

Full History

St Mark's had no ordinary beginning. The present building was dedicated on 19th November 1910 but the beginning of the story goes back another seven years, to the establishment of a temporary Iron Church, due in the main part to the generosity of some wealthy and determined local people.

At that time, the area around Purley and Woodcote was mainly rural - substantial estates and farm land belonging to what remained of the landed gentry. Hunting and coursing were popular, the mail vans were still horsedrawn, and the London to Brighton stagecoach passed close by. Foxley Lane was still an unmade road and Farm Lane no more than a track, rutted by farm wagons and waterlogged on a bad day. The local churches, not straightforward for everyone to get to, were St Mary's Beddington and Christ Church, Purley.

By 1903, however, the local property market was gathering momentum, and with this momentum the issue of church location became important. Servants were still the norm and churches still needed to be within walking distance for the two or three visits made by some families on a Sunday. In fact, a church was very much a 'desirable feature' when the late Victorian and Edwardian professionals moved from London suburbs to the new houses in the vicinity, and estate agents were well briefed as to the eloquence of local ministers. It was common for prospective purchasers to visit a recommended church and hear a sermon before making a final decision on the suitability of the house for the family. A good preacher, therefore, was an asset not only for his congregation but for the estate agents!

This, then, was the scene when in 1903 a small body of keen churchmen, living mostly in Foxley Lane, began talk of having their own church and a formal committee was formed. Early in 1904 the committee was given the choice of two sites, both offered by prominent members of the committee. One of these was on the south side of Foxley Lane and offered by Mr William Webb, a landowner and estate agent. William Webb was creating what is now known as the Webb estate and his home, right in the centre of the estate, would have been a few minutes walk from 'his' church. However, the other site, on Peak's Hill and from the estate of Mr Edward Harrison, a gentleman farmer, was considered to be the more suitable and, on Lady Day 1905, on what is now Church Road, a temporary Iron Church was erected at a cost of about £1000. It is worth noting that, from start to finish, the project had been instigated, and driven forward by the laity, and not the Bishop or the church establishment.

The most difficult task the committee tackled in the early stages was the choice and the method of appointment of their first Priest. This issue created a near irreparable rift in the group, not so much in the choice of churchmanship required as the method of appointment. The gift of the living was the stumbling block and it became so because of the great fear of some of the committee - particularly William Webb - that the man appointed would not adhere to the type of service they required. What was not wanted was an Anglo-Catholic type service and the committee appeared prepared to go to any lengths to avoid this. It was strongly held that St Mark's should be neither 'High' nor 'Low' church, but Evangelical. This 'type of service' issue was to dominate the affairs of St Mark's for over a decade.

There were some 150 applicants for the post of first Priest-in-Charge, and, after much heartsearching and discussion between the committee and the Bishop, the Revd Lucius Palmer Smith of St. Margaret's, Streatham Hill was recommended as a suitable candidate for the post. The Bishop described Lucius Smith as 'manly and honourable', and listed the points which the priest had agreed would not be introduced i.e 'the lights on the altar and the bowing towards the Holy Table'. The Bishop further reported that Revd Lucius Smith felt that what the new church required was 'a man who was not pronounced in any way'. (Interestingly, in a speech towards the end of his ministry, Lucius Smith said that he felt a congregation wanted not 'a slow bowler' or 'noted bridge player' but a man given to prayer.)

Although at the beginning William Webb was unconvinced, Lucius Smith proved to be the right man for the job and church life at once began to expand with his energy, not least the task of raising funds for the permanent church. The balance remaining from the money subscribed for the Iron Church began to swell with further gifts, and in 1906 it was agreed to engage an architect. The decision was to invite Mr George Fellowes Prynne, an ecclesiastical architect of some experience. Fellowes Prynne had previously designed some nine churches, four in the London area and a further four in the West country. The committee visited most of them and were particularly impressed by the church at Budleigh Salterton built some twenty years previously. A design on similar lines was requested from Fellowes Prynne.

Raising sufficient money was a large undertaking but, eventually, the first sod was cut on 7th July 1909 and the foundation stone laid on 23rd October, an account of the founding of the church being deposited underneath it. The new church was ready for consecration on 19th November, 1910. The total cost of the building to date had been £9826 plus £20 for a pulpit, £324 for the pews, £55 for the choir stalls and £42 for the font. The Iron Church was converted for use as a parish hall.

However, despite the generous giving of the congregation, there were not sufficient funds to carry out all that the architect had in mind. The plan had included a tower and steeple (with a ring of six bells) on the north side, but it was only possible to erect the tower base (now the north porch) and that proved to be far more costly than was anticipated. The windows were all plain glass and nothing had been done about a really worthy organ. (This situation was put right in 1915, with the installation of a Walker organ, widely acclaimed to be one of the best of its kind in the diocese.)

Nevertheless, St Mark's was indeed fortunate with the generosity and resolve of its original benefactors, Edward Harrison and William Webb. Although rivals from the outset, these two men, together with the Bishop of Southwark, Bishop Talbot, had a vision which, in their very different ways, they realised with energy and purpose. Edward Harrison, a private and rather autocratic man, had donated the land and possibly felt that his gift entitled him to manipulate the committee as he pleased. Sadly, he died a few weeks before the church was consecrated and left William Webb to be the effective Lord of the Manor and a major influence in the years which followed. (There is a window in the north transept in memory of Edward Harrison.)

However, the story was by no means all about men. From the outset, women played a vitally important part in raising money for the new church. At one of the bazaars held near East Croydon station – where they could catch the men disembarking from the train after a day's work in town - the ladies of St Mark's ran fourteen stalls and a ladies' orchestra played each evening! There were flower shows and many other events, and the success was such that the men on the Church Council passed a resolution that the ladies of the parish should be asked to form a Ladies' Association.

No woman was more active in this Association than William Webb's sister Julia. Julia Webb was tireless in her work around the parish, particularly in the so-called 'poor' area of Ellen Avenue (now Lansdowne Road). It was considered that St Mark's was too far for the inhabitants of Ellen Avenue to walk to and so St Mark's went to them! When a permanent place of worship was needed, it was Julia Webb who donated a piece of land on which was built a Mission Hall, large enough to hold about one hundred people. Julia Webb remained in the parish after her brother had left until she died in 1934.

The early priests

The Revd Lucius Smith remained quietly in command of the Iron Church until he left at the end of 1909. As a fund raiser he had been superb, raising money from rich and poor alike. Although St Mark's was conceived as being a church for the upper and middle classes, it was Lucius Smith who, in 1906, organised a Mission for the poor area of Ellen Road. Regular services were held from the cart and, during Lent, Lucius Smith would walk down to Ellen Avenue every week to

deliver his Lenten addresses. When he left the parish, it was as a much respected and admired man of God. (His son Philip was Vicar of St Mark's from 1954-64).

Lucius Smith was succeeded in 1910 by Albert Hooper, appointed when the foundation stone for the new church was laid. Revd Hooper was variously described as being fat and jolly, as having a genial smile, and riding round the parish on a bicycle, wearing a top hat. His ministry at St Mark's was short but eventful with much of the early objectives being achieved and the foundation for future progress being laid. (A new ecclesiastical parish of St Mark's was formed by the Bishop of Southwark, Dr Burge, in July 1911.) However, Revd Hooper was soon at odds with William Webb on the familiar Albert Hooper – "much loved, despite the conflicts" issue of churchmanship and reference was made in the council minutes to 'the form of service and ornaments'. This conflict escalated into full scale war with the result that the vicar dissolved the council (which had no legal basis) and announced that he could manage the church with the assistance of the Churchwardens! What transpired during the following months is not known but the next entry in the minute book for the Church Council is dated 3rd June 1912 and the council was re-formed under its original rules and constitution. An uneasy alliance seems to have existed. Sadly though, a year later, Albert Hooper contracted pneumonia and died, leaving his widow with the sum of £4 after his debts were cleared. He had been generous to a fault, much loved despite the conflicts, and the parish responded with an appeal on his widow's behalf.

St Mark's third priest was the Revd George Marten, a thirty eight year old bachelor, who came to a parish described as having 'splendid possibilities, and George Marten – "the consolidator" therefore needing much tact, much patience, and unquenchable optimism'. Although his churchmanship did not suit some of the pioneers, William Webb in particular, he remained in the post for nine and a half years, and could truly be called the consolidator of St Mark's early years, guiding it through the difficult period of the Great War. A roll of honour was kept and a list of those killed, lost or wounded was printed month by month in the magazine. Notes of sympathy to relatives increased as the war years passed. George Marten was not, however, a stay-at-home theologian and he did a six month stint as a Naval Chaplain with the Auxiliary Fleet. He clearly missed his parish, for in a letter he wrote, 'Thank you for the many letters I have already received. You can't imagine how one values them when far away.....Please write often!'

It was during the Revd Marten's ministry that the curtain fell on William Webb's involvement with St Mark's. The idea of a 'plain service' would not go away from him and he lost his final battle with the Bishop over the appointment of St Mark's third Priest in Charge. In 1919 Webb wrote to the Croydon Advertiser contending that parish boundaries have less importance than the preferences congregations have for a particular kind of service. He concluded that many had left the area as a direct result of the change which had taken place in the local churches (including, of course, St Mark's) and this was ample justification for yet another church in the area, and one which would provide a plain, Evangelical service. The Bishop set up a commission to look into the feasibility of the idea and eventually, in April 1929 Bishop Garbett of Southwark dedicated the church of St Swithun now a joint benefice with St Mark's.

By this time the Webb family (except for Julia) had left the area and William Webb died in 1930. He had been a generous and hard-working servant to St Mark's and there is a window in his memory in the south side of the church.

The Vicars of St Mark's Church

Lucius Palmer Smith 1905 - 1909
Albert William Hooper 1910 - 1913
George Henry Marten 1913 - 1922
Eric Arthur Shattock 1922 - 1939
Alfred Charles Raby 1939 - 1954
Philip Morell Smith 1954 - 1964
Derek Reeve Blows 1965 - 1970
Philip Mayo Haynes 1970 - 1982

Roderick Harold Gibbs 1983 - 1992
Peter Michael Sills 1993 - 2000
John William Scholar Paton 2001 - 2007
Frances Mary Long 2008 -

The above brief account of St Mark's early history has been extracted from two sources: It's up the Ladder to Heaven by Celia Barker (available in Purley Library), and the booklet A Walk Around St Mark's, which has recently been reprinted and is available in church for £3. This booklet contains a description and photographs of many interesting features at St Mark's, including a number of fine stained glass windows.