

## A BRIEF HISTORY IN TIME



On 14<sup>th</sup> August 1850, John Bird Sumner, the Archbishop of Canterbury consecrated St Paul's Church, Rusthall. Now, in 2025 we are celebrating its 175<sup>th</sup> anniversary!

The church was built in 1849 to serve the expanding local population. The idea was driven forward by the then Rector of Speldhurst, the Rev J.J. Saint who was also the Lord of the Manor at Groombridge Place. It was built on land purchased from William Neville, the 4th Earl of Abergavenny who also provided a sizable contribution the finance and building costs.

St Paul's was designed in the Gothic Revival style of the 13th century by the Derbyshire based architect Henry Isaac Stevens. It's thought Stevens had been chosen as he had designed the nearby church at Fordcombe only a couple of years earlier. His brother, Nehemiah Edward Stevens, was living in Tunbridge Wells working as an architect and played a small part in the project.

It is constructed of local sandstone at the cost of £5,200 which was a considerable sum for the period. That included £190 paid to Lord Abergavenny for the two-acre site. The building society which was also involved in the finance originally withheld some of the funds as they considered there were not enough seats provided for "free use of the poor" and even though new plans corrected this, the church soon needed to be expanded.

By 1864 there was an appeal for further funds as, "since the Church was built in 1850 it was computed that upwards of 45 mansions had been built.....and 133 cottages". So, St Paul's was extended in 1865 with the addition of a north aisle and that was followed by further work in 1875 when an organ chamber and vestry were added to the northeast and again in 1913 with a large western porch, with both a west and north entrance.

### CHURCH CENTRE

The site of St Paul's, at the edge of Rusthall Common although picturesque was difficult to access on foot in bad weather and was a way from the main village area. The Rev Benjamin Smith, who was the first Vicar, was concerned about the problems many of his parishioners had getting to services and so from 1860 a small room was opened for worship in Rusthall High Street, then known as Workhouse Lane.

From small beginnings evolved the Mission Room, built and dedicated on 25th November 1887. For the previous 27 years Sunday evening services had been held in the Infant School, now the library.

Many activities were associated with the Mission Church: for example, Sunday School, Band of Hope, Boys' Brigade, Mother's Union, Scouts and Guides. Coal and Clothing Clubs were well supported. The church was extended in 1908; the join in the brickwork can be seen clearly. At the same time the Parish Hall was added.

During the Great War (1914-1918) the building was used as the girls' school while theirs was used as a VAD Hospital.

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Now the Church Centre, it fulfils a vital role in parochial life. It houses our Family Service, two halls with kitchens and modern facilities, also the Parish Office. It welcomes many and varied activities as part of modern Rusthall community life.

St Paul's Parish Church has been given a Grade II listing by Historic England as

- it is a good example of an Early English Gothic Revival church showing a good understanding of medieval architecture and its application to the design of an early Victorian Anglican church.
- It has a fine extension of the 1860s to meet increasing accommodation needs.
- It retains a largely complete ensemble of 19<sup>th</sup> Century fixtures.

Here are some of those in brief

### WINDOWS

The stained-glass originates from a number of sources: the main east window coming from the workshops of Ward and Hughes. By 1935 when every window was filled with stained glass and include designs by Edward Burne-Jones and Martin Travers.

In 1999 a stained-glass window was discovered on a dusty shelf high up in the tower. It originated from a small east window in the south transept (now behind the organ) which had been replaced by clear glass. It was re-sited in a former blocked window in the east wall of the north aisle which now adjoins the 1875 vestry. It is effectively a false window illuminated by a strip light.

### SCULPTURE

The sculptured reredos, that is an ornamental screen covering the wall at the back of an altar, was designed in 1869 by John Norton and carved by William Farmer (later part of the Farmer Brindley partnership) and was controversial. Some thought it too Roman Catholic with its lifelike imagery and petitioned for its removal. The central portion depicts the Supper at Emmaus with the side panels showing the Road to Calvary and the Entombment. The Ten Commandments had been removed from behind the altar to make way for the reredos.

The Ten Commandments stayed in storage for over a century, when in 1999 they were cleaned up and added to the west end of the north aisle in what has become a dedicated chapel to the memory of Canon Norman Mantle, a much-loved 20<sup>th</sup> century vicar of St Paul's.

Also hanging in the chapel is a modern piece of glass work designed by Jenny Clarke.

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### FONT

The font is from 1850 and has a foliated octagonal bowl with angle shafts and a moulded circular base. It has had several sites in the church over the years.

### WAR MEMORIAL

Just outside to the North of the church, on the boundary between the churchyard and the road is a magnificently stern, tall war memorial cross by Sir Giles Gilbert Scott bearing the names of the fallen in the First World War and constructed of Hollington stone.

SOURCES: Geoffrey Copus, St Paul's Parish Church Rusthall 1850-2000. Roger Homan, The Victorian Churches of Kent, 1984, John Newman, The Buildings of England: West Kent and the Weald, 1980. Additional material from Len Evans and Rob Baker.