

## **Faith in Maintenance presentation**

In many ways what I've been asked to do today – to give an introduction into the pattern of church building in London – is an impossible task as the Diocese is such a richly diverse place in terms of its churches. So what I intend to do is give you a whirlwind chronological tour of the Diocese's building stock so that you get a flavour of both its diversity and its common threads in terms of architectural styles, materials and construction techniques. By the end of the talk I hope you'll understand better how your own church building fits into this context.

### **The broad facts**

The Diocese covers 277 sq miles of Greater London north of the river. It extends as far west as Staines, as far north as Enfield and as far east as the Isle of Dogs. There are about 480 churches buildings in the Diocese. About 70% are listed; that's over 320 churches which are classified as being of national historic or architectural significance. Whether listed or not, church buildings require special understanding and care. Many of the churches are buildings which have been altered and added to over the centuries, and are not necessarily defined by one particular architectural style or period or building, or indeed one building construction technique.

### **Pre-1200**

The Diocese of London has existed since at least 314 AD and there has been a constant succession of bishops since 604.

Before 1066 and the beginning of the Norman period, there are very few remnants of building fabric, and what's left is mainly confined to the occasional Anglo-Saxon altar slab or reused pieces of Roman tiling. So we begin with the Norman period, of which there are only a handful of significant examples in the Diocese: one is Temple Church and another St Bartholomew the Great. Here is a slide of the interior of St Bart's. The key characteristics of Norman churches can be seen here: solidly built arcades; massive stone pillars; barrel vaulted roofs; and semi-circular arches. Why were Norman churches built with such so solidity? Well, on the one hand it helped to prevent moisture from penetrating the interior of the buildings and, on the other, it was necessary for engineering purposes. A semi-circular arch spreads the load sideways, meaning that thick walls are needed to hold up the arch.

### **Medieval churches**

It's when we enter the medieval period, from about 1200 to the reformation in 1530s, that we begin the first major period of church building in London. This took two forms: those within the City and those outside it. By the time of the great fire in 1666 there were 106 parish churches in the City. Here is St Sepulchre without Newgate. Its massive gothic tower has mid-C15th fabric, although restored in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. Outside the City a large number of medieval churches were built in villages, then quite separate from London but now of course engulfed in its urban sprawl. Examples include the medieval parish churches in Harrow, Stepney and Chelsea. This is St Mary's, Harrow,

mostly built of flint. The tower has Norman work and a rather handsome lead spire, but the main part of the fabric dates from the 13<sup>th</sup> century, with refashioning in the 15<sup>th</sup> century. There are still a small number of medieval churches in the Diocese which have maintained their rural setting, such as St Mary, Harefield.

The medieval period was dominated by the Gothic style. This style was revolutionary because of the new engineering possibilities brought about from the innovation of the Gothic pointed arch. The gothic pointed arch transfers stress vertically downwards meaning it doesn't need such thick walls to support it. This means less substantial columns are required, steeply pitched roofs are possible and buildings of great height can be erected. The gothic style evolved over the course of 350 or so years. By the end of the medieval period technological improvements, such as the amazing use of rib and groin vaulting and flying buttresses (offering greater support to the structure) meant that soaring height, vast window spaces and extravagant timber roof structures were possible. Most of the surviving medieval churches in London are built in the Perpendicular style, which was a later Gothic style, popular from about 1400 onwards. The emphasis of this style is verticality, intended to produce an impression of height and lightness of structure.

Here is St Margaret's, Westminster. Look at the thinness and height of the columns (compared to our earlier Norman example) and the verticality of the stonework in the windows.

Being the major city in the country with a developing infrastructure of trade and commerce, London did not have to draw so heavily on immediately local materials – as is the case in many Dioceses – for the construction of its churches. As you can see from the examples, various types of stone, flint and sometimes brick were used, each with their own weathering characteristics. However, it's fair to see that the commonest types of stone used were Ragstone (particularly in the City) with a more lavish stone dressing, such as Reigate stone, around windows and corners, and flint more broadly in the county of Middlesex.

### **Sir Christopher Wren**

There was very little building activity between the Reformation and the great fire of 1666. However during this period interest grew again in the classical style of architecture. This style was pioneered in the building of St Paul's, Covent Garden in the mid-17<sup>th</sup> century, said to be the first truly classical building in England. It was the Great Fire that really allowed the classical style to prevail in London, and resulted in the construction of a truly unique set of church buildings. Out of the 106 churches in the City of London, only 20 survived (only 8 of which are with us today). 51 new churches were rebuilt by Sir Christopher Wren and his assistants, almost exclusively using the classical style as their base. The majority of churches were built of Portland stone, with brick used in some cases. Many of them have fabulous towers and steeples, and often lead or copper roofs concealed behind balustrading. This is the interior of St Stephen's, Walbrook, rebuilt by Wren in 1672-79. You can see how the classical style is characterised by giant pillars with carved capitals, round-

headed windows and arcades and decorative plasterwork. The ceilings themselves would often be richly decorated with plasterwork and sometimes the new innovation of domes might be employed. The copper clad dome of St Stephen's is said to be the first built in the country, generally believed to be Wren's trial run for St Paul's. The impression given was one of a building full of light, airiness, and geometrical harmony (with rectangles, squares, circles and triangles all employed in harmony with each other), contrasting with the Gothic style. Internally, wooden galleries were often built to accommodate more people and fine woodwork used for panelling, pulpits and altars etc.

### **The 18<sup>th</sup> century**

This revolution of the design of churches in the City impacted on the design of churches elsewhere. The classical style lasted and became embellished throughout the 18<sup>th</sup> century as money became available to build churches in areas outside the tight boundaries of the City to keep up with London's growth. Here we have two early 18<sup>th</sup> century churches by Nicholas Hawksmoor: St George, Bloomsbury and St Anne, Limehouse, again both built with a durable Portland stone facing. And here is Hampstead parish church, then in its rural setting. Also around this time we see an increasing amount of slate being imported into London. Up until the end of the 17<sup>th</sup> century the Diocese was a mainly clay tiled city but slate (which was relatively cheap) became the favoured choice of roof covering from the 18<sup>th</sup> century onwards.

### **19<sup>th</sup> century**

In the 19<sup>th</sup> century the population of London really began to swell. As a result of industrialisation people flocked from the countryside to the city and the Establishment became deeply concerned about the need for a spiritual home for the new multitude of urban poor. Government grants, known as Commissioners' grants, became available for the building of churches in areas not presently served by one, facilitating the building of a considerable number of churches between 1818 and 1850. The styles varied: some were built in a classical style but most were built in the gothic style, which began to become popular once again. Some had considerable amounts spent on them, whereas others were built as cheaply as possible. Here are two examples along the same road and just 200 yards away from each other: St Pancras New Church and St Mary's, Somers Town. Who would believe they were both designed by the same architect? One is built in a primitive medieval style, with little decorative detail and out of London stock brick; the other is much grander, being built out of stone and with considerable ornamental detail. As you can see, you're never too sure what you'll find in London churches.

### **Victorian Churches**

If there is one predominant period of church building in London it was, as in other cities, the Victorian age, from 1837-1901.

I would estimate that in the case of about 40% of churches in the Diocese, the principal phase of construction took place in the Victorian period. Let us not forget that the Victorians were just as eager to restore, alter or even rebuild existing churches as they were to build new ones.

We know that the religious zeal of the Victorians spread all over the country but in London, as in the expanding industrial cities of the north, they really were at their most energetic. Some of the finest architects of day – and that this country ever produced – designed churches in the capital, such as George Gilbert Scott, William Butterfield and George Edmund Street. This was also the great building period for other denominations, such as the Roman Catholics, Methodists and Baptists.

For the vast majority of churches, the Victorians favoured the Gothic style, believing this medieval style to be the true and proper expression of English Christian architecture. The Victorians were not shy about making bold statements with their London churches. Victorian engineering and building skills meant that some terrifically complicated and awe-inspiring buildings were built. The innovation of cast-iron structures allowed interiors such to be built (see St Mary, Ealing, a church containing a 1735-40 body completely disguised in the Victorian makeover). As you can see, the Victorians poured much effort into decorating their interiors. This might be through flamboyant polychromatic decoration, elaborate floor tiling schemes or the use of ornate materials, such as marbles from all over Europe, if not the world. For an excellent example, please see St James the Less (1859-61).

However, as well as providing many beautiful edifices, the flipside of the Victorians' church building zeal is that their churches are not always easy to keep eye on. The fact that it's very difficult to observe the condition of the roof of a tall tower like this or a valley gutter hidden on a lofty, complicated roof structure has not made your job as churchwardens very easy (though I hope today will offer you some tips on that front).

Externally, materials sourced from a wide area of the country or abroad might be used – e.g. Caen stone or Kentish rag. A whole variety of materials can be found in the decoration and construction of Victorian churches. However, it is fair to say that the most popular building materials were Welsh slates for the roofs and brick for the main structure. This might be London stock brick, red brick or a combination of different sorts of polychromatic brick, such as see in this example at St Augustine, South Kensington (here, bands of red brick are alternated with bands of bath stone).

Not all churches were built in the gothic style. Here is one built in the Italianate style and here is one with an Arts and Crafts influenced interior, being more domestic in its scale and in this case drawing upon early C18th design motives in its woodwork.

The gothic style developed in its representation over the course of time and remained popular into the first few decades over the 20<sup>th</sup> century. After World War I, and most certainly after World War II, we begin to see a definite shift in terms of the way church buildings were built and designed.

Up until this time church buildings, like long lasting domestic buildings, had generally been built using traditional methods, i.e. rather than

providing an impervious outer layer to prevent moisture penetrating the walls, moisture would be absorbed by the fabric and then allowed to evaporate from the surface. Lime mortars would usually be used between the blocks of stone and bricks, ensuring that the mortar in the joints would be more permeable than the materials they bond. This meant that the walls would be dependent upon evaporation of moisture from the joints to remain dry.

The Diocese is unusual in having quite a large number of post-World War II churches. Although some of these replaced bomb damaged churches most of them are simply the result of London's ever expanding population. Many of these use concrete as their primary material, providing an impervious layer or barrier to prevent any moisture penetrating the walls at all, in contrast to the traditional system of allowing moisture into a building but then allowing it to evaporate out. As well as providing a new way of protecting a building from damp (though not always successfully!), the use of concrete also allowed for interesting new forms, shapes and spaces in churches. For example, here are St Mary the Virgin, Isleworth (1955, Goodhart-Rendel) and St Paul, Harringay, built in 1994 (Peter Inskip).

So what is a typical London church? Well, as you've gathered, it's not really possible to say because of the sheer diversity in the Diocese. However, I leave you with two images. Here is St Mary's New Church, Stoke Newington – a vast church of the 1850s by Sir George Gilbert Scott with the tower completed in the 1890s – searing over the surrounding area, reminiscent of the power and splendour of the City churches and our many Victorian churches. And directly opposite in Clissold Park stands St Mary's Old Church, a building spanning many periods and many different architectural styles. Originally there was a complete medieval church on the site with the oldest surviving part being the red brick Tudor south aisle. In the 18<sup>th</sup> century the church was classicised (round headed windows, external render, low-pitched roof) before the Victorians gothicised it. It suffered bomb damage and had the north aisle rebuilt in the 1950s. Our churches are richly varied and sometimes very complicated. It is only when you start to look at them closely that you begin to understand these layers of development.

In order to link this to the rest of what you'll be learning about today, I thought I'd leave you with this final thought about understanding your building. At some point in time (possibly in the 19<sup>th</sup> century) it was thought sensible to render parts of the outside of St Mary's Old Church in cement. However, the brickwork behind relies on the traditional method of allowing moisture to enter the buildings and then evaporate back out again. The impervious cement render has trapped the moisture in the brickwork, leading to the brickwork decaying and the concrete cracking. Significant and costly repairs are now necessary. Church buildings can be very complicated and it is essential we understand them in order to care for them properly. Your role as churchwardens and volunteers is critical in providing daily care for these buildings and liaising with professionals so that people can appreciate the wonder of our heritage and so these buildings can serve us in the best possible way as living places of worship.

Charles Smith  
Conservation Officer  
Diocese of London (2008)