

The tower & spire through the years

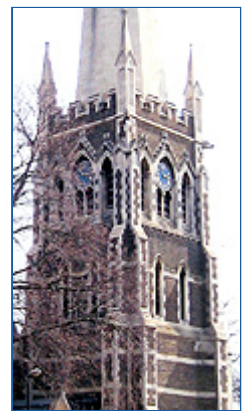


The
foundation
stone

Back in 1885 the magazine reported; *"We must not forget the unfinished state of our Church, and that there is still wanting the Tower and Spire, a Peal of Bells and a Parish Clock. The only funds hitherto set apart are the proceeds of the sale of honey produced in the Vicarage garden. This amounts now to £8 12s. 0d."*

To celebrate Queen Victoria's Golden Jubilee in 1887 it was decided to complete the church by building the tower and spire. It was seen as important for two reasons: firstly as an expression of loyalty to the Queen, and secondly as a landmark to put Hampton Hill on the map. The architects were Messrs Romaine-Walker and Tanner of 19, Buckingham Street, Adelphi, the contractors were Messrs Dove Bros, of Islington, while as much as possible of the labour was provided by local men. The total cost was £2,425 and £1,325 was promptly subscribed by the parishioners.

On June 20th 1887, the anniversary of the Queen's accession, local clergy and gentry, led by the choir chanting Psalm 84, 'Oh how amiable are thy dwellings', processed to a platform on the site of the tower for a short service. The pink granite foundation stone, at the base of the southern wall, was laid by the vicar's only son, Edward. It was inscribed *"To the glory of God and in commemoration of the fiftieth anniversary of the accession to the throne of his servant Victoria, Queen of the realm by public subscription on foundations laid by Revd Fitzroy John Fitz Wygram, first Vicar of the Parish. This stone was laid by Edward Bligh on the 24th June 1887."* One each of every coin in the country, from a farthing to a guinea, was placed behind this stone.



The tower

After the short ceremony, watched with interest by a very large number of parishioners, a move was made to the vicarage grounds *"where the rest of the day was spent in general rejoicings"*. At four o'clock eight hundred children sat down to a *"capital tea"* and each received a special Jubilee medal. From five to seven-thirty, one thousand four hundred adult parishioners were supplied with tea on the vicarage lawns, and celebrations continued with *"frequent performances of Punchinello"*, swings and races. *"A capital selection of music"* was supplied by the Hampton Hill brass band and dancing continued until dark when the grounds were *"very prettily decorated with Chinese lanterns and fairy lamps"*. At nine-thirty there was *"a nice display of fireworks"* and half an hour later the crowd dispersed to the common where a huge bonfire was lighted which must have been visible for many miles. So ended a day of rejoicing in which *"all classes and sects united harmoniously in the effort to make the celebrations a success"*, and doubtless the day was long remembered by those who took part in it.

The well-proportioned tower, made of mellow stock brick with stone dressings, grew during the next few months with the main walls over three feet thick at the base, reducing to just under two feet thick at the upper belfry level. It was built 64 ft high to the top of the battlements. The opening of the baptistry beneath the new tower took place after the Christmas Eve service in 1887. The Parish Magazine of 1888 January reported: *"The first instalment of our additions to the Church has left the builder's hands, and we have to record the opening of the Baptistry beneath the new Tower, on Christmas Eve. After the usual Christmas Eve service, the clergy and choir proceeded to the Baptistry. Standing round the Font a short service was held, including the 127th Psalm, and the following collect specially compiled for the occasion. 'Almighty and Everlasting God, mercifully be pleased to bless this Baptistry which we have built in the Name and strength of Him Who is the tried and precious Stone; visit it, we beseech Thee, with Thy merciful loving kindness; cleanse it by Thy grace from all pollution, and keep it ever pure; bless those who shall here be admitted through the holy waters of baptism into the fold of Thy Church; and may all who witness baptisms here, be stirred up to a more worthy fulfilment of their own baptismal vow. We ask all in the Name and for the sake of Jesus Christ"*

our Lord.' The procession then left the Baptistery, singing the 242nd Hymn, 'We love the place, O God'."



The spire



The original cross and weather vane



The cross by 1989

The gracefully tapering Portland stone spire was completed in the New Year and on January 3rd, 1888, in warm sunshine, the vicar and the intrepid Mrs Annie Bligh, together with the Church Wardens and other parishioners, climbed the scaffolding to the summit where Mrs Bligh placed the capstone in position. The choir up in the new belfry sung the 'Te Deum' which was heard by the parishioners and innumerable school children below but not by the party so high above. When the ceremony was completed, Mrs Bligh threw buns out of a large clothes basket

down to the crowds below, to their amusement and delight. That spring the parish was recorded as being delighted with the new spire.

Climbing a staircase to about eighty-five feet, then a ladder to the middle look-out, parishioners could experience the spectacular view for sixpence. It was the tallest structure in the then Borough of Twickenham, standing 157 feet and remains a prominent landmark. From the lower platform in the steeple, which is 83 feet above the ground, a fine view of the surrounding countryside could be seen, including Windsor Castle and Box Hill, both more than 12 miles away.

The £2500 required to pay for the tower and spire came in very slowly and caused great anxiety, so in June, 1891, a "Fancy Fair" was held to clear the remaining loan. This was a tremendous undertaking, lasting two days and under the patronage of eight titled ladies, and the always generous Mrs Fitz Wygram and Mrs Carr. The Fair opened on June 30th in "a sort of Scottish mist" while the following morning there was a downpour, but in spite of this it was a great success. The central feature was an ingenious street of card houses decorated with masks, flags and fairy lights. This earned much admiration. There was every type of entertainment, "Gipsies" organised coconut shies, swings and palmistry and there were stalls of all kinds, even "galvanic shocks" were dispensed at a penny - although the receipts from this indicate that only thirty odd were intrepid enough to brave this hazard. The local band was in attendance, also the Thames Valley Orchestra with choirs and soloists, while dancing continued on both evenings until eleven o'clock.

In December 1893 Messrs J Smith & Sons of Derby supplied and fixed a clock with four dials in the tower, and also four ordinary bells for chiming. The first inscription reads "J Smith & Sons, Midland Steam Clock Works Derby" and the second reads "Reconstructed by John Smith & Sons, Midland Clock Works, Derby Ltd, CLOCKMAKERS, Derby 1974." The clock and four bells were dedicated on December 23rd 1893, when the former vicar, Revd Henry Bligh, who had been chairman of the Clock and Bells committee from 1887-93, returned from Fareham to preach a sermon appropriate to the texts on the bells. He then "set the clock in motion by pulling a tassel, which liberated the pendulum and immediately the sweet-toned chimes were heard". A short peal was rung and the choir sang "To Thee O God we dedicate our bells now raised on high". By starting the clock and the first chime "which delighted everyone within receiving distance" Revd Bligh had the satisfaction of completing the work he had begun with the building of the tower.



The clock



The bells

Another two bells were added in 1902 and this completed a peal of six with the inscriptions of 'CORONATION OF KING EDWARD VII JUNE 26TH 1902 FEAR GOD HONOUR THE KING' and 'JUNE 26TH 1902 HONOUR ALL MEN, LOVE THE BROTHERHOOD'. It was planned that they would not be heard until the eve of the Coronation of King Edward VII unless the South African War should end before that date. However, the sudden grave illness of the King caused the coronation to be delayed until August.

Parts of the tower needed re-pointing in 1920 and there were several outbreaks of dry rot in the tower, the one in the fifties causing extensive damage to the floors at the east end, and another in the early sixties.



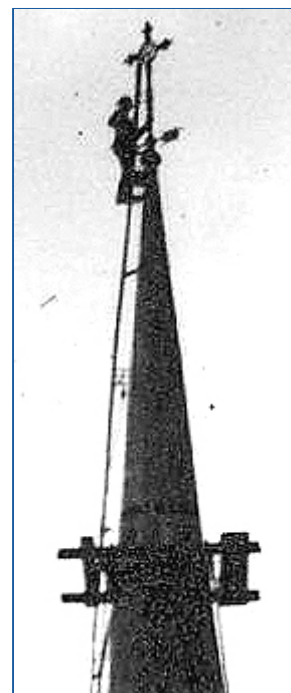
Baptistry bell rope

In 1921 a Mr Jakeman invented and erected, at his own cost, an apparatus by which the bell on week days could be rung from the baptistry, instead of from the belfry. The church clock was repaired in 1924, the vicar writing "(it) may once more be relied upon for catching the business trains. Some have already expressed their pleasure in hearing their old friend chiming forth the hours. I hope that many who have missed the clock's timely aid will send me donations to help pay for its cleaning and repairing". Again in 1934, "the clock has not been behaving itself in its usual correct manner just lately. This is because the wire of the striker has broken". The clock was consequently cleaned and mended.

In December 1940 a British Wellington bomber, the crew of which had bailed out when their plane had become uncontrollable due to icing, crashed on to No 63 Park Road, the home of Lady Stanton. The tip of the plane's wing knocked off one of the crosses from one of the four pinnacles at the base of St James's spire. (See the picture on the near right where the right hand cross is missing.) After a parish-wide collection, much needed repairs to the clock and spire were undertaken in 1947. The spire had been badly shaken during the bombing in the war and steeple-jacks set to work making good the damage. (See the picture on the far right.) At that time the spire still supported the original cross and weather vane (see left). It must have been removed some time between then and the 1989 spire renovation because at that time the 'new' cross was taken down, repaired, re-coated with glass fibre and resin, and refixed in a new capstone by the steeplejacks.



Cross and weather vane on the top and missing cross on pinnacle



Cross and weather vane on the top



The steeplejacks up the spire

The church clock had to be stopped on 7th September 1970, when it was found that the bottom pulley anchorages of the driving weights, which total nearly half a ton, were affected by dry rot. A preliminary inspection in 1970 showed that some repairs were needed to the spire stonework, lightning conductor, and weathervane, and that the upper brickwork of the tower needed extensive re-pointing. Strong wire-mesh was put up on all openings in the tower in 1956 to stop the pigeons coming in.

The hands from the north dial of the clock were stolen in 1974 but were later returned, left on the church doorstep in a brown paper parcel one night. However they were too damaged to be of any use. The wrenching away of the hands badly damaged the intricate drive-mechanism of the entire clock. So the clock mechanism was rebuilt and the winding mechanism was converted from manual operation to electric automatic power-drive by the original makers. This was driven by three falling weights pulling wires over pulleys and

therefore unwinding the three spindles, provided with ratchets, which ran down in just over three days. There were three separate sections and the central section (the time-piece) drove a bevel differential gear which operated the vertical rod to a similar mechanism in the belfry above for control of the four dial faces, hour and minute hands. The other two sections activated the hour and quarter chimes, etc, by levers and wires to external clappers on the four bells used by the clock at the correct intervals. While the scaffolding was up to repair the damage, the clock was repainted and regilded, A second inscription was added that reads *"Reconstructed by John Smith & Sons, Midland Clock Works, Derby Ltd, CLOCKMAKERS, Derby 1974"*.

In 1989 various defects were discovered in the spire as a result of one of the quinquennial inspections (every church is inspected by its architect every five years). The February 1990 edition of the Spire reported: *"The appearance of steeplejack's ladders signalled a warning of trouble, and now, sadly, we have confirmation from the architect's inspection that the spire may not be as solid as we thought. Undamaged by the violence of the '87 hurricane, it is however under attack from the insidious effects of dampness, frost, and atmospheric pollution which are causing areas of masonry, where the spire rises from the tower, to crumble. Stonework on both tower and spire is eroded, and the cross at the top is split. Urgent work is necessary to restore these areas and prevent further damage."* A special appeal, 'Save Our Spire' was launched and the renovation, which included an application of an impervious surface at the base of the spire to inhibit water penetration, was completed later that year.

The church clock and chimes were out of action for a few months at the end of 2008. The problem was that the rewinding mechanism needed a replacement part, and as this was not available as a spare the makers had to create a special part. The clock had given almost uninterrupted service since it was first set in motion in 1893 and had not been stopped for nearly 40 years. The clock was out of action again in 2014 when the rewinding gearing system failed yet again. The makers from Derby yet again had to make a special part.

The above information covers the period from when any records could be found until November 2016. This was when Revd Derek Winterburn became St James's tenth vicar and from this time onwards any new information can be found on the main site.