

A Brief History Of St John's Church



St John's c.1840

St John's Parish was originally part of the ancient Parish of West Ham, which covered an area from the River Lea on the West to Green Street (or White Post Lane) on the East, and from the River Thames in the South to Leyton and Wanstead in the North. In 1832 the Vicar of West Ham (who was also the Archdeacon) saw that Stratford was growing, and he said there was an urgent need for a Church building at the centre of Stratford. Local people gave much of the money for the new building, and it was built in 1834 as a Mission Church for West Ham.

Edward Blore, who was one of the leading architects of his day, designed St John's. Blore was given the job of finishing off Buckingham Palace after Nash, a very famous architect, was sacked for being too extravagant. St John's was designed in the Early English style with a tall, ornate southwestern spire. Interesting architectural features are, externally, the lancets (like stone bridges) and internally the moulded piers (grooves in the pillars) and depressed arches (the tops of the arches are flatter than usual). Originally there was a gallery at the back of the Church, which was removed in 1887, and plans show an organ on the gallery. Building

work in the mid 1990s revealed the bricked-up door leading from the tower on to the gallery.

The railways reached Stratford in 1839 and five years later London forced its smellier industries to move across the Lea into West Ham, boosting the population of the area tremendously.

Ten years after St John's was built it separated from the Parish of West Ham.

One of the famous names connected with St John's is the poet, Gerard Manley Hopkins. He was born in 1844 at 87 The Grove, Stratford, which was just opposite St John's. Gerard's family had contributed towards the building fund for the new Parish church. Gerard was baptised at St John's in August 1844. Unfortunately for us, he later became a Roman Catholic. There is a memorial to him outside Stratford library as well as one in Poets' Corner in Westminster Abbey.

In 1852, Stratford Marsh, or Stratford-in-the-Marsh, became the first of a number of areas to be separated from St John's. The new Parish church was Christ Church, on the corner of Union Street and High Street. Then in 1865, Stratford New Town, followed Stratford Marsh and also become a separate parish, that of St Paul's.

In 1879, during the incumbency of the Rev W J Bolton, the huge 6-sided Martyrs Memorial was built in St John's churchyard to commemorate 23 local Protestant men and women who were burnt alive at the stake in Stratford in 1556, during the reign of Mary Tudor, for their religious views. The burnings probably took place on Stratford Green, once called Gallows Green, where the University now stands.

The world's largest docks were constructed on the old swamps along the Thames, as well as in Tower Hamlets. Ships sailed from these docks carrying the output of factories (where working conditions were often awful); they returned with raw materials, food and people.



St John's c.1910

By the 1880s West Ham had one of the largest populations in the country, made up of people from virtually every corner of the world. More people moved in, some to the more gracious houses along Romford Road, many more to the poor conditions around the docks areas and the railway yards.

In 1881, partly due to this massive increase in the population of the area, St James, Forest Gate, also became a separate parish from Stratford. The Parish church was originally at the southern end of St James Road.

In 1884 the interior of St John's was completely changed when it was extended with the building of the Chancel, the Choir Vestry and the Organ Chamber. There is a plaque near the organ stating that the Chancel is in memory of Sir Antonio Brady, a famous geologist of the time. His collection of prehistoric animals is now part of the national collection at the British Museum. In 1881 he died suddenly at the family home in Forest Lane, and was buried in St John's churchyard.

In 1889 the Rev Thomas Stevens became Vicar of St John's. He became Archdeacon of Essex in 1895 while continuing as Vicar of

St John's. In 1901 he left to become the first Bishop of Barking.

The docks area and the railway yards, some of the largest in the country at the time, made East and West Ham prime targets for German Zeppelins in World War 1 and also German bombers in World War 2: during the Blitz West Ham was raided 194 times, losing 1207 lives and one third of its houses.

Many hundreds of people took shelter night after night in the crypt of St John's. The building was badly damaged by bombing: in particular all the windows were blown out. The only pre-war window is the small window in the Chancel, which is a copy of the famous picture by Holman Hunt "The Light of the World". This was taken out and stored before the bombing. The churchyard railings were also removed for the war effort.

The Friends of St John's was formed in 1944 to keep members who had been bombed out of the East End in touch with each other. After the war St John's went in to a bit of a decline. Many of the faithful members had been bombed out, others moved out as a result of demolition and new developments. The Friends contributed towards the cost of repairs and St John's was finally restored from war damage in 1951, the new East Window being dedicated in 1955.

Redevelopment of the area was slow; the famous pre-fabs appeared; in 1953 the River Thames flooded; tower blocks appeared. The 1960s saw the redevelopment of an authentic East End street market, Angel Lane, into a shopping mall.

1961 saw the Parish of Christ Church, Stratford Marsh, re-united with St John's, the church buildings stood empty until they were eventually demolished in 1975.

In 1965 West Ham and East Ham were combined to form the Borough of Newham. Governments began to recognise their neglect of the areas that had suffered in the Blitz and plans began to redevelop the area.



St John's in 2004

Unfortunately, by the 1970s the congregation of St John's was quite small, the building was in poor structural condition, the doors were locked except for Sundays and there was even talk of closure.

Things started to change however. A new Freight Terminal opened on the derelict areas of the vast Railway Engineering Yards, then a new Rail Station, a new Bus Station and soon to be a Euro-Station; new rail routes linked the East End with the City and the new Docklands.

The 1960s Mall was redeveloped, as was the Theatre Royal, a famous East End venue for many celebrities and home of Joan Littlewood. An Arts complex was designed for the area. A new set of Municipal Offices (The Pyramid) was built in the Grove. The old North East London Polytechnic achieved University status. A new General Hospital was built in Plaistow in 1983.

A year later the Thames Barrier opened to prevent a recurrence of the 1953 disaster. The Gas and Sewage plants in Beckton gave way to a new town along Newham Way near the new City Airport.

St John's congregations started to increase. A new extension was built at St John's in 1998 to provide facilities for the church members and the local community.

With the redevelopment of the old Railway Engineering Yards into the new Stratford City, the coming of the Channel Tunnel Rail Link and the Olympic Games coming to Stratford in 2012, the area has taken on a new life and vitality. The area has always been a largely happy melting pot of cultures and races and an influx of refugees and immigrants from Eastern Europe has recently, once again, brought new culture and new ideas. Things are looking up.

At St John's congregations have increased even more. The average attendance is now 273 adults and children on a Sunday morning, and 55 adults in the evening, with up to 393 people for special services. We are pleased that our congregation is very multi-cultural, reflecting the community around us.

The Church building is also open every day with morning and evening prayer, lunchtime and midweek services for people who work in Stratford. The nature of ministry at St John's has changed greatly over the past few years. The building is a hive of activity once again - a place for prayer, for meetings, for concerts, for peace and quiet in a busy town centre.

In 1834 St John's was built to serve the Stratford community. 172 years later that community has changed again and again. St John's has changed too - the building has been extended twice, the pattern of services has also changed. However, the basic reason for St John's existence has not changed. St John's is part of the worldwide Christian Church, dedicated to spreading the good news that Jesus Christ came to earth 2000 years ago, that he died for our sins on the cross, that he rose again from death to life and that he lives for ever and still has the power to change lives.

St John's is a living witness to that message.

Carol Richards, Dave Richards, Chris Aubrey & Garry Walker © St Johns Church, 2005/6