

ST JOHN FISHER CHURCH NORTH HARROW

by Chris Fanning
Westminster Diocesan Building Surveyor



The Roman Catholic church of St John Fisher was built in 1939 in the Romanesque style to designs by Mr Thomas H.B. Scott F.R.I.B.A.

The inter-war years of the 1930s saw a rapid expansion of housing estates in Greater London and Mr Scott was regularly engaged to produce designs and build new churches on limited budgets. He designed several churches in the emerging suburbs in much the same style using similar materials for the different elements of structure. The church of St John Fisher, along with some others, was to be built in various phases to be completed when funds permitted. There are at least twenty examples of varying types of his churches in the



Westminster Diocese with variations to the width of the aisles and some occasionally included a tower although few examples with towers exist. Some of these churches were originally built as halls and designed to serve as temporary churches until funds were available to build a permanent church.

In 1982, the church acquired unsympathetic additions, which were to become a cause of dissatisfaction within the parish. To ask a parish for permission to tear down its sanctuary in order to rebuild it, takes a certain amount of courage. However, it was obvious that a more sympathetic rebuilding was needed to be faithful to the Romanesque



architectural integrity that Scott had intended. Some other Scott churches in the Diocese provided a template for the design principles for rebuilding.

The method of construction and style of the churches were invariably the same. The solid exterior walls were built with hand-made Chesham multi coloured bricks and the interior faces lined with yellow London stock bricks. The windows were either circular or



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round-arched, fitted with steel casements containing amber coloured leaded lights.

The joinery was generally made from pitch pine but occasionally from English Oak. The open timber roofs comprised king trusses of pitch pine with tongue and groove boarding placed between the exposed pitch pine common rafters. These were invariably covered with double roman pattern clay pantiles. The floors to all areas, except the sanctuary, were laid to pitch pine blocks laid in a herringbone pattern. Few stone elements were added, except as embellishments, around the entrance doors. There was usually a stone carving representing the dedication invariably commissioned from Philip Lindsey Clark and carved in a similar style to Eric Gill.

Mr Scott was president of the Guild of Catholic Artists and held annual exhibitions at the Cathedral Hall, Westminster up to the start of the Second World War, where many of these artists displayed their work.

The church structure had been left in 1939 without a permanent entrance porch, side aisle and sanctuary. These open areas were enclosed with timber screens and wood cladding. These were eventually removed in 1982 when another architect was commissioned to design the incomplete areas. The decision at the time was to complete >



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PROJECT

ST JOHN FISHER CHURCH



sanctuary in line with Scott's original plans but with some modifications.

At the commencement of the work a full height wooden screen was erected in front of the chancel arch. The choir gallery was demolished along with the 1970s sanctuary extension and the new designs were set out. It was a challenge to source materials matching those of the 1930s but thankfully imperial sized Chesham multi bricks are still available. Handmade yellow stock bricks are harder to match since there are no brickworks in the UK producing imperial hand made stock bricks in the rich yellow colours of the 1930s originals. It was fortunate that a reasonably good matching brick was being produced in a Belgian brickworks for the UK market. There was anxiety at the start of the project, as production of these bricks had just been suspended. However, as luck would have it, a suitable quantity of the same bricks was in stock at the builders merchants. The builder moved quickly to purchase these despite a concern that if they proved insufficient it would be necessary to cover the shortfall with good second hand stock bricks, which are often hard to source, frequently dirty and chipped and unlikely to produce a good quality internal finish to compliment the new bricks obtained. Thankfully these fears proved unfounded.

The original detailing of the low level plinth exterior bricks was adhered to with the brick makers producing moulds necessary to replicate these to ensure the extension would match the original in all details, unlike the north aisle, which was added in the 1970s using standard plinth bricks. Matching the standard of the 1930s brick building and

some parts of the building in a modern style at the front and rear extensions but the side aisle wall that was added followed Scott's designs. This resulted in an incoherent combination of designs noticeably out of character with Scott's original Romanesque scheme. Even the side aisle wall was not faithful to the detailing evident in the original church. The front and rear extensions both had flat roofs and all the joinery was designed to a different style and with different material. The sanctuary walls to the interior were covered with stippled Artex rather than fair face brickwork. A new choir gallery was constructed in one corner at the front of the church attached to two of the principal columns resting awkwardly in the front corner of the north aisle.

Father Middleton, the parish priest, had previously served in Muswell Hill parish, where a complete Scott church had been constructed in the late 30s. He was keen to obtain the support of his parish to remove the 1970s gallery and reconstruct the apse and the

PROJECT TEAM

Architect:
Kyle Smart
Architects

Builders:
Terra Firma Building
Contractors

Engineer:
Derek Lofty
Associates

Sculpture &
Masonry:
Firmarmo

Brick Supplier:
H.G. Matthews

Specialist Brickwork:
S Kelly Brickwork

Specialist Pointing:
Christopher Wyles

Curved Church
Benches:
Irish Contract
Seating

Woodblock
Flooring:
Allwood Flooring

Artist:
Sister Petra Clare

Stained Glass Artist:
Benjamin Finn



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pointing is not easy to achieve in the modern era. There is also a need to establish the correct Flemish bonding to the two brick thick solid walls. Brickwork sub-contractors were therefore carefully selected, all of whom had served their time as apprentice craftsmen and were able to deal with the complexities of the brick bonding. It was helpful that the brickwork in this and other similar churches by Scott is

there to refer too if bonding solutions were required. Mortar consistency was controlled by purchasing the mortar in silo's and the bricklayers were diligent in ensuring the joints were neat and even with all necessary cuts being undertaken on site with the use of a cutting machine to ensure accuracy. Building Control did not stipulate that the extension had to meet the rigid standards of modern thermal >



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insulation, as it would hardly have made any difference with the almost non-existent thermal insulation in the remainder of the church. As churches are infrequently heated they are exempt from the higher standards of insulation required of other buildings. The builder was able to construct the wall in solid brickwork as in the 1930s original.

The large four-ring brick on-edge chancel arches, were built on stout wooden turning pieces. All the joints were raked out as work proceeded and a sub-contractor was appointed

to finish the joints and to follow the correct detail and colour using sand and lime and to twice rule the interior joints as originally described in Mr Scott's building specifications. All joints were formed uniformly and were oversized cut to an even width to ensure visual consistency.

The original church builders from Hertford are still trading and were invited to tender but regrettably failed to procure the contract.

The original double Roman pantiles on the roof are no longer produced but a modern

equivalent in clay was sourced and is an excellent match although there had to be a vertical junction where the new met with the old.

The new joinery is fabricated in light oak as pitch pine is no longer readily available. The external doors were designed using Scott's standard joinery details. Second-hand pitch pine floor blocks were obtained to patch up

where the flooring had been disturbed and the whole floor was sanded and sealed making the infilled section invisible. However, it did highlight the 1970s flooring in the side aisle which, had been laid with a modern dark hardwood block.

Careful cutting and stitching of the bricks made good the scars revealed after removal of the >

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PROJECT



“As well as respecting the architectural integrity there had to be theological integrity to the sanctuary furnishings. The altar, ambo, tabernacle plinth and font take their motifs from the Book of Revelation.”

gallery but in the area of the old staircase the scars were so evident that a whole new panel of matching Funton stock bricks was built over this disturbed section of the 1970s wall, which had been built using those bricks and then pointed to match the 1970s standards of pointing all to great success. The architect introduced some new detailing around the edges where the new panel stood proud so that it harmonised with the wall behind.

The circular apse walls were plastered internally and the new dome ceiling was constructed in timber and plastered with two semi-circular head clerestory windows piercing through on either side. Amber coloured leaded lights have also been installed into black aluminium slim line windows to match the other steel windows in the building.

Once the superstructure was completed work started on installation of the altar furnishings, artwork and paving to the sanctuary. Curved church benches, made in light oak, for the altar servers were supplied by Irish Contract Seating. Paving to the sanctuary was laid throughout in cream coloured limestone and the new altar, ambo and baptistery were commissioned from Jim Keegan who also fabricated them to his designs.

As well as respecting the architectural integrity there had to be theological integrity to the sanctuary furnishings. The altar, ambo, tabernacle plinth and font take their motifs

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from the Book of Revelation, which speaks of Christ as the Lamb of God, the Alpha and Omega and refers to the Eucharistic Banquet to which we are called by Jesus.

Hanging from the triumphal arch above the sanctuary is a cross in the style of Cimabue by the iconographer Sr. Petra Clare, whose work can also be seen at another church in our Diocese. The back of the cross shows the Virgin Mary at the empty tomb, the first herald of the resurrection of Jesus and as such Mother of the Church. On the front of the cross, flowing out from the side of the crucified Christ, blood and water are emblematic of Eucharist and Baptism. A little imagination is required to see this water flowing from Christ's side towards the font which bears a Latin inscription translating as 'I saw water flowing out from the temple'. The newly commissioned stained glass window by Benjamin Finn, which is placed above the font, depicts the baptism of Christ by John the Baptist in the river Jordan. Once more reference is made to the life giving waters which flow from the temple in Jerusalem into the Jordan.

There is a theological hermeneutic within the sanctuary which celebrates Christ the giver of baptism and Eucharist and this has provided a wonderful resource helping the parish community to deepen their faith.

The Cardinal celebrated the completion of the project in 2014 and all agreed that the artists and builders had done an excellent job in faithfully refurbishing and extending this church. ■

