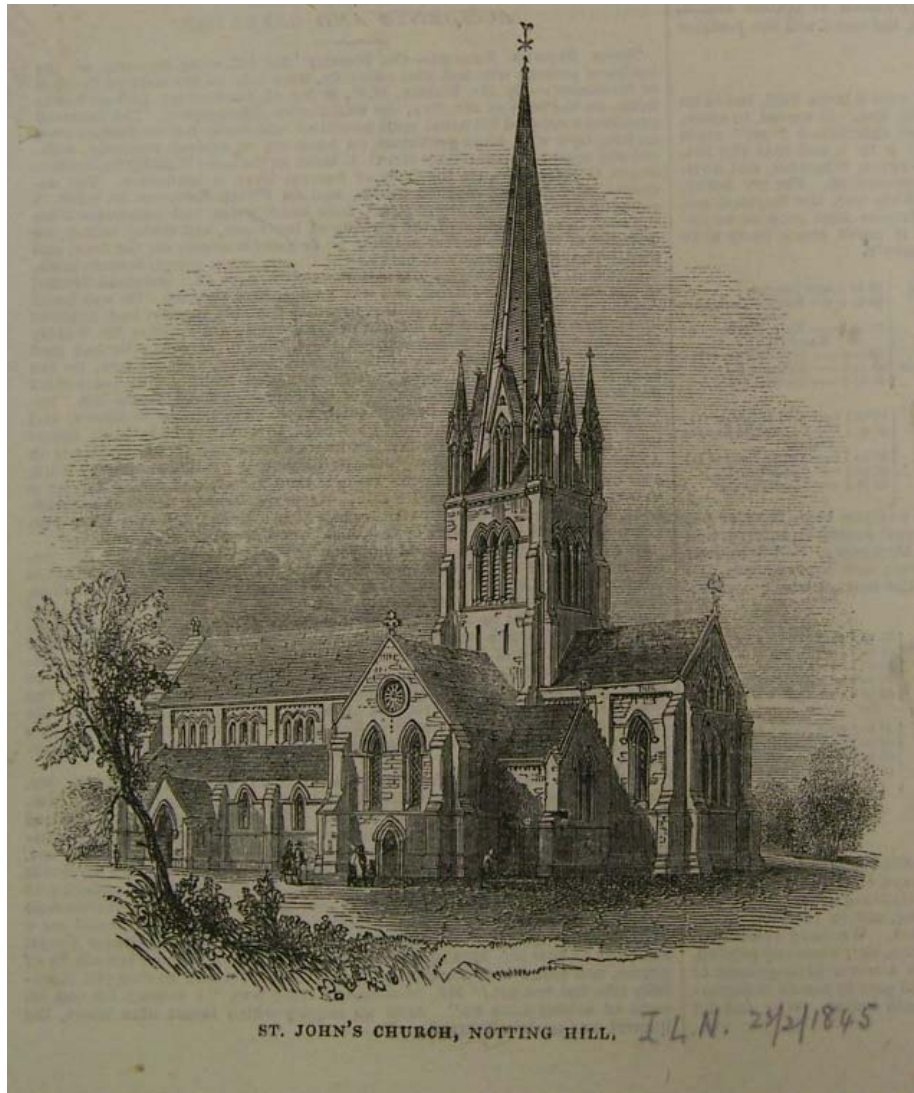


Historic Building Report

St John's Church, Ladbroke Grove



AHP Architectural
History
Practice

Historic building report

St John's Church, Ladbrooke Grove

Prepared for

Richard Griffiths Architects

by

The Architectural History Practice Limited

August 2009

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1.0 Introduction

The Architectural History Practice Ltd was commissioned in February 2009 by Simon Ablett of Richard Griffiths Architects to research the history of St John's Church in Ladbroke Grove, London W11. Preparation for the report was limited to a site visit and desk-based research, with information from sources including the RIBA Library, the London Metropolitan Archive (LMA), the Guildhall Library, Kensington Local Studies Library (KLSL), the National Monuments Record (NMR) and the Church Buildings Council (formerly the Council for the Care of Churches, CCC). AHP also gratefully acknowledges the help of parishioner David Hebblethwaite, William Taylor, vicar of St John's, and John Norman, organ consultant. The report was prepared by Lydia Wilson, with assistance from Neil Burton.

St John's Church in Ladbroke Grove was completed in 1845 to designs by the architectural partnership of John Hargrave Stevens and George Alexander. It was listed grade II in April 1969, and is situated in the Royal London Borough of Kensington's Ladbroke Grove Conservation Area.

1.1 Location

St John's Church is at the top of a hill, surrounded by the communal gardens and crescents of the Ladbroke Grove estate. The estate was laid out in the 1840s, and is therefore contemporary with the church at its centre.

2.0 Historical development

2.1 Early site history

St John's Church is situated at the centre of the Ladbroke Grove estate, named for its eighteenth century owner Richard Ladbroke, of Tadworth Court in Surrey, who acquired its rural fields and meadows in the middle of the 1700s. By the start of the nineteenth century, the estate had passed to James Weller Ladbroke, under whose stewardship principal roads were laid and land parcelled up into building plots. By the time Weller Ladbroke died in 1847, 'the layout and character of the estate were largely determined' (Survey of London).

From 1837, around 125 acres of the Ladbroke Grove estate – between Holland Park Avenue to the south and the current Westway to the north – was occupied by the Hippodrome horseracing course. The crest of the hill, where St John's Church is now located, was an ideal vantage point from which to see the racing. The course closed after four years and was replaced from the 1840s by a series of communal gardens, crescents and avenues – including the north-south spine of Ladbroke Grove – to designs first drawn by Thomas Allason in 1823.

3.0 St John's Church

3.1 Development

A copy of the Sentence of Consecration of the church at the LMA records a petition by (among others) John Sinclair, archdeacon of Middlesex and vicar of the parish of St Mary Abbots in Kensington, to build another church, the existing churches of the parish being 'inadequate to accommodate the inhabitants'.

The new church was to be the first in the parish north of the Uxbridge Road, its reach stretching as far north as Kensal Green Cemetery. The Survey of London says that the selection of the site and architect for the new church was 'evidently

the subject of much discussion', with a number of estate developers jostling to have the building located on their land.

In the event, the land for the church was donated by Robert Roy, the solicitor in charge of the development west of Ladbrooke Grove, and John Hargrave Stevens, one of the architects working for Jacob Connop, the developer of the land east of Ladbrooke Grove. An indenture of 21 August 1844 allocated a piece of ground on a former meadow known locally as 'Hilly Field'. The *Builder* of 13 January 1844 described the location as 'on an eminence opposite to Notting Hill...and [commanding] a view of the whole surrounding country'. The plot was 130 ft from north to south and 250 ft from west to east, comprising three quarters of an acre. It was bounded to the east by the 'new road called Ladbrooke Road' (now Ladbrooke Grove), and on the north, south and west by the remains of Hilly Field. The east end of the church was designed to close the view west along a new, wide avenue of houses (the current Kensington Park Gardens), built from 1845.

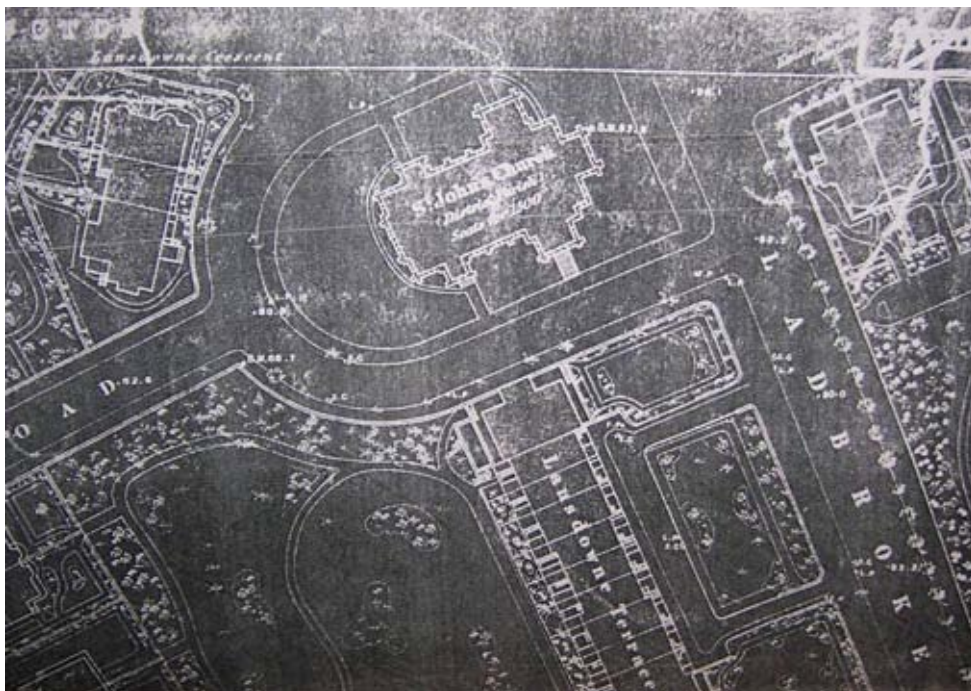


Fig. 1 The Ordnance Survey map of 1867 (5ft: 1 mile) - (LMA).

3.2 Design and Plan

On 14 October 1843 the *Builder* reported that Mr Stevens, of Clements Inn, the Strand, was the architect of the proposed new church. John Hargrave Stevens went into partnership with fellow architect George Alexander in c. 1845¹, and both architects are credited with the design for the finished building. Although Stevens and Alexander had experience in church building, the appointment, as described in 3.1, appears to have been the result of wrangling between the different developers of Ladbrooke Grove.

The church is cruciform in plan, the main body of the exterior clad in hammer-dressed Kentish rag stone. Above the crossing is a broached stone tower and spire, the total height of which was originally 156ft. The quoins, door and window dressings, spire and other ornament are Bath stone. The buttresses at each angle of the building were precautionary, but proved prudent in 1955 when movement in the sub-soil required the west front to be strengthened. Projecting entrance porches were originally situated at the west end of the north and south sides of the building, with further entrances in the north and south ends of each transept.

Built in thirteenth-century, Early English style, the five-bay nave has clerestory windows over projecting, single-storey aisles (*figs. 2-4*). The two-bay chancel has a large, tripartite east window, with two smaller gothic windows above. There are two long windows in the west end of the church, each with clear glass, and a small rose window with stained glass above. The latter is one of two windows in the church designed by William Warrington (1796-1869). Set into the gable ends of both transepts, above two gothic windows, are circular tracery windows.

¹ The Directory of British Architects suggests this date. However, in 1843 Stevens and Alexander had already jointly designed St Mary's Church in Herne Hill, so it might be assumed their partnership had begun earlier.



Fig. 2 Drawing of the church in c. 1845 (NMR).

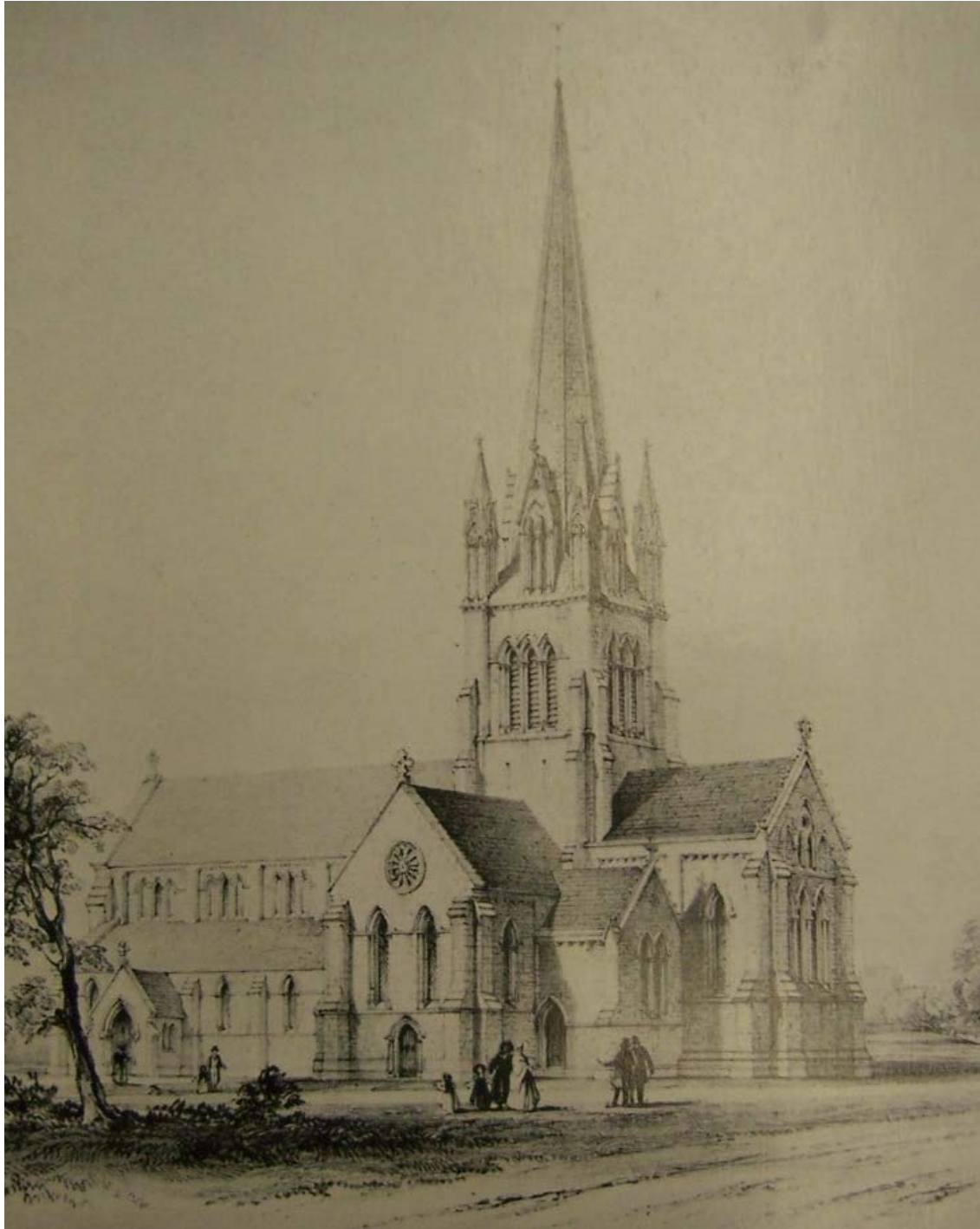


Fig. 3 Drawing of the church in 1844/5, included in the Survey of London.



Fig. 4 Drawing of the church in c. 1845 (CCC).

The interior comprises the nave with its two aisles; north and south transepts projecting from the crossing; the chancel, and two single-bay, two-storey 'mini-transepts' projecting north and south of the chancel. The nave and aisles are divided by columns carrying pointed arches, above which are the clerestory windows.

An illustration in the *Builder* on 8 February 1845 (*fig. 5*) shows a number of features not included in the finished church, including bosses set into the aisle spandrels, and a carved rood screen separating the nave and chancel. *Fig. 5* also shows an engraved (or similar) cornice below the clerestory windows. While the *Builder* reports that the 'un-Protestant' rood screen and 'coloured decorations' in the spandrels were not used, there is no mention of the decorative nave cornice. If this did exist, it has now been removed. The other window in the

church by William Warrington is one in the south aisle, presented by George Alexander, the architect.



Fig. 5 Illustration of the interior of the church, published in the Builder in February 1845.

The pews, not included in the drawing to give a sense of the interior space in the church, are described in the *Builder* as 'low, formed of deal and simply varnished'. The timber roof beams, stained and varnished, are exposed, and were originally decorated with painted symbols of the 'Evangelists', and sentences of scripture.

The tower is supported at the crossing by clustered columns. Leading off the chancel, the north mini-transept was designed to house a vestry on the ground floor, with the organ on the floor above (*Illustrated London News; Builder*). However, it appears that plans for the organ location were unseated by financial problems and the upper floor of the north mini-transept was originally occupied by pews. John Norman reports that the original intention was to equip the church with a new organ, but that financial constraints necessitated the purchase of an existing instrument from Holy Trinity Church, Clapham Common, originally built by William Gray and moved to St John's by J.C. Bishop² (Elvin, 1984). Norman believes that this second-hand organ was 'too tall for the planned single storey east-end position', and that the instrument was therefore installed in the west gallery right from the start. This would account for the fact that there is no faculty granting permission to move the organ from the north mini-transept to the west gallery, from where it was moved in 1873 (see 3.4).

The south mini-transept originally contained two floors of pews, separated from the chancel by a high, open screen.

Both transepts originally contained galleries, accessed via spiral stone stairs which are still externally visible; the transept galleries were removed for structural reasons in 1929 (see 3.4). Early accounts confirm that there was originally a west nave gallery, accessed via the now-closed spiral stair in the west wall, but no early drawings or plans could be found to confirm its exact size. A faculty plan of 1883 shows the same supporting columns at the west end of the nave that currently exist (with three slimmer columns to support the

² John Norman reports that J.C. Bishop was not paid for this work until 1849.

weight of the gallery – see *fig. 6*), so it is probable that the west gallery was always this size, especially as the organ seems originally to have been sited here.

The builders of the church were Higgs and Son, who charged £8,213. The total cost, with architects' fees, was £10,181. About half of this sum came from subscriptions; the rest from loans from various developers of Ladbroke Grove. The completed church, with 1,500 seats, 400 of which were free, was consecrated by the Bishop of London on 29 January 1845 (Survey of London).

The church was well-received by the *Builder* and the *Illustrated London News*. The former wrote that the exterior of the church was 'artistical and effective, and cannot fail to advance the reputation of the architects', while the *ILN* wrote:

[The new church] presents a noble architectural nucleus of this rapidly increasing locality; and, viewed from either point, but more especially from the west, its lofty and well proportioned spire is seen to picturesque advantage.

Pevsner calls the church 'architecturally undistinguished'.

A forensic description of the features of the church can be found in chapter nine of the Survey of London (pp 242-3).

3.3 Architects

The RIBA holds little information about either John Hargrave Stevens or George Alexander. Stevens became an associate of the RIBA in December 1864; his address between 1864 and 1868 was 468 Hackney Road. The Survey of London reports that he trained as a pupil of William Wilkins, and in 1843 was elected district surveyor for the western part of the City of London. With Alexander, Stevens designed St Mary's Church at Herne Hill (1843), and, as well as St John's Church, apparently designed 'many houses' on the Ladbroke Grove estate in the 1840s (Survey of London). He died in November 1875.

George Alexander submitted a number of drawings to the Royal Academy during his career, including the design for unnamed churches in 1831, 1842, 1844 and 1849; the interior of St Mary's Church, Herne Hill (1843), and almshouses and a new church at Salton Waldron near Shaftesbury (1847). In 1885, the *Builder* refers to Alexander's early retirement from architectural practice 'to the enjoyment of the life of a country gentleman on his estate in Wiltshire'. In his younger days, he was apparently well known as a successful architect (the *Builder*).

3.4 Alterations

Patterned glass in the north and south windows of the sanctuary is 'nearly contemporary' with the church (Survey of London).

Faculties exist for major alterations to the church, the first of which appears to have been the removal of the organ from the west gallery to the double height space of the mini-transept on the south side of the chancel in 1873³. Correspondence in the faculty file reveals that the firm of Bishop and Starr quoted £70 to move the existing Gray organ, along with £542 to repair it, the churchwardens having reported that it was 'so deficient'. Bishop and Starr also quoted £655 to build a new organ, offering £160 for the old one. Instead of these two expensive options, the churchwardens seem to have favoured a third route: the faculty file includes their 'preferred' plan to replace the old organ 'with another now in their possession formerly in the Female Orphan Asylum Chapel, Westminster Road'. This had been built in 1799 by John Avery. The list of estimated costs for work relevant to the 1873 faculty includes the Asylum Chapel organ (£300), some of the cost of which was to be offset by the sale of the old Gray organ (£140). However, this is an estimate and – other than the fact that the Avery organ was 'in the possession' of the churchwardens – there is no confirmation in the faculty file that the Gray organ was definitely replaced by the Avery instrument. In any case, the organ – in its new position in the south

³ The fact that the organ required a double-height space is further evidence that it was never installed in the north mini-transept, where a single-height space above the vestry had been set aside for the purpose (the *Builder*).

mini-transept – was enlarged by Hele in 1885 (as confirmed by a contract dated 11 August 1885, a copy of which is held by Simon Ablett of Richard Griffiths Architects). The instrument has a grade II* historic organ certificate.

Once the organ was moved in 1873, the west gallery was filled with pews, to make up for the two floors of pews removed for the new organ chamber. The current stone steps up to the west gallery were installed in 1873, obviating the need for the smaller spiral stairs at the west end of the nave, the entrance to which is now blocked up.

Pressure from the School Board to exceed the accommodation originally provided for students led the church to set aside the north transept gallery for the use of boys from the National School in 1873. That year, a separate door for the boys was made in the west side of the spiral stair to the gallery. All the other school sittings were then allocated to girls. Also in 1873, the pulpit and reading desk were restored to their 'original position'. Although the pulpit's original location is not specified, two sources suggest that it was by the north east column of the crossing: first, it is shown here in the *Builder* illustration (*fig. 5*) and secondly, a plan of 1883 (*fig. 6*) refers to the 'old entrance to the pulpit' via stairs in the north east column. If the pulpit was returned to the north east corner of the crossing in 1873, beside the steps to the sanctuary, this would also have explained the faculty's reference to restoring 'the middle aisle seats to their former places'. In any case, the pulpit appears to have been moved again 10 years later (*fig. 6*).

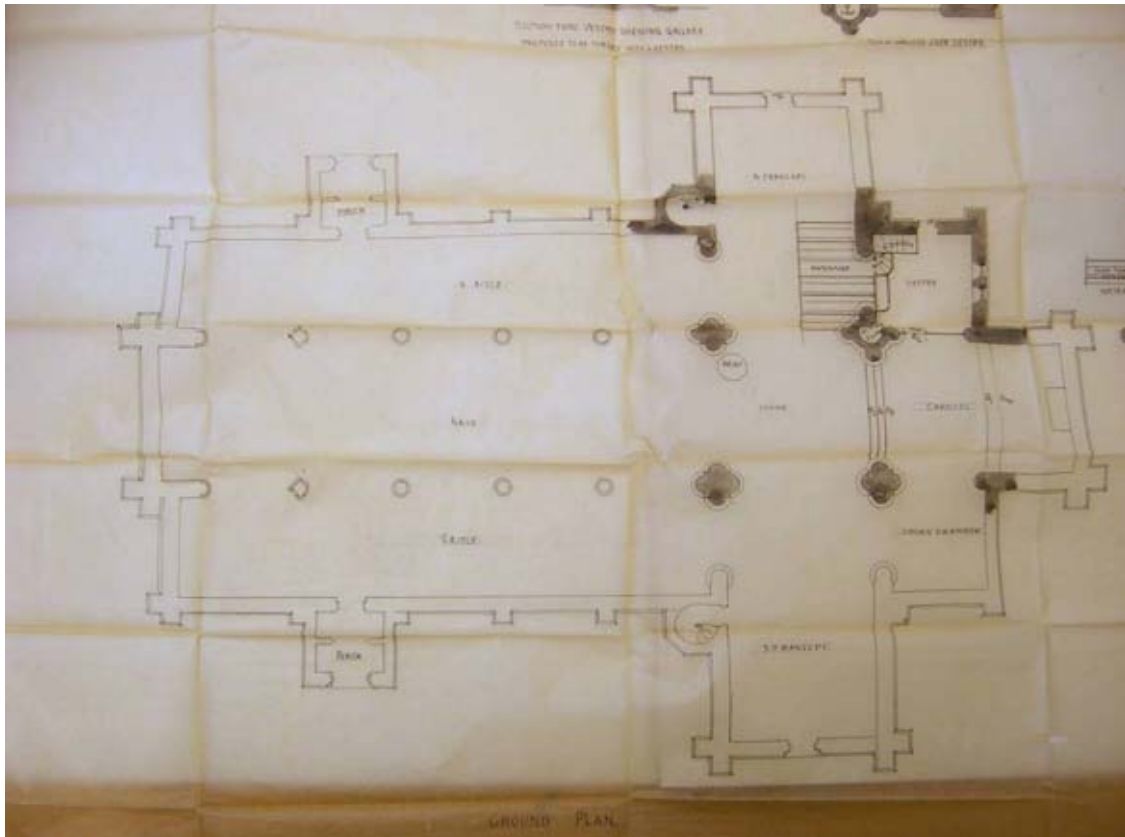


Fig. 6 A faculty plan of 1883 shows the ground floor layout of the church, together with the distinctive cluster of columns at the west end of the nave, supporting the gallery (Guildhall Library).

In 1883, it was agreed 'by a large majority of the congregation that a more zealous and religious feeling would be imparted to the services' if the men and boys of the choir wore surplices. However, the vestry did not have enough space for the clergy and choir to robe together before services. A faculty granted in 1883 allowed the church to remove the pews from the galleried top floor of the north mini-transept. These seats – around 20 in all – were, it was argued, located so that it was 'difficult for occupants to see the pulpit or hear', and were seldom occupied. A new floor was inserted when the pews were removed, and a partition was carried on above the woodwork of the gallery⁴ to enclose a new clergy vestry on the first floor. The ground floor was then used as the choir vestry. At the west end of the nave, under the gallery, was a space previously used by the choir to hang their hats and coats. As these were now

⁴ The gallery front – a Gothic arcade with trefoils in the spandrels (now painted in terracotta and white) – is similar but not the same as that of the west gallery, which could be considered evidence that the west gallery was re-fronted, perhaps as part of its enlargement when the original organ was moved.

accommodated in the vestry, seats for 10 were installed here, along with 'five or six' more seats in the space originally used as a passage to the gallery pews in the north mini-transept. The choir and vestry used the door in the north side of the chancel from which to enter the church for services. The cost of making the changes was £29.9.0.

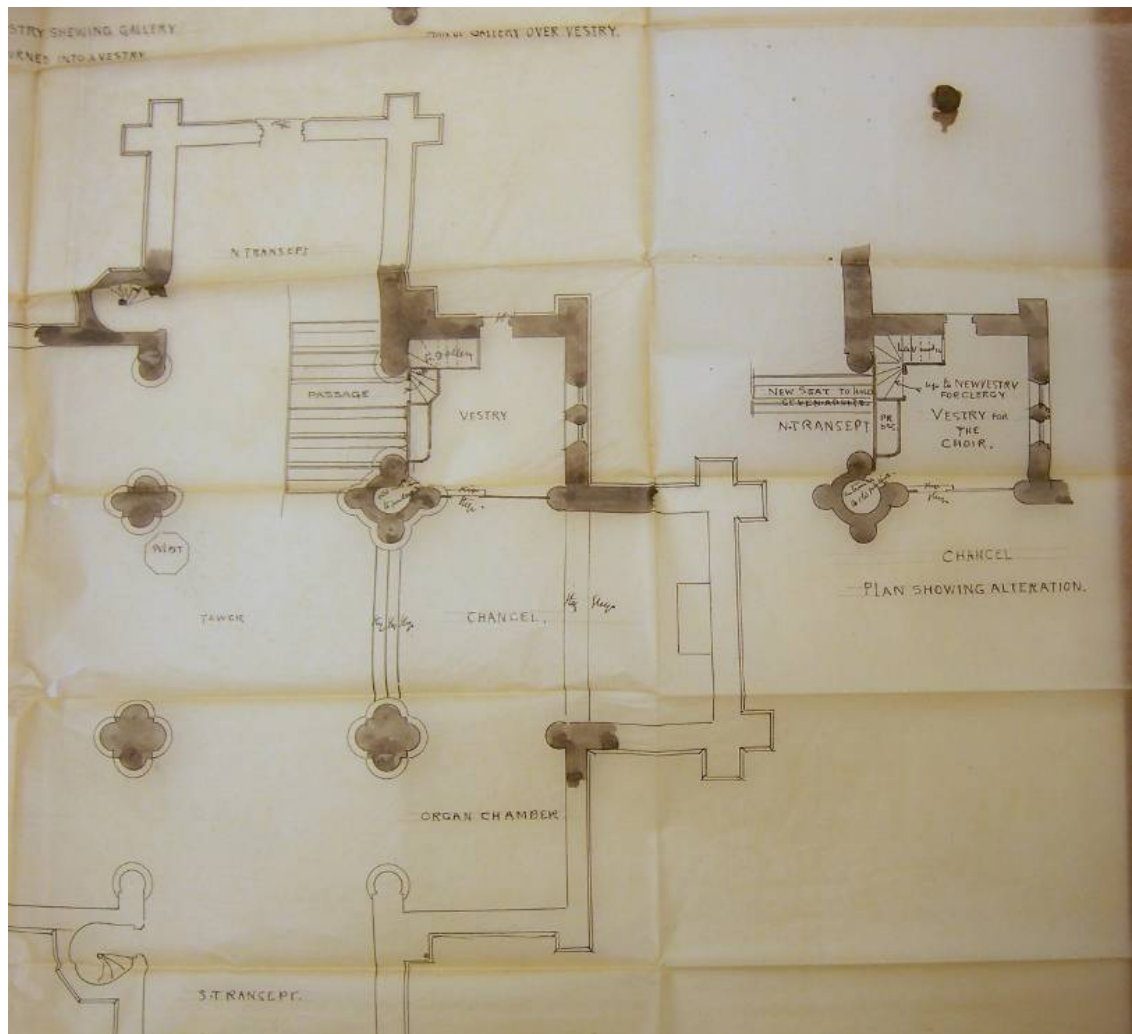


Fig. 7 Plan of the existing arrangement of the north mini-transept, and showing the proposed alterations, 1883 (Guildhall Library).

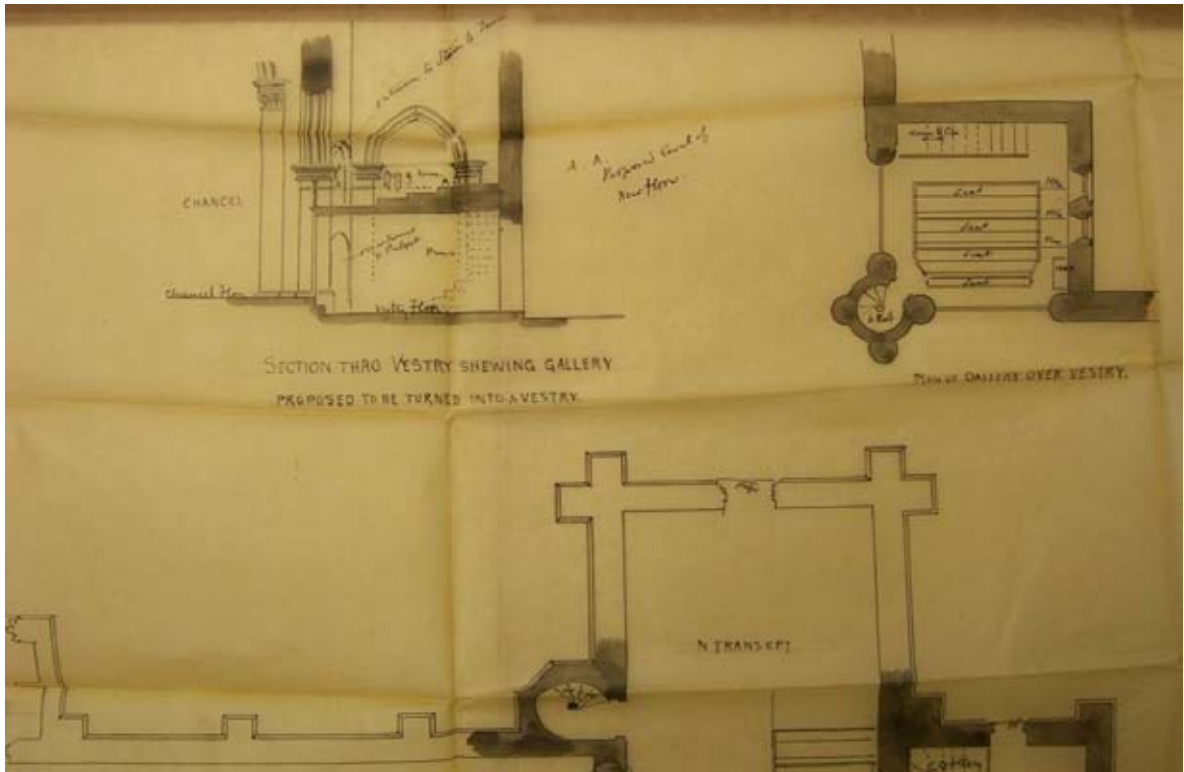


Fig. 8 A section and plan of the gallery over the original vestry, 1883 (Guildhall Library).



Fig. 9 Exterior of the church in c. 1889 (CCC).



Fig. 10 Exterior of the church in 1906 (CCC).

The reredos was erected in 1890 and designed by Aston Webb, with figures depicting the life of St John sculpted by Emmeline Halse. The north and south sides of the chancel floor feature original Minton tiles, presented to the church by a Mr Blashfield. It is believed these tiles are also under the organ. The rest of the chancel floor is a 1930s overlay.

The east windows contain stained glass by C.E. Kempe (1900), which replaced a window of 1860 to the memory of the wife of the first vicar, Reverend John Philip Gell (Survey of London).

In 1929 the galleries in the north and south transepts were removed. *Fig. 11* shows the proposed plans. The reasons for their removal are provided in the faculty: the solution to settlement at the west end of the nave, in the south transept and at the crossing was to strengthen the abutments of the arches between the north and south aisles of the transepts, where they were 'weakened' by the spiral gallery staircases. To do this, the staircases were to be blocked and the galleries removed altogether. Removal of the galleries reduced church sittings from 1000 to 838, which was deemed 'amply sufficient for the needs of the church'. The faculty also allowed for 'any necessary underpinning of the walls and such other restoration and repair work as is recommended', although this is not specific. The interventions were recommended by the firm of Aston Webb and Son, consultant architects. Webb was a member of the congregation.

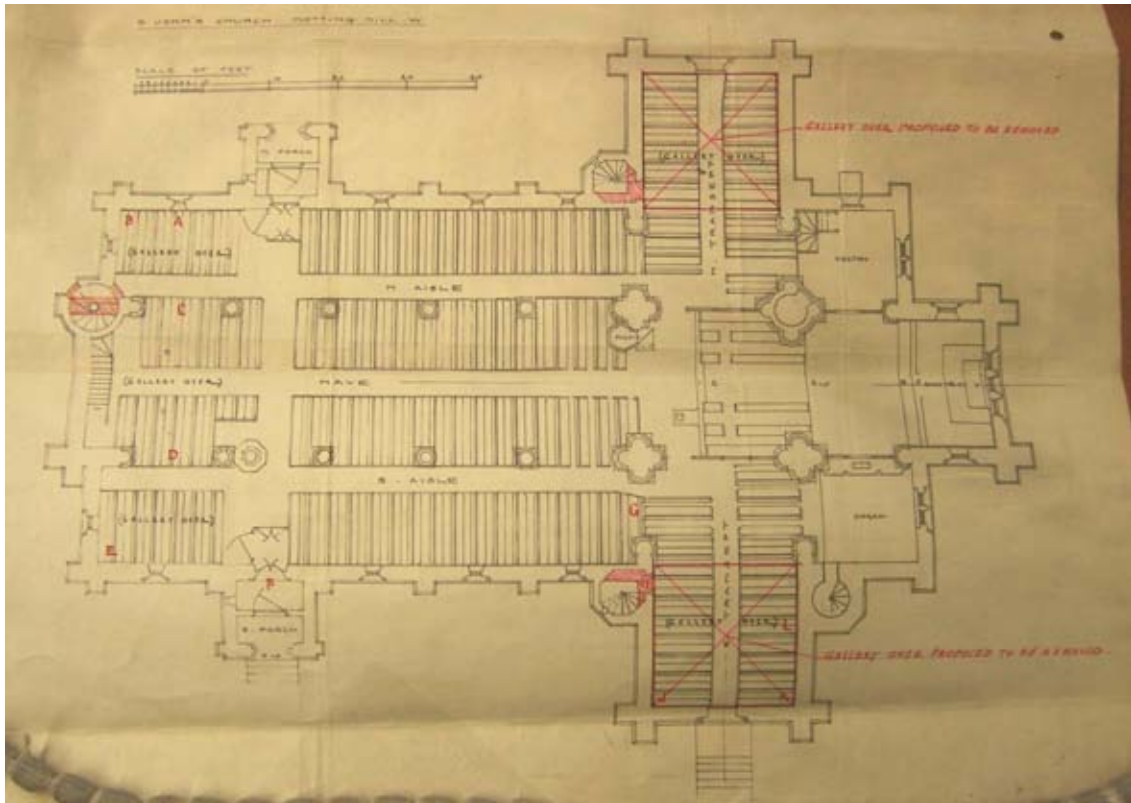


Fig. 11 Plan of the church in 1929 showing the extent of the existing galleries (Guildhall Library).

In 1937 the space under the west gallery, at the end of the north and south aisles, was enclosed with (the existing) oak panels to form vestries for church wardens and the choir. In 1937 the present baptistery was occupied by pews; these were slightly altered in the course of enclosing the neighbouring space (see *fig. 12*). The changes were designed by Knapp-Fisher, Powell and Russell Architects, of Bryanston Street, W1. The vestries were dedicated to the memory of Robert Dudley Baxter, mayor of the local borough from 1925-8 and sometime church warden; a Hopton wood and black marble tablet explaining this fact was mounted in 1937 on the north internal wall. The entire cost of the changes was defrayed by a private donor.

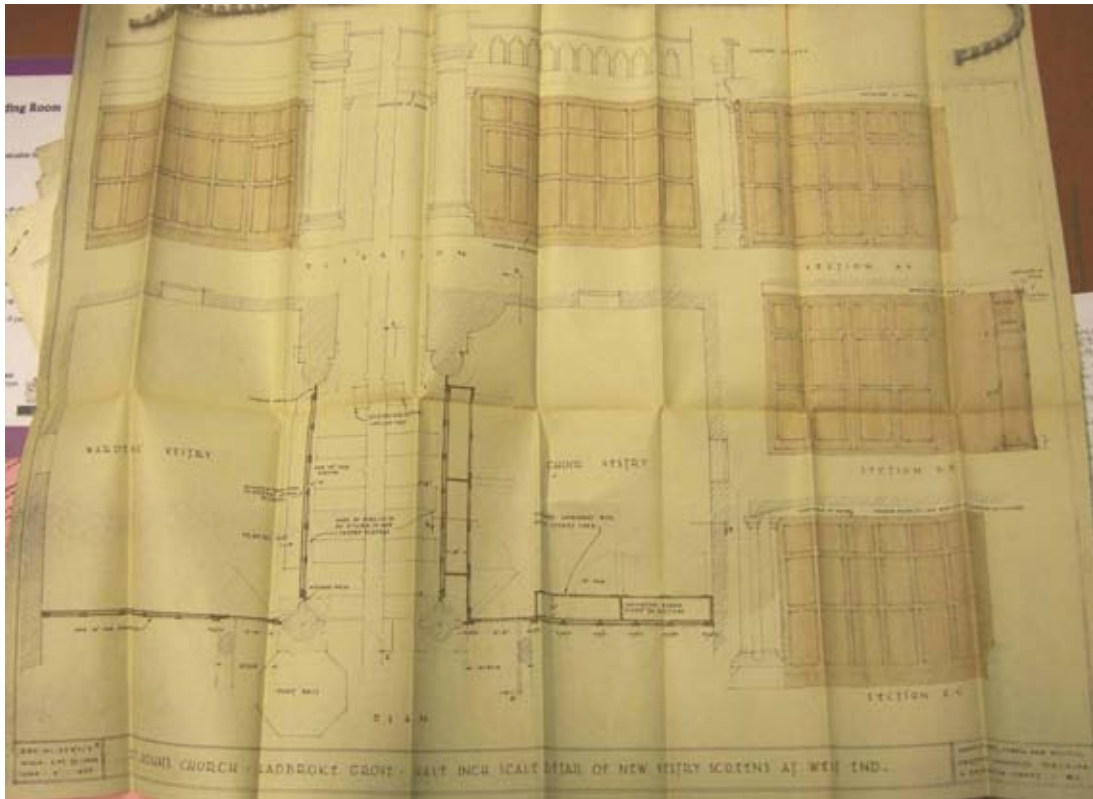


Fig. 12 Plan, elevations and sections of the partitions for the vestries enclosed in 1937 (Guildhall Library).

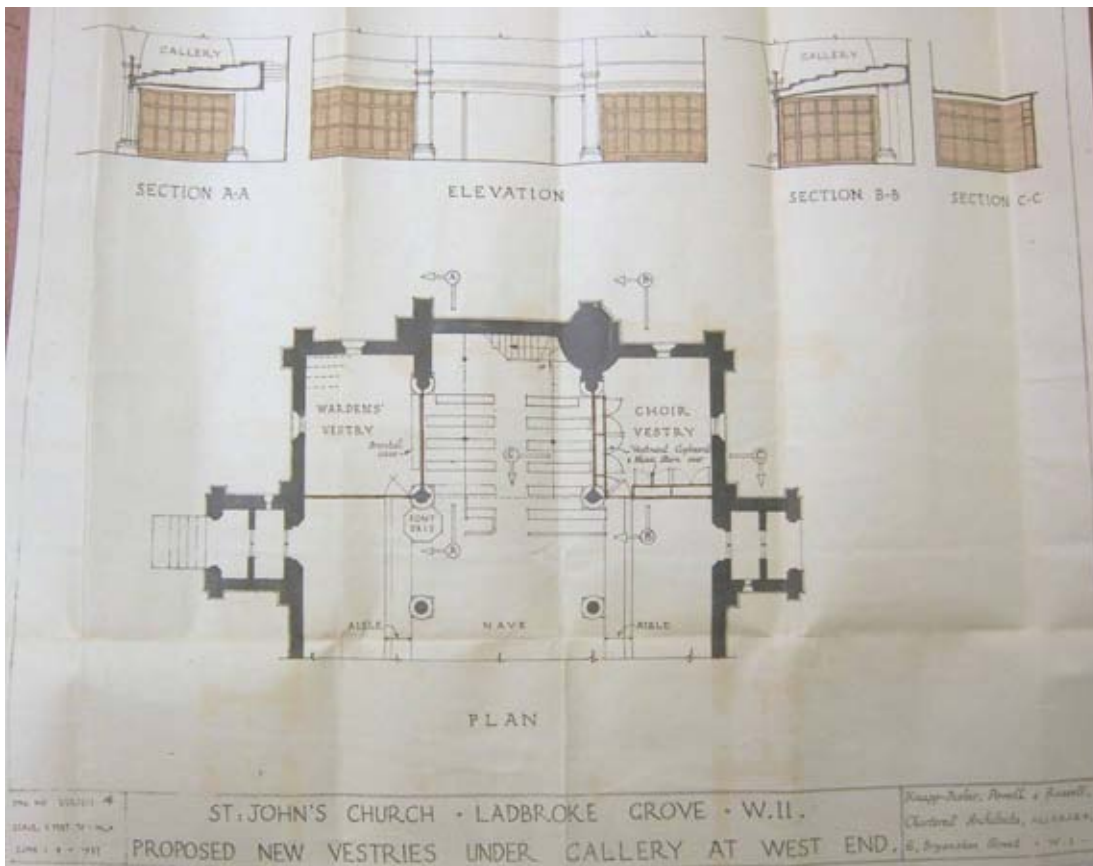


Fig. 13 Basic plan of the layout at the west end of the nave in 1937 (Guildhall Library).

A series of wartime photographs stored by the CCC show how the interior of the church looked in 1942 (see *figs. 14-17*, below).



Fig. 14 East end of the church in 1942 (CCC).



Fig. 15 North aisle, looking west, 1942 (CCC).



Fig. 16 North transept, 1942 (CCC).



Fig. 17 Reredos and altar, 1942 (CCC).



Figs. 18-19 St John's Church in 1942, shorn of a portion of its spire following bomb damage (CCC). The top 26ft of the spire was rebuilt in 1957 (Survey of London).

Fig. 19

In 1944 a crucifix pronounced as late sixteenth century by Sir Eric Maclagan, director of the Victoria and Albert Museum, was hung on one of the pillars in the church. In the 1950s it was hung on the south wall of the south transept; it was later moved to the north transept. Apparently now in poor condition, it has been in storage in the church store room since 1993. Some reproductions of sacred paintings by the Old Masters were also hung on the walls in 1944, the church being considered 'rather bare' by the vicar. The faculty does not specify the location of the paintings. Lastly, curtains were hung across the north and south transepts, to divide them from the north and south aisles. The south aisle curtain helped to enclose a side chapel and altar for which a separate faculty had been granted in 1943. This chapel was located west of the organ, bounded to the north and south with plain blue curtains and furnished with a small holy table, communion rails and chairs for 28 people (see *fig. 20*).

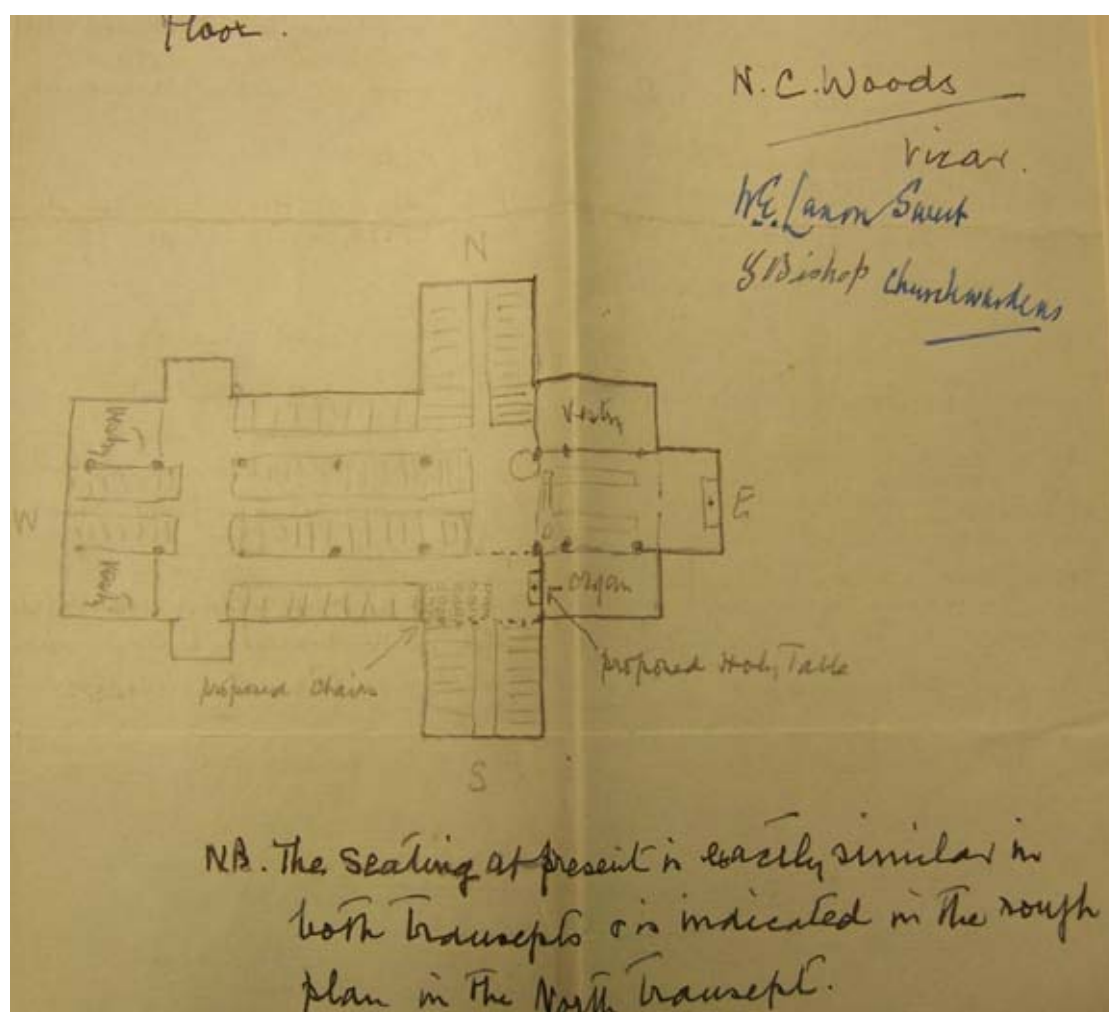


Fig. 20 Pencil plan sketch of the church in 1943, including the new chapel at the east end of the south aisle (Guildhall Library).

A 1950s scheme to move the organ to the south transept was abandoned upon the death of the then vicar, Norman Woods. The church was ‘rearranged and redecorated’ in 1955-6 by the firm of Milner and Craze, who painted the walls cream and the terracotta decoration grey. According to parishioner David Hebblethwaite, all trace of the original wall colouring was expunged by this work, but the original ceiling colour/decoration is still visible in strong evening light. The west wall was also underpinned as part of the 1955-6 works. The chapel which now occupies the south transept was created in 1955-6, and the font was moved to its present position as part of the same reorganisation (information supplied by David Hebblethwaite). A 1973 plan by the Survey of London shows the font in its present, central position at the back of the nave (*fig. 22*).



Fig. 21 East end of church in 1957 (CCC).

Milner and Craze envisaged an altar under the crossing, but this was only a temporary experiment: a photograph of 1957 shows the altar table at the bottom of the sanctuary steps but the present arrangement – with the altar placed centrally under the crossing on a raised platform – dates from early 1968. According to Mr Hebblethwaite, no faculty was obtained for this change.

Examination of the faculty plan of 1883 (*fig. 6*) and photographs in 1942 (*figs. 14 and 16*) and 1957 (*fig. 21*) show that the pulpit had been returned to the north east corner by 1942 (having been moved to the north west corner in 1883). It was transferred back to the north west corner of the crossing by 1957, a change no doubt effected by Milner and Craze. The pulpit, without its ornate timber tester but appearing otherwise original, remains in this position. Victorian changes in the pulpit’s location reflect liturgical fashions, especially

the notions of being removed from or close to one's flock during the sermon. The 1950s change appears to have been for practical reasons, necessitated by the changes to the position of the altar (the raised dais was not introduced until 1968).

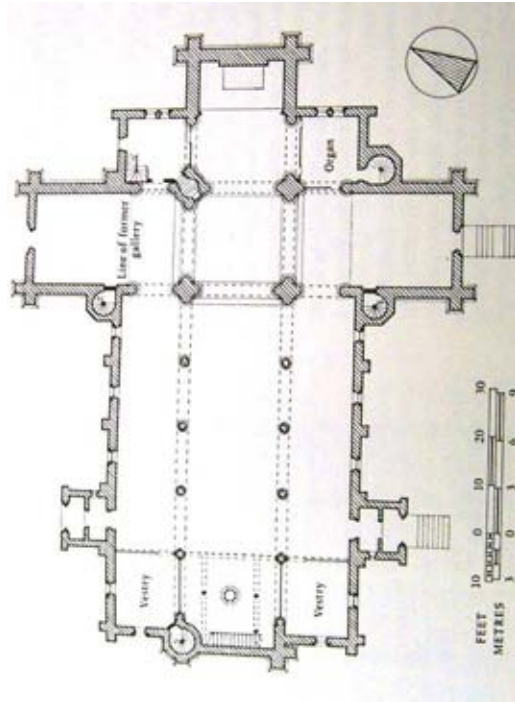


Fig. 22 Plan of the church in 1973 (Survey of London).



Fig. 23 Exterior of the church from the south west, 1965 (LMA).

According to a letter from the church to the CCC in 2005, the grounds of St John's were originally entirely surrounded by railings. These were removed between 1939 and 1945 to support the war effort. After the war a temporary post and wire fence was erected. This was replaced by the current plain steel railings in 1979 although cost constraints meant only the eastern portion of the church (as far as the north and south porches) was enclosed at that time. The western part was completed in 2009. Gates on both porches apparently survived until the 1960s, but AHP could find no visual record of how they looked.



Fig. 24 West end of the church, 1965 (LMA).



Fig. 25 Front of the church, 1965 (LMA).



Fig. 26 Church from the north west, 1965 (LMA).



Fig. 27 Exterior of the church in 1968 (KLSL).



Fig. 28 Interior of the church, 1973 (Survey of London).



Fig. 29 Undated, c. 1970s view of the church from Kensington Park Gardens (NMR).

In 1983 brief description was made of the church bell, which has a diameter of 25.375 inches and an inscription attributing the manufacture to J. Warner and Sons London (1850). The same year the church made an urgent appeal for funds to repair the building's stonework. According to notes at the CCC, coping stones over the north east vestry 'were in danger of falling, as they did in 1979 from the north transept'.

According to a feasibility study by Richard Griffiths Architects in March 2008, in the 1990s there was a programme of structural engineering works to rectify settlement. This allowed the existing undercroft to be converted into a new lower ground floor that extends under around two thirds of the church. The undercroft contains a number of 'multi-use' rooms, a kitchen and toilets, and has its own exterior and interior staircase access.

A number of more modern faculties relating to the church are kept at the Guildhall Library, but these may not be consulted without the permission of the parish. They cover, briefly:

1. Installation of central heating (1965/6);
2. installation of railings and sale of icon (1979);
3. renewal and upgrading of the building's electrics (1989);
4. structural works (1991/2);
5. a new parish centre, alterations to the heating system and relaying of the nave floor (1993);
6. new boiler (1994);
7. granting of licence to use the crypt as a nursery (1994);
8. new sinks in the vestry and kitchen, new sound system, interior decoration and exterior repairs (1996);
9. disposal of pulpit tester, backboard and cupboard (1998);
10. exterior repairs (2000);
11. a new lectern (2001);
12. internal plaster repairs (2003);
13. a replacement bell and works to the font (2004);

14. works to the church roof (2005);
15. installation of new pews (2005);
16. erection of a new railing in the memorial garden (2006);
17. completion of railings to western part of grounds (2007).

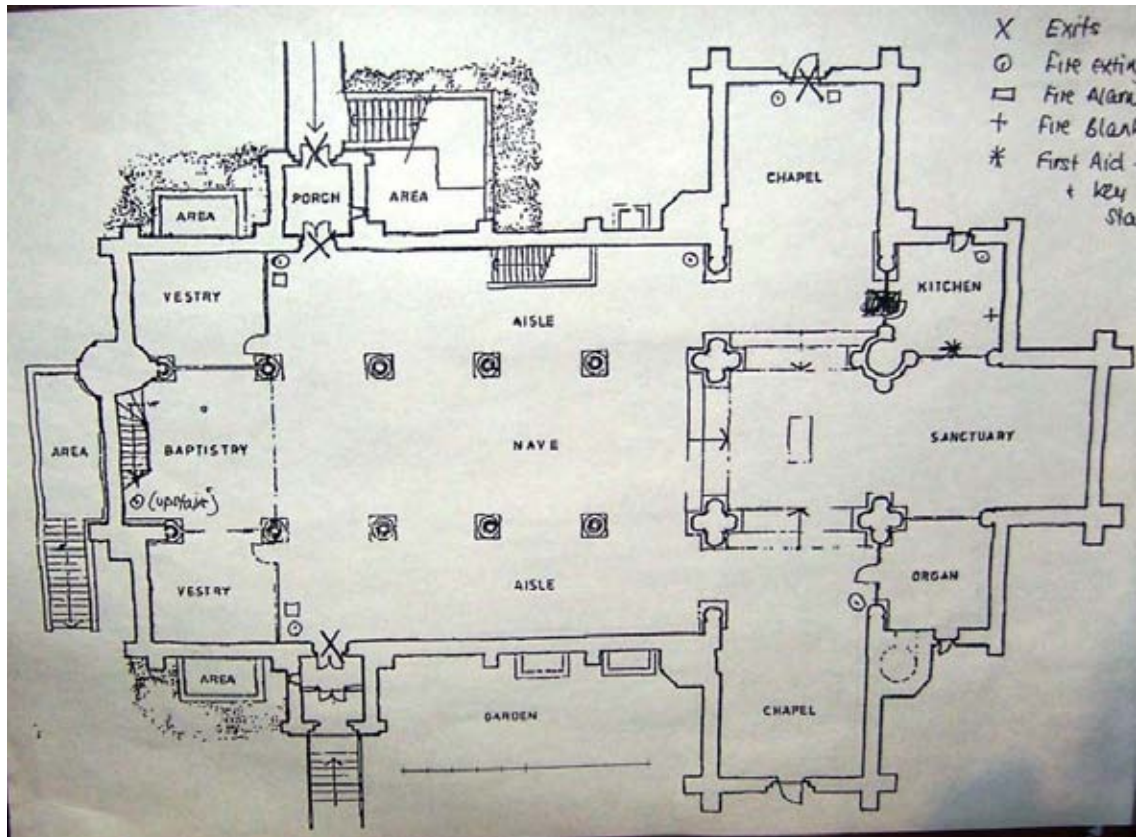


Fig. 30 Current plan of the church (in St John's Church).

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Builder (13 January 1844), p24

Builder (1 February 1845), p54

Builder (8 February 1845), p66

Builder (23 August 1890), p142

Builder (20 December 1890), p480

Illustrated London News (22 February 1845), p124

4.2 Unpublished sources

Feasibility Study, Richard Griffiths Architects, March 2008

Faculties

Photographs at the LMA

Various reports and texts at the CCC.

4.3 Websites

From: 'The Ladbrooke estate: The 1820s and 1830s', Survey of London: volume 37: Northern Kensington (1973), pp. 194-200. URL: <https://www.british-history.ac.uk/report.aspx?compid=49874> Date accessed: 19 February 2009.

Appendix 1: Listed Building Description

Building Name: CHURCH OF ST JOHN NOTTING HILL
Parish: KENSINGTON
District: KENSINGTON AND CHELSEA
County: GREATER LONDON
Postcode: W11 2PD

LBS Number: 421384
Grade: II
Date Listed: 15/04/1969
Date Delisted:
NGR: TQ2460880606

Listing Text:

TQ 2480 NE LADBROKE GROVE W11
(West side)
249/19/12 Church of St John Notting Hill
15.4.69
II

Alternatively known as: CHURCH OF ST JOHN THE EVANGELIST,
LADBROKE GROVE W11

Church. 1845 by J H Stevens and G Alexander. Built of Kentish ragstone coursed rubble with Bath stone ashlar. Early English style. Aisled nave, transepts, crossing tower and broached stone spire 150 feet in height, lower chancel of 2 bays.

INTERIOR: Arcade of thick columns and boarded roof. West gallery with trefoil-headed balustrading. Original pews remain to nave and west gallery. West window has quatrefoil of mid C19 stained glass. Octagonal stone font at west end of nave. North wall of nave has lancet window with stained glass of St Cecilia, artist unknown. Original glazed octagonal light over crossing. Original wooden pulpit resited in north transept. East window by C E Kempe of 1890 depicting Christ flanked by St Michael and St Gabriel. Reredos designed by Sir Aston Webb with figures designed by Emmeline Halse. Chancel retains encaustic tiled floor, tessellated floor and marble steps. Several wall monuments, including one to Philip Edward Webb, son of Sir Aston Webb, with rebus of spiders webs. This church forms the pivot of the Ladbroke Grove planned layout.

[BOE North London 4 North p458.]