St Thomas More (formerly St Anthony's)

Active
Roman Catholic
380 Lordship Lane, SE22 8ND

St Thomas More exterior

St Anthony's exterior and interior

Historical summary

In 1879 the Franciscans took a house in Lordship Lane, near Bassano Street, where the East Dulwich Picturehouse is now. They converted the house into a monastery, and the stables and coach house into St Anthony's church. A school opened in 1882. In 1892 the site was taken over by the Benedictines but was later sold. A new site for the church, further up Lordship Lane, was leased from the Dulwich Estate, next to what is now Dulwich Library; the school moved to Etherow St. A presbytery designed by JN Comper was completed in 1908 but plans for a church lapsed due to WW1. The Benedictines relinquished the parish to the diocese in 1923 following which the parish priest, Fr James O'Donoghue, revived the building project. Construction began in 1927, the church opened in 1929 and was officially named St Thomas More in May 1935, possibly the first church to be so named following More's canonisation that month.

The building, designed by Joseph Goldie, is late Gothic Revival with a wide, aisleless nave, transept-chapels, a baptistery, and a three-bay chancel, with a striking west front dominated by a six-light traceried window, stone crucifix and bellcote. Internally, the painted hammer-beam roof, wrought-iron-gated baptistery, and rib-vaulted transepts contribute to a rich Gothic character. The church's Caen stone high altar and reredos are possibly by Pugin and came from a demolished chapel in Canterbury. Further additions continued through the mid-20th century, including new chapels, pews, sanctuary decoration, and a replacement presbytery after wartime bomb damage. Significant artworks include carved oak fittings, stations and statues by Anton Dupre, and a 1970 stained-glass window of St Columba.

Historical background

The Catholic presence in East Dulwich grew from the mid-19th-century revival. With Bishop Thomas Grant appointed to Southwark in 1851, missionary activity expanded, and in 1879 the Franciscans from Peckham began saying Mass in Mrs Lucy Taylor's house near Peckham Rye. Later that year they acquired premises on Lordship Lane, converting a house and outbuildings into St Anthony's with the church upstairs and school downstairs.

In 1892 the Franciscans, finding the work incompatible with their itinerant vocation, transferred the mission to the Benedictines of Downside Abbey under Abbot Benedict Snow. In 1900, the congregation numbered around 500, mostly clerks, earning £80-£200 pa.

A small Benedictine monastic community was planned, but financial difficulties forced the sale of houses and the demolition of the priest's house. In 1907, Snow's successor, Dom Meinhard Fulton, secured a new 1¼-acre site from the Dulwich Estate next to Dulwich Library.

In 1923 the Downside Benedictines relinquished the parish to the diocese, and Fr James O'Donoghue became parish priest. He secured a new long lease and appointed Joseph Goldie, a third-generation Catholic architect, to design the church. Goldie's initial plans were ambitious and costly but a revised Gothic Revival scheme was approved. The church opened on in May 1929 though transepts (1934) and baptistery (1935) followed later.

WW2 caused severe bomb damage, destroying Comper's presbytery in July 1944; Mass returned temporarily to the old St Anthony's chapel. Repairs were protracted, and the church reopened only in February 1953 with a new presbytery by Russell Vernon.

From 1961, Fr John Kenny oversaw significant improvements: refurbishing the Sacred Heart chapel and sanctuary ceiling (1963), installing oak lobbies and pews (designed by parishioner John Kirby), extending the sacristy, adding a new organ, and building boundary walls and gates (1968). A new Lady Chapel opened in 1970, supported by the Knights of St Columba, and a modern stained-glass window of St Columba by Patrick Pye was added.

St Anthony's School moved from Lordship Lane to Etherow Street in 1964. Numerous parish organisations revived or emerged during the 1960s and 1970s, including the Parish Council, choir, youth groups, Legion of Mary, and scout groups. In 1985 the John Paul Centre opened as a hub for parish activities, and in the 1990s Worth Abbey maintained a small Benedictine outpost.

The church itself remains a solid late Gothic Revival structure in Middle Pointed style, built of Bargate stone with Bath stone dressings. Its wide aisleless nave has a painted hammer-beam roof; the transepts are rib-vaulted, and the sanctuary is barrel-vaulted with painted panels. Furnishings of note include the Pugin-linked high altar, Gothic timber reredoses, oak seating and panelling, powerful carved Stations of the Cross (1929) by Anton Dupre, statues of St Thomas More and St John Fisher, and 20th-century additions such as the Freda Skinner Virgin and Child and the stained glass by Patrick Pye.

Source: Southwark Local Studies.