

ST MICHAEL AND ST MARY MAGDALENE, EASTHAMPSTEAD. NOTES ON THE REBUILDING 1865~1873.

NEW LIGHT ON OLD OBJECTS

The Parish Church is well-known for its stained glass, much of it produced by Edward Burne-Jones in collaboration with William Morris, two famous artists of the 19th Century. These windows are held to be outstanding examples of the Pre-Raphaelite style.

What is less well known is that the Parish Church retains a remarkable number of objects from the old Church. We still have the 12th century font tub, a medieval Brass memorial plaque of 1443, parts of the 15th century Rood Screen, parts of the Jacobean Pulpit of 1631, the Royal Arms of 1660, the Benefactions Board, several fine marble wall memorial plaques of the 17th century and many large ledger (floor lying) memorial stones from the 17th to the early 19th centuries. In addition the base of the tower is the old brick tower of 1664.

The Parish Church was almost totally rebuilt between 1865 and 1867. It was usual practice, when rebuilding a church in the 19th Century, to retain virtually none of the old furnishings. Instead new and expensive furnishings in the latest style were provided. Why does Easthampstead still have many treasures from the Old Church when many other churches rebuilt in the 19th century have so few of theirs?

It used to be thought this was due to the Oxford connections of Osborne Gordon, Rector from 1860 to 1883. He was the driving force behind the rebuilding of the Parish Church. He had been on the staff at Christ Church College, Oxford. Oxford at that period was the centre of a theological and artistic revolution. The "Oxford Movement" sought to recover the medieval heritage of the Church of England. Osborne Gordon was a colleague at Christ Church with Edward Bouverie Pusey, a leader in this theological revolution. Oxford was also the breeding ground for a new artistic movement that rejected the industrialised world and looked for inspiration to the world of the medieval craftsmen. Both William Morris and Edward Burne-Jones were in Oxford at this time. The link between Osborne Gordon, Burne-Jones and Morris is John Ruskin. John Ruskin was a highly influential art critic and artist. He also happened to be Osborne Gordon's student and a patron of Morris and Burne-Jones. This means that the people influential in the rebuilding of the Parish Church had a great respect for the past and the medieval world in particular. The theory is that we retain at Easthampstead so many of our old furnishings because of the influence of Osborne Gordon and his circle.

However a different interpretation can be put on the retention of the old furnishings. The old furnishings may have been retained primarily for financial reasons. The rebuilding of the Parish Church was expensive. It cost the Downshire family at least £3000 in the late 1860s. At the same time the Downshires were beginning to rebuilding their country house, Easthampstead Park.

Initially no expense on the Parish Church was spared. It was an ambitious project. It is faced in stone. There is no natural building stone in Berkshire so the ashlar (cut stone) facings of the Church had to come from a distance. Use is also made of expensive marble pillars in the interior of the Church. The carvings were done by the O'Shea brothers, famous for their work with Ruskin at Oxford. As a result there is physical evidence that the building budget may have spiralled out of control. On the outside of

the Church the pillars framing the doors are not marble or stone, but rendered in red plaster. The outside of the Church is faced with expensive ashlar but the tower, the last part of the new Church to be completed, is of less expensive brick. The brick base of the old Church Tower of 1664 was kept and a new belfry built in matching brick to heighten it.

When looked at in this light, the retaining of furnishings from the old Church becomes a cost-cutting exercise. Given the quality of the materials used in the rebuild it might have been expected that a brand-new font and pulpit in carved stone and marble would have been provided. This was often the case in other rebuilt churches. There is a new purpose-built baptistery and but there is no marble in the new font base and the plain 12th century font tub is reused. The pulpit has a D.I.Y quality about it. It is essentially a box put together from bits of the old pulpit of 1631. The remains of the 15th century Rood Screen have been used to fill-in the arches around the organ. The cresting from the 1631 pulpit has been nailed on top to finish it off. In this light the use of the old ledger stones to pave the floor of the north aisle could be seen as a cheap flooring option.

When looked at today the Parish Church is a building that speaks of the splendour and glory of God. That is what the rebuilders intended. However it is a finished work. Any building project running over budget makes savings in the interior fittings. When the Parish Church reopened it probably had few of the quality furnishings seen today. There was none of the stained glass that so impresses. Stained glass windows are usually commissioned as private memorials and donated to the Church by grieving families. The earliest windows went in within two years of the nave being completed. However the East Window didn't go in until 1876, ten years after the body of the Parish Church was completed. The Reredos was decorated in two stages as funds became available. We know that the Sanctuary around the High Altar only received an expensive mosaic pavement as a memorial to Osborne Gordon in 1883, nearly 20 years after the Parish Church reopened.

Today the survivals from the old Church are viewed as treasures from the distant past. Osborne Gordon may have viewed their retention very differently. He had the old Church demolished. It had some fine medieval carving. It had also been expensively refitted in the 17th century. There were boards painted with the Ten Commandments, the Creed and the Lord's Prayer. The altar rail had a barley-twist balustrade. The font appears to have been given a cone shaped cover. None of these objects are known to have survived the rebuilding. The canopy of the old pulpit was last seen being used as table in the old Rectory in 1911. Those who rebuilt the Parish Church may have kept and reused the old furnishings for reasons which had nothing to do with valuing our heritage.

GSC