room on the other, where a beautiful and moving marble tablet commemorates Maj. George Broadfoot of the 34th Madras Infantry, who made a name during the Afghan Wars and fell in the Battle of Ferozeshah.

Built of lime and mortar, the cathedral has a long nave, two flanking aisles and two side entrances built on a tier of steps lined with palms. It is filled with statues, busts and memorials to men, women and clergy who administered, fought and died for the Empire. Stained-glass

windows filter daylight in shades so colourful. Sunbeams pierce the panels on the altar, with its ascension of Christ sculpted in alabaster. A statue of St. George in black, with sword and shield and the slain dragon coiled at his feet, stands above the altarpiece. The church, that was consecrated in 1816 by Calcutta's first Anglican bishop, Rev. Middleton, was raised to the status of a cathedral in 1835, with the appointment of Rev. Corrie as the first bishop of the Madras diocese. "This was where the Governors of Fort St. George and visiting Viceroys attended service. The diocese now extends between Nellore and Cuddalore and, at present, we have about 1,200 families as members," says Rev. Devakadatcham.

I sit in one of the teak-and-rattan pews, some part of the cathedral since 1865, and savour the lost-in-time serenity. The eagle-shaped lectern, the bishop's chair and the eight bells cast in London were gifts to the cathedral. "The bells sound the entire octave. At Christmas, the choristers play carols just by ringing them."

Music drifts from the 200-year-old pipe organ made by Hill and Company, and played by stalwarts such as V. Abraham. The notes rise to the curved roof and spill over to the quaint cemetery and the gardens that once extended from the consulate to the other end of the road. Beyond the parsonage, in a wooded grove stand many tombstones — the older ones in marble with sad angels and poignant epitaphs, the newer ones in granite. The well-maintained cemetery (de Havilland's wife was the first to be buried here), has a gateway constructed in 1832, with a massive bell. The sexton, Aaron, tells me its resonance is so deep, that at one time, all of Madras could hear it when it was tolled. Filled with luxurious vegetation and fading summer flowers, the cemetery was once helmed in by a guard rail made from musketry captured in the Battle of Seringapatam.

As I head out, a woodpecker beats a tattoo on a tree. I close the silvered gates where once ended a whirlwind romance of the Raj.