

St Luke's Church, Canning Crescent, Oxford

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SUMMARY

St Luke's Church, Canning Crescent, Oxford was extensively refurbished between 2011 and 2013. The authors recorded the building in 2010, before this work began. It is hoped that this article will go some way to capture the atmosphere of the church before refurbishment, and provide a record of those parts of the decoration that had to be sacrificed in creating the new building. The history of St Luke's, a building which has a strongly domestic ethos, demonstrates the continuity since the 1930s of a utilitarian structure designed for flexibility between worship and community use. St Luke's is compared to other similar church halls in Oxford, and its rich collection of locally produced contemporary Christian art is explored.

LOCATION AND HISTORY

St Luke's Church (Fig. 1) is located beyond the building line of the group of houses forming Canning Crescent close to the Abingdon Road on the southern edge of the city of Oxford in the area once known as Cold Harbour (or Cold Arbour). The building is orientated north-south, with the altar table at the north end. St Luke's is an Anglican church opened in 1933 as a mission hall for the area of Cold Harbour (or Weirs Lane), under the patronage of St Matthew's Church, Marlborough Road, in Grandpont.¹ The Revd (later canon) Stather-Hunt (1896–1979), who was vicar of St Matthew's from 1929 to 1975, set up a Boys' Brigade at St Matthew's in 1929, which soon attracted large numbers of children from all over the area. St Luke's was founded partly to give the boys from the Weir's Lane area a Sunday school of their own.²

Stather-Hunt led the fundraising and organised the building of the church.³ A fundraising committee was set up in June 1930 and St Matthew's agreed to contribute at least £250.⁴ The total cost of the building was to be £1,100;⁵ fundraising was by means of sales of work, lenten boxes, collections in church and special grants.⁶ A piece of land 87 feet deep and with a frontage of 77 feet to Canning Crescent was leased from Oxford City Council at £20 a year for twenty-one years, commencing 29 September 1930.⁷ The fundraising took longer than expected but a grant of £400 was received in early 1933 taking the total raised up to £720.⁸ The Parochial Church Council (PCC) noted that the rent on the land had already been paid for over two years, so it was decided to carry out a special door-to-door appeal to try to raise the

¹ St Matthew's parish magazine, Nov. 1933 (pages pasted into St Matthew's Church minute book, April 1897–July 1952, kept in a safe in the vestry of St Matthew's). St Luke's remains an unconsecrated building, licensed for public worship.

² Information from Brenda Horwood, interviewed 30 November 2007. Miss Horwood was born in 1928 and has lived at 262 Marlborough Road since she was six. The house was built in 1890 by her great grandfather William John Giddings.

³ St Matthew's Church minute book, minutes of PCC meetings between June 1930 and Nov. 1933.

⁴ Ibid. 19 June 1930.

⁵ Ibid. 6 Feb. 1933.

⁶ Ibid. 18 July 1930 and 6 Feb. 1933.

⁷ Oxford City Council, minutes of meetings of the Property and Estates Committee, 6 May 1930 and 21 April 1931 (OHC).

⁸ St Matthew's Church minute book, 6 Feb. 1933.



Fig. 1. *St Luke's, Canning Crescent, in 2010.*

remainder required so that building could begin.⁹

In May 1933 a special emergency meeting of the PCC was held to discuss an offer by the chosen contractors (William Harbrow Ltd., of 214 Rotherhithe New Road, London SE16)¹⁰ to reduce the original estimate by £100 on condition that the work began immediately, '... owing at the moment to favourable markets for the purchase of building materials.'¹¹ As the amount collected had now reached £844, it was decided to proceed and a special committee was formed to deal with the practicalities of the building work.¹² Work began on 12 July 1933, a licence to erect a *temporary* building having originally been issued by the City Surveyor on 2 May 1931. The plans showed all the external walls covered with asbestos sheeting, but the builder requested, and was granted, permission to substitute creosoted weatherboarding up to sill height because it was considered more durable and to give an improved appearance. The walls were timber-framed, with asbestos lining, the dado to be matchboarded. The roof was asbestos tiling on boarding. Labour was to be found locally, under the direction of Mr Hunt (probably Stather-Hunt).¹³ The architect's plan has been framed and hangs in the church.

The church was opened on St Luke's Day, 18 October, 1933.¹⁴ The pulpit and holy table came from St Matthew's, which had received a new pulpit from Stather-Hunt's father's church

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Oxford City Council Planning Department, plan no. 5059 (NS), for '*Temporary Building (Church Hall), Canning Lane, Abingdon Road*'.

¹¹ St Matthew's Church Minute Book, minutes of special emergency PCC meeting 15 May 1933.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Oxford City Council Planning Department, plan no. 5059 (NS) and associated documents, including letter of 16 May 1933 from W. Harbrow to the City Surveyor.

¹⁴ St Matthew's parish magazine, Nov. 1933.

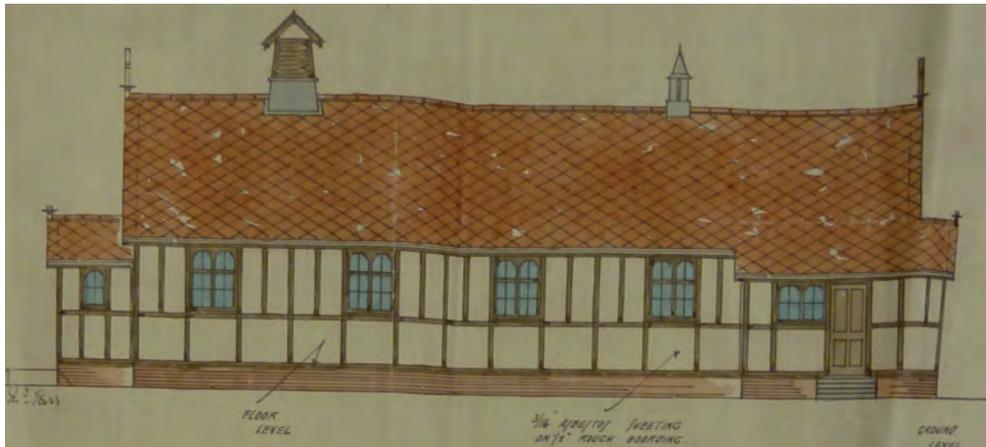


Fig. 2. Architect's drawing (1930) of east elevation. Oxford City Council Planning Department, plan no. 5059 (NS).

in London,¹⁵ and a new table from St Peter-le-Bailey.¹⁶ The pulpits were swapped in 2004, so that the one in St Matthew's is now its original one, and the one in St Luke's is the one from London.¹⁷ The PCC meeting of 9 November 1933 praised: '... the amount of work and the success obtained by the vicar in making St Luke's opening day possible and that no other vicar could have accomplished a better result to his efforts than our present vicar the Revd D.K. Stather-Hunt.'¹⁸

THE BUILDING

The building was recorded on 1 July 2010.¹⁹ The materials were substantially those discussed above. The weatherboarding below dado level was an alteration agreed before construction, and was the most obvious difference between the building as seen in 2010 and the architect's drawings (Fig. 2). The structure stood on a brick plinth, with concrete steps to the original side doors, and a modern disabled access ramp to the front lobby (see Fig. 1, above). The priest's door to the north-east vestry (to the right of Fig. 2) was blocked up, presumably in the 1960s when a kitchen was installed in the vestry area. The bell-cote on the roof towards the south was not present in 2010. A seating for this was visible inside the church where bolts for a structure could be seen, but there was no obvious arrangement for ringing a bell. However, a photograph of the church made in 1967 showed it in place.²⁰ The ventilator towards the north of the roof was built and survived.

Internally, the original structure was clearly legible. The two-tiered dais and the folding screen were still in place, but the doorways to the vestries were not built according to the plan (Fig. 3). The north-west vestry had an apparently original doorway in its east wall to the altar area behind the screen, while the north-eastern one had an original doorway in its west wall giving access to the lower dais in front of the screen. This door was in situ but unused. A

¹⁵ Information from Brenda Horwood, 2007.

¹⁶ St Matthew's Church minute book, minutes of special emergency PCC meeting 15 May 1933.

¹⁷ Information from Brenda Horwood, 2007.

¹⁸ St Matthew's Church minute book, 9 Nov. 1933.

¹⁹ OBR, report 106.

²⁰ OHC, 21100-N.

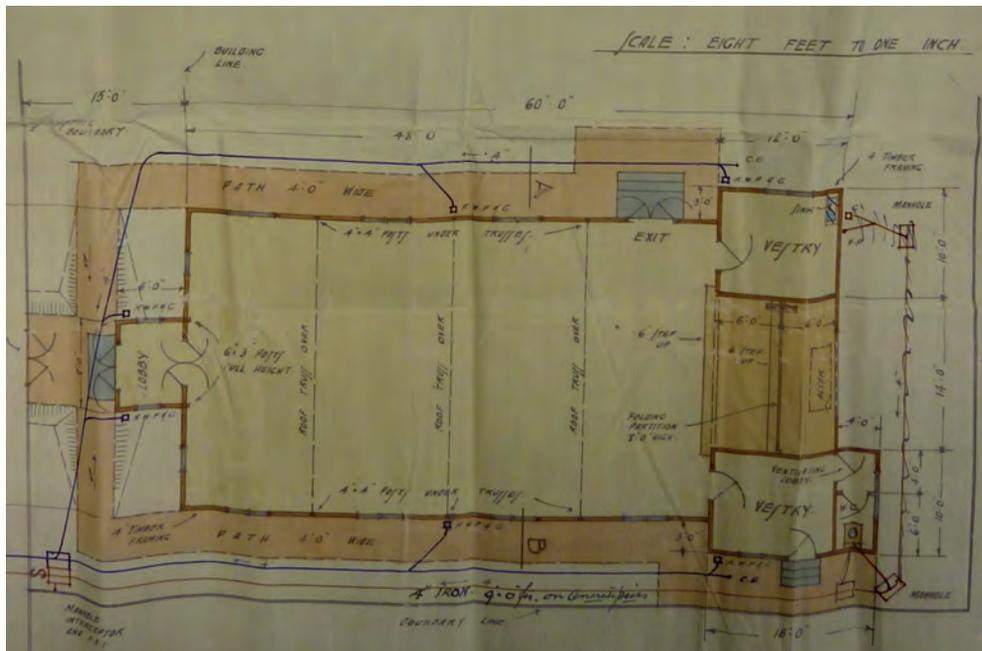


Fig. 3. Architect's drawing (1930) of ground plan. Oxford City Council Planning Department, plan no. 5059 (NS).

new doorway in the position shown on the plan was probably inserted when the vestry was converted to a kitchen.

The roof structure of trusses with low collars and principal rafters linked by raking struts and metal ties survived in good condition, including the matchboarding behind the purlins. All the timber seemed to be softwood. Instead of a tie-beam, additional iron rods below the collar were fastened to metal brackets where the rafters met the wall-plate. These were not quite the same as those in the drawings, which seemed to show additional small corbels at these points.

FIXTURES AND FITTINGS

Figure 4 shows the interior of the church looking north. The windows all had a distinctive shouldered arch frame with glazing bars and frosted glass. Some had opening upper lights, others had casements. Most of the windows had additional painted glass panels of various designs. The idea for these was conceived by the late Hughie Rogers, a member of St Luke's, c.2003. He designed the geometric panels, which young people and children then painted. There were also some panels designed by Jane Sherwood, the current vicar, and some by young people themselves. The colourful designs included biblical references, heraldic devices and abstract designs.²¹ Figure 5 shows an example from the east wall. The original doors (in other words all except the later south door to the north-east vestry) were pine, with four panels and box-type locks with brass fittings.

At the north (liturgical east) end was a folding screen (Fig. 6) with six leaves decorated with a number of mosaic panels. The idea of the mosaic panels was conceived by Hannah

²¹ Personal communication from the Revd Jane Sherwood.



Fig. 4. General view of interior.



Fig. 5. Window in east wall.

Sparrowhawk, a younger member of St Luke's, designed by the Revd Jane Sherwood, and completed by a variety of different age groups in the church, but mainly young people and children, from 2002 onwards. The motifs were mainly Christian. The screen facilitated the dual use of the building as a church and multi-purpose space since when folded back (Fig. 7) the altar table was revealed. This was a sturdy oak table, originally in St Matthew's, Marlborough



Fig. 6. Folding screen.

Road (Christopher and White, 1890) and thus probably part of the original furnishing of St Luke's.²² This liturgical area also contained a lectern and small stone font.

In front of the screen to the west of the lower dais was the pulpit (Fig. 8). As discussed above, this came from a church in London, and was a fine piece of (probably Victorian) workmanship, although lacking some backing panels. Inside, under the front cornice, were two wooden bowls, one looking very much like an ash-tray (Fig. 9). To the right of the dais was a small brass war memorial plaque recording the names of ten men of the 'Cold Arbour' area who lost their lives 'for the cause of justice and freedom' in the Second World War. On the east wall beneath a window was a small bracket with candles set on old CDs. This feature recognised the traditional liturgical significance of the east side of the church. On the upper part of the liturgical east wall (north) there was a painting, 'The Last Supper', c.1996, by Ernesto Lozada-Uzuriaga Steele.²³ As can be seen from Fig. 7, it shows thirteen figures, mostly women but also including two small babies. Jane Sherwood writes that '... it is perhaps best described not as a traditional Last Supper painting, but as a depiction of members of the Church surrounding Christ, who are themselves ministering to others, looking after others or simply resting at the table. Note the woman who is anointing the head of Jesus or the baby being baptised.' At a time when the church is moving towards enhancing the role of women in its affairs this picture may be making a statement about this while recognising that women's ministry in the church is important but often unnoticed.

²² J. Sherwood and N. Pevsner, *The Buildings of England – Oxfordshire* (1974), p. 335.

²³ A former member of St Luke's from Latin America, who became an artist-priest working at Christ the Cornerstone, Milton Keynes. More of his art is shown at www.soultravellodge.com (accessed 27 Jan. 2014).



Fig. 7. Sanctuary with altar table and painting of 'The Last Supper', by Ernesto Lozada-Uzuriaga Steele.



Fig. 8. Pulpit.

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Fig. 9. Interior of pulpit.

There were a number of other pictures hanging from the roof. Jane Sherwood wrote that 'these are a series entitled "Jesus' Hands", c.1996. They are accompanied by prayers such as 'Lord feed me', 'Lord release me', 'Lord bless me'. They are also by Ernesto Lozada-Uzuriaga Steele, as is the picture above the bookcase entitled 'Judas Kiss' (also c.1996). This picture contrasts the betrayal of the kiss Judas gives Jesus with the simple act of worship given by the woman who kneels and washes his feet.²⁴

These pictures were complemented by decoration on cupboards containing children's toys (Fig. 10). The designs (by Steele and Jane Sherwood) were projected from an overhead projector onto the cupboards, the outlines filled in, and finally painted by young people from the church's youth group. As well as the usual animals and toys, there were more symbolic references, for example a person in a wheelchair in the sky symbolised people who do not let their disability compromise their independence. One such, who might have inspired the figure, was Albert, from Canning Crescent, a well-loved member of the church and a polio victim, who was an inspiring example of independence to the congregation. St Luke's has had a long history of helping disabled people and had strong links with nearby Rivermead Rehabilitation Centre for strokes and head injuries. Wheelchair users and people with other disabilities frequently visit the church.²⁵

Seating in the church was of three main types, stacking single chairs, two standard church benches (one shown in Fig. 11) and a group of three domestic sofas which formed the main seating area during Sunday worship (Fig. 12). This arrangement was also used for informal meetings. For some uses, a carpet was laid out within the group of sofas. The general flexibility

²⁴ Personal communication from Jane Sherwood.

²⁵ Ibid.



Fig. 10. Children's toy cupboard.



Fig. 11. Church bench.

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Fig. 12. Sitting area.

of the hall/nave space is shown in Figs. 4 and 12 above. Other aspects of this were a basketball net on the south gable and other areas of designated space such as a carpeted children's area and book areas such as that in Fig. 13. On the morning that the authors visited St Luke's to record the building, two young German backpackers were just leaving, having spent the night sleeping in the main hall at the invitation of Revd Sherwood and in return for a small donation to church funds.

The north-west vestry continued to be used for its original purpose, with the vicar's desk and paperwork taking up most of the space. As stated above, the north-east vestry was converted to a kitchen and the toilet was extended (c.1996) to allow for disabled access. A washbasin was inserted into the extended 'ventilation lobby'.

CONTEXT

Mission halls such as St Luke's were built in their thousands across England, Scotland and Wales (and indeed in overseas colonies) from the 1850s onwards. They were erected in villages, at rural roadsides and in the rapidly developing suburbs of towns and cities, usually by public subscription and on plots of land donated by local landowners. A series of evangelical revivals, the spread of non-conformity and the growing influence of the temperance movement had prompted many people to return to Christianity and churches of all denominations were keen to provide accommodation for these expanding congregations as swiftly as possible. The buildings were often pre-fabricated and were designed to be temporary and even portable, in order to provide short-term accommodation wherever it was needed most whilst the pastor and his flock gathered funds for the building of a more permanent place of worship. At



Fig. 13. Book area in south-west.

least twenty companies produced these prefabricated buildings, many of which utilised the relatively new building material of corrugated iron. Boulton & Paul, with a head office in Norwich and a network of joinery companies across England and Wales, appear to have been the major supplier.²⁶

Mission halls provided accommodation not only for church services but also for Sunday schools and for other community meetings and events. There are a number of other examples in Oxford, almost all built as the suburbs expanded in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Some of the buildings survive; a few are still in religious use whilst others have been converted for alternative purposes. Wesleyan Methodism began to revive in East Oxford in the early 1870s and in 1883 the St Clement's Mission Chapel opened on Tyndale Road; in 1905 it became the Christadelphian Hall. The Anglican St Clement's Mission Hall opened on St Clement's in 1891; it was designed by H.W. Moore and is listed Grade II and now functions as a Christian bookshop. A Workmen's Mission Hall was built in Magdalen Road in 1879 but was demolished in 1900 to make way for the Magdalen Road Mission Hall, now the Evangelical Free Church. The Unitarian Church of the Divine Love and Mission House was

²⁶ I. Smith, *Tin Tabernacles: Corrugated Iron Mission Halls, Churches & Chapels of Britain* (2004), pp. 26–9; A. Mornement and S. Holloway, *Corrugated Iron: Building on the Frontier* (2007), pp. 76–97.

built on nearby Percy Street in 1889 by the Revd Ulric Vernon Herford, a pacifist and anti-vivisectionist; the building is now an artist's studio and private residence.²⁷

The Primitive Methodist Mission Room which opened on Walton Street in 1883 and the Methodist Free Church Mission Hall which was built on Brook Street in Grandpont in 1890 no longer exist, but the Railway Workers' Mission Hall which opened on the Botley Road in 1903 now houses the Elim Pentecostal church. A mission room in Hayfield Road in North Oxford was replaced by the church of St Margaret, built between 1883 and 1888. Marston Mission Hall on the Marston Road, founded in 1885 under the auspices of the Cowley Road Congregational Church, closed in 1939 when the congregation was transferred to new premises nearby.²⁸ The Anglican church of St Michael and All Angels, Marston Road, consecrated in 1955, replaced a mission church in Ferry Road, established in around 1919 to serve outlying parts of Marston parish.²⁹ St Luke's on Canning Crescent is therefore a relatively late example, but a rare survival, of what was once a common building type in the suburbs and outlying areas of the city.

CONCLUSION

St Luke's in 2010 was a remarkable example of the continued use since the 1930s of a utilitarian building designed for both worship and community use. It is the only Anglican example in Oxford still used for its original purpose. Now transformed into a building suitable for the twenty-first century, much of its timber-frame survives within a new exterior cladding (Fig. 14). Its earlier building history was also a story of changes – some minor alterations were made to



Fig. 14. St Luke's on 20 May 2014.

²⁷ VCH Oxon. 4, pp. 415–24.

²⁸ M. Teal, *Marston United Reformed Church, Oxford: From Mission Hall to Church, A History in Words and Pictures 1884–1984* (1984).

²⁹ VCH Oxon. 4, p. 411.

the building plan before or during construction, and additional facilities were added later. The external weatherboarding was an alteration suggested by the builder; the positions of the doors from the vestries were changed probably because the drawn locations required the incumbent to turn his back to the congregation before beginning the service. It is not clear, however, how the two vestries were intended to be used. Only the north-east one had an external door, and so perhaps was more of a lobby for use by organisers of secular activities, while the north-western was clearly for the vicar alone, as it was the only one with access to the area behind the screen where the altar table and other liturgical items were kept. The main structural alteration was the creation of a kitchen in the 1960s and disabled toilet in the north-east vestry at a later date. The bell-cote was removed after 1967.

The decoration of the church was very colourful. The children's toy cupboards were painted with animals and other motifs suggesting fantasy and collective memory. More overtly Christian features included the decorative mosaics and window panels. Much of the artwork, which is an important aspect of the ministry at St Luke's, involved children and young people. Nevertheless these pieces were a serious attempt to make artworks in the Christian tradition, and have been recorded as such. With the major refurbishment programme for the church now complete, it is hoped that this report will go some way to capture the atmosphere of the church in 2010, and provide a record of any parts of the decoration which have had to be sacrificed.

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