Places of Worship in Dulwich

All Saints Church

Active
Church of England
Lovelace Road, SE21 8JY

All Saints church exterior and interior

All Saints temporary church, 1885

All Saints exterior and interior

Historical summary

In the 1880s, West Dulwich was still partly undeveloped, and a temporary iron church on Rosendale Road, erected in 1877, served the local congregation. The Estates Governors later provided land for a permanent church, with the foundation stone laid by the Bishop of Rochester in 1888 and completion following in 1891. Designed by G. H. Fellowes Prynne, a student of G. E. Street and designer of Colombo Cathedral, the church's plan was inspired by Catalan hall churches, featuring a long, wide nave and a short apsidal chancel. Its triangular site slopes steeply eastward, causing the chancel to rise on a high basement, giving the structure a dramatic appearance from the north. Though the nave was planned with seven bays, only the eastern four were built; the uncompleted western end was later echoed in design. Constructed in red brick with yellow and stone details, the church suffered bomb damage in 1944 and was restored in 1952, when J. B. S. Comper added a memorial belfry.

Historical background

In the 1880s parts of West Dulwich were still largely undeveloped. A temporary iron church, erected in 1877 on Rosendale Road, served the spiritual needs of the growing district. Proposals for a permanent church were first advanced by the West Dulwich New Church Building Committee in 1887. The Estates Governors granted a site, and the Bishop of Rochester laid the foundation stone in October 1888.The church was designed by Prynne (1853–1927), a pupil of Street, and was completed three years later. The partially finished building was opened under licence on 31 October 1891 at a total cost of about £16,000, all raised through donations from local residents. The site was conveyed free of charge to the Ecclesiastical Commissioners in 1893, and the church was consecrated on 13 November 1897. A Consolidated Chapelry was formed in 1899.

All Saints was designed on a generous scale to seat around 1,400–1,600 worshippers. Its plan was influenced by the great hall churches of Catalonia, a form favoured by Street, consisting of a wide and long nave joined to a short, narrow, apsidal-ended chancel. The nave was intended to have seven arcaded bays—the westernmost four opening to narrow aisles, and the easternmost three to chapels. The three western bays, with the semi-circular baptistery and flanking porches, were never built, though the later west end echoed the intended design. The chancel end, raised on a lofty basement, was composed to dramatic effect and designed to be viewed to best advantage from the north. The exterior, in red brick with stone dressings, was Gothic of an eclectic nature, the east end possibly inspired by Erfurt Cathedral. The chancel apse, with seven tall three-light windows, dominated the composition. Offset buttresses, ambulatory lancets and deeply recessed basement arches created rich shadow and texture. Prynne had originally intended two slender angle towers flanking the junction of the nave and chancel, rising with a central flèche, but these were never built. The later pyramidal-roofed belfry, added after the Second World War, provided a modest substitute. The interior was spacious and richly articulated in red and yellow brick dressed with stone. It had a pointed wooden wagon vault (a modern replacement after earlier damage). The nave arcades featured moulded brick arches of nearly semi-circular form, surmounted by panels for colour decoration and three-light clerestory windows. The chancel arch contained a stone screen of three tall foliated arches rising

from slender Devonshire marble shafts, linked by delicate wrought-iron girders forming a rood beam—a motif found in several of Prynne's churches.

Each side of the chancel had a lofty arch containing a gallery—the north for musicians, the south for the organ. The apse had seven tall three-light windows that illuminated the high altar, flanked by interlacing arcades that held statues of sixteen saints. The Lady Chapel on the north side effectively formed a small church in itself, being wider than the south chapel and having its own narrow chancel of three arcaded bays, a three-sided apse, and an ambulatory. Ten stone angels bearing the Instruments of the Passion formed the corbels. The church was damaged by enemy action in 1944. Restoration was carried out in 1952, when J. B. S. Comper designed a belfry in memory of parishioners who had died in the war. A fire in 2000 destroyed the interior and roof, along with the stained glass and lavish decoration. The church was subsequently restored and reopened in April 2006, featuring a modern wooden vault, a contrasting new west-end entrance, and a modern altar brought forward into the chancel replacing the original high altar. The 1969 organ from the chapel at St Paul's School, Barnes, was installed to replace the lost instrument. Despite never being completed to its original design and ultimately being destroyed by fire, All Saints, West Dulwich, was long regarded as one of the most impressive examples of late 19th-century ecclesiastical architecture and a mature work Prynne, whose distinctive style retained individuality even under the influence of his mentor Street.

George Fellowes Prynne (1853–1927) was born in Plymouth, the son of a clergyman and supporter of the Oxford Movement. He was educated at St Mary's College, Harlow, Chardstock College, and Eastman's Royal Naval Academy, Southsea. Initially intending to enter the ministry, he instead travelled to Iowa at 18 to work for an uncle, later moving to Canada, where he entered the office of architect R. C. Windyer in Toronto. Returning to England in 1875, he joined G. E. Street's practice, and later worked with Swinfen Harris, R. J. Withers, Alfred Waterhouse R.A., and the London School Board. He studied at the Royal Academy (1876–78) and established his own practice in 1880. His first commission was extending his father's church, St Peter's, Plymouth. All Saints, West Dulwich, built 1888–1892, was his first major London project, following work at St Peter's, Streatham. It is often cited as one of his most ambitious designs, rivalled only by his Christ Church Cathedral in Colombo, Sri Lanka. Between 1880 and 1914, Prynne worked on nearly two hundred churches, mainly in southern England, including new builds, extensions, and restorations. A deeply religious man, Prynne's later life was marked by tragedy: two of his sons, Edgar and Norman, were killed in the First World War, and two others, Aubrey and Harold, were seriously wounded. Thereafter, many of his designs were war memorials. Near the end of his life, he also won the competition to design the Town Hall in Ealing, where he lived for many years.

Sources: London Archives. Ken Vernon, 'All Saints Church 1888-1988: A Centenary History', 1988