

ST PAUL'S PARISH CHURCH

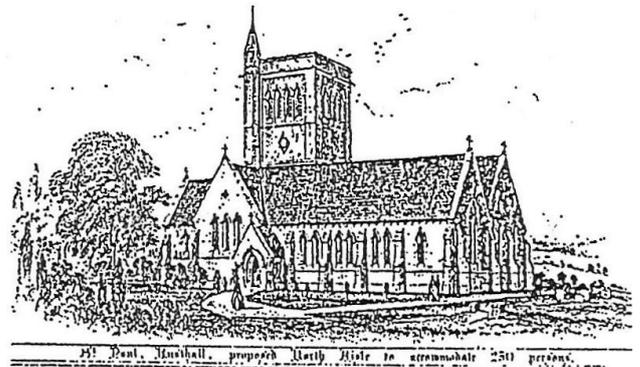
RUSTHALL

1850 – 2000

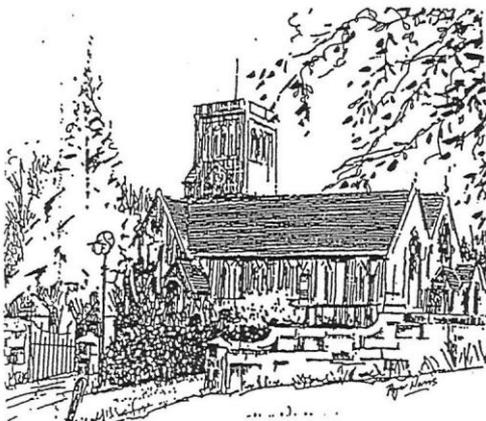


The original Church of 1850 - an engraving from the "Illustrated London News."

A brief history
by
Geoffrey Copus



The north aisle, added in 1864. The turret to the tower shown in this engraving was never actually completed.



The Church as completed in 1913 by the addition of one bay and a western narthex.

On 14 August 1850, John Bird Sumner, Archbishop of Canterbury, consecrated St. Paul's church, Rusthall. It was a daughter church of the ancient parish of Speldhurst whose Rector, the Rev. J.J. Saint, a "squarson" of the old school, was also Lord of the Manor of Groombridge, and lived at Groombridge Place. Nonetheless he was a vigorous and forward-looking pastor, whose concern for maintaining a strong Anglican presence among the expanding population led to the building of All Saints' Langton as well as Rusthall church, and the founding of both parishes.

St. Paul's was built on the edge of the Common, on a site which was part of the Nevill Park estate begun by the Earl of Abergavenny in 1833. The church's architect, Henry Isaac Stevens, (1807-1873) came from Derby, but seems likely to have obtained the commission through his brother, the Tunbridge Wells architect Nehemiah Edward Stevens. The latter is credited in printed sources with having had a minor role at St. Paul's, although original evidence for this is lacking.

N.E. Stevens is an obscure figure, whose only known works locally are the Schools and Schoolhouse for Holy Trinity, still in existence in York Road, Tunbridge Wells. By contrast, H.I Stevens was prolific in designing churches, particularly in his native county; Nikolaus Pevsner, in the Derbyshire volume of the Penguin "Buildings of England " series, refers to Stevens' work being "never cheap-looking and never in bad taste". This may equally be applied to St. Paul's, although John Newman is not very enthusiastic in his comments, in the West Kent volume of the same series.

The church is very solidly built, of local sandstone from "Mr. Powell's quarry", and the total cost was over £5200, a considerable sum at the period. This includes £190 paid to Lord Abergavenny for the two acre site but naturally, as a leading local landowner, he contributed handsomely towards building costs. The Incorporated Church Building Society, to whom Mr. Saint had applied for financial

assistance, at first agreed to a grant of £150, but later cut this by £20 when it appeared that there would not be enough seats "free for the use of the poor." Mr. Stevens drew up a new plan, juggling with the proportion of free seats to fit the Society's rules, and was able to reclaim the lost £20. Incredibly, though, there was no endowment fund for St. Paul's, and until 1917 the Vicar relied entirely on fees and pew rents for his income. The long outmoded system of letting sittings, although deplored by the clergy, persisted in modified form for many years after that date.

By 1864 an appeal for further funds was issued because "since the Church was built in 1850 it was computed that upwards of 45 mansions had been built in the district, to contain upwards of 300 souls, and 133 cottages containing between 500 and 600..." The mansions were mainly in Nevill Park, Hungershall Park and Mount Ephraim, the cottages mostly in Rusthall New Town and Denny Bottom. The extra church accommodation was provided by adding a north aisle, and extending the north transept. H.I. Stevens again planned the work, this time with his partner and former pupil, Frederick Josias Robson (1833-1892).

In 1875, a new organ chamber and further vestry accommodation was added to the north of the chancel, designed by John Norton of Old Bond Street, Westminster (1828-1904), who had been a pupil of Benjamin Ferrey, the noted early Gothic Revival architect. Finally, by 1912 the accommodation was again considered inadequate, and heating, lighting and ventilation all needed to be improved. The work was entrusted to Philip Appleby Robson (1871-1951), who had been articled to J.L. Pearson, the architect of Truro Cathedral and of many distinguished churches.

At Rusthall, Robson submitted a lengthy report suggesting the extension of the building by one bay westwards, and the addition of a large narthex and baptistery. His plans and proposals are among

the Rochester Diocesan Faculty papers, and it must be said that it is a major task to try to understand exactly what happened. The work included demolishing the original south porch and re-siting some of the existing windows, while to complicate matters some of Robson's arrangements have since been altered - the font has twice been moved, for example. St. Paul's was reopened for worship in 1913, when the church assumed its present structural shape.

Successive fashions in fittings, furnishings and liturgy have led to many changes and additions within the building. A fine watercolour, now hanging on the south side of the nave, was painted by the local artist Charles Tattershall Dodd senior, showing the interior as it was when awaiting consecration in July 1850. Although the east window was already filled with stained glass - such as had only recently begun to appear again in English churches - the altar was backed by tablets of the Ten Commandments, in accordance with centuries-old regulations which many in the rising generation considered to be obsolete.

In 1869, influenced by this trend, John Stone-Wigg, a Churchwarden and generous benefactor to St. Paul's, presented the elaborately carved stone reredos. It was designed by the John Norton mentioned above, and executed by "Mr. Farmer of Westminster Road" - presumably William Farmer of the firm which later became Farmer and Brindley, whose workshop was in Westminster Bridge Road. They were responsible for carving many similar items, including a reredos for Worcester Cathedral.

St. Paul's reredos is an admirable and vigorous piece of work, but the way in which it displaced the tablets of the Commandments was not greeted with universal approval. In 1871, the Rev. Thomas Jennings Bramly of Nevi¹¹ Park began writing lengthy letters of complaint to Archbishop Tait. He demanded that the reredos should be removed, since the figures were in such complete relief as to constitute

"images" which he held to be illegal. Not only that, but he called for all the stained glass to be removed too; he alleged - correctly, as it turned out - that it had all been put in without any Faculties being applied for. He complained also that the church was far too dark, and wrote that "even on bright days, I have heard it likened to a Tomb...".

Fortunately, Archbishop Tait demurred on both counts, but this storm in the parochial teacup subsided only on the death of the complainant in 1873. Removal of the stained glass, which by then filled almost every window, would have been a serious loss, since it forms a very fine series. The east window of 1850 is by Ward and Hughes and, in common with a number of earlier windows elsewhere in the church, has a mediaeval look to it. Memorial windows continued to be presented to St. Paul's until 1935, and well-known artists whose work is represented include Burne-Jones and Martin Travers.

In 1999, a complete Victorian stained glass window was discovered, stored high up on a dusty shelf in an upper room of the tower. It was found to commemorate Louisa Mary, wife of the Rev. George Frederick Allfree, who died in 1855; it had been one of a pair occupying small lancets on the east side of the south transept. The lancet had been almost completely obscured by the re-siting of the organ, and had been filled with plain glass; its companion window remains in situ, but can be seen only from outside the building. It is planned to recite the newly found glass in an internal opening on the east side of the north transept, with a light positioned to illuminate it from behind.

Among unusual items in the church are the two flags in the western corners of the nave. One is that of the local South African Wars Veterans' Association, the other is the Red Cross flag which flew over Rusthall V.A.D. (Voluntary Aid Detachment) Hospital during the Great

War. The hospital was sited in the house known as Rust Hall, which its owners lent for the duration, while there was a Nurses' hostel at Rusthall Beacon. Later, as the War dragged on and the flow of casualties grew ever greater, the Girls' School was also commandeered. Among many wealthy local people who contributed liberally to the expenses of running the Hospital was Mrs. Rachel Beer of Chancellor House, aunt of the noted poet and author Siegfried Sassoon.

Additions to the furnishings include the cross and candlesticks on the high altar, designed by Sir Walter Tapper, and the pulpit tester of 1947 by the eminent local architect Cecil Burns. More recently, the west end of the north aisle has been transformed into a chapel, consecrated in 1994 to the memory of Canon Norman Mantle, a much-loved twentieth century Vicar of the parish. The striking fittings include a hanging glass sculpture by Jenny Clarke, an ironwork screen and an icon of Christ. The tablets of the Ten Commandments which, as described above, had been removed in 1869, were rescued from oblivion and repainted in glowing colours, to form a fitting background to the free-standing altar in the new chapel.

St. Paul's has always had a fine musical tradition - even the original plans show seats appropriated for "16 singing boys" in the chancel, and an organ gallery was also provided, an attractive feature which appears in Tattershall Dodd's painting. The first organ was superseded in 1875; the present instrument was built in 1930, and placed in the south transept, with the choir stalls in their present position under the tower.

The churchyard in which St. Paul's stands is filled with a splendid collection of monuments, ranging from simple headstones to elaborate tombs with iron railings. In some Victorian churchyards social distinctions persist in death as in life, with the wealthy taking

the more favoured positions, but at Rusthall rich and poor seem to lie mingled together. The epitaphs of some of the former read in many cases like brief CVs; the verses on the stones of the poorer parishioners are generally more touching. The monuments are in good condition; the inscriptions remain largely legible, and they were all transcribed in 1985, together with those in the church.

Rusthall has the distinction of a 1914-1918 War Memorial by Sir Giles Gilbert Scott, the architect of Liverpool Cathedral. It is a simple, sombre design in the form of a very tall cross in cream Hollington stone, set on the churchyard wall, and because it encroaches slightly onto the Common, the permission of Mr. Frank Osborne Baird, the Lord of the Manor, had to be obtained to erect it. This was most grudgingly given - he commented that he considered the design "extremely ugly", and consented only because he was assured that the Committee had unanimously approved of it.

St. Paul's was made independent of Speldhurst in 1864 and assigned a District, which in 1868 became a parish covering a wide area which included both Rusthall and Tunbridge Wells Commons. The population continued to expand, with the Erskine Park development in Rusthall village, and the Molyneux Park and Boyne Park estates on Mount Ephraim, and in 1900 the Rev. D.J. Stather Hunt, Vicar of Holy Trinity, Tunbridge Wells, proposed to establish a new parish of St. Andrew's, including all the Mount Ephraim area - although, he wrote " I fear it is impossible to include any poor..." Incredibly, he did not tell the Rev. F.F. Walrond, Vicar of St. Paul's, anything about his scheme before submitting it to the Church authorities: not surprisingly, much indignation was felt in Rusthall, and the plan never got off the ground.

There were several subsequent ideas about dividing the parish, and a detailed appraisal was made by local estate agents in 1906, several sites in Court Road, Molyneux Park and Oakdale Road being

suggested for a church. In the twenties, further ideas were pursued, and a site was actually purchased in Royal Chase, but again nothing came of the proposals. The parish boundaries have been altered from time to time, but it still includes much of the Mount Ephraim area.

St. Paul's had been built in a spot which, although picturesque, was difficult of access to those on foot in bad weather, and well away from what became the main village area. The Rev. Benjamin Smith, curate in charge from 1850 and then the first Vicar, worried about the undeniable problems his poorer parishioners often had in getting to St. Paul's, and from 1860 a small room was opened for worship in the High Street - then known as Workhouse Lane.

From this small beginning evolved the Mission Room, built in 1887 and greatly enlarged in 1908. From the first this housed a wide range of activities, including help for the poorer inhabitants in ways which would now be considered the responsibility of the State. Today, under its new title of Church Centre, it continues to fill a vital role in parochial life, and incorporates a church, two halls and a very efficient Parish Office, equipped with modern technology which would astonish our Victorian forbears.

We hope that you will enjoy your visit to St. Paul's in this, our 150th. anniversary year. As the former Vicar, the Rev. Bob Whyte, wrote: " The world of today is very different from that of the mid-19th. century, and this is an opportunity to reflect upon our past and to plan for the future....The welfare of the parish and all its people has always been central to our concerns. In this sense" St: Paul's was and remains committed to the catholic tradition of the Church. Catholic in its concern for the whole community and in its commitment to both the spiritual and material needs of its people. Catholic in its refusal to draw rigid lines between churchgoers and parishioners and in its openness to everyone. "