

OLD TRINITY CHURCH

Marlow's Old Trinity Church (formerly Holy Trinity) in Wethered Road is today privately owned, and used as offices.

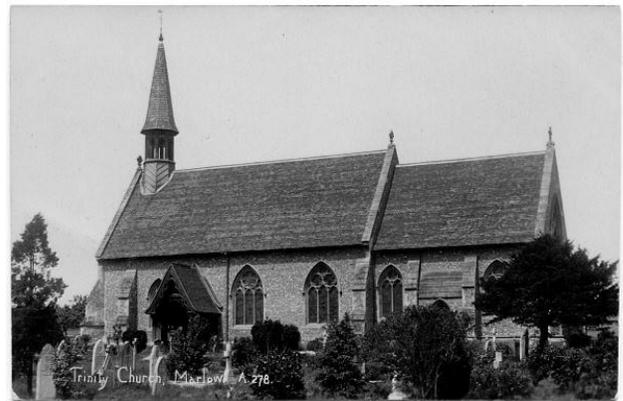
The 13th August 1852 was a big day for churchgoers in Marlow. A new church was consecrated. Holy Trinity Church (today called Old Trinity Church), in Wethered Road, was open for business. Construction cost was £3,000.

Marlow was expanding, and the Parish Church could no longer accommodate the town's churchgoing population. The new church was built as a 'chapel of ease' to meet this need, and provided an extra 200 seats for worshippers.

At the time Holy Trinity Church was built, Wethered Road was not much more than a path, with open fields to the north and east. Despite its location on the edge of town, the site chosen for the church did have some buildings nearby. Two of them remain today - the small cottages next to the church on Trinity Road. In 1851 one of these was a public house called the Three Horse Shoes. The pub garden, which extended to the north along the church boundary, is today occupied by two houses built around 1990. They can be seen on the original sale deed dated 23rd August 1851, which shows that the land needed for the church was sold to Her Majesty's Commissioners for Building New Churches by Thomas Peers Williams for the sum of £120. Interestingly, the deed also refers to a building called The Garrison that formerly stood on the site.

The sale document includes a plan which shows that Wethered Road was in 1851 simply labelled as 'Path from Marlow Field to Dean Street'. The lane running across the bottom right hand corner of the plot, today known as Trinity Road, is shown as Gun Lane. The land to the east of Gun Lane is stated as belonging to B Atkinson Esq. The outline sketch of the church building shows clearly that the porch was originally intended to be on the North side. It also appears that the original churchyard was smaller than the present one, a parcel of land on the south-east, mainly cottages with gardens, being excluded.

To many people, Old Trinity Church looks older than it really is. This is because the 'gothic revival' architecture of the 1850s drew its inspiration from the Middle Ages. The same stylistic influences can be seen in many Victorian churches, cathedrals, schools, museums, town halls and other buildings. The style was not just about the shape of buildings, but also about the colour schemes used in the interiors. Many gothic revival colours are back in fashion, and can be purchased from specialist paint suppliers. This is all good news for the old churches and other buildings from this era, since they are less likely to be demolished, and more likely to be treated sympathetically.



Trinity Church in the 1920s

The architect responsible for the church was Sir George Gilbert Scott, one of the most famous of the gothic revival architects, with over 100 churches and cathedrals to his credit. Scott was also responsible for buildings such as the Albert Memorial and the spectacular St Pancras Hotel building in London.

The church authorities realised quite soon after its erection that it's churchyard was inadequate for the town's needs. Just six years after the consecration, in 1858, the church announced plans to extend the grounds by purchasing the oddly-shaped piece of land to the south west corner. This is the plot excluded from the 1851 purchase.

Interestingly, in the meantime the ownership of this plot had changed from Mr Harris to Mr Bloxham. Had Mr Bloxham seen an opportunity

to make some money, and acquired the land from Mr Harris in the expectation that one day the church would need it? This is pure speculation, but it is a matter of fact that the Church Commissioners had to pay dearly when they purchased this plot. The small parcel of land cost the church £145 when the sale deed was signed in 1859. Not much by today's standards, perhaps, but less than eight years earlier the entire plot for the church and churchyard had cost only £120. Inflation? Or shrewd bargaining by Mr Bloxham?

Despite this expansion of the churchyard, in 1909 the vicar announced that there would soon be no further room for burials. Since it was not feasible to acquire further adjacent land, plans for the establishment of the parochial cemetery were drawn up instead. At a church meeting of 1912 it was announced that the churchyard was closed 'for all purposes of opening new graves.' Visitors to the churchyard, however, will see that there are a very few gravestones from comparatively recent times. These are family plots acquired several generations ago.

The church records include references to various internal additions and modifications over the years, such as a new oak altar rail, and new stained glass windows. Most of these were paid for by local families and individuals to commemorate the passing of loved ones. The records also provide insights into the costs of running the church in 1915. The insurance bill that year was £4.14.6d. The organist was paid & organ tuning cost £2.12.6d; blowing £1.13.3d; Choir boys earned £3.8.5d; and washing surplices cost £2. Gas cost £2.16.6d; candles £1.4.0d; fuel £7.8.7d; and repairs £1.1.5.

Little is known about the church in the years until it fell into disuse. Many of the gravestones evidently disappeared during these latter years, according to comments from local people, and today there are very few left in the churchyard.

The bell is no longer in the tower, but is preserved at Widmere Farm. The organ has of course long gone, and was presumably removed when the building came into private ownership. There are no longer any pews. The stone pulpit and steps are still in the building, although they have been moved to a corner next to the reredos. The altar

rail and its supporting metalwork are no longer in their original places, but are safely in storage.

For the past 25 years, the Church of England has had a continuing programme of selling off redundant church buildings. Falling numbers of churchgoers, coupled with the costs of maintaining buildings that were over a century old, meant that many simply became too much of a drain on the church's finances. Marlow's Old Trinity Church was closed in 1975, and sold off by the Church Commissioners in 1978 as part of this programme.

The building was used for various purposes in the years that followed. At one stage it was a photographic studio and gallery. Then it was occupied by an exhibition and advertising company, which increased the useable space by adding a mezzanine floor over part of the interior, and installed a new solid floor throughout, with under-floor heating. For three years around 1990 Old Trinity Church stood empty.

Since 1994, the church and grounds have been owned by The RSA Group Ltd, a public relations and marketing services consultancy.

The report prepared for the church commissioners before the deconsecration in 1976 makes interesting reading. This is where the construction figure of £3,000 was given. In the introduction to the report, Old Trinity Church is described as 'typical of many chapels of ease built in the mid nineteenth century'. Here are some other extracts from the report.

'A four-bay nave with north aisle, west bell turret and south porch; chancel of three bays with north organ chamber and vestry. The walls are built of brick faced with flint, with bath stone dressings. The roofs are covered with machine-made tiles. The south porch is made of timber. "

'The style of the church is, typically of Scott, his favourite Middle Pointed with a simple overall plan to accommodate as many seats as possible without resorting to galleries, and most of the detail confined to the decorated window tracery which is varied enough to give diversity to the several views of the church.

'The east window of four lights shows the baptism of Christ and the ascension alternately with two Old Testament scenes, one of which is Abraham

and the three Angels. In the tracery is the Saviour flanked by seraphims. The bright reds and blues are typical of Hardman, who made the window in 1867 at a cost of £300.

"Chancel south wall 1 of two lights, showing Christ giving Peter the keys of the Kingdom. All rather yellowish, perhaps by Burlison & Grylls, about 1970.

"Chancel south 2, of two lights showing the Adoration of the Magi, by Clayton and Bell, 1867, predella panels below show two of the Acts of Charity.

"The west window shows the Four Evangelists and the four Latin doctors, all drawn with most characterful faces but rather drably coloured, probably around 1890.

"The west window of the north aisle dates from around 1921 and shows Christ in Gethsemane, the Flagellation and Christ bearing the Cross, all very grey and rather decadent, perhaps by Curtis, Ward and Hughes.

"The other nave windows are all but one by Burlison & Grylls. "

The current owners have found that there is one error in the report. When some of the internal plaster work was chipped off during treatment for damp in the 1990s, it revealed that the internal construction is mainly of chalk rather than brick.

The final conclusion and recommendation of the 1976 report is worth quoting:

"The council understands that the church has not been used for services for well over a year, and that the congregation who used to worship at Holy Trinity are now content to go the relatively short distance to All Saints. According to the architect's latest Quinquennial report, the church is in reasonably good condition, and to demolish it therefore would seem to be a waste of a good asset. It seems to the council that an alternative use should be sought for it. "

Martin Harrison, a stained glass window expert who had been involved in preparing the 1976 report, happened to call into the building one day in the mid 1990s, and provided some interesting additional information. He suggested that the mosaic work on the reredos was most probably executed by Salviati of Venice, to a design by Clayton & Bell. If so, the mosaic glass would almost certainly have been imported from Italy.

Salviati was a famous glass mosaic company whose work can also be seen in St. Mark's, Venice, the Albert Memorial, the Cupola at St. Paul's Cathedral, Middle Hall of Parliament and the Albert Chapel at Windsor Castle.



The church interior

The main entrance porch of the church is on the south side. The plans in the original 1851 deeds, however, show that the north door was intended to be the main entrance. Certainly, the stonework intended to frame a porch roof on the north side can be clearly seen today, although as far as is known the porch on this side of the building was never built.

Converting an old church building for use as business premises (or for that matter as residential premises) demands considerable ingenuity and expense.

For one thing, churches were not designed to allow much natural light into the building. Certainly not enough for a 21st century office environment. Another problem is heating. Stained glass windows are not airtight, and allow heat to pass out, and draughts to enter. Double glazing is not practical, since the creation of a micro-climate could damage the painted glass. There is not much that can be done, apart from accepting that heating costs will be high during winter, and there will be cold spots at certain locations.

Strangely enough, cooling can also be a problem during the summer months. Stained glass windows obviously cannot be opened for ventilation.

Despite these considerations, a former church building makes characterful offices, and it is perhaps not surprising that most of the owners

and occupants of the building since the 1970s have been firms in creative businesses.

Since 1974 the building has been Grade II listed. The grounds have separately been designated a conservation area. The current owners have undertaken regular work to preserve and protect the building, internally and externally. They are pleased to be preserving the church as a living part of the local community, even if it is no longer used for its original purpose as a place of worship.

In 1995 the old and rusting mesh protection on the stained glass windows was removed and replaced with new stainless steel mesh. The Vestry was completely re-roofed, as was the porch over the lych gate. Wire mesh was installed in the bell tower openings, to thwart the large number of pigeons that had taken to nesting there. A long stretch of the brick and flint wall along Trinity Road was rebuilt.

The most recent work was the complete dismantling and rebuilding in 2002 of the brick and flint border wall alongside Wethered Road. This had been suffering from the combined effects of traffic damage and disturbance by tree roots, and by the 1990s was leaning over dangerously into the road, and had several very large fractures. It was deemed by the local council to be unsafe, so was taken down, flint by flint, brick by brick, and rebuilt. This work revealed that the original 1850s wall had simply been built directly

on the soil ! Today, apart from a certain brightness that will tone down in the next few years, the rebuilt wall looks as though it has been there for centuries. Hopefully, with its new concrete foundation, it will be there for centuries to come.

The future for Old Trinity Church looks good.

Information sources

Accounts for Marlow Parish Church from around 1830 to 1915, Diocesan Records, Aylesbury, Bucks.

Report on Holy Trinity Church for the Council for Places of Worship, 83 London Wall, EC2, 12th April 1976

Conveyance deed relating to the purchase of land for the building of Holy Trinity Church, between Thos Peers Williams Esq.. and Her Majesty's Commissioners for Building New Churches, dated 23rd August 1851. And a subsequent deed from 1859 covering the purchase of an extra plot of land to extend the churchyard.

The Buildings of England, by Nikolaus Pevsner, Penguin Books, ISBN 0 14 071019 1. contains

The book of Marlow, by A J Cairns, Barracuda Books, ISBN 0 86023 094 5

Marlow, a Pictorial History, by Rachel Brown and Julian Hunt, Phillimore & Co Ltd, ISBN 0 85033 942 1.

Abridged by J Smith from an original article by Roger Staton, which first appeared in the Marlow Historian 4.