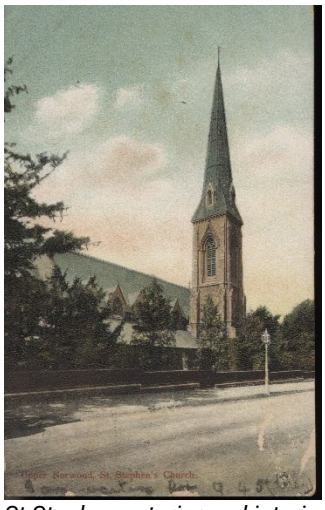
St Stephen

Active
Church of England
111 College Road, SE21 7HW

St Stephen exterior



St Stephen exterior and interior

Historical summary

Until the mid-19th century, the area surrounding what is now the church site was largely undeveloped, dominated by the Kingswood House and Woodhall estates. The construction of the Crystal Palace in the 1850s and the arrival of the railways in the 1860s transformed the district, prompting the establishment of new housing and, by 1865, the decision to build a church to serve the growing community. Designed by Barry, architect to the Dulwich Estate and resident of Sydenham Hill, the church was consecrated in 1868 and was painted in 1870 by French Impressionist Camille Pissarro. It cost £8,000. The first vicar was the Revd John Mack Clark, former fellow of Magdalene College Cambridge. Its marriage registers include notable figures such as John Lawson Johnson, inventor of Bovril, and Lionel Logue, speech therapist to

King George VI. A fine east window by C. E. Kempe was later added in 1924, donated by Lord Vestey in memory of his wife.

Built in Kentish ragstone and richly decorated in Victorian Gothic style, the church was extended to meet its tower. It suffered severe damage from V1 flying bombs in 1944, which caused the walls to lean outward. A young builder ingeniously corrected this by using jacks to realign the structure, securing it with hidden tie bars. Although much Victorian decoration was lost, Sir Edward Poynter's rare fresco The Trial and Martyrdom of St Stephen survived intact. The interior was restored for the centenary, with a west window by Moira Forsyth added in 1952. The church hall, rebuilt in 1999, and new stained-glass windows by Roland Mitton installed in 2024 commemorate Dr Joan Greenwood OBE. Church and war memorial listed Grade II.

Historical background

DE Minutes September 1863: A reference to influential meeting of residents of Sydenham Hill and other parts of the district – a commit nominated to confer with the Governors about a suitable site for a church and parsonage – near the temporary railway station

Historic England Listing description: Church. 1867-75. By Banks and Barry. Ragstone with ashlar dressings; slate roof. Early English style PLAN: rectangular plan with apsidal chancel facing south-east, narrower and lower than nave. Aisles with lean-to roof; tower to north-east elevation, 2nd bay from (liturgical) west end. To (liturgical) north-east and south-east, gabled porch and 1-storey extension respectively. EXTERIOR: Perpendicular tower of 4 stages with corner buttresses has blank, 3-arched arcade above moulded round-arched entrance. Single lancet on each face of 3rd stage; large louvred bell opening with moulded surround to each face of 4th stage. Broach spire. Large traceried (liturgical) west window. Groups of 3 lancets with trefoil tracery between stepped buttresses to aisles; gabled clerestory. INTERIOR: painting of the trial and stoning of St Stephen by Sir E Poynter, 1872. Stained-glass windows by Kempe and (to west end) by Moira Forsyth, 1952.

From Dulwich by Doris Pullen: Erected from designs by Charles Barry, it consists of a chancel, nave, aisles and a tower with a spire. The interior is ornamented with a fresco of two subjects from the life of St Stephen and has stained glass windows. The church was consecrated in 1868 and cost £8,000 to build.

From St Stephen's website:
Beginnings
St Stephen's Church was built to meet the needs of the growing population in South Dulwich following the establishment of the Crystal Palace on the top of Sydenham Hill and the arrival of the railway which made its way in a tunnel under Crystal Palace en route to Chatham and Dover.
The Church with its notable spire has been a landmark in Dulwich ever since it was painted by the famous French Impressionist, Camille Pissarro in 1870, two years after its Consecration.

Designed by Charles Barry Jr (the son of the architect of the Houses of Parliament), the Church was of considerable beauty and was richly decorated in the Victorian Gothic style beloved of Pugin and Ruskin, as can be seen from a contemporary painting, probably the work of Barry himself.
The Church met the needs of the growing community south of the newly-built Dulwich College (also designed by Barry) and Dulwich Woods became the setting for many fine houses. Shortly after the completion of the building Sir Edward Poynter executed the fine fresco in the chancel commemorating the Trial and Martyrdom of St Stephen.
World War II
Over the years the Church was further beautified and enlarged. In particular there is a fine east window by the renowned stained glass makers C.E.Kempe & Co, erected in memory of his wife in 1924 by Lord Vestey, the owner of Kingswood House which lies close to the Church.
Despite serious war damage caused by V1 'flying bombs' in 1944, the building was saved, though not without anxious moments in 1946 when the walls began to lean outwards. This was the result of the pressure exerted on them by the roof which had almost been lifted off the building by the bomb blast.
An ingenious proposal by a young builder to squeeze the walls together by the use of jacks resulted in the walls being restored to their original position, since when they have been held together by unobtrusive tie bars inserted at intervals along the nave. This work was described in The Builder magazine as a 'miracle'.

Sources: London Archives. St Stephen's website. Dulwich College Archives. Dulwich by Doris Pullen