

St Barnabas Church

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Vicar:

the Revd. James Ramsay

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National Grid ref. TQ 425 847

Local Authority: Newham

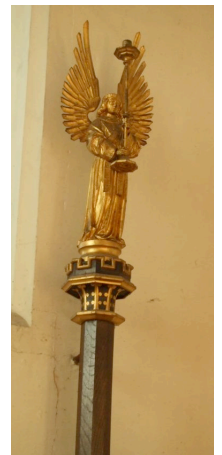


I STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE *September 2011*

General Description

Designed by Sir Ninian Comper in partnership with Benjamin Bucknall, and built in the first decade of the twentieth century to serve the new residential neighbourhood of Manor Park, St Barnabas Church is a Grade II listed building of red brick with stone copings and window tracery. A 'hidden gem', with slightly wild yet affectionately tended front garden leading to a triple-gabled west front, it makes an unexpected break from the surrounding rows of terraced houses. Along the north side is a striking vista through arched buttresses. The interior, much bigger than one would anticipate from the exterior, is a joy: clear perpendicular-style windows and measured arches in the nave give a sense of lightness, high wide aisles offer the spaciousness of a hall-church, while a long chancel leads the eye horizontally to a fine east window that commands the architectural unity of the building. The 'Christ in glory' in the centre of this window was installed in 1954 and incorporates Comper's "trademark" strawberry motif in the bottom right hand corner. Either side of the east window, two "Comper angel" candle sconces add a touch of richness to the sanctuary.

North of the chancel, separated from it by an oak parclose screen (also Comper), is a Lady Chapel with a stone memorial to those from the parish who lost their lives in the 1914-18 war - a soberingly long list of names, plainly but elegantly inscribed. Originally there was no screen, but sections of the Lady Chapel wall and pillars were painted. The organ on the south side of the chancel came from the old St. Michael and All Angels church when a new church and community centre were built in 1989. The organ loft panelling was installed in 1951 as a memorial to parishioners who died in the 1939-45 war. Beneath the organ loft is the sacristy, and beyond, with separate door into the chancel, the choir vestry: a pleasing room with boat-shaped wooden ceiling and mullioned, diamond-paned windows.



The church was re-ordered in the 1970s, the sanctuary partitioned off by a temporary screen, and the altar brought forward to the east end of the nave. At the same time a kitchen and toilets were installed in the north-west corner of the nave. The re-ordering of the sanctuary did not involve any permanent alterations - original oak communion rails, choir stalls, and eagle lectern remain extant. The octagonal carved stone font (originally raised high on two stone steps and situated where the kitchen now is) has an attractive cover of wood and wrought iron. Unusual aumbry in the sanctuary. Door handles and locks throughout the building distinctively designed. Of note finally are the pulpit and the bell (in a bellcote above the south aisle roof) - the former dating from the 17th century, rescued from a church at Rayleigh when undergoing modernisation; the latter, cast by Richard Bowler in 1596, salvaged in 1932 from the debris of Markshall church, Coggeshall (and cleaned and re-hung in 2011).



Current State of Repair

To halt serious deterioration the building needs extensive structural repair and renewal work. This is currently the PCC's top priority, so the mission and outreach of the church is not impeded. Work has been successfully completed to replace/restore the roof, copings, buttresses, brickwork and rainwater goods at the east end, but must be continued over the rest of the building as urgently as we can secure funding.

Community Facility

In the 1970s, with the demographic profile of the parish changing, the church hall was sold, and became a Sikh gurdwara. Since then the west end of the church has doubled as a church hall for social and community use.

The building is in use throughout the week, hosting a Pre-School group, a Textiles art project, a karate academy, Indian classical dance classes, an Urdu class, a Tamil prayer group, and two local bands, as well as the church's own singing group and religious services. These generate income to help maintain the building as a community resource. The people attending these activities come from diverse ethnic, cultural, and faith backgrounds, and range from 0-90+ years old.

The largest public space in the locality, with good acoustics and comfortably seating 300, St. Barnabas is also used for public meetings, charity fairs, and jazz concerts, as well as for weddings, funerals, commemorations and public events.

The commemorative benches in the front garden are well, if not always appropriately, used by the general public.

Ecumenical and Multifaith Context

St Barnabas is part of 'Churches Together in Manor Park', has active contact with the local Evangelical Christian network 'Transform Newham', and hosts occasional gatherings of a local Tamil Christian fellowship. It is also valued by people of different faiths as a witness for Christianity in a multifaith setting. This role, as a sign of the presence and engagement of the national church in the area, should not be underestimated: as the parish church, it provides a place of "common property" amid a diversity of faith communities (including Christian groups of diverse persuasions). The light interior creates 'spiritual' space that does not impose a strongly acculturated Christianity. Linking with networks such as the Newham Association of Faiths, the Faithful Friends project, Bridge Builders in Unity, and the London Presence & Engagement Network, it has the potential to make a significant contribution to interfaith work.

Arts and Music

St Barnabas has had a long association with local arts and music, having for many years been the base for an art club and a Newham Festival of the Arts venue. Current use of the premises by music and dance groups continues this tradition, and the Textiles Project based at the church partners with other centres and service providers across the Borough. Exhibitions of art work demonstrate that the under-used east end of the church could make a successful exhibition, recital, and meeting space. Currently it is used as a work space for the Textiles Project.

Ecological significance

Most front gardens and many back gardens in the area have been paved, thus reducing the amount of green space, and making the church site all the more valuable as a wildlife habitat. Local residents and passers-by (the church is on a bus route) appreciate the garden as a "little oasis". The church is surrounded to the north, east,

and south by a narrow curtilage of land, with arched buttresses along the side walls: this has the potential to be made most attractive and very usable. The front garden also has an area set aside for interment of Ashes, with a simple oak beam for memorial plaques. The flowering thorn has a tree preservation order, and a number of new shrubs and plants have recently been put in.

Significance to the Built Environment

St Barnabas is a fine example of an unfashionable yet important style of architecture. Many of Newham's neo-gothic churches have been either demolished or substantially altered internally, and characterful secular buildings (e.g. pubs) of the same era have also disappeared. Thus, from the architectural point of view, the church is important both as a sign of continuity and as a reminder of diversity and craftsmanship in streets that show a combination of neglect, functionalist modernisation and uniform new "features".

Entering the building creates what one local resident calls a 'Tardis' effect, the interior being much more impressive than is suggested by the unostentatious facade. People of many different backgrounds find it has an aesthetic and spiritual appeal, and comment on the beauty of the interior.

Commitment to the Future

In the past the church has responded to numerous changes and needs within the community. Recently Church members have been praying and thinking towards a more proactive approach to mission opportunities. Local consultation, open days, and away-days have led us to commit to maintaining the building as a place of worship and a resource for the local community rather than developing it on a more commercial basis. This means, however, that we have to address the building issues that hold back our mission, and develop appropriate, sustainable new forms of witness and outreach. Our architect, Roderick Maclennan, has contributed practically and positively to a vision of maintaining and re-evidencing the beauty of the building while adapting it for optimum use in the present context.

We recognise the challenges. But in a spirit of faith and Gospel realism (Luke 14.28ff) we rejoice to follow the path of faithful discipleship to which we are called - as stewards of a useful and inspiring building open to all in the name of the Saviour whom we proclaim in worship, word, and deed.

Christian Aid drumming event at St. Barnabas



II STATEMENT OF NEEDS

Demographic Context

The Borough of Newham is ranked 6th most deprived Local Authority nationally (4th most deprived in London). Over 50% of the population are from ethnic minorities - in St. Barnabas parish, over 90%. It is densely populated, with subdivided 2-up-2-down houses accommodating up to as many as 20 people. 30% of households in the parish are deemed "overcrowded". 28% of the population are children under 15. Poverty, poor housing, low skills, transience of population and, increasingly, unemployment create many social needs. In recent months jobs advertised at local job centres have decreased by over 50%, many in employment have poor pay and no security. In the 2001 census the religious profile of the population of the parish emerged at 43% Muslim, with large Hindu and significant Sikh communities. 22% of electors declared themselves Christian. However, most members of this Christian minority are originally from Africa or the Indian sub-continent, and increasingly now also from Eastern Europe, and meet for worship in denominational fellowships other than traditional CofE (e.g. Roman Catholic, Pentecostal, Mar Thoma). Nevertheless St. Barnabas has a broad-based, committed congregation, most of whom live in or very near the parish. Sunday worship attracts an average congregation of 50, with a small but lively Sunday School, and there is demand for pastoral offices as well as space for midweek activities as mentioned above. Because of the exceptional diversity of the parish and its range of social needs and intercultural opportunities, St. Barnabas also has significant educational and training potential for the wider Church.

Immediate Structural Needs of the Building

Our 2008 quinquennial inspection confirmed the need for a major 're-fit' of the entire building, as had been indicated in the two previous quinquennials. For many years the church's priority was active ministry in the local community, and little was done on the building beyond maintaining it for everyday running purposes. Now, however, it is vital to ensure the long-term viability of the building in order to sustain the church's ministry and mission. Grants from English Heritage, London Over the Border, and Friends of Essex Churches have enabled us to complete high-level repairs at the east end, but substantial further work is needed over the whole building from roof to copings, brickwork and buttresses, windows and doors, boundary fence and garden. The stone cross on the central west gable is broken and needs renewing (originally each of the three gables had a cross, each different). Internally, the stone flags at the east end are



badly deteriorating, the electrics need renewing, the toilets need upgrading, with additional disabled provision. Further needs: improve the main entrance, create a side entrance to increase weekday flexibility of building use, remove redundant piping and radiators, redecorate sacristy and vestry. The floor of the west end of the nave requires protection and care due to heavy community use.

Community Needs

Although the building is busy seven days a week, it is not well adapted for use by more than one group at a time, because of CRB requirements, restricted access to toilets/kitchen and the problem of sound (the church being a single open space). We have thus not been able to pursue possibilities of further use of the building for educational and drop-in purposes (requests received from Trinity Community Centre, Bridge Builders, and mental health services, as well as from other Christian and non-faith-based groups), and the potential of the total space is not being realised. Initial ideas have been explored for re-ordering the interior to optimise use of the building by different groups while retaining its distinctive qualities and appeal. Not unimportantly, this will reduce heating costs and bring in income to make the church more self-sustaining.

Accessibility

The whole of the church except the sanctuary is at ground level, so access is easy for all (disabled access would be built into any plans for the sanctuary). Disabled toilet facilities are needed. The main entrance is accessible but not friendly for those with wheelchairs or walking frames, it lacks light, has a slightly awkward arrangement of doors, and is uninviting. Requires improvement. The north side and east end garden area could be most attractive and a valuable addition to what the church has to offer, but at present is inaccessible and inappropriate for public use.

Regeneration

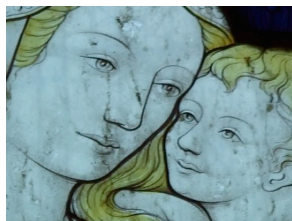
Regeneration projects can bring major benefits but also leave pockets of deprivation and neglect, particularly in a time of economic uncertainty. St Barnabas parish and surrounding neighbourhoods have not benefited noticeably from the Olympic and Thames Gateway projects. Meanwhile recession and public spending cuts are having a clear detrimental impact. Needs in the community are increasing while resources contract. The sooner major structural work on the church can be completed, the sooner we will be able to explore further ways of offering our resources and the witness of the Church for the benefit of the community.

Environment

The arched buttresses on the north side of the church and the area at the east end are potentially very useful and attractive, but need to be worked on imaginatively. A proper boundary wall must be constructed and garden areas reclaimed. Rubble, thorns, Japanese knotweed and ivy need eradicating and paving for access by all laid. Aspects of the front garden (bent railings, noticeboards, disused parking space) need improvement. Litter bins of an appropriate design are needed beside the benches. A cleaner/caretaker will be needed as building use increases.

Needs of the Church Community

The core identity of the building as a place of Christian worship and witness needs to be affirmed in a way that is visible, intrinsic to the overall character of the premises, and genuinely welcoming. The broken cross on the west front needs to be replaced. Internal re-ordering will need further imaginative and sensitive thinking to secure the sense of 'sanctuary' where the altar is sited while integrating "sacred" and "profane" in a way that communicates Gospel values and makes a beautiful building practically available for multiple community use. Clearly the work required is beyond the means of the local congregation to pay for. Ongoing and regular one-off local fundraising events bring a generous response, but we depend on the concern and support of the wider Church and community. All who have a care for the church will need to be committed in prayer and active engagement, that our efforts may "bear fruit richly" to the glory of God.



Details from the East window