

## The History Booklet of St. Matthew's at Bethnal Green



### ATTRIBUTES

The church was built in 1746 to the designs of George Dance the Elder Interior destroyed by fire in 1859 - restored 1861. Interior destroyed by enemy action in 1940. Restored to a modern design by Antony Lewis ARIBA and re-consecrated in 1961.

The present parish of St Matthew includes the former parishes of St Andrew, St Philip, St Jude, St Matthias, St Paul and St James the Great.

This history was revised in 1989 by Fr. John Oldland and incorporates some earlier material.

### RECTORS of BETHNAL GREEN

1742 – 1747 J. BROOKBANK M.A.

1748 - 1765 E. DAVENPORT M.A.

1766 - 1809 WILLIAM LOXHAM M.A.

1809 - 1861 JOSHUA KING M.A.

1861 - 1865 TIMOTHY GIBSON M.A.

1864 - 1895 SEPTIMUS HANSARD M.A.

1895 - 1897 ARTHUR FOLEY WINNINGTON-INGRAM D.D.

(Bishop of Stepney 1897-1901

Bishop of London 1901-1939)

1898 - 1901 B.R. WILSON M.A.

1901 - 1916 HUBERT VINCENT ECK D.D.

(Prebendary of St Paul's Cathedral)  
1916 - 1939 SIDNEY LANCASTER SAREL M.A.  
(Prebendary of St Paul's Cathedral)  
1939 - 1949 F.W. FERRARO M.A.  
1949 - 1957 ARTHUR A. CORBOLD  
1958 - 1968 CHARLES GEOFFREY HOW  
1968 - 1974 CYRIL ASHTON ROWE A.K.C.  
1974 - 1979 KENNETH LEECH M.A., A.K.C.  
1981 - CHRISTOPHER JOHN CHARLES BEDFORD B.D., A.K.C.

### **To the Visitor**

This is the house of God where for nearly 250 years prayer and worship have been offered to Him. Please join your prayers to the myriads offered over the years and merged with those of our patrons, Saint Matthew and Saint James.

Lord God, grant that the prayers of the blessed Apostles and Martyrs, St Matthew and St James, may ever protect us and make us worthy of your service.

We ask this through Christ our Lord.

Pour forth, O Lord, your Holy Spirit on us and on this place, that your Name may be glorified on earth as it is in heaven. Amen.

St Matthew and St James our patrons, pray for us; and may the souls of our departed Founders, Benefactors, Priests and Layfolk, through the mercy of God, rest in peace and rise in glory. Amen.



## **THE CHURCH OF SAINT MATTHEW the Mother - Church of BETHNAL GREEN**

### **THE EARLY DAYS OF THE DISTRICT**

The East End of London seems to have been used originally as a dwelling place for the dead more than for the living, for the Romans used it as a burial area. One of the earliest cemeteries was Lolesworth Field in Spitalfields, and the breaking up of this field for brick making in 1576 was the beginning of BRICK LANE and of modern Bethnal Green. The earliest residential settlement was Stepney which dates from Saxon times, and up to the 18th Century Bethnal Green was a small rural hamlet within the Parish of Stepney. Its few houses centred around the green, at one end of which (where the Bethnal Green Museum now stands) stood the ancient Chapel of St George of England. Little documentary evidence exists regarding this chapel, but it is reasonably assumed to have been a chapel of ease to St Dunstan's, Stepney, of which quite a number once existed. It is known that the adjacent Netteswell

House (built by Oliver Cromwell's great-grandfather) was for a time used as the priest's house, and Gascoyne's Survey of 1703 shows the chapel still in use. However, by the time of the next survey, following the consecration of St Matthew's Church in 1746, no trace exists of the chapel. It is possible that some of the St Matthew's silver, the earliest items of which date from the reign of Charles I, were originally in use at the earlier chapel.

The origin of the name **BETHNAL GREEN** is largely conjectural, but Lysons in his **History of London** states that it is derived from a family named Bathon who were

landowners, and whose home (Bathon Hall ...Bethnal?) was in the area in the reign of Edward 1(1272-1307). It was shortly after this time, in 1338, that Whitechapel became a parish.

It is from the 13th Century also that the legend of the **BLIND BEGGAR** is alleged to derive. The story is that Henry de Montfort, son of the Earl of Leicester, after the battle of Evesham of 1265, was discovered among the bodies of the dead and dying by a young woman. He was almost lifeless and had lost his sight. Afterwards he married the woman, but fearing that his rank and title might be discovered, he is said to have disguised himself as a beggar and lived at Bethnal Green. His beautiful daughter later attracted the attention of many suitors, but most of them forsook her when they found that her father was a blind beggar. To the faithful suitor, Henry revealed his true identity and gave a dowry of £3,000. A ballad about this story dates to the Tudor period and is preserved in **Percy's Reliques**. Plays were written on the theme by Chettle in 1600, Robert Dodsley in 1743, and Sheridan Knowles in 1828. The legend is preserved at St Matthew's by the Beadle's Mace which dates from 1690, and on the churchwardens' staves, and the road from Whitechapel to Bethnal Green is marked by the Blind Beggar pub.

By the 16th Century Bethnal Green was growing, although still largely rural. Estimates for 1580 showed a population for Whitechapel of 4,500 and for Stepney (including Bethnal Green) of 7,500. Some industrial development was beginning in the 17th Century, and the Black Eagle Brewery was built in 1669. In 1694 it became Trumans, and today the brewery in Brick Lane, is one of the boundaries of the parish.

A major turning point in the history of Bethnal Green was an event which happened in France. In 1685 the Edict of Nantes, which had guaranteed religious freedom to French Protestants (called Huguenots), was revoked, and a wave of fierce anti-Protestant persecution followed. Large numbers of Huguenots fled and came to England as refugees, and many settled in Spitalfields and the western end of Bethnal Green, greatly increasing the population in these areas. They were mainly weavers, and the more wealthy of them lived in the area around Spital Square, with the poorer ones in Bethnal Green. By 1748 Spitalfields was described as "close built up and inhabited by an infinite number of people". Several years earlier, the new Parish of St Matthew was said to consist of "journeymen weavers and other inferior artificers belonging to the weaving trade who by hard labour and industry can scarcely in the most frugal way of life maintain themselves" (House of Commons Journals, Vol. 24 3rd March 1743). Probably not many of these were foreigners however, for in 1727 when 100 of the main inhabitants of Bethnal Green sent a petition of gratitude for the buying of the site of the church, only 23 had foreign names. The Huguenots certainly made a major impact on Bethnal Green, but their numbers have probably been exaggerated.

## THE CHURCH

As early as 1690 negotiations were begun for the creation of a separate Parish of Bethnal Green, and Nicholas Hawksmoor, a pupil of Sir Christopher Wren drew up plans for a large basilica-type church, to be built by the "50 Church Commissioners" who were empowered by an Act of Parliament to raise a tax on coal for the purpose of building 50 new churches. Opposition to these plans came from two fronts. Some of the local residents, fearing the increased costs in rates which maintaining their own church and rector would entail, protested that Bethnal Green was neither large enough nor rich enough to support itself as a Parish; and the Rector of Stepney objected on the grounds that part of his income from tithes in the Hamlet of Bethnal Green, would be lost if it became a separate Parish. It is interesting to note that in settlement of the Rector of Stepney's objection, the Rectors of Bethnal Green had to make an annual Tithe Payment, out of their own income, of £2.16.3d. to the Rector of Stepney, a practice which continued until 1924.

Negotiations were long drawn out, and it was not until 13th October 1725 that a piece of ground, part of Hare Fields, was purchased for £200 for the Church. The situation of the Church, which was a long way from the Green, the old centre of the hamlet, was due to the development begun by the Huguenots who had created a new and much larger centre in Bethnal Green, clustered around Hare Street (now Cheshire Street). However, by this time the 50 Churches Commission was in financial trouble, and plans for the erection of a church had to be abandoned.

In 1742 an Act of Parliament was passed, making Bethnal Green a separate Parish, and authorising a local rate to be levied for building a church. George Dance, the architect of the Mansion House and a number of City churches, was commissioned to design a somewhat smaller church than that proposed by Hawksmoor - a fact for which we are now very thankful! - and in 1743 the foundation stone was laid by Ebenezer Mussell, a local dignitary. But troubles were not yet over, for, as had been foreseen, considerable difficulties were encountered in raising sufficient funds locally, and the following year work on the half-built church was halted.

A petition was submitted to Parliament on behalf of the Parishioners, and in 1745 a further Act of Parliament was passed to "complete the Church at Bethnal Green and pay debts already contracted". The wording of the Act began as follows:

"Whereas the want of a place for public worship of Almighty God hath been a great cause of increase of dissoluteness of morals and a disregard for religion, too apparent in the younger and poorer sort "

Finally, on 15th July 1746, the completed church was consecrated by the Bishop of Llandaff (who seems to have resided permanently in London, and only rarely saw his own diocese in Wales!).

If the "younger and poorer sort" were in great need of a place of worship, it does not appear that they readily availed themselves of its use on Sundays, for soon after the Consecration, we learn from the Vestry records that on Sundays "several hundred persons" would gather in the field adjacent to the churchyard to enjoy the sports of dog-fighting and bullock-hunting, and on one occasion, when a bullock was chased through



the churchyard, the terrified animal took refuge in the church, followed by its raucous pursuers, much to the alarm of the worshippers at the Morning Service which was taking place at the time!

For the first 150 years of the Parish, the Patrons of the living were Brasenose College, Oxford, who usually appointed their own Fellows to the living. As was fairly common practice in those days, the Rector, once instituted, would then appoint a "perpetual curate" who, for a pittance,, would actually do the work in the parish, while the Rector remained either at Oxford or in some other area more comfortable than Bethnal Green. Of one Rector, William Loxham, who held office from 1766-1809, there is no evidence that he ever set foot in Bethnal Green!

One serious problem during this period was that of preventing the desecration of the churchyard, since medical schools would buy their corpses without asking too many questions, and many of these actually came from graves. (The London Hospital was built the same year as the Church!). So the Watch House - which still stands in the

churchyard, at the junction of St Matthew's Row and Wood Close - was erected in 1754. However, on 22nd March 1792, the Vestry Minutes record a discussion on the best methods of protection of the burial ground, and it was resolved that "a person be stationed in the churchyard at 10s.6d per week". In addition, a reward of two guineas would be paid to anyone apprehending a body snatcher, and it was agreed to "provide a blunderbuss and rattle for the watchman". In 1826, an extension was built to the Watch House to accommodate the Parish fire engine. One famous preacher in the 18th Century was John Wesley, who noted in his Journal for 12th November 1775:

"I was desired to preach in Bethnal Green church, a charity sermon for the widows and orphans of the soldiers that were killed in America".

Again, on 15th January 1777 he wrote:

"I began visiting those of our Society who lived in Bethnal Green hamlet. Many of them I found in such poverty as few can conceive without seeing it".

In 1809 Joshua King became Rector, and in his first years took a close interest in the Parish. He uncovered a great web of fraud and corruption among Parish officials, the chief culprit being his Churchwarden, Joseph Merceron. Merceron seems to have been an early 19th Century version of "the Godfather" of the American Mafia. As Churchwarden, he manipulated the poor funds to his own advantage and that of his "henchmen". As Licensing Magistrate, he controlled more than twenty of his own Public Houses, which were, in fact, notorious brothels, and operated a "protection racket" on the rest. (It is probably an inheritance from the days of Merceron that the Parish still has such a high ratio of

pubs per head of the population!). As Vestryman and Magistrate, he gave official encouragement to dog-fighting and bullock-hunting through the streets and generally violated the law. When he was first charged in 1813 he managed to get acquitted, but finally in 1818 he was fined and imprisoned.

Shortly after this, King inherited from his father the "right of representation" to a well-endowed living in Cheshire. He promptly appointed himself - as was legal then - and left Bethnal Green, never returning again, though he retained the office of Rector - and the stipend! - until his death in 1861. Joseph Merceron, on leaving prison and finding his adversary gone, returned to the scene of his former misdemeanours and, regaining his office, took up where he had left off. On his death, a very grand memorial tablet was erected in the church recording his Huguenot descent and stating that "he lived to an honoured old age". His marble tomb is in the churchyard to the south of the church.

The only other tombstone still remaining is that of Peter Renvoize which stands near the main doors of the church. He was also a Churchwarden of Huguenot descent, and on his death in 1824 he made a bequest to Parmiters School expressing the hope that the family tomb be kept in "good repair and condition".

In 1828 St John's, Bethnal Green, was built as a chapel of ease. In 1837 Bishop Blomfield chose Bethnal Green to be a model parish, and within ten years ten new churches were built. Blomfield's theory was that if large parishes were subdivided into small ones, and well-staffed, with schools and charities, then working people would start to come. But by 1846, Blomfield referred to Bethnal Green as "the spot where it is said that we have sown our seed in vain". (Curiously, however, both the 1851 Religious Census, and Booth's survey of churches in 1886 show a much higher incidence of churchgoing in Bethnal Green than in other parts of East London.)

In December 1859 the interior of St Matthew's was destroyed by fire. George Bainbridge, the son of the Parish Surveyor, rescued the registers and the robes belonging to Timothy Gibson, the elderly curate. "The night was so cold that the firemen were covered in sheets of ice as they worked". A rate was levied on the parish to rebuild the church, but the work was delayed by the builders' strikes and by rows between the architect (T.E. Knightley) and the local committee. In 1861 King, the Rector, died, and there was a clamour for Gibson to be appointed Rector. He seems to have done the work of Rector for many years for very little pay. In fact, he was appointed Rector, and also given a Lambeth D.D. but he only lived for three more years. Meanwhile the church was re-opened on 13th December 1861. The collections on that day totalled £18 and were divided between Bethnal Green Charitable Maternity Society, the Queen Adelaide Dispensary and an infants school.

The following year the architect inserted a note in **The Builder** (January 1862) disclaiming responsibility for the church since the local committee had meddled.

From the writings which survive it would seem that the clergy of this period did not have too high an opinion of their parishes. This is what the Revd. J. Colbourne of St Matthew's told a Select Committee of the House of Commons in 1857:



"What is the general moral character of your population?"

Very low indeed.

Could you mention any vice as more prevalent than any other?

I am afraid that fornication prevails to an enormous degree.

Does drunkenness prevail?

We have several gin palaces and a great deal of gin drinking."

He went on to say however that "you can walk the streets in safety and comfort at any hour of the night" but that he did not like either himself or his family to live in the neighbourhood of the church because of "the fairlike appearance of the streets on a Sunday". In 1862 the Rector said that "the greater part of the population consists of Radicals, Infidels and of

persons who are to all good works reprobate." In the 1880's C.E.T. Roberts, the priest-in-charge of St Peter's, complained that the churches were dead and the incumbents were broken down. His own Vicar was a retired Bishop of Sierra Leone and lived in Eastbourne.

Septimus Hansard who became Rector in 1864 was a friend of Charles Kingsley, Pusey and F.D. Maurice, and an early Catholic socialist. It was through his efforts that the Bethnal Green Museum was founded. He seems to have been the first Rector to spend his ministry in the parish, and it would seem that it is from this period that the daily Eucharist and reservation of the Blessed Sacrament were introduced. His curate, Stewart Headlam, only spent just over four years (1873-78) in the parish, but he made a powerful impact on the district and on the Church of England as a whole. When he was dying in 1924 he asked where he was and when he was told he was at home said "No, home is Bethnal Green". Headlam founded the Guild of St Matthew in 1877, one of the first explicitly socialist groups in Britain. In the same year he was suspended from preaching because of his support of ballet dancing, and in 1878 Hansard gave him notice. Headlam remained without a licence till 1898.



In 1889 J.J. Woodroffe became curate and his diary which is still in St Matthew's contains a good deal of curious and amusing information about his work. A recent historian has described the diary as "a pathetic document".

"Woodroffe was plagued by beggars, tramps and parishioners in trouble and he seems to have spent most of the day in trying to determine whether applicants for hospital letters were deserving cases, and whether seekers of advice or spiritual consolation were merely after his money. Some clergymen invested the East End with a murky romance, but Woodroffe was certainly not among them. His period in Bethnal Green seems to have produced only bitterness and cynicism".

(Hugh McLeod, *Class and Religion in the Late Victorian City*. (1974) pp.112-113.)

In 1895 Arthur Foley Winnington-Ingram became Rector, but after a few years he left to become Bishop of Stepney and later of London. In 1904 the Parish Hall was opened at a

cost of £3,633, and the following year the Rectory was completed at a cost of £3,000. In 1916 Sidney Lancaster Sarel was appointed Rector and remained until 1939. He is still remembered by many people in the district, not least for his athletic performances, and Sarel House, the old peoples' home in Buckfast Street, is named after him. Soon after his departure, in 1940 the interior of the church was destroyed by bombing. A temporary church was built within the walls of the old one, and dedicated on 27th November 1954. Three years later it was decided to rebuild the church, and Antony Lewis was appointed architect. The temporary church was demolished in 1960, and the services were held in the Parish Room and at St James the Great. Finally, on 15th July 1961, the present church was re-consecrated. It was restored and redecorated in 1972, and again in 1984.

## **THE INTERIOR OF THE CHURCH**

No detailed description of Dance's original interior has been traced, but his drawings in the Soane Museum show that it was simple and spacious. There is, however, a description of the second interior, after the fire of 1859:

"The gallery is supported on plain stone columns. The wood is pitch pine, varnished. The font is of Caen stone. The reading desk and clerks' desks are pitch pine, carved. The chancel has a stained glass window by Clutterbuck of Stratford. The walls and ceiling have mural decorations in geometrical patterns, in gold and colour, with margins of polished scagliola. Beneath the east window is a stone reredos in three panels. The gas fittings are polished brass".

The architect, Knightley, objected to the governors' pews (with people sitting face to face), the pulpit being on the south side, the absence of stalls, and the galleries, but he was over-ruled by the committee.

## **THE PRESENT CHURCH**

After the 1940 bombing nothing was left of the church except a damaged shell with no roof. When rebuilding began, the shell was restored from the original drawings by Dance in the Soane Museum.

The roof is supported by steel-framed trusses with woodwool slab covering and aluminium. The ceiling is fibrous plaster supported from the roof trusses, and there is a cat-walk inside the roof from which the light fittings can be lowered for cleaning. The east gallery is reinforced concrete on columns, while the west gallery is a steel construction, cantilevered. The screen is made from African hard-woods, with elm veneered panelling. The painted panels of the apostles are usually open to show the Blessed Sacrament chapel behind, but they can be closed if desired. The walls in the nave are vermiculite plaster, the west wall acoustic tiles. The floors in the nave are oak blocks, in the chancel and steps terrazo, and the upstairs chapel and sacristies lino tiles.

The organ is above the main door in the west gallery, though the console was intended to be under the stairs leading to the south-east gallery.



On the south side of the gallery is the Muniments Room where there are many old records of the church, though the Baptism, Marriage and Burial Registers have now been transferred to the Greater London Records Office at 40 Northampton Road, E.C.1.

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## **IMPORTANT PARTS OF THE CHURCH**

**THE HIGH ALTAR**, a large and impressive block of wood standing on a wide plinth, is in the centre of the church so that there is ample space for the celebration of the Liturgy with dignity and splendour. The large panels on the plinth are by the sculptor, Robert Dawson. That on the west side, which is somewhat puzzling at first, represents the ram caught in the thicket (Genesis 22), which God provided as a substitute when Abraham was prepared to sacrifice his only son, Isaac.

"God himself will provide the lamb for the sacrifice By myself I have sworn, says the Lord, because you have done this and have not withheld your only son, I will indeed bless you and your descendants shall possess the gate of their enemies".

That on the east side represents the  $\chi$  (Chi-ro), the first letters of the Greek word for Christ, the lamb which God himself provided for the Sacrifice which saved the world. In this symbolism we may see the Christian message of **Faith, Trust and Deliverance**.

**THE TESTER** the great canopy over the altar. Designed by Antony Lewis and painted by Dorothy Rendell. The design is a "clamour of angels' wings", suggesting the hosts of heaven gathered around the altar for the offering of the Eucharist.

**THE CRUCIFIX** on the east wall behind the altar (illustrated on the following page) was made for the temporary church. It is not only of great beauty and power but is also a constant reminder of those days of waiting in worship and hope for the restoration of the church.

**BAS-RELIEF SCULPTURE** on the staircase wall is by Kim James and depicts the "war in heaven" (Revelation 12:7) with St Michael and the angels in conflict with the forces of evil.



**THE SCREEN** - above the altar, painted by Peter Snow. From left to right are the apostles Matthias, James the Great, Thomas, Bartholomew, Simon, Peter, John, Matthew, James the Less, Andrew, Philip and Jude.

**GLASS PANELS** on the east gallery doors. These were designed by Heather Child and the designs were put on the glass by sandblasting. The symbols are as follows:

**North Door:** Centre - chalice and host with vine and wheat, symbols of the Eucharist;

2 and 3 vine and wheat.

4 - the Lamb of God, symbol of Christ, with the flag of victory symbolising the Resurrection.

5 - the Fish, early Christian symbol of Christ and of the liturgy of Baptism;

6 - crown of thorns, nails and cross, symbols of the Passion;

7 - cock, ladder, spear, scourge, dice, and 30 pices of silver, more Passion symbols;

8 - Greek letters CHR, beginning of the word CHRist, and olive wreath, symbol of peace.

9 - IHS, first letters of the Greek form of the name of Jesus, surrounded by a palm of victory.

**South Door:** Centre - a lily, symbol of the purity of the Blessed Virgin Mary;

2 - celestial crown, symbol of Mary, Queen of heaven and earth; 3 - fountain, symbol of Mary, who gave human life to her Son; 4 - pelican, symbol of the life-giving sacrifice of Christ; 5 - a hand, symbol of God the Father, Creator; 6 - a Roman lamp, symbol of the Word of God;

7 - dove, symbol of the Holy Spirit;

8 - peacock, symbol of resurrection;

9 - ship, symbol of the Catholic Church, the Ark of Salvation.

Beyond these doors is the CHAPEL of the BLESSED SACRAMENT in the East Gallery.



**THE FONT** - designed by the architect, Antony Lewis. The cover was designed and made by Brian Wood.

**STATIONS OF THE CROSS** - these are thought by many to be the most beautiful possessions of the church. Designed by Donald Potter, they are in ceramic, and the varying colours were obtained by firing the kiln with wood only.

