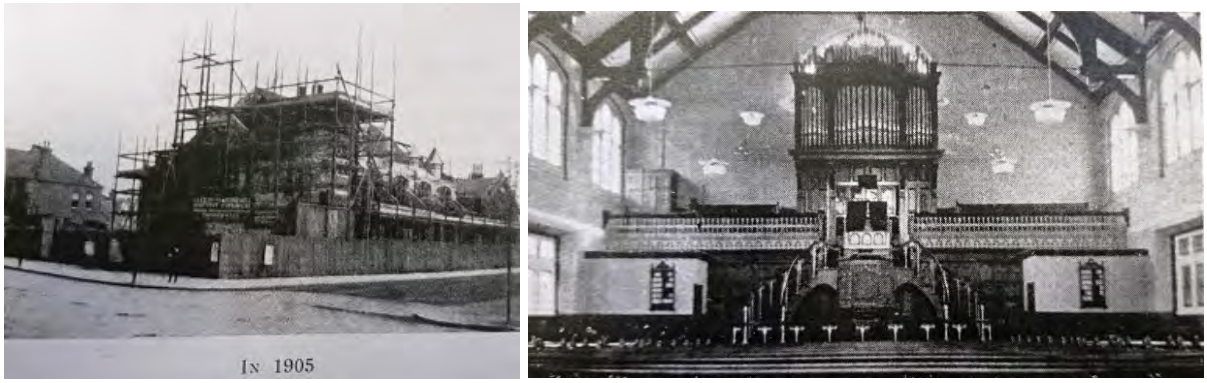
Herne Hill Baptist Church

Active
Baptist
Half Moon Lane, SE24 9HU

Herne Hill Baptist Church exterior and interior



Herne Hill Baptist Church under construction and interior

Historical summary
Congregation founded mid-1890s by Revd Alfred G. Short, Revd J. T. Swift, George Harris, Arthur Bendall, A. Q. Tucker and John Hambrook Dean. Site acquired 1897. The Hall was built first, designed by Estate architect Charles Barry Jr, completed in 1899 by local builder W. J. Mitchell, as indicated on one of the five memoria on the façade including one dated 2 May 1899 from Mrs Short, wife of the pastor. Plot at edge of site sold to become 1A Winterbrook Rd, built by church treasurer Arthur Bendall.

On 9 June 1904, 12 memorial stones were unveiled by, among others, Henry Wood Treasurer of the London Baptist Association: John H. Deane of Sittingbourne “one of the founders”, of the brickmakers Sneed Dean: Alderman Sir Horace Marshall, former Sheriff of the City and subsequently Lord Mayor: and the church’s first pastor, Revd Alfred G. Short.

The church was designed by J. William Stevens of Alleyn Park and was formally opened on 22 March 1906. The bell in the unusual octagonal bell tower was the gift of local resident Augustus Q. Tucker. The organ was procured from Gresham Hall (now the Karibu Centre) in Gresham Road Brixton.

In the 1970s the nave was floored over to create a 200-seater Worship Hall on the first floor.

Historical background

The church was founded in the mid-1890s following a series of meetings held at the house of a Mr Swift in Wiltshire Road, Brixton. A committee was formed and the members 'called' the Revd Alfred G. Short to join them as their new pastor – at the time he was the pastor at the Baptist church in Brading near Sandown on the Isle of Wight. Born in Bristol, he had moved to London to find work and had come under the influence of Revd Charles H Spurgeon, the famous Baptist preacher and founder of the Metropolitan Tabernacle (still located in Elephant and Castle). He joined the Pastors' College in 1869 and, after a student pastorate at Battersea, was sent to Irvine in the West of Scotland. In the late 1870s and early 1880s he held positions in Sittingbourne and Newcastle-on-Tyne but then took some years away from the pastorate due to ill-health. His 'calling' to join the Herne Hill church most likely came through his friendship with George Hambrook Dean, a wealthy brickmaker, who had sponsored the Sittingbourne church and whose son, John, a Herne Hill resident in Woodquest Road, was both a member of the implementation committee and would become chair of the building committee.

John Hambrook Dean worked for the family firm, Sittingbourne based brickmaker Smeed Dean, as a factor (salesman and distributor). In the final 25 years of the nineteenth century, the company was probably the largest brick manufacturers in the country: in 1877 they produced 60 million bricks, specialising in the cheaper yellow stocks used for the side and back walls of the typical speculatively built house. George Smeed had established the firm in 1845 and was joined by his son-in-law, George Dean, in 1875. The firm owned their own barges to move the bricks up to London and you can still buy Smeed Dean bricks today – though the brand is now owned by Austrian brick company, Wienerberger Ltd.

Initially church services were held in a railway arch at Loughborough Junction. The site on the corner of Winterbrook Road and Half Moon Lane was acquired in the summer of 1897. The original intention had been to locate the church on the opposite side of the road, but the contemporary Estate minutes confirmed that it was moved because it impacted on the layout of the planned shops. George Augustus Young, the builder of the new Half Moon Tavern, the shops and the houses on the Springfield Estate, offered the church the alternative site and the Estate were perfectly happy as long as the church paid £60 per annum ground rent and agreed to build a chapel to cost not less than £500. Dulwich estate architect Charles Barry Jnr was appointed to design the first building, the church hall (in fact it was to be his last building), and a series of his sketches were circulated to local Christians to raise money for its

construction. An initial £1,000, was forthcoming, made up of £300 from gifts and £700 from free five-year loans from members of the building committee; it was sufficient for work to start.

Local Dulwich Village builder, W. J. Mitchell, completed the hall in May 1899. At the opening ceremony the Revd Short talked optimistically about the future church and school room, but noted that the new building had cost £2,259, and that they needed to pay it off before they even thought about a church. In November 1899, to help raise the money required, the heads of a local private school in Loughborough Junction, the Misses A. & L. Ridler, donated the proceeds of their sixth annual pupils' concert to the church building fund. The event was held in the Loughborough Park Chapel and the South London Press reported that 'the large room was taxed to its upmost to find accommodation for the number attending, and it speaks volumes for the attractiveness of the programme that so many of the audience remained standing for the three hours that the concert lasted.' In February 1901 more money was raised by selling part of the site for a new house: 1A Winterbrook Road. It was constructed by the church building committee's treasurer, local house builder, Arthur Bendall, best known for his houses in Turney Road, Desenfans Road and Court Lane. The house was called 'Illinois' as the first owner, Isaac More, was the London representative for Armour & Co, the large Chicago meatpacking company.

In June 1904 the twelve foundation stones of the new church were laid by the Revd Short and a number of local worthies. The trowel used for the ceremony was provided by the Revd V. J. Charlesworth, of the Stockwell Orphanage, while the plummet and mallet were those used to lay the foundation stone of the Toxteth Tabernacle in Liverpool. Each of the 12 major participants also provided a cheque. Both George and John Hambrook Dean gave £100 as did George Harris, Mrs J. Pearce of Haddon Lodge in Norwood and Mrs A. Q. Tucker of Onaway, Half Moon Lane. During the ceremony, the gathering was photographed, and as a further source of funds, members of the congregation were invited to buy copies or to lay bricks with their initials inscribed in the well, at a cost of one guinea apiece. The South London Press said 'we understand, many took advantage of adopting this means off having their names down to posterity in connection with the history of the church.' The architect for the new church was an Alleyn Park resident, J. William Stevens, FSI, ARIBA. The new church was complete by the spring of 1906 at a final cost was £11,000. The organ was acquired from the Gresham Hall in Brixton, an earlier building designed by J. W. Stevens (now the Karibu Centre, 7 Gresham Road).

Lady members of the congregation provided the church furnishings including the carpets, the communion table and chairs, the clock and the communion set. Another local builder, and building committee member, George Harris, carried out the paving of the forecourt and paths and planted the shrubs in the grounds. The church was formally opened on 22 March 1906 by Mrs G. H. Dean, mother of the chair of the building committee, and was followed by a public meeting where children representing the Sunday School presented purses of money. There was tea at 5pm followed by an organ recital, and then a further meeting and dinner, both chaired by Harvey Aspden, the editor of the Sunday Companion newspaper.

An unusual feature for a Baptist church was the bell tower. The bell bears the following inscription 'The Bell was kindly given to the Herne Hill Baptist Church by A. Q. Tucker Esq. of Onaway, Half Moon Lane, Herne Hill, A.D. 1905'. American Augustus Quackenbush Tucker was a wealthy local resident who had made his money through selling quack asthma medicine. In October 1911 the Croydon Guardian & Surrey County Gazette reported on his daughter's wedding at the church. The article noted that Miss Tucker, being an American lady, introduced several innovations which made the ceremony unique. These included the double wedding service, the bridesmaids preceding the bride on the way to the altar and there waiting for the bride, and the groomsmen preceding the bridegroom. The report added that the church was beautifully decorated, and a novel note was the two flags, the Stars and Stripes and the Union Jack, tied together with white satin ribbon. Apparently soft music played throughout the service and the bride's trousseau (by Messrs Selfridge) 'was a creation of the dressmaking art'. The reporter was particularly impressed by the bodice, 'one half being of real antique Carrick Marcross lace, almost priceless in value'.

Revd Short left in 1913 following a breakdown in his health and retired to Farnham in Surrey. Subsequent pastors included Revd Percy A. Clements (1914-22) and Revd A. E. Edwards (1923-37). The latter celebrated the church's twenty fifth anniversary in January 1924 when the chairman, still John Hambrook Dean, gave a speech to much applause saying that 'By the united effort of many friends during the years that had gone, culminating in a bazaar last Autumn the church was now entirely free of debt'. The event was attended by the Mayor of Camberwell and special messages of thanks for past services were sent to Mr and Mrs Harris and Mr and Mrs Bendall.

Historic England listed the church in 1989 describing it as designed in 'a Nonconformist Art Nouveau-cum-Gothic Revival style'. The nave was floored over in the 1970s to form two meeting halls but the arched braced and hammer beam roof remains intact and is exposed to view.

The architect, John William Stevens (1852-1939) of 21 New Bridge Street, was best known as a designer of workshops and warehouses for the drapery trade. He was clearly a consummate networker: he was Master of the Felt Makers Company and a prominent Freemason being, at different times, Master of the Onslow Lodge in Guildford and the Bushy Park and Mendelssohn Lodges. Locally, he was a member of the Alleyne Masonic Lodge, chairman of the Working Men's Constitutional Association for Lambeth and for several years he represented Brixton on the Lambeth Vestry. He was also a member of the Surrey Archaeological Society, vice president of the Upper Norwood Literary and Scientific Society; president of the South London Musical Club and for many years a churchwarden at Saint Catherine's, Brixton.

Sources: Dulwich College Archives. Southwark Local Studies