

A brief history of St Mary's church

St Mary's in the fields

Work on St Mary's Church, Kilburn began in 1856 as part of a trend in church building to accommodate the growing population of Hampstead in the second half of the nineteenth century. In those days the area was semi-rural. There were no houses north of the Abbey Road and only a few larger mansions to the south-the Church was first known as 'St Mary's in the Fields'.

The site was chosen because it was near the site of old Kilburn Priory-a nunnery which was founded around 1130 but had disappeared entirely by the early eighteenth century with the demolishing of the last buildings-recorded in this contemporary line drawing.

The church opened for worship in 1857 and building was gradual with the font and the pulpit dating from the mid 1860's and the tower and spire erected in 1871/2. The turret clock was added in 1877.

St Mary's School came into being in the early 1870's with the centenary being celebrated in 1972. St Mary's Hall opened in 1890. The original vicarage was built on a site in Priory Road in 1878 but this has since been converted into flats with a new vicarage being built in the garden of the premises in 1987.



The first incumbent of St Mary's was the Revd. George Read Adam who remained the parish priest until his death in 1867. The first churchwardens were Messrs. Robert Lucas Wood and G.L. Stanley.

St Mary's has always been a busy parish with a variety of activities on offer. In the 1950's youth groups flourished alongside an amateur dramatics group. In the 1980's the parish of All Souls, St John's Wood joined with the parish of St Mary's and in 2000 the old church was sold with the money used to repair the St Mary's Hall, now the St Mary's Community Hall, which is now the venue for a range of community groups including a pensioner's group and after school club.

The height of fashion

The architects of St Mary's were the brothers E and H Francis and they decided to build the new Church in the style then at the height of fashion. Neo-Gothic was all the rage following the spectacular success of the new Palace of Westminster built by Charles Barry in the 1830's. St Mary's is in the style that copies the Early Decorated Gothic that was first used in England in the 12th and 13th Centuries.

Tall pointed arches - called lancets - are characteristic of the style and used throughout the building, both to support the nave arcade but also in windows and doorways. Although arches of equilateral proportion were most often used, lancet arches of very narrow proportions are frequently found and are highly characteristic of the style. A notable example of steeply-pointed lancets being used structurally is the apsidal arcade of Westminster Abbey. In windows the lancets are usually narrow compared with their height - as is the case here at St Mary's and often grouped together in twos, threes or even fives to give a variety of sizes of window. The style is sometimes called 'The Lancet' or 'First pointed style' as a result. The intention was to create a sense of height and space to give a sense of drama to the Church building, drawing the eye up to heaven.



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Here at St Mary's many characteristics of the style were used - including the decorative motif of leaves at the top of the pillars in the nave and the large size of the main windows to give plenty of light to the interior.

The first phase of the building cost £9,000, a very large sum of money in those days.

The spire, with its bells and clock were not completed for another twenty years and the internal decoration of the High Altar, with its paving and marble and baster reredos was completed in the 1890's. The tradition of improving and altering the interior of the Church, in line with fashion and as money became available, has continued to the present day with significant internal alterations in the past decade.

St Mary's, one of the most historic and important buildings in our community was built above all to remind the people of Kilburn of the love of God and the members of the church here are resolved to preserve this beautiful building for future generations.

Points of view

St Mary's contains many points of interest - some original and some installed in very recent times. This is a living Church and it changes according to both the fashions of the current day and the needs of the congregation - just as it has always done!

The main features of note are the Font, Nave, High Altar, Great East Window and stained glass, the All Souls Chapel - which contains the famous Medieval Wall Brass of Emma de St Omer. As a result of changes made in 2006 the original stone font now stands to the right of the entrance of the church. It is made of Bath stone with carvings of the symbols of the four Gospel writers. Close to it stands the Easter Candle - also known as the Paschal Candle, symbolic of the Light of Christ. It is lit at every baptism and renewed each year at the Vigil Service that precedes Easter Day.

The main portion of the church is the Nave, which contains the original pews. The line of the nave draws the eye to the High Altar, the most sacred part of the Church - on the left of the High Altar is the Tabernacle - a special safe in which the Blessed Sacrament is kept. Above it a candle burns continually as a sign of God's abiding love and presence. The High Altar is used now only at major services and was brought from All Souls, Loudoun Road with many other furnishings when that Church closed in the 1980's. For regular services the Nave Altar is used, which was dedicated in 2004.

Behind the High Altar is the East Window, which was installed in 1890. It shows the Resurrection of Christ, with saints adoring and the guards Herod placed on the tomb asleep. The lower panels show some of the healing miracles performed by Christ and his disciples. Two side lancets to the left and right of the main window increase the sense of light around the altar.

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Most of the rest of the original stained glass in the Church was destroyed as a result of enemy action in the Second World War. During 2006 new windows were installed, taken from All Souls, Loudoun Road - as the gift of Marcus Cooper who had purchased the old Church at All Souls for development.



The All Souls Chapel in the North aisle was refurbished in 1997 and again in 2003. It contains many features, (Altar, Lectern, panelling, figures of Christ and Angels) from All Souls church.

This chapel also contains a medieval brass found in the 1850's. It is all that remains of the ancient Kilburn Priory which once stood near this site. Several graves from the Convent were also found at the same time and the nuns' remains are buried under the High Altar.

This is a line drawing of the brass of Emma de St Omer, the nun whose tomb brass and bones are in the church.