

A Brief History of St Mary's, East Barnet

- ⊙ St Mary's is the 'mother church' of Barnet and was dedicated to St Mary the Virgin in 1080 AD. Before the stone church was built there may well have been a wooden structure, and prior to that there is some evidence that this was formerly a place of druidic worship.
- ⊙ When the Benedictine monks from the Abbey at St Albans built this small Church, midway between St Albans and their Abbey at Westminster, it was built to minister to the needs of a local community. For over 900 years it has continued to do just that, and it still does. The Church is used daily for prayer as well as other activities.
- ⊙ This small building has been used by local people for all of its long life, and is still used by the local community, as a place of prayer and calm for worship offered to the glory of God. Over the centuries these countless thousands of people have left their own little marks upon the building, often only a scratch here or a niche there, but all helping to create the atmosphere of this much loved Parish Church.
- ⊙ There are few written records about the Church's early history although there is much circumstantial evidence of occupation in the area. In 1005 King Aethelred (the Unready) granted part of his estates in return for money to the Abbot of St Albans. This included woodlands bounded by a stream, probably Pymmes Brook, running from Edmonton in the south to Hadley woods in the north and forming the Shire boundary (Middlesex/Hertfordshire).
- ⊙ In 1176 a Charter from Henry II to the Abbot of St Albans refers to the Abbot's properties at Barnet with the woods at Southaw and Osidge. In 1187 the Bishop of London reclaimed all of the Abbeys land between Barnet and London Common (modern Friern Barnet) leaving Barnet with the Abbot of St Albans. This was justified by reference to William the Conqueror (1066 - 1087) and as punishment for the Abbot of St Alban's rebellion - he backed King Harold in 1066.
- ⊙ The Abbot of St Albans was both Patron and Rector until the Reformation. In 1553 the patronage was taken over by the Crown and to this day Rectors are appointed by the Monarch.
- ⊙ The list of Priests at St Mary's starts in 1324 and is available on the parish website. Some have left lasting memorial such as Rector Underne who took an active part in the founding of Queen Elizabeth's Grammar School in 1573. Rector Goodwin (who was instituted in 1639) was sequestered in the year 1643 "and until the kinges return, all was neglected, christenings, marryages and buryalls". He was exercising his duties again in 1650 (Source: Church Records). On a lighter note there was Rector Burnet, 1719, who had a novel way of ensuring that his parishioners paid their dues to the church by resorting to the expedient of taking them in kind. He made an entry in the records regarding a certain East Barnet resident "he did not pay his tythe, so I took his pig".

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- ⊙ Before 1834 many of the current functions of Local Councils such as education, social services, road repairs and police constables, were all carried out by the Parish either through the Churchwardens (Overseers of the Poor) or the Vestry meeting and paid for by the Parish Rate. At various times 4d (2p) was paid to poor travellers to move on, 4d for catching a hedgehog, one shilling (5p) for catching a polecat; the church paid eight shillings to wash the Rectors surplice. Between 1834 and 1884 they were gradually taken over by a variety of ad hoc bodies pending the Local Government Act of 1894 which set up East Barnet Urban Valley District Council, the forerunner of Barnet Council in 1965.
- ⊙ Rector Hadow was the first volunteer Chaplain to the Forces in the Crimea and it was during his time here that St Mary's Church School was built on its present site in 1871, although a school has been attached to the Church since at least 1631 when it moved from the Church to a building (demolished in the 1950s) in the park opposite Cedar Avenue.
- ⊙ In the church there are memorials to notable families who lived in the area during the 18th and 19th Centuries when the parish extended all the way up to High Barnet - St John, Chipping Barnet the Baptist became a Parish in its own right in 1866; Holy Trinity, Lyonsdown in 1868; St Marks, Barnet Vale in 1897 and St James, New Barnet in 1911. This area had many large estates owned by wealthy families who could travel at weekends to the countryside of East Barnet. The arrival of the railways in the 1860s led to the sale of the estates and rapid population growth.
- ⊙ There are no written records of the Church's early development. Parts of the building are known to be of late Saxon or early Norman origin with the North wall being built of rubble, lime plaster and stone only around the openings. There are three apertures, now windows containing 13th or 14th century glass, and two doorways one on the North and the other on the South side of the building, which are believed to be part of the original structure dating back to at least 1080. The earliest church probably ended at about the line of the present Chancel step and pulpit.
- ⊙ The Chancel was built around 1400 and there are records of its repair and enlargement in 1632 at the instigation of Sir Robert Berkeley. In 1880 there was a major rebuilding of the Chancel when it was extended eastwards by another 12 feet, to the present East End of the Church, including the stained glass window depicting the Annunciation, Crucifixion and Resurrection. At the same time the organ chamber was built and most of the choir stalls.
- ⊙ The organ itself was installed in 1920 and had a major rebuild in 1984. It is reckoned to be a particularly fine instrument for such a small church. The first gallery is believed to have been built in 1619, during the reign of James I, and has had a number of rebuilds, including at one time a second tier, before the gallery that we now see, part of the 1880 rebuilding work. Until the end of the 19th century the gallery was used by the choir, and it also housed a barrel organ which had been given by Sir Simon Haughton Clarke of Oak Hill (now a Theological College).

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- ⊙ The Bell Tower, incorporating the main entrance porch was erected in 1828 and originally separated from the rest of the building. Before then the bells had hung in a small wooden turret on the top of the west end of the church. The present three bells were recast in 1961 from the two original bells that had been cast at the Whitechapel Foundry in 1861.
- ⊙ In 1868 the old South wall of the original church was pierced by two arches and the South aisle built. At the same time new pews were put in to the whole church, probably replacing box pews which were in the church some time prior to this as there is a grave stone to Elizabeth Press "Pew Opener", who died in 1877, aged 80 years. The church was heated by two large internal coke boilers. The church was not connected to gas until 1984 when gas fired heating was fitted.
- ⊙ Further alterations took place at the start of the 20th century, in 1911, when the present vestry was built to replace the previous one under the gallery and electric lighting was installed so for over 800 years the only light inside the church was limited daylight and wax candles.
- ⊙ There was some damage to the building during the 1939 - 1945 war that resulted in the roof and ceiling needing repair. The Nave has had a double roof since 1805 when an enterprising churchwarden had the walls raised by a few feet and a new roof put over the old one!! The present East window in the South Aisle was installed in 1950 and incorporates a War Memorial.
- ⊙ The church is fortunate in having many of its old records. The earliest dating back to 1553 is the Baptism Register, 1568 for Burials and 1582 for Marriages. There are also early Churchwardens accounts, certificates and maps. Copies of them are available for further inspection at the County Archive offices as are transcriptions which are often easier to read. The church has a collection of Communion silverware including a Chalice and Paten which are hallmarked for 1636, during the reign of King Charles I and so predate the Civil War.
- ⊙ In the churchyard there are many memorials to local families, from Lords to housekeepers, Major Generals to wheelwrights and clerks. The elaborate memorial on the North east corner is to Sir Simon Haughton Clarke, ninth baronet and his family and is so sited that it may be seen from Oak Hill where he died in 1832.
- ⊙ The wooden boards originally had the names of the deceased written on them and were for families who could not afford a stone memorial. The churchyard has been closed for burials for many years (except the burial of Ashes) and is now under the care of Barnet Council who were also responsible for the rebuilding, in 1991, of the lych gate which was erected in 1872.
- ⊙ Today this Church is home to a lively, growing Christian community of all ages. Worship and prayer are still offered daily within the walls of this building, as they have been down the ages. Here, young and old can meet and relate together in a way which is rare in today's society. In our life together, we try to cherish and

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nurture what we believe to be the God-given values of respect for one another and all creation. Above all, we believe our calling is to look outwards onto the village community which this little Church serves; to bring the good news of Christ, to rejoice with the glad, weep with those who mourn, bind up the broken hearted and raise up the fallen. In brief, our vision and our calling are summarised in this contemporary prayer:

**O God,
make the door of this house
wide enough to receive all
who need human love and fellowship,
narrow enough to shut out all envy, pride and strife.
Make its threshold smooth enough
to be no stumbling block to children,
nor to straying feet,
but rugged and strong
to turn back the tempter's power.
God, make the doorway of this house
the entrance to your eternal kingdom.
Amen**