

ST. BARNABAS

— OXFORD —

A Short History and Guide

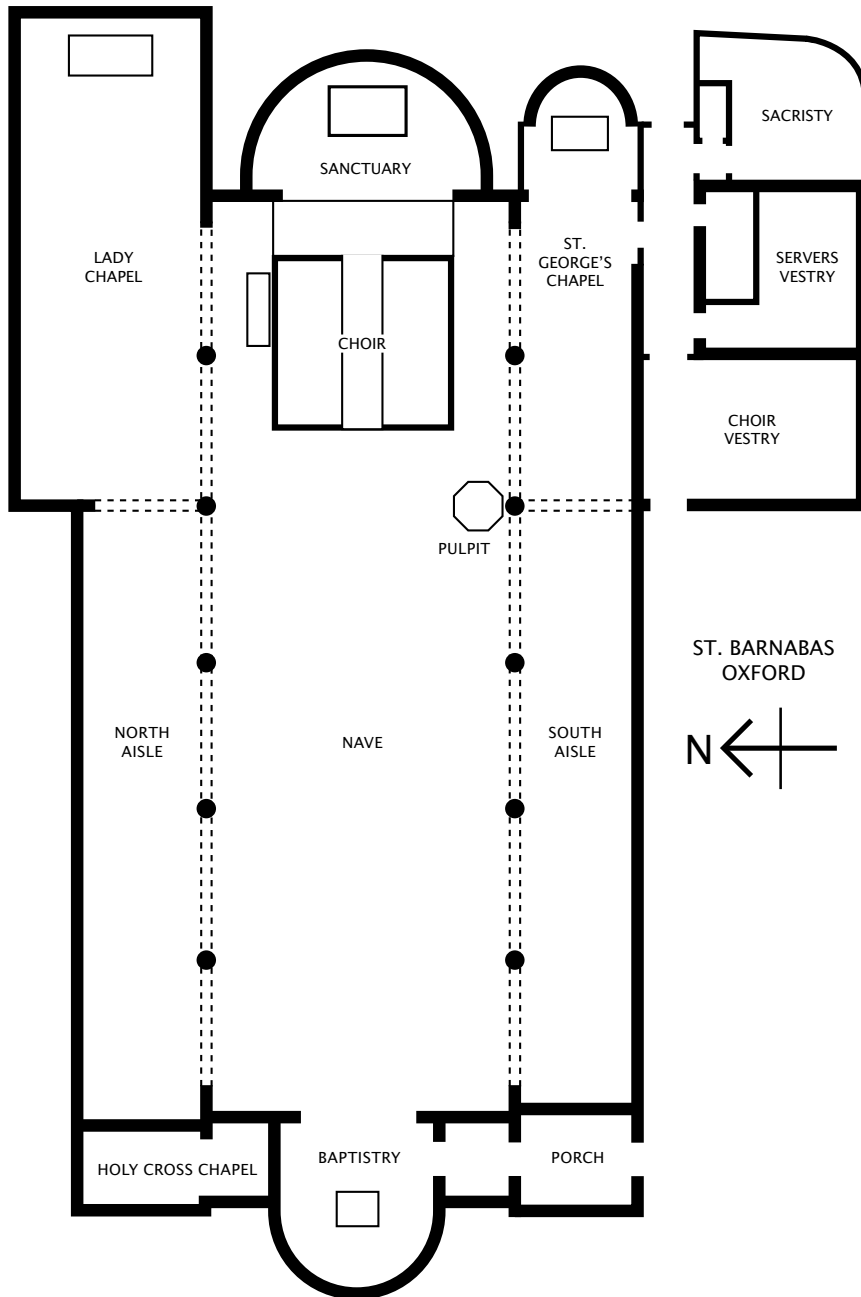


St. Barnabas

A Short History and Guide

The church of St. Barnabas was built in 1868/9 at the expense of Thomas Combe, Printer to the University, with the strong support of his wife Martha. The church was built to serve the spiritual needs of the workers of the Oxford University Press and their families, many of whom lived in the developing suburb of Jericho. Jericho's development had been stimulated by the relocation of the University Press to the area in 1828/30. Thomas and Martha Combe were supporters of the Oxford Movement (or Tractarianism) which came about as a reaction against liberalism and laxity in the early 19th century Church of England and which promoted some of the ceremony, practices and teaching of the pre-Reformation church. St. Barnabas was to reflect these ideas, both in its layout and churchmanship. Thomas and Martha were also patrons and friends of the arts, particularly the young artists known as the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood.

The site for the church was given by George Ward, an Oxford ironmonger and member of a well-established local family. His elder brother, William, was twice Mayor of Oxford, a magistrate, and a generous benefactor to the City of Oxford. In the mid-1860s the site was an undeveloped low-lying meadow near to the Oxford Canal, known as Ward's Fields. The architect of the church was A.W. (later Sir Arthur) Blomfield, who had previously designed St Luke's Chapel at the Radcliffe Infirmary for Thomas Combe. Blomfield and Combe were both of the view that an Italianate early-basilica plan form should be the model for St. Barnabas. The design has been said to be based on the cathedral on the island of Torcello in the Venetian lagoon or the church of San Clemente at Rome (and the unusual projecting Choir (or Schola Cantorum) certainly seems to be based on





that at San Clemente) but the architect said only that he had introduced the main features of such early basilicas into his design.

Combe's instructions to his architect were that he "should design a church to hold a thousand persons for as small a sum as possible", and that while he hoped that he "should be able to produce a dignified interior, no reasonable expense was to be spared in first securing strength, solidity, and thoroughly sound construction in every part; and not a penny was to be thrown away on external appearance and decoration. The Tower was consequently to be left as a more or less ornamental and unnecessary feature to be added hereafter".¹

The architect's original intention was to construct most of the building in concrete, but it was found to be cheaper to use local stone rubble set in mortar for the walls, plastered internally, with some feature courses of brickwork. The walls were faced externally with a rough covering of Portland cement. Bath stone was used for the nave pillars and capitals, and the arches were constructed of brick which was then plastered. An innovative feature was the use of Portland cement/concrete, formed in

wooden moulds in situ, for the window lintels and sills, the steps, and the base of the Choir. The builder was Joseph Castle of Oxford. Small carved portraits, said to be of Samuel Wilberforce (the Bishop of Oxford), the Rev. Alfred Hackman (Vicar of St Paul's from 1844 to 1870), Fr. Montague Noel (the first Vicar of St. Barnabas), and Sir Arthur Blomfield are carved in the stone capitals near the Baptistry (although the southernmost of these portraits looks very much like Thomas Combe). Small portraits of Thomas Combe and his pet dog "Jessie" are carved on the opposing corners of the pillar base in the Lady Chapel. The cost of the entire building, including its decoration, furniture, fittings, communion plate and bell, together with the tower (or campanile) completed in 1872, was £6,492 7s. 8d. The foundation stone was laid on 26th April 1868 by Bishop Wilberforce, who later dedicated the completed church on 19th October 1869, assisted by Bishop Venables of Nassau and Bishop Whipple of Minnesota.

The church bell tower, or campanile, is an impressive feature in the Oxford skyline. Constructed in two stages, the lowest storey was built in 1869 at the same time as the rest of the church. This was used (as it still is) as a vestry, and was linked to the church with a short corridor. The campanile was completed in 1872 and originally had a steeply-pitched pyramidal roof, with a small window on each side. This roof was removed in 1965 and a new roof of copper, with a much lower pitch, constructed. This alteration reduced the height of the tower from its original 130 feet to about 115 feet (some 35 metres). A set of tubular bells and the clock were installed in 1890. Extensive restoration of the whole structure of the campanile was carried out in 1996 after a very successful appeal to raise the necessary funds. A Blue Plaque commemorating Thomas and Martha Combe was fixed to the tower in 2007.

The main south-west door into the church leads directly into the Baptistry. The font dates from the church's foundation in 1869, but the canopy above was added in 1943 in memory of Fr. Herbert Moore. The ceiling of the Baptistry retains its original decoration. The panelling around the walls, dating from 1939/1940 and in memory of Fr. Walter Sargent, is said to conceal original 1869 wall paintings.

From the Baptistry the impressive size and fine proportions of Blomfield's building are immediately apparent. The church's floor was originally made of hard Portland cement, relieved with a few lines of black and red tiles. Some of this tile decoration was uncovered when the floor was excavated in 2004 and small sections have been re-laid in their original positions by the steps into the Choir. Below the level of the original floor was a unique heating system which consisted of a series of brick-lined hearths, linked by brick flues, which led to paired chimneys in both the east and west walls. It appears that hot coals were placed in these hearths, which had metal covers flush with the floor. The efficiency of this arrangement can only be guessed at, but apparently the church was occasionally filled with fumes and smoke. Wooden blocks were laid over the floor in 1889/90, and in 1905 a boiler was installed and hot water pipes and radiators rather brutally fitted into the building. The relatively poor foundations of the floor led to subsidence over the years and it had to be repaired on many occasions. In 2004/5 the entire floor was reconstructed, with a new base and reinforced concrete under-floor on which new oak blocks were laid. An under-floor electric heating system was installed and the ugly radiators and pipe-work removed, to the great benefit of the building. During the work the remains of the original heating system were revealed and recorded. One hearth at the west end of the nave has been preserved and an inspection chamber constructed beneath floor level.

The church has never had fixed pews; the first chairs were of wood, with rush seats, some of which remain in the Baptistry. These chairs were replaced gradually over many years from 1910 and the later chairs, which have wooden seats, are those still in use today. The church was said to seat 1000 people when built and certainly the whole of the nave and the aisles used to be full of chairs. With smaller congregations it has been possible to reduce the number of chairs and, with other improvements, the church now has a more open and uncluttered appearance. The oak cabinets towards the west end of the nave, which provide valuable storage and display space, were commissioned in 2001. They were designed and built by Christopher Dyer.





The fine murals on the north wall of the nave, by the well-known firm of Powells, are made of cut glass in a technique known as “opus sectile”. These panels, which illustrate the Te Deum, were commissioned, panel by panel, as funds became available, between 1905 and 1911. Unfortunately considerable research has failed to trace the original plans for the scheme, but it seems likely that the intention was to fill all the spaces on the north, south and west walls of the nave. Lack of funds and (probably) the start of the Great War in 1914 meant that the scheme was never completed.²

The church originally had a fairly simple black pulpit, sited on the north side of the nave, but this was replaced with the present beautifully-decorated walnut pulpit in 1887. This pulpit, designed by Blomfield and made by Heaton, Butler and Baine, was given by Martha Combe’s sister, Mrs. Ridgeway, in memory of her husband, Canon Ridgeway. The finely-painted panels are thought to be by Floyce. The original pulpit was given to St. Peter’s, London Docks, where it remains. The nave roof, with its ridge some 50 feet above the floor, is constructed of sawn timber and retains most of its original paint. The free-standing wrought-iron lectern in front of the Choir is thought to be one of the church’s original furnishings.



The raised choir or chancel was originally surrounded with wrought and cast iron-work railings, with three pairs of gates at the entrances, but virtually all of the railings and two pairs of gates were removed in 1940. This decision was originally made in 1939 in the belief that it would improve the church, but confirmed in 1940 in response to the Government's appeal for scrap iron and steel. The gates from the nave into the choir were retained but reduced in size, and still bear the marks of the hacksaw. Small sections of the original railings survive on the north and south sides of the sanctuary, as do the ambos (or lecterns) on the west walls of the choir and the small gilded wooden caps from the railing supports. The choir stalls, made of New Zealand pine, are original. The large gilded cross with its inset coloured glass brilliants, hanging above the entrance to the choir, was given by the church's builders in 1869. A brass in the centre of the choir dates from 1931 and recalls the life and work of the first Vicar, Montague Henry Noel. The statue of Our Lady on the north side of the choir was given by Miss Powell in 1910. The statue of St. Barnabas, on the south side, was carved in oak by the woodworkers of Oberammergau and given in memory of Mrs. Alice Sargent in 1923.



Music has been an important element in worship at St. Barnabas from the beginning, and a small temporary organ was placed at the east end of the south aisle in 1869. This was replaced with the church's first permanent organ in 1872. This organ was reconstructed (and probably extended) in 1880. When it was decided to install a larger instrument in 1887, there was insufficient space in the south aisle and it was decided to construct an extension to the church at high level on the south side of the nave, linking the upper level of the nave to the campanile. This large extension has been criticised for its bulk and design as well as for linking the campanile (which would traditionally be a free-standing structure) to the church. Further additions to the organ were made in 1892, and in 1916 it was completely modernised. The gilt railing visible across the top of the arch below the present organ dates from 1887 and was a safety measure for the organist, as his seat at the organ console was immediately behind this rail. The large 1916 instrument was in a poor state of repair by the early 1970s and it was removed in 1975, being replaced by the present smaller organ, built by Nicholson's of Malvern. This organ uses only a very small part of the organ loft created in 1887.



The dominant feature of the church is the high altar, raised above the level of the nave by nine steps, with its original gilded canopy or baldachino, thought to be the first in an Anglican church since the Reformation. The high altar crucifix and set of six candlesticks, a thank-offering by the Rathbone family in 1929, were restored and re-gilded in 2007. The brass altar missal stand is thought to be the original from 1869; it was discovered in 2001 in the porch loft, cleaned and restored. The seven hanging sanctuary lamps were given in 1874/5 by the then Duke of Newcastle and some of his undergraduate contemporaries.

The eastern apse, in which the altar stands, has a scheme of decoration designed by Blomfield and carried out by Heaton, Butler and Baine in 1869. This decoration is dominated by a large figure of Christ in Majesty at the top of the apse, with lower panels containing figures of the apostles and vine scroll and grape motifs. On the walls each side of the apse are panels containing representations of the four beasts described in the Book of Revelation (Chapter 4), with echoes of Ezekiel's vision (Ezekiel 1:5, 10). These came to symbolise the four evangelists, namely the eagle (St. John) the winged ox (St. Luke) the winged lion (St. Mark) and the winged man (St. Matthew). The original scheme of decoration was amended on a number of occasions between 1869 and 1893 but the design was not changed. In 1893 an extensive "makeover" saw some further detailing and extensive areas of gilding added and this is the scheme that largely remains today.³ The lowest tier of decoration was restored/repainted in 2007.

An important change to the church's original symmetrical plan was the building, in 1888, of the Lady Chapel on the north-east side of the church. Also designed by Blomfield, this chapel was called the Morning Chapel on the original plans, and its construction involved the removal of the north-eastern corner of the north aisle. The altar and reredos,⁴ which were originally at the east end of the aisle, were relocated in the new chapel. This altar and reredos date from 1873 and were commissioned by Martha Combe as a memorial to Thomas Combe, who died in 1872, just a few years after his church was completed. The altar and reredos were designed by Blomfield and the work carried out by Heaton, Butler



and Baine, with the altar made by a Mr. Capel of London. In 1906, the reredos was extended with 11 additional panels at the base and to each side (also by Heaton, Butler and Baine) in memory of Martha Combe and others. The painter of the figures on the original reredos is unknown, but it has been suggested that it could be Henry Holiday (1839-1927), a well-known artist (especially in stained glass) who is known to have been employed as a freelance artist by Heaton, Butler and Baine from 1864 to 1878. The altar and reredos were restored in 1999.⁵

A decorative 'Della-Robbia' memorial in the Lady Chapel is in memory of Miss Julia Marshall, a benefactor and long-standing member of the congregation. The two black litany desks were part of the original furnishings of the church, as were the black solid wood seats. These two seats, with a further one now lost, were the original sedilia (or seats for the priests) which were positioned on the south side of the high altar before being replaced. The confessional dates from 1913.

In the north aisle, the statue of our Lady with our Lord and St John the



Baptist as children dates from 1929. It was carved by Mother Mirabelle of the Community of St. Mary the Virgin at Wantage and is in memory of Charles Montagu Browne, a generous benefactor of St. Barnabas. The elaborate back-drop is by F. E. Howard, a well-known ecclesiastical architect and designer and pupil of Sir Ninian Comper. Howard also designed other fittings for St. Barnabas, as well as vestments. The elaborate 19th-century brass candlesticks and stands, which were cleaned and restored in 2001/2, date from the earliest days of the church. For many years from the 1870s they stood on the steps each side of the high altar. The candlesticks were made in Paris but the stands are probably English: the latter were lost for many years but found in the porch loft in 2001. The large Calvary crucifix at the west end of the aisle was given by Miss Macdonald in 1916.

The Holy Cross Chapel was converted from the porch at the west end of the north aisle in 1912 to house the Reserved Sacrament. It was dedicated by Bishop Charles Gore in 1913. The chapel's fittings and scheme of decoration date from that time.

The Sacrament is reserved nowadays in St George's Chapel, at the east end of the south aisle. This chapel (originally called the Lady Chapel) was constructed in 1919/20 to an unusual design by architects Bodley and Hare, and involved the removal of the eastern end wall of the south aisle. The apsidal form of the chapel reflects Blomfield's eastern and western apses. The chapel, which was dedicated on 25th April 1920, was built as a thank-offering for St Barnabas's first fifty years and as a memorial to those who were killed in the First World War. The hanging silver lamp, given in 2006, is in memory of Mrs. Nesta Wright.

The War Memorial in the south aisle was transferred from St Paul's Church, Walton Street, when the two parishes were united in 1964. The grille in the south-west porch, installed in 1981, was designed by Alan Drury, a parishioner, and made at Lucy's Eagle Ironworks in the parish. The series of fine paintings depicting the Stations of the Cross⁶ were given by Miss Julia Marshall in 1902. These were restored and re-hung in 2004. An identical set is in St. Thomas's Church, Oxford.

St. Barnabas has a number of fine banners, many of which are displayed in the church (except during Lent). These include a banner of St. Barnabas which dates from 1873, although remounted and restored in 1903 and again most recently in 2007. Other banners ('Rex Gloriar', 'S. Deipara',⁷ and 'S. Michaelis') date from 1903. The Church also possesses some valuable gilded and silver sacred vessels which are kept in the Treasury at Christ Church Cathedral where they are on display. These include a remarkable and extremely rare silver Russian chalice and paten from Pryluky, dating from 1658, given by the Earl of Gainsborough (a relative of Fr Noel) in 1869.

The church also possesses some notable vestments, many of them made (or re-made) by Miss Grace Drinkwater in the 1920s and 1930s. The most precious is probably the High Mass set made of Russian cloth of gold. This cloth was purchased for the Church and made into vestments in 1932. The white High Mass set was one of the church's original 1870 sets of vestments, although parts have been remounted. The black High Mass set dates from 1883. The red High Mass set, embroidered with gold



Tudor roses, dates from 1906, and was recently restored. The memorial brass in the choir shows the first vicar wearing the chasuble of this set, which is still in regular use. The green High Mass set, dating from 1916, was restored in the 1960s in memory of a departed parishioner. The elaborate orphrey work on this set, and on the gold cope which dates from 1932, was designed by F. E. Howard, whose original designs for St Barnabas's vestments (and some other furnishings) are kept at the National Monuments Record.

There are a number of references to St. Barnabas in literature.⁸ These range from Thomas Hardy's 'Jude the Obscure', where St. Silas - "the church of ceremonies" - is St. Barnabas, to John Betjeman's poem 'St. Barnabas, Oxford'. The Revd Francis Kilvert visited St. Barnabas one Ascension Day and described the experience in his Diary. There have also been many passing mentions of the Church in books by Colin Dexter, Evelyn Waugh, A. N. Wilson, Robert Bernard Martin, and Joanna Trollope. PD James also based a church in one of her novels on St Barnabas.

St. Barnabas's uncompromising adherence to Tractarian principles aroused a great deal of criticism and controversy in its early days. Protestant pamphlets attacked the ceremony and ritual, as did cartoons, one of which used the church's location near to the railway to portray the church as "Barn'bas Junction - change here for Rome." However most of the heated controversy had faded by the retirement of the first Vicar in 1899. St. Barnabas has always been very much a parish church for the people of Jericho, as Thomas Combe intended, but it also attracted a following from a much wider area, as it still does today.

Richard Whitlock

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- 1 From A Description of St. Barnabas Church, Oxford, In a Letter to Thomas Combe, M. A. By Arthur Blomfield, Architect. Published by the Oxford University Press, 1871.
 - 2 Anne Abley's research into the history of the murals is available as a separate note.
 - 3 More details of the history of the east end decoration are available in a separate note.
 - 4 A decorated screen behind the altar.
 - 5 Anne Abley's research into the history of the reredos is available as a separate note.
 - 6 Images or pictures representing events in Christ's passion, often used for devotions.
 - 7 Literally "God-bearer", another name for Mary, Mother of God.
 - 8 A separate note gives more detail on these literary references.

For more information on St. Barnabas please visit: www.sbarnabas.org.uk

