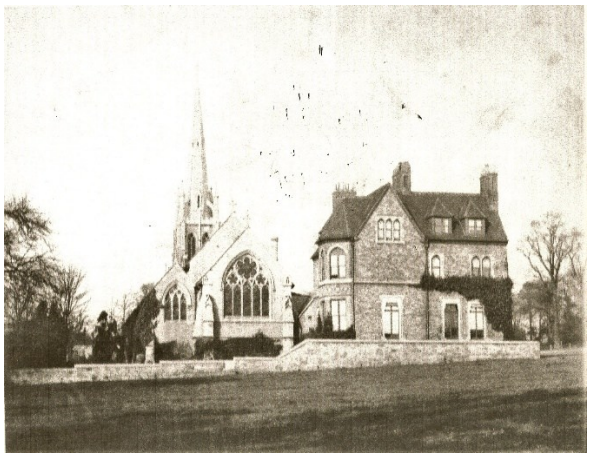
St Paul, Herne Hill

Active
Church of England
129 Herne Hill SE24 9LY



St Paul, Herne Hill exterior

Historical summary
Originally built in 1844 in the Early English style and designed by George Alexander. Following a major fire in 1858 only the tower, spire and outer walls remained. GE Street was employed to rebuild it. The contractor, Holland and Hannen, completed the work by October that year. John Ruskin, who lived nearby in Denmark Hill, called the new church 'one of the loveliest in the country and one that makes the fire a matter of rejoicing,' Nave columns with carved crocket capitals; clerestory with trefoil arcading on short marble capitals. Timber arched brace roof to nave. Marble and alabaster reredos with carved heads in chancel. Only two of the original stained glass windows by Hardman remain after a near miss by a V1 in 1944 (at the west end). East window 1949 by Lillian Pocock. 3 manual pipe organ by Norman & Beard 1914 substantially unaltered.

Carved roodscreen 1920, a war memorial moved in 2014 to form the entrance to the two western bays which were partitioned off with glass. Wall plaques for Capt. James Horsburgh FRS, hydrographer to the East India Company 1836; Henry Fearon, killed aged 29 by lightening on the Wetterhorn, Switzerland with his brother in 1902; John Ruskin erected 1908. The church is listed Grade II*.

Historical background

St Paul's Church, located at the southern end of the parish, was originally completed in 1844 to the designs of George Alexander in an Early English style. Constructed from coursed rubble with ashlar quoins and dressings and topped with a pitched slate roof, the church quickly became a local landmark. Unfortunately, in February 1858, a major fire destroyed much of the building, leaving only the tower, spire, and outer walls.

The rebuilding was entrusted to the eminent Victorian architect George Edmund Street, one of the foremost proponents of Gothic architecture, who was commissioned by the vicar, Reverend Matthew Anderson. Street completed the reconstruction the same year, with Holland and Hannen as contractors. The result preserved the original Early English style while introducing notable refinements. The church has a long, five-bay nave, a western Perpendicular tower, side aisles with lean-to roofs, and a slightly lower chancel extended to the east. Additional north and south extensions house the vestry and organ chamber, respectively.

The tower, with stepped corner buttresses, contains the main entrance beneath a tall traceried window, and twin bell openings above. The spire features flying corner buttresses and pinnacles, contributing to its status as a prominent local landmark. The interior features nave columns with carved crocket capitals, a timber arched-brace roof, and a clerestory with trefoil arcading on short marble capitals. The chancel contains a marble and alabaster reredos with carved heads, and a carved rood screen dating from 1921. Stained glass, mostly by Hardman, survives in west aisle windows despite wartime losses, while the large Decorated east window remains a highlight. A memorial to John Ruskin, who lived nearby, is also located in the nave.

In 2014, following extensive fundraising and parish support, the rear third of the nave was reordered. This created a modern welcome area separated from the worship space by a floor-to-ceiling glass screen incorporating a First World War Memorial Screen. Additional facilities include a fully equipped kitchen, a soundproofed crèche, meeting rooms, accessible toilets, and storage areas, integrating contemporary functionality while respecting the historic fabric.

George Edmund Street (1824–1881)

Street, born in Woodford, Essex, was the third son of a solicitor. After schooling in Mitcham and Camberwell Collegiate School, he trained under Owen Carter in Winchester and then with Sir George Gilbert Scott in London, where he developed a profound interest in Gothic architecture. He established his own practice with Biscovey Church in Cornwall as his first commission.

Street became well-known for ecclesiastical projects and was also an influential theorist, publishing The Brick and Marble Architecture of Northern Italy (1855) and The Gothic Architecture of Spain (1865), both illustrated solely with his own drawings. Over his career, he undertook numerous significant commissions, including St Paul's Herne Hill, St Luke's West Norwood, and an ornate mausoleum in West Norwood Cemetery for John Peter (Zannis) Ralli, a wealthy Greek merchant. Street's work in Dulwich and south London is notable for its rich Gothic detailing and careful attention to material and craftsmanship.

Street received numerous accolades: associate of the Royal Academy in 1866, fellow in 1871, Professor of Architecture, president of the Royal Institute of British Architects, member of the Royal Academy of Vienna, and in 1878, a Knight of the Legion of Honour. His death in December 1881 was reportedly hastened by overwork on the Royal Courts of Justice, and he was buried in Westminster Abbey.

Sources: London Archives.