

St MARY'S CHURCH ISLINGTON

There has been a church on the site of St Mary in Upper Street for at least 1000 years. The current building is the 5th on the site. The history of the successive churches reflects that of Islington, and indeed, of England.

It is likely that a church building existed in Anglo-Saxon times, although there are no records, Anglo-Saxon life not being much recorded. It might have been made of wood. It is recorded that the Archbishop of Canterbury established the Parish of St Mary the Virgin in 628AD. An archaeological dig near Islington Green in 1993 found the remains of what was probably an Anglo-Saxon village. It seems a likely a church would be nearby. It is on high ground and beside one of the main roads going north from the City since at least Roman times.

The Domesday Book of 1086 states that the Canons of St Paul held extensive land here in Islington. (Even at the time of the Dissolution of the monasteries 4/5th of Islington was in the possession of the Church.) In 1078, William, Bishop of London, presented the living of Islington to the nuns of St Leonard's, a nunnery founded by him in Stratford ette Bow. Subsequently these nuns had some say in the choosing of vicars, and they built the first vicarage. They were suppressed in the Reformation. The first vicar recorded, in was Walter Gerkin, appointed in 1327.

The next church, possibly incorporating the Anglo-Saxon one, definitely existed. It was a C12th Norman building, and while it may have been partly of wood, stone was also used. One stone still exists, now part of the skirting down in the Crypt, and can be seen on application to the Church office there. It is 16" x 5" and has a typically Norman zig-zag pattern on it. There was a 7' tower. It served a population of c5000. (In 2014 it was c206,000)

More is known about church number 3. It was built in 1483 during the reign of Richard III. A stone was found in the tower with this date inscribed on it. It was erected exactly on the site of the present church, and was described as being spacious and somewhat rambling. It was 92' long, made of flint, pebbles and chalk and paved with brick and stone, with a tiled roof. The tower was square and had a steeple. It had 6 bells which are still in use today, also a

clock and a sundial. Inside the church the walls were wainscoted to the height of 7' and painted olive green. The ceiling was painted with clouds. There were 3 aisles, a gallery added in 1663, and an altarpiece acquired in 1671, with a decalogue in two halves painted in black letters on a white ground, and a fine stained glass window in between.

At this time or possibly even earlier, there was a shrine known as Our Lady of Islington, either in the church or outside the west door. It was much visited by pilgrims and was considered one of England's important shrines, though not in the same league as Walsingham or St Thomas a Beckett in Canterbury Cathedral. Presumably the statue was wooden as, during the Reformation it was removed and burnt on Islington Green, at that time waste land.

In 1710 what was possibly Islington's first school was set up in rooms attached to the west door, so entrance to the church was through the school. The outside walls had reliefs of a boy and a girl.

There were many tombs and monuments in the church and churchyard. A prominent one was in memory of Richard Cloudsley, landowner of Stonefield, sometimes spelt Stoneyfield, now Barnsbury, who died in 1519. He left funds and property in his will, which formed the basis of a charity which still supports the poor and the sick in Islington. The church bells were recently refurbished with money from this fund. His will was interesting, and included bequests such as two dresses costing 6.9d each to be supplied to poor girls named Maria, in honour of the Virgin. It was felt that he requested an excessive number of masses to be said for his soul, and it was assumed that he had done bad things which would make his entry into heaven difficult. People thought this was justified when his soul proved restless, causing minor earthquakes in the churchyard, and apparitions were seen. His tomb survived various vicissitudes, and its remains can be seen beside the portico, behind the bus stop. There are 4 pieces from 2 brass memorials of the Fowler family, an influential local family, dating from 1540, which survive and are displayed in the current church, in the chapel to the right of the door. During the Civil War, much brass was stolen from tombs in the church and from the graveyard.

Another large tomb commemorates the life of Dame Alice Owen (1547-1613). Her life mirrors that of her almost exact contemporary, Bess of Hardwick, in

that they both married 3 times to men who all did well, and left them fortunes. Dame Alice left considerable funds to support the poor of Islington. She had vowed to do this when, as a girl she was walking with her maid in fields just south of the Angel, and was shot through her tall hat by an arrow fired by practising members of the Artillery, and she was unharmed. She built a row of alms-houses for the use of indigent old women, and also established a school for girls, which still exists, although it moved to Potters Bar. Both the alms-houses and the school were destroyed by World War II bombs. Her tomb was very large, pyramidal in shape, made of black and white marble, with a relief depicting her and 11 of her children and grandchildren, although there were 19 alive when she died. It was damaged over the centuries and the remaining part finally shattered when the church was hit by a bomb in 1940. Various members of her family had been associated with the Brewers' Guild – there were many brewers in Islington - and they administered her estate. In 2001, when the churchyard was renovated, the Guild supplied a drinking fountain, with a brass plate identifying the Brewers as the donor, but there was insufficient space on it to include Dame Alice's name.

There was a vicarage for the priest in the C16th on Upper Street by the Pied Bull Inn. A new one was built in 1692 near the corner of Theberton Street, by William Cave, chaplain to Charles II. The old one was rented out. The new one was used by all subsequent vicars who did not have homes of their own in the parish. The current red brick one replaced it in 1897, in the grounds of St Mary.

This church existed through times of great changes in religion. In 1537, during the reign of Bloody Mary, a number of Islington parishioners, accused of holding clandestine services, were burnt at the stake on Islington Green.. Many people found the switching back and forth between Catholicism and Protestantism very difficult and during the reign of Edward VI one vicar resigned because he could no longer cope.

Some of the vicars were no better than they should have been. In 1581 the Reverend Meredith Hanmer caused some disquiet because he was marrying couples without bans or licenses, and also stealing brass from graves to melt down for counterfeit coins. However he was allowed to stay until 1590 because he was considered a good preacher and historian!

A century later, during the Civil War, considerable damage was done to the monuments, tombs and stained glass windows in the church, and also to the tombs in the graveyard, by Cromwell's followers, the Dissenters.

In 1733 there were disturbances regarding Methodism, which was attracting a following in the area. At that time the vicar employed assistants to help relieve him by giving some of the many sermons required each week. John and Charles Wesley were both employed to do so, although they were unlicensed. The church authorities objected, so John Wesley continued to preach, but in the church garden. Charles Wesley wrote the hymn Hark the Herald Angels sing while employed at St Mary. Another assistant was George Gaskin. For whom the street is named, who went on to be Secretary of the S.P.C.K.

The Parish Register records go back to 1557. Deaths averaged at 238 a year, but rose during times of plague outbreaks. In 1593 there were 106 deaths from plague, in 1603 322, in 1623 213, and in 1665, the year of the Great Plague, 695 died, 94 in the week of August 29th to September 5th.

In the 1500s there were usually about 38 christenings a year. In the C19th the numbers rose to about 120. In the early years there were always more deaths than births recorded, because Islington was considered healthy, with salubrious air, and many older and ill people moved here for their last years.

In 1751 the building was found to be too dilapidated to repair. There had been considerable storm damage in 1740. As the population in the Parish was approaching 10,000 by then, the church was no longer big enough. An Act of Parliament was passed to allow it to be pulled down and replaced. A tax was levied on landlords and householders so that the Trustees could borrow money. The tower was so well constructed they had to use gunpowder to blow it up, and that did not work until a huge fire was built in the foundations. Services were then held in a house in Church Row, which had a temporary tabernacle costing £600.

The new church was designed and built by a joiner called Lancelot Dowbiggin, who had worked on various other London churches and possibly the Mansion House. He was later buried in St Mary's churchyard. It was built of brick with stone groins and cornices, and had a square tower with a spire of Portland

stone, the height being 104'. The church had a nave, chancel and 2 aisles. There was a semi-circular porch with 4 Tuscan-style pillars. The galleries inside were painted to look like oak. There were 91 pews made of fir, and a simple white marble font. The ceiling was domed and adorned with painted plaster swags of roses. The Decalogue was in 2 halves with gold letters painted on black, and in the middle was what was described as a chaste and appropriate painting of the Annunciation, by Nathaniel Clarkson (1723-1793), a local resident who started his career as a painter of carriage doors. He became a portrait painter later and was well thought of.

The tower had a clock on 2 faces, also a sundial. The original 6 bells were recast and 2 treble ones added. There were many tablets and memorials on the walls. The cost of the building was £6579.12, and after the bells, organ, churchyard walls and clock were added the total came to £7340.

In 1787 repairs were needed. The tower needed strengthening with iron rods due to subsidence. A lightning rod was added to the top. This was difficult to do, so a Mr Thomas Birch, a basket maker, made a sort of beehive shaped wicker structure, which covered the entire tower, incorporating a spiral staircase for the workers. He had tried 2 of these before, both of which had collapsed. Apparently thousands of people paid 6d to climb up and see the view.

Iron railings were added in front of the west door in 1802.

The Parish, which extended from Angel to Archway and from York Way to Green Lanes had about 140,000 residents by 1800 and as the church was proving too small, it was decided to build a Chapel of Ease, (meaning - to ease the main church). St Mary Magdalene was erected along the Holloway Road, at considerable cost, and consecrated in 1814. There after the population grew rapidly during the C19th, and there was a religious revival in Britain, and many churches were built in Islington.

By 1793 the churchyard was full and the area was extended by buying adjacent land, which was then a nursery garden. In 1852 the Burial Act banned burials in metropolitan areas, so the churchyard was closed. The Islington Burial Board was set up in 1853, and together with the parish of St Pancras, 30 acres

of land was bought in East Finchley, which remain in use today. More land has since been added.

In 1888 a plot adjoining the north side of the churchyard was bought from the Metropolitan Board of Works. The present vicarage was then built, also a hall which held 600. The latter deteriorated and was demolished and the current St Mary's Neighbourhood Centre replaced it. Church cottage on St Mary's Path was built for the sexton.

In 1902, after a fire destroyed the organ, changes were made to the chancel, and the portico was replaced with the present neo-classical colonnaded one built of Portland stone, with a relief of the Nativity. An elaborate new font was installed and the earlier simple one stored in the Crypt. Coffins stored in the Crypt were emitting a noxious odour so they were removed.

In 1936 the tower and spire were restored and re-enforced. When a bomb landed on the nave in September 1940, everything was flattened except the tower. Very little of the contents of the church remained, except the Royal Arms of George III, which by law, had to be hung in the Dowbiggin church of 1781. They are now in the present church. The C18th white marble font was undamaged in the Crypt and is now back in use in the church. The Crypt was used as an air-raid shelter during World War II.

The body of the church was rebuilt in the 50s by Dove Brothers, a local firm, and re-consecrated in 1956. In 1960, a vandal did much damage to the new murals with a fire extinguisher. The Crypt, which has been in existence in some form through most of the history has been renovated in 2009. It has a stone commemorating Lancelot Dowbiggin, the builder of the C18th church. As mentioned, it also has the Norman stone in the skirting,

The church has had several curates who have subsequently become important figures in the Anglican Church. David Shepherd, played cricket for England while serving at St Mary and later became Bishop of Liverpool. Two other curates who became Archbishops of Canterbury were Donald Coggan and George Carey.

Today the church has a growing congregation which reflects the multi-national population of Islington.

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