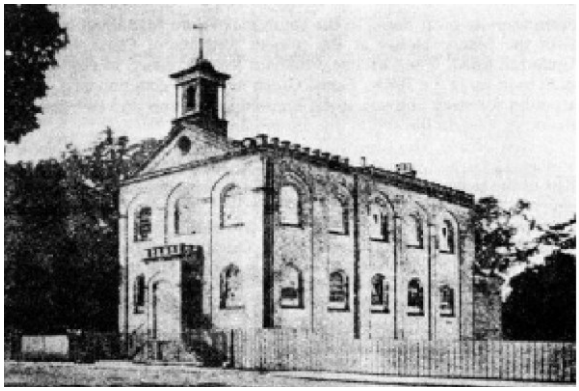
Places of Worship in Dulwich

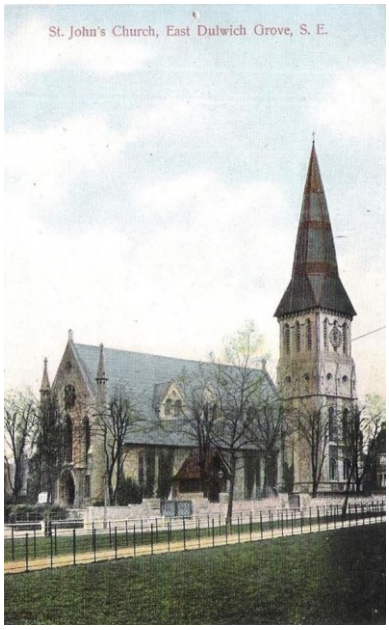
St John the Evangelist, East Dulwich

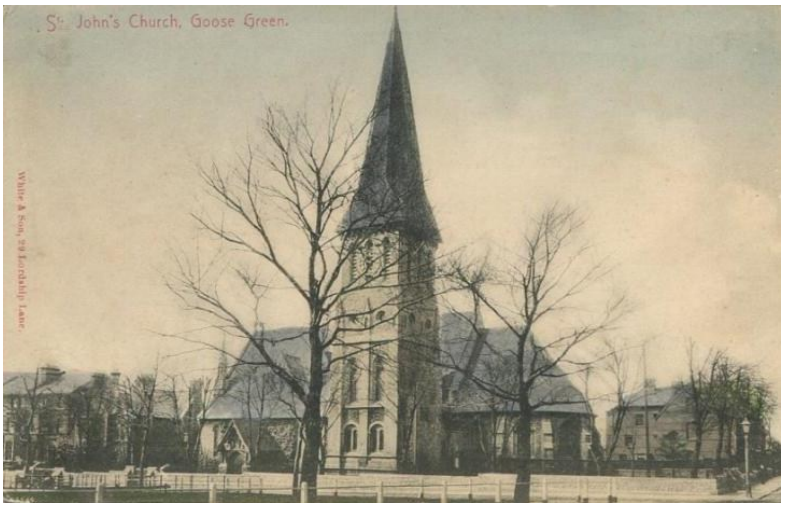
Active
Church of England
62A East Dulwich Road, London SE22 9AU

St John East Dulwich, exterior and interior (interior photo courtesy of John Salmon)



1827 chapel of ease and the 1865 building that replaced it





Historical summary

In 1827, Thomas Baily, a landowner in East Dulwich, built the East Dulwich Chapel at his own expense to serve residents too far from St Giles, Camberwell. It stood on the corner of what is now Tintagel Crescent facing Goose Green and functioned as a chapel-of-ease for St Giles. As the population grew, the chapel became inadequate, and in 1861 Baily's son Charles was commissioned to design a new church, the only one he is known to have designed. Since the original site was too small, Lord Chief Justice Selwyn donated land for a new Gothic-style building, which was consecrated by the Bishop of Winchester in May 1865.

The church suffered severe bomb damage in 1940. Sebastian Comper, son of renowned church architect Ninian Comper, was appointed to oversee its reconstruction. He raised the walls by nine feet, added clerestory windows for additional light, and installed six stained glass windows in the apse by A. L. Wilkinson. The church was rededicated in 1951, with further artistic enhancements completed by 1952. Comper also installed the Stations of the Cross and added a choir gallery in 1954. The south aisle windows, designed by John Lisle of C. E. Kempe & Co., feature the Kempe symbol of a wheatsheaf and tower.

Ninian Comper contributed a baldachino over the high altar, four stained glass windows, and other decorative elements in the Lady Chapel, with craftsmanship by his great-nephew John Bucknall. The church bell, marked "Monarch 1814," originated from a shipwreck off Madeira. The current organ is on loan from Trinity Laban.

Historical background

St John's Church, East Dulwich, was erected in 1865 at a cost of £8,000. The site was generously provided by Lord Justice Selwyn, who also laid the foundation stone in 1863. The first vicar was the Revd Thomas Acton Warburton.

Until 1827, the hamlet of East Dulwich was part of the large and ancient parish of St Giles, Camberwell, which encompassed Camberwell, Peckham, Dulwich, and East Dulwich. The area was largely farmland, pasture, and market gardens, and its sparse population had to travel to St Giles, over Dog Kennel Hill, to attend services.

As the population began to grow, Thomas Baily built East Dulwich Chapel in 1827 on his own land at what is now Tintagel Crescent, facing Goose Green. This chapel-of-ease allowed residents easier access to worship while remaining subordinate to St Giles. Baily conveyed the chapel and land to Trustees, including his family members and associates. The first minister was Revd Matthew Anderson, who served until 1844, followed by Revd John Oldham (1845–1858) and Revd William Elliot (1858–1864). By this time East Dulwich had a population of around 800.

By 1861 the chapel had become too small for the growing congregation. A Church Building Committee was formed after a meeting in the National School Room (Troy Town), chaired by R. Hichens with John Scott as Treasurer and Henry Puckle as

Secretary. Charles Baily, son of the chapel's founder, was appointed architect. Plans were approved for a church seating 845, at an estimated cost of £6,658. Generous subscriptions from parishioners, including £350 from 43 poorer families, contributed to the funding. The church was consecrated by the Bishop of Winchester on 16 May 1865. The original tower, spire, and apse remain today, along with the 1864 clock by John Moore of Clerkenwell, which strikes the hour on a ten-hundredweight bell. A sacristy was added in 1883 and a vestry in 1914.

During WW2 St John's was heavily damaged by incendiary and explosive bombs. Revd Frank Bishop, vicar from 1939 to 1945, described the devastation, noting that multiple fires broke out in October 1940, destroying much of the roof and interior. The vestry was quickly converted into a temporary chapel for weekday services, and Sunday services continued at the nearby Church of the Epiphany. Despite the destruction, the tower survived, and the original clock was restored and operational by September 1948, symbolizing the resilience of the parish.

In January 1947 Sebastian Comper was appointed to oversee the rebuilding. Restoration began with the apse, which had survived the bombing. Materials were scarce, and certain features, like the baldachino over the high altar, were rebuilt in plaster rather than wood. Reconstruction of the rest of the church commenced in August 1949. By April 1950, the chancel arch was complete, and work on the nave had begun. The fully restored church was rededicated by the Lord Bishop of Southwark on 5 May 1951.

Sir Ninian Comper contributed key elements to the church's interior, including the baldachino over the high altar and four stained-glass windows in the Lady Chapel (installed in 1958 by his great-nephew John Bucknall, featuring Sir Ninian's strawberry monogram). He also designed the canopy above the Lady Chapel altar and the bas-relief of the Virgin and Child. Sebastian Comper raised the walls of the main body of the church by nine feet, added eight clerestory windows on either side, and designed six stained-glass windows in the apse, installed between 1951 and 1952. He also erected a choir gallery in 1954. Additional stained glass was created by John Bucknall in 1963 in the north aisle, incorporating his monogram of strawberries and a bee.

Some of the earliest surviving stained glass at St John's includes works by A.L. Moore (1849–1939) in the south aisle, and C.E. Kempe & Co, founded in 1868. The organ, originally from Camden Church, Peckham, was rescued and restored by N.P. Mander Ltd during the war, making St John's the first church to receive one of these salvaged instruments (since replaced).

Sources: London Archives. Mary Boast, 'St John's East Dulwich Church and Parish', 1991