

LITURGY & ARCHITECTURE IN DIALOGUE

St John's Notting Hill 1845 – 2011

David Hebblethwaith (Phases 1 – 6)

William Taylor (Phase 7)

David Hebblethwaith, regular worshiper 1966 to the present writes:

Whatever view one takes on current proposals, an appreciation of how things have been and developed over 165 years can only be helpful. At least that is how I see it with a natural inclination to historical perspective. How can you begin to discuss what to do next if you don't know how you got to where you are now?

My sources for most of the period (before my own arrival in 1966) are the published descriptions and comment in *Pevsner, The Survey of London* and the very helpful survey by Architectural History Practice compiled in 2009 from St John's own records kept in the Metropolitan Archives in Clerkenwell. I supplement these with notes I took myself in the Clerkenwell Archives in the 1970's including, more pertinently, the "Preachers Book 1845 to 1861" and Registers of Services November 1897 to November 1958 (there is a regrettable gap between 1861 and 1897). I also have copies of a series of returns of revenues and other matters made to the Ecclesiastical Commissioners (now Church Commissioners) in 1845, 1866, 1877, 1887, 1890, 1901, 1906-8, 1921, 1929, 1937, and 1950.

Unfortunately there is a dearth of photographs of the interior of St John, before the post war period. The early 19th century engraving shows the architect's proposal rather than what was actually there in 1845. There is, however, much to be gleaned from the various plans attached to Faculty applications in 1883, 1929, 1937, and 1943.

Phase 1: 1845

Architecturally St John's was for its date "far more architecturally correct (that is, at the time, "modern") than, for example, St James Norland" (*Pevsner*). The comparison with St James a quarter of a mile to the west is relevant. Both churches were built 1844/5 and both carved out of St Mary Abbot's Parish at the instigation of the then Vicar of Kensington, Archdeacon Sinclair, who appointed the first vicars to both churches. That means both churches initially reflected the current liturgical climate of St Mary Abbots (not, as often happened later in the century as a "party" or churchmanship challenge to it) St James was essentially a galleried rectangle with no separate chancel (the present chancel was only built in 1876) – a Georgian "auditory" church with the fashionable, but superficial, characteristic of pointed windows.

St John's by contrast was a serious essay in trying to recreate a 13th century cruciform church, central tower/spire, deep transepts, long chancel - the "coming style" much more general 20-30 years later. The then arbiter of this "modern" trend - the very suspect high church journal *The Ecclesiologist* criticised it for being too cathedral-like, but was by no means disparaging. As a building St John's was ahead of this time. But its use was much more in line with St James's

Norland (and St Mary Abbott's, which was at that date a galleried Georgian church) There are two clues to this:

1. There were galleries at the west end, in both transepts and both chancel aisles, and seats everywhere -1500! (Only 400 free) Why? - because the only revenue the church had came from pew rents.

2. A telltale sign – through the thickness of the NE tower pier runs the pulpit staircase leading directly from vestry into pulpit. At that date the clergyman took the service from a reading desk in a surplice but changed (in the vestry) into a black gown before preaching. To do otherwise in 1845 would have been scandalously “high” and St John's then was not high - it was standard Church of England of its day.

For the rest, the Font was under the arch between Nave and South aisle (where it displaced the fewest possible seats) and there was a small organ in the west gallery (there is some doubt whether there was a very early stage of an organ over the vestry but that may have been the initial proposal never implemented.) The Chancel would have been empty but for the communion table with rails in front (what these looked like at that date we do not know, because the architect's engraving hides them with a screen which was never installed). The paving that survives to the sides of the Chancel is probably original as is the coloured glass in the side windows. The east window glass has been changed twice since. There were probably Lord's Prayer/Creed Boards on the east wall but we have no proof of that. In the early days Communion was celebrated fortnightly by 1855 and (a novel innovation for its day) an early celebration at Easter 1848 (104 communicants 8am and 216 later that morning). We do not know how many attended non- Communion Services but we must *not* assume 1500. The fact that a pew was rented and its income came in (a bit like stewardship) does not mean that the pew owner attended every week. It is later noted that the pews in the aisle where the organ now is were “seldom occupied.” The Transept galleries were much occupied by the school children. There was some sort of choir (unrobed) whose members hung their hats and coats at the west end under the gallery.

How was the church decorated? Probably some colour. The architect's engraving shows decorative schemes on the walls, some of which were not carried out, but the nave roof was painted with stencilling, traces of which can still be seen in strong sunlight.

Phase 2: Late 19th century

Probably little changed in the time of the first two vicars (Dr Holdsworth and Mr Dennison) who were appointed by the Vicar of St Mary Abbots, but subsequent vicars were appointed by the Bishop which probably opened the possibility of change – and indeed views on liturgy and church use were changing rapidly at the time. There was a new east window in 1860 in memory of the third vicar's wife (Mr Gell). In his time the number of communion services increased but in any case fashion was catching up with the building, without that necessarily implying high church practices.

In 1873 the organ was moved from the west gallery to its present position (when the present west gallery staircase was put in) and soon after in 1883, the choir began to wear surplices and vestry space was provided - the clergy moving upstairs to where the parish office now is. The choir was now in the west part of the chancel near the re-positioned organ, a very general trend in church arrangement in the later nineteenth century. There is also something to be said about the place of the pulpit. The plan on the Faculty of 1883 shows the pulpit on the east side of the north west tower pier - though in 1873 there is a reference to pulpit and reading desk being restored to its "original position" - was that against the NE pier or further west - it is not clear. The fact that the more western position was east of the NW pier must have been so that those in the transepts and galleries could see (and hear). Mr Gell left in 1877 and was succeeded (for 3 weeks only) by Crauford Tait, son of the Archbishop of Canterbury and then in June 1878 by Dr Robinson Thornton, later Archdeacon while still remaining Vicar. It was in his time that the main changes to the Chancel took place in the 1890's. Aston Webb, the well-known architect was churchwarden and the scheme was his design incorporating sculpture by Emmeline Halse. The reredos first, the side parts later and yet another window above, this time by the well known late nineteenth century designer C F Kempe. Also a new pavement incorporating symbols and monograms of St John was installed.

Once again however architectural design gets ahead of practice. A sedillia was provided as medieval precedent dictates - such seats were intended for the three vested ministers of a High Mass, which is not what St John's had in the 1890's. The sedillia were not used for their intended function until well after the Second World War. More telling was the provision of a credence shelf on the north side (not south as medieval practices would have suggested). Communion services were still "north end" at St John's.

Archdeacon Thornton left in 1904 and was succeeded by Mr Darling. In 1906 a major scheme of painting and decoration caused the church to be closed for a month in August, but I have no evidence that that entailed any change of arrangement. Mr Darling died in 1909 succeeded by Mr Dundas till 1914. In this time there is first mention of daily Morning Prayer (1913). He was succeeded in 1914 by Mr Dudden and in 1916 by Mr Makin. The church was closed again for cleaning in 1915 and in 1917 but there is no evidence for changed arrangements and in any case it was wartime. Extra services of prayer and higher communicant figures (638 at Easter 1917) suggest that church life was strong. From 1925 Meredith Jackson was the Vicar. It was a time of parish organisations (even in my time there remained Girls Friendly Society, Mothers Union and Church of England Temperance Society banners). There was a week of 90th birthday celebrations in 1935. In 1929 the vicar described the parish as "One third fairly well to do, remainder poor of whom 1000 are very poor."

Phase 3: Between the wars

The next phase of rearrangements in the building was precipitated by a structural crisis. The west end of the nave began to subside, "Heavy timbers shoring up the West End already in place as an emergency measure to secure safety of building" reports the vicar in February 1929. The structural measures taken included the removal of the North and South Transept Galleries. This reduced the seating capacity down to 838; amply sufficient for the needs of the church.

More intriguingly for the purposes of this paper, the plan attached by the Faculty application shows considerable modification of the liturgical furniture under the crossing and in the Chancel. The pulpit is now on the western side of the NW tower pier definitely facing west, a two-step platform extends west of the chancel almost to the western tower pier, and the choir and clergy stalls are on this platform under the tower. The western half of the chancel is shown as empty. There is no visual record of this arrangement known to me and the earliest photograph I have seen (post 1945) shows the choir and clergy stalls back into the western end of the chancel and the floor under the tower flush with the nave and transept floors. There is no Faculty for moving choir seating. It must have been a temporary experimental arrangement – presumably for acoustic reasons bringing clergy and choir nearer to the people. The position of the pulpit indicates that in normal circumstances only the nave was used by the congregation.

In 1937 a Faculty sanctioned the enclosing of the two vestries under the west gallery – for choir and wardens. In that same year a new departure in church service patterns was a 9.45 sung Eucharist before Choral Mattins – indicating that the parish was coming under some influence from the “Parish and People” movement to provide a main morning Communion service, later than 8am but early enough to allow for fasting Communion. The service was weekly at first but in the War – under the next vicar Mr Woods – was reduced to the first Sunday in the month only - returning to a weekly service after the War.

Mr Woods became vicar in 1939 and two innovations ensued. First, there was a marked emphasis on music - recitals and concerts were held. Second, in 1943 a side Chapel was installed for the first time. It was not where it now is but at the east end of the south aisle in front of the transept with the chapel altar in front of the organ. It was screened off from the transept by a curtain. I am told by Austin Lloyd – a choirboy in the war years now living in north Bedfordshire, corroborated by a friend of his also in the choir then, now living in Sussex – that Mr Woods acquired a second hand organ intending it to replace the existing organ in the south transept. For several years, it is recalled the floor of the transept was littered with the parts of this dismantled organ, but it was never erected (it was war time) and after Mr Woods died in September 1944 these organ parts were disposed of.

A curious feature of the rather sketchy plan attached to the faculty for the new chapel is that the choir stalls were shown to be back in the chancel and the pulpit in its 1845 position

Phase 4 – 1950's

There do not seem to have been any centenary celebrations in January 1945 but after the war a major scheme of restoration – under the new vicar Austin Oakley – was put in hand, culminating in early 1956.

The choir stalls were taken out of the chancel and placed, at ground level, under the tower (later in early 1960s these stalls were removed and replaced by more pews placed college – wise.) The pulpit was definitely now against the west side of the NW tower pier with its back piece and sounding board (I know of no documentation about the age of the present pulpit and/or the addition of back piece and sounding board but I have heard it stated that the design of them was by Randol Blacking which would suggest a date between the wars). The altar rails were replaced

by moveable kneeling benches at the west end of the chancel. The font was moved from its original position to the present position centrally under the west gallery. The pews in the side aisles were shortened and detached from the wall. Later in the very early 1960s, they were removed entirely.

The chapel was moved into the south transept with the altar against a curtain masking the transept door. The north transept was cleared of seating and a second side altar placed against the transept east wall. The high altar was not moved but an altar under the crossing was suggested and there were experiments with a moveable altar for the 9.45 Sung Eucharist (taken away before mattins)

More generally, there appeared more by way of pictures and “Shrines”, this had begun in Mr Woods’s time with some framed old master reproductions (of which the picture on the present kitchen is one survivor, and until the creation of the Sacred Space Gallery, a circular reproduction on the west wall of the north transept was another). Also in Mr Wood’s time a new crucifix with a renaissance period figure appeared (until 1990’s it was high on the north transept wall – now in store)

Under Austin Oakley there appeared the candelabra hanging under the tower (from 1955 onwards) the Icon cross originally in the south transept now behind the pulpit. A bronze statue of St George on a marble plinth (roughly where the Font had been) was stolen in the late 1960s, (plinth stored in west gallery), a small wooden statue of our lady and child (uncoloured) later replaced by the present statue in memory of Austin Oakley’s wife. A Della Robbia style ceramic plaque over the sacristy door and a Greek marble framed icon let into the west wall of the south transept. An icon of St Theodora halfway down the south wall of the nave, and various items of antique furniture (a large Germanic style cupboard and various chairs) all appeared.

The credence shelf to the north of the sanctuary was converted to an aumbrey for the reservation of the sacrament. Four rather than two candles were placed on the high altar. Various lamps and candlesticks marked the places of these “shrines”. Although the newly decorated walls were pale cream these various adornments began to give the church a distinctly “high church” feel that it had not had before. Vestments and incense were introduced. The phase culminated after 1963, when John Livingstone became Vicar, by the high altar candlesticks being increased to six and the aumbry for reservation being replaced by a veiled tabernacle on the Lady Chapel altar. The clergy and choir swapped vestries – the sacristy moved to the west end

Phase 5: 1968-80

Beginning with the insights of the “Parish and people” movement and influenced at one remove by the liturgical movement in European Catholic countries, there was a definite change in liturgical emphasis abroad after the 1950’s and this was given a major prominence (particularly in high church circles) by the Second Vatican Council and the reform in Roman Catholic Liturgy after 1965. In particular, the priest facing the people from the east side of the altar and bringing the altar and people into closer proximity.

In St John's this was first manifest by placing the clergy seats for the whole first part of the service west of the crossing on the south side. Only at the offertory did the altar party cross the tower space and go into the sanctuary. There was also a growing wish (to me it seemed to be a very generally shared wish, but no doubt there were those less happy) to bring the altar further west. The opportunity to do this arose in 1968 (acting under the generally expressed terms of the 1955 Faculty) when a skilled amateur carpenter (John Hall, helped by two sturdy sons) was part of the serving team and substantial timbers from a derelict hospital building became available at cost of transport only. Between January and Easter 1968 the present sanctuary platform was erected (with in-house labour). The high altar had at some time (not recorded) been extended in length. These extensions were removed to make the altar fit comfortably on the platform. At the same time it was realised that the pulpit canopy and back piece dominated the altar in its new position – so they were removed and stored. The clergy seating was placed on the eastern edge of the new platform and the chancel left clear of all furniture – to diminish awareness of its length and so that the reredos “read” as a backdrop to the new sanctuary. At a later date warmer terracotta colour was applied at some points in the building (gallery fronts and reredos) and the North Transept Chapel arranged as a freestanding altar with seating on three sides.

At this time also theft, more than other factors, reduced the number of shrines and richer furnishings. New furniture for the South Transept Chapel was obtained when the Community of the Resurrection moved away from Holland Park to Stepney. A revival of a children's choir at the end of the 1970's led to placing of choir seating once more in the Chancel, east of the clergy seats.

In John Livingstone's time as Vicar, St John's was linked with All Saints, and St Clement's (and originally also St Mark's, subsequently closed and demolished) in a Team Ministry. This meant a team of clergy often coming together for daily Morning and Evening Prayer, which was quite often sung (as was the daily Eucharist on Feast Days). This meant that the college style arrangement of the South Transept was appropriate.

Phase 6: 1980-1995

After Randolph Wise ceased to be Team Rector in 1981, the Team was disbanded and St John's was put in plurality (and later joined with) St Peter's. This led to a change in the style of using St John's building. There was no longer a daily celebration of the Eucharist – so less need for side chapels, and the North Transept was cleared to be a “social space.” The Font was largely disused in favour of a portable basin in front of the Altar. The tabernacle for reservation was replaced by an aumbry in the South Transept east wall.

There was also by this time – in parallel with the strictly liturgical use of the building – an increased willingness to use the building for other purposes- also a fruit of liturgical movement thinking. More separate spaces (for children's classes etc) were needed. The NW Gallery was enclosed for a meeting room, the SW Gallery for storage. The original Church School in Clarendon Road (a whole separate history in its own right) was first closed except for Parish Hall activity, and then sold and the proceeds used to purchase No 2 Lansdowne Crescent, opposite the church, as a Parish Centre. Even that was a little too far for some social activity (hence the use of

the North Transept in the 1980's) and there emerged the project of creating a Parish Centre below the nave. This was realised in time for the 150th anniversary in 1995.

The project necessitated upheaval and essential redecoration of the interior. A number of features were disposed of (the Faculty allowed for disposal of the Pulpit, but it was in the end retained and stored in the North Transept). Although – once completed- the Parish Centre did not impinge greatly on the Church's appearance internally, the project must rank as a major phase in the evolution of St John's Church building. It also necessitated a period of a year when the worshipping life of the congregation was "turned round" – congregation in chancel and transepts with the altar used in reverse –clergy with their backs to the nave. Such confined spaces no doubt had their effect on the ethos of the congregation even if hard to pin down. All was however back in order for the Bishop of London's visit on 29th January 1995 –150 years to the day from Bishop Blomfield's consecration of the church.

Harold Stringer retired in 2001. The link with St Peter's was loosened to a "group ministry" and the post 2000 story is evolving, and is for others to take up.

Phase 7: Restoring the Future, 2002-2011

William Taylor, vicar 2002 – present, writes:

In 2003, the new Parish of St John was created as an independent Parish within the Notting Hill Group Ministry. What would be its liturgical identity? Older roots were drawn on to re-establish a re-invigorate a sense of identity. The disused and abandoned became revitalised: *Liturgically*

- Church open daily. South Porch restored and opened. Petrol and garden tools stored there removed.
- Daily Morning & Evening Prayer (Canonical requirement on Church of England clergy) restored.
- Organ re-used instead of the piano. The piano is helpful for smaller assemblies.
- Number of regular worshippers and "occasionals" with the Pastoral Offices grew.
- Pulpit brought back into the Church from under a blanket in the North Transept, and began new use as an *Ambo*.
- Font restored and re-used. Opposition to both! High theology of baptism established as commission to ministry.
- Baptised children admitted to Communion on the strength of their baptism.
- New benches bought and old and broken pews removed after 30 years of discussion.
- The whole Church used liturgically, from east to west, to accommodate a larger number of clergy and servers, and to integrate the whole of the building.
- The clergy platform on the platform had been abandoned and cut in two, which caused visibility problems, with a consequent move east.
- Open intercession book established with votive candles as a prayer point in an open Church by the statue of the Blessed Virgin Mary.
- An icon of Christ replaced a curtain in the South Transept, followed by a deisis- John n the Baptist and the Blessed Virgin Mary.
- Previously abandoned items were restored to use – altar frontals, hanging lamps, thuribles, processional crosses etc.

- New silver ware for Communion bought after St Peter's silver was returned.

Community Use:

At the same time, much greater community use of the Church for other purposes was developed:

- Sacred Space Gallery created for the display of art, especially icons.
- MayFest programme of concerts/lectures/ exhibitions established.
- Many more concerts and other events, together with the Licensing of the Premises.
- Other Christian groups use the Church for worship.
- Community groups use the Church and Undercroft for meetings.

The rationale of this is the revitalisation of Sacred Space and the restoration of the numinous through the full involvement of all the baptised in an inspirational building. The different demands of the twenty-first Century require above all, flexibility, in the use of our building and high quality facilities.

Reading:

Sacred Space (ed. Philip North) – Continuum 2007

Re-Pitching the Tent – Richard Giles – Canterbury Press, 1996