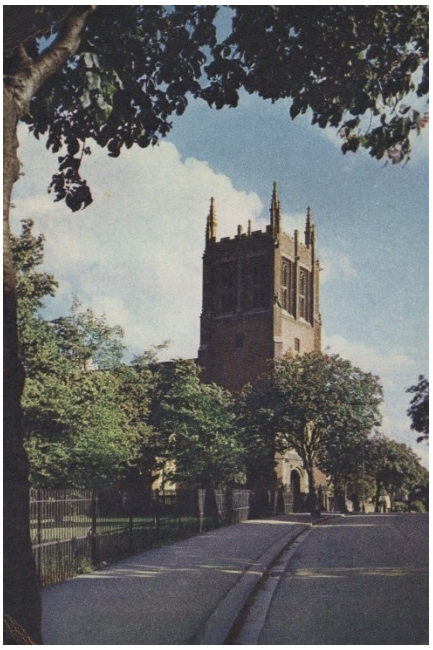
Places of Worship in Dulwich

St Barnabas Church

Active
Church of England
40 Calton Avenue SE21 7DG

St Barnabas church exterior and interior



Original St Barnabas church exterior before and after the tower was built.

Original St Barnabas interior

Historical summary

The need for a dedicated parish church in Dulwich emerged in the late 19th century as the local population expanded. With land provided by the Alleyn's College of God's Gift estate, a temporary corrugated-iron church was erected in 1891 on Calton Avenue while plans for a permanent building were set in motion. The main church building, designed by Wood in a red-brick, Perpendicular Gothic style, was consecrated on 11 June 1894 (the Feast of St. Barnabas) as part of a new district chapelry which later became a full parish. Over the subsequent years, the tower (added in 1908) and interior wood-carved furnishings by parishioners enhanced the church's character. On 7 December 1992 the church burnt down leaving only outer walls and the tower. Demolition followed in 1993. The parish commissioned a replacement designed by the firm HOK Architects (with Larry Malcic as lead) and the new church was completed in 1996. The new design features a modern octagonal plan, central altar, and distinctive glass spire with stained glass by Caroline Swash.

Historical background

The Dulwich College Act of 1882 set up the existing Alleyn Foundation. Among its many provisions it envisaged a new ecclesiastical district for Dulwich. This was because of the rapid increase in London's population due to urbanization and the consequent expansion of the suburbs. At the time, local government was provided within the framework of the medieval parish boundaries which were known as vestries until they were replaced in 1902 by borough councils. The parishes to the south of the City were large. Dulwich was situated in the parish of Camberwell, which also included Peckham, and the population rose from 39,000 in 1841 to 235,000 in 1891. This huge rapid increase in population naturally caused the ecclesiastical parish of St Giles, Camberwell to be unable to cope with the numbers requiring its service in the three stages of life, baptism, marriage and death. It was therefore sub-divided into a number of smaller districts. The bishop of the diocese of Rochester of which Dulwich was part before the creation of the diocese of Southwark in 1905, was Bishop Thorold who was regarded as a broad church or liberal cleric and thus in complete contrast to his predecessors a generation earlier when the Anglo-Catholic Revival ensured that all the new churches founded in Dulwich would be Ritualist in their liturgy.

Meanwhile, in Dulwich, the condition of Christ's Chapel which had served the village and its surrounding district since 1616 was causing considerable concern. Water was coming in through the roof and funds from pew rents did not appear to be sufficient to satisfactorily cover the cost of repairs. Furthermore, the pews were all let and there was little or no room for the increasing population. The only solution was to build a new church. Dulwich was the last ecclesiastical district to be carved out of the old Camberwell parish; its increase in population had been far slower because of limitations to development placed upon it by Alleyn's College. However, development was anticipated to increase in order to generate income for the ambitious schools' building programme as envisaged by the Act of 1882. The Act also required the estate to provide, free of charge, land for a church and parsonage and £2,500 towards building costs. Christ's Chapel would continue under its own chaplain but parochial duties would go to the new vicar of St Barnabas. The sum of £500 pa and free

accommodation was to be extended to the existing chaplain and any successors. The campaign to build the new church was led by Mr William Cortlandt Mahon, a local resident living in East Dulwich Grove. It seems that it was his choice that the dedication of the new church should be to St Barnabas. Mahon, who had pressed the bishop to build it, acted as one of its first churchwardens and he, like Thorold, was not a high churchman nor was the prospective new priest-in-charge, Howard Nixon who thought ritualism put off young men. So the tradition of St Barnabas' low or broad ministry evolved. In 1890 Thorold found an energetic young curate, Howard Nixon who had spent 8 years in Kingston parish where his work among young men was particularly successful. He was asked to start the church in Dulwich. The site earmarked by the Dulwich Estate was between Woodwarde Road and Townley Road but Nixon objected to this, wanting it to be nearer the centre of the parish. Nixon persuaded the Bishop to attend an Estate Governors' meeting to add his support to that of his own in seeking to build the new church on higher ground so it would be better seen. The governors agreed.

In May 1891 a public meeting was held at the Infants' School. By all accounts it was poorly attended and clearly a disappointing start. There were probably local divisions over the passing of pastoral roles from the Chapel Chaplain to the new vicar designate. Nevertheless, there was sufficient attendance to ensure that a building committee was elected and soon offers of help started to flow in. It was agreed to hire a corrugated iron church for a year and open for the first service that September. A choir was to be formed, of 12 boys and 12 men which the new vicar would train. It was designed to accommodate 300 persons and had a small chancel at one end. It stood at the junction of today's Woodwarde Road and Calton Avenue.

A month after the temporary church opened in September 1891 building work started on the new church. The architect was William Wood who had won the competition to build Alleyn's School. The design, in similar red brick toAlleyn's was described as Perpendicular Gothic and was designed to seat 600. Work however was stopped when it was discovered that the building was being erected over the High Level Sewer put under the hill in 1859. The site was moved westwards, nearer to the proposed new road of Calton Avenue. It would thus appear that the current church, set back from the road is built over the same tunnel. The new church, without the tower, cost £18,000, which, apart from the Dulwich Estate's contribution of £2500, came in small sums from the parish. Two years later the vicarage was built. In 1895 Nixon had asked the Estate for land to build a church hall. A site was found in the village and work commenced 1910-12. The iron church, which had been used as a hall, was taken down in 1913.

After the fire in 1992 many wanted a replica of the old church rebuilt, others wanted a modern building with a lighter interior with fewer or no obstructive columns. The damaged tower proved to be unsafe and a competition was held for a new building. The winners, the HOK Partnership, had little or no experience in church building but were a major designer of important public buildings including the Crick Institute in London and the Barclays Bank building at Canary Wharf. Nevertheless, the design by Larry Malcic was ambitious and featured the first glass spire of a church in England.

Vicars of St Barnabas

1894–1935	Howard Nixon
1935–1957	Wilfred Roland Alexis Brown
1957–1979	Arthur Sidney Perry
1979–1990	Richard Lewis
1990–1999	Richard Melville Cattley
1999–2013	Dianna Lynn Hartley (from 2002 Gwilliams)
2013–2023	John Calum Watson
2024–	Liz Barnett

Records: London Archives. Dulwich Society