

Reading All Saints:

Church Building & History

NB: A pamphlet for the guidance of visitors, containing some of this material, is now available on the bookstand in Church and also available to download from this website. For access to a fuller history for 1865 to 1915, in the form of a Powerpoint presentation, see the link on the home page entitled The Year Past.

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 (see photo gallery) 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 is of the early-decorated style and an extensive description was 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 still remains. On the night of 31st October 1965 the Church Centenary was marked by one of the stone crosses being blown down, causing significant roof damage. All of the stone finials were replaced with unsympathetic aluminium crosses in the 1980s.

When first consecrated the Church was completed to about half of its present length. An indication of this can be observed in the 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 and by All Saints-tide 1874 the font had also been installed. The first baptism was of Frances Clarrey Liddiard on Christmas Day 1874 by Albert Cooke Daymond, Hon. Curate to St Mary's. The church now accommodates about 450 people. When the first part of the church was consecrated a four-stop organ, lent by Mr Henry Willis of London, provided the music. This continued in use until 1874 when it was extensively developed by Willis into more or less its present form and 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".

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, a fine town church well worth a visit, was the main priest in charge. He made a great input to the construction of All Saints and later used the same contractors for the heating system, windows and organ when he moved to Guildford from St Lukes, Bevois Valley, Southampton (redundant many years ago and now a Hindu Temple) in 1875. After 1872 some special responsibility fell upon Mr Winter, Mr Miles and also Mr Daymond, an honorary curate who was the full-time headmaster of a local boys school. He it was who gave the stained glass window which, curiously, celebrates All Saints Day 1871, now hidden away in the passage behind the organ. In 1883 these informal arrangements changed and Mr Gibbs Payne-Crawford (see photo gallery) became the first priest to be specifically allocated to All Saints. Amongst other things he 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 Sonning (a lucrative posting) up until his retirement in 1926. Various aspects of the furniture and decorations were completed over a number of years as funds became available, such as the colourful stencil decoration in the chancel (paid for anonymously in 1889 by Mr Thomas Rogers), the provision of gas lighting and solid oak pews. 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 and only minor cosmetic changes have been made since.

There are many beautiful artefacts to be seen in the Church. The west wall contains a lovely Rose Window (1874, a memorial to Bishop Wilberforce killed in an 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) 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 (1866) he was the very influential Town Clerk for Reading responsible for many major works in the town such as the Town Hall, Caversham Bridge, and the Water and Sewage systems which we inherit today. Below the arcade of figures is the marble font backed by a 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 wrought iron work around the chancel was installed in 1865 and 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. Some gold paint has since been added by way of doubtful compensation. The Lady Chapel in its present form dates from 1937. Prior to that the south transept had been used for the children and the Sunday School though it had also been a consecrated chapel from 1905. This area has its own external entry door from the garden, now more or less disused. 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. Regrettably, it is now often obscured by a number of gaudy modern brass candlesticks (except in Lent). The Stained Glass windows are almost all Victorian, mostly by Clayton and Bell, and almost all are memorials to parishioners.

(with acknowledgment to the memory of Eric Bowden, one-time Churchwarden of Reading Minster, ex-Choirboy at All Saints (he joined the choir in 1908), and long-time custodian of the fabric at All Saints. This text is a modification and expansion of his original.)