

History of the Church

All Saints was consecrated as a daughter church of the ancient Minster Church of St Mary-in-the-Butts by Bishop Samuel Wilberforce in 1865. It was the increasing demand for seating in the Minster together with the spiritual needs of the growing population around Bath Road that induced the then Vicar, Arthur Purey-Cust, later Dean of York, to initiate the building of a church in Downshire Square. The idea was first contemplated in 1860 and plans drawn up once the land had been given and several large donations received. The appointed architect was J P St Aubyn, and it appears that he also designed the Day School next door (now the Infant School) as part of an integrated scheme. Mrs Purey-Cust was a key figure in the development of the School. St Aubyn was also responsible for much work on other Reading Churches at this time. The Church architecture is a copy of the English early-decorated style with a semi-circular apse in French mode but with a very English hammer-beam roof. An extensive description is given in the 'Reading Mercury' of 4th November 1865. Provision was later made for a tower on the south side but the money ran out and it was never built. The foundations are still there a few inches beneath the surface of the south lawn. The building is soundly constructed of Blue Bristol stone lined with bricks. On the inside the pillars and arches, the window surrounds and many other details are of Bath Stone. The roof timbers are of Pitch Pine of a fine quality unobtainable today. The roof of the Church was originally embellished with several stone cross finials and one wrought iron cross finial, which remains. On the night of 31st October 1965 the Church Centenary was marked by the fall of one of the stone crosses, causing significant roof damage. When first consecrated the Church was completed to about half of its present length. An indication of this can be observed in the lower spandrel detail of the arches dividing the nave from the aisles and in the colour of the pointing on the outside walls. The later part of the church was completed by 1874. At this time the choir stalls were gifted to the church. Various aspects of

the furniture and decorations were completed over a number of years as funds became available, such as the provision of gas lighting and solid oak pews (total cost £525). Electric lighting was installed in 1929 but vestiges of the old gas lighting may still be found in many places today. By 1900 the church was effectively complete as we see it today

For the first eighteen years it appears that none of the several curates at St Mary's had specific responsibility for All Saints. For the first seven years Mr William Jebb Few (at St Mary's 1862-1872), later Rector of St Nicolas Guildford, was the main priest in charge. He made a great input to the construction of the early phase of All Saints and later used the same contractors for the heating system, windows and organ when he moved to St Nicolas Guildford from St Lukes Southampton in 1875. After 1872 duty fell variously upon the St Mary's curates, Messrs Winter, Miles and Daymond. In 1883 these informal arrangements changed and Mr Gibbs Payne-Crawford became the first priest to be specifically allocated to All Saints. Amongst other things this energetic man was responsible for additions to the School, enlargement of the priest's vestry and the building of the large choir vestry in the early 1890s. Later he was Vicar of Bicester, then of Sonning (a rich living at that time) up until his retirement in 1926.

A tour of the interior

We will now take a tour from the glass entrance doors in an anti-clockwise direction passing down the south aisle and then in front of the Lady Chapel and Chancel and returning via the north aisle. Be careful not to enter the Lady Chapel or Chancel if the gates are shut as these areas are likely to be alarmed. As we enter the Church the font is on the left. By All Saints-tide 1874 this font of English alabaster with Irish marble columns had been installed. The first baptism was of Frances Clarrey Liddiard on Christmas Day 1874 by Albert Cooke Daymond, retired first headmaster of Framlingham College and Hon. Curate to St Mary's. The west wall above the font contains a

fine Rose Window depicting the Holy Spirit in the form of a dove surrounded by angels (1874, a memorial to Bishop Wilberforce killed in a riding accident the previous year), and an arcade of figures representing the nine gifts of the spirit (1892). The latter is one of several memorials to the family of Thomas Rogers (born Helston, Cornwall, 1819) a local solicitor who was Chairman of the Reading Board of Health from 1854 (Public Health was a hot potato at that time) and who personally donated to the town the drinking fountain in Market Place on the south wall of St Laurence, now sadly neglected and in disrepair. Later he was the very influential Town Clerk for Reading being responsible for many major works in the town such as the Town Hall, Caversham Bridge, The Cemetery, and the Water and Sewage systems which we inherit today. Below the arcade of figures is the decorated wall of colourful mosaic, some of it in opus sectile work. Some of this is a memorial to Bishop Wilberforce but most is a memorial to the Rogers. The two opus sectile medallions were added in 1893. The discreet memorial to Mary Catherine and Thomas Rogers is by the font. Thomas Rogers also paid anonymously, in 1889 for the colourful stencil decoration in the chancel. This stencil decoration was refreshed, after 76 years, in 1965 and Hardmans of Birmingham regilded the chancel roof ribs in 1992.

We move on to the Children's Corner at the west end of the south aisle. In the 1970s this was lost to a contemporary fashion for multiple altars, but it is now being restored. On the west wall above the Children's Corner are the Royal Arms of Queen Victoria. Below this are painted glass figures of three male English saints; three female English saints are similarly disposed in the north aisle.

Moving up the south aisle we come to the gates of the Lady Chapel, which, including the altar, reredos and tester, dates from 1937. Prior to that the south transept had been used for the children and the Sunday School and it has its own external entry door from the garden, now more or less disused. The six candlesticks on the altar are from the studio of Martin Travers and the two gold angels are from moulds by

Ninian Comper. These angels are a memorial to Peggy White, first Parish Secretary. The fine Jacobean parish chest in the Lady Chapel is of unknown provenance, probably a gift from a parishioner.

The wrought iron work around the Chancel and Lady Chapel was installed in two stages in 1865 and then in 1880 by Leavers of Maidenhead, including the very elegant pulpit (1880) which replaced an earlier wooden pulpit. This ironwork was originally decorated with gold leaf but this was unfortunately removed at the 1965 restoration as it had become fragmented.

Perhaps the finest work of art in the church is the glass mosaic reredos showing the Last Supper. This came from the London workshop of the famous Venetian glass mosaic artist Antonio Salviati and was installed in 1866. He had in the same year completed a larger similar panel, to a cartoon by J R Clayton, for Westminster Abbey which forms part of the reredos designed by G G Scott. Salviati also made similar reredos panels for St. Thomas of Canterbury, Elsfield (1860) and Wisbech St. Peter (1885) and probably others. The stained glass windows in All Saints are almost all Victorian, mostly by Clayton and Bell, and, with the one exception mentioned above, are all memorials to parishioners, one of whom died during Divine Service. The five double-lancet windows above the High Altar were gifts commemorating the Purey-Cust and Monck families. They illustrate the principal events in our Lord's life starting with the Nativity, leading on to the Crucifixion, Resurrection and finally the Ascension. In each of twenty panels there are depicted three saints of the church, sixty saints in all. Two windows in the South transept commemorate the family of the 17th Baron Saye and Sele whose ancestor was one of the 25 signatories of the Magna Carta. The family lived and worshipped here for many years. The fine Victorian brass lectern in the chancel was a gift from the Rev. F J Blandy in 1871 as a memorial to members of his family. Years of vigorous brass cleaning have rendered the inscriptions illegible.

The original north transept now contains the "Father Willis" organ. When the first part of the church was consecrated a small four-stop organ, lent by Willis, provided the music. Over the period 1874 to 1883 he extensively developed the organ into more or less its present form and it then presented "a triple keyboard with a goodly array of pipes which will pour forth a volume of sweet sounds sufficient to fill the church", to quote a church magazine of the period.

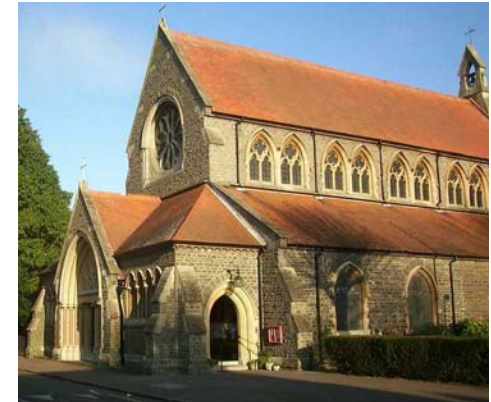
In about 1980 the Holy Cross altar in the north aisle, adjacent to the organ, was added. The crucifix behind the altar is reputed to be by Ninian Comper and came from a school chapel in Wantage. The wrought iron sections behind the altar are remnants of the chancel gates from St Saviour's Coley, declared redundant over 20 years ago. The adjacent war memorial commemorates those of the congregation killed in the First World War.

Towards the back of the north aisle are memorials to the Collins family. Henry Collins was the founder of the solicitors firm, now known as Collins Dryland and Thorowgood, which still practises in Reading. He was on close terms with the Royal Family, several members of his family having served Royalty in various capacities. His son Leopold and his house in Tilehurst Road were both named after Queen Victoria's youngest son, his friend Prince Leopold. Queen Victoria's third daughter Princess Helena was also associated with All Saints through the naming of Helena House in Brownlow Road next to All Saint's School, originally a Nursing Home. She regularly attended the House as its patron.

(with acknowledgment to the memory of Eric R Bowden, Churchwarden of Reading Minster, ex-Choirboy at All Saints (1915-1921), and long-time custodian of the fabric at All Saints)

for further information see:
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