

## THE PARISH CHURCH OF ST PETER AND ST PAUL, DAGENHAM A BRIEF HISTORY

It is very difficult to give an exact date for the building of the church, but judging from the general architecture of the chancel with its lancet windows, it can be fixed approximately at the end of the 12th century.

The church was built through the efforts and generosity of the Abbess of Barking Abbey, and was intended to provide for the spiritual needs of the tenants of the abbey lands, and of the local fishermen, woodmen, farm workers and other dwellers of the district.

The site was given by the abbey and the building carried out by workers on the abbey estate. There is no evidence of an earlier church on this site, but archaeologists think it is likely that there may have been an earlier church, due to the proximity of the abbey.

The original building was constructed with Kentish ragstone, brought across the Thames. Timber came from the king's forest at Hainault. The consecration was probably between 1180 and 1220.

The North Chapel is mentioned as "new" in a will of 1475, and the two bays separating the chancel and north chapel have moulded form centred arches, typical of late 15<sup>th</sup> century architecture (see Urswick Tomb).

During the Reformation, the church was plundered and spoiled and the majority of the treasures confiscated. With the generous aid of the Fanshawe family, the building was restored and strengthened. A stone buttress was added to the outside of the east wall. This can still be seen.

By 1770 the church was in a dangerous condition owing to the foundations of the tower having crumbled, causing the tower to press on the west and south portions of the nave. Temporary repairs were carried out and plans made to rebuild the tower at a cost of £1176 5s. The inevitable happened on the second Sunday in Advent 1800! The congregation were assembled in the churchyard, waiting for the vicar, who happened to be late for the service that morning. Whilst they were waiting, the tower fell with a tremendous crash on to the nave. The roof, porch, gallery, font and pews were destroyed and the chancel arch damaged. No lives were lost but the church was damaged beyond repair. All but the chancel and north chapel had to be rebuilt.

The parishioners redoubled their efforts to replace their house of prayer, and the foundation stone was laid by Mr H Fanshawe on 13th April 1801.

Debris from the fallen tower was used for the floor of the nave, which made it 15 inches higher than the chancel.

By 1841 the population was growing, so a new gallery was added.

In 1844 an organ was installed in the gallery where the village orchestra had once performed.

In 1877 it was decided to lower the floor of the nave by 15 inches (this is why the windows are so high in the church today). The organ was removed to the chancel, the "two-decker" pulpit replaced, and the entire church furnished with deal benches.

During excavations a human skeleton, in armour, was found in the nave, together with the jawbone and teeth of a horse. It is thought that they are the remains of a warrior who decreed that his steed be buried with him.

The restoration was completed in 1878.

The church was re-roofed in 1913.

In 1938 improvements were made to the interior of the church. Electricity replaced the gas lamps, the organ pipes were placed in the gallery and pumped by electricity, the console enlarged and placed where it is today.

\* \* \* \*

Nothing is known about the helmets in the chancel except that they appear to be jousting helmets and were in the church prior to the restoration of 1877-1878.

The bells. A peal of bells was cast for Dagenham in 1804 by Thomas Mears of London. It was a peal of six bells with a tenor bell of 14 and three-quarter cwts; the tenor being the largest bell of the peal. It is thought that there may have been some bell in the church before 1804, maybe a clock chime. In 1933 the bells were recast by Gillet and Johnston of Croydon. They were then hung in a new timber frame with new fittings. Then John Taylor and Co. founders of Loughborough, in 1938 cast two new bells to complete the octave in the key of F sharp. The total weight of the bells now being 2 tons 18 cwts 0 qtrs 15 lbs. It is believed that the first peal rung in the tower was on 10th February 1900, as there seems no record of a peal being rung before that date.

The churchyard. This originally covered one acre of land but additions of half an acre and 11 and a half rods were made over the years. During a period of 600 years there were over 11000 burials in the one acre of land!

There are several marble crosses - a sign of Christian hope; and some pedestals supporting urns - a sign of pagan despair. There are 20 stones dating from the 17th century, but the inscriptions have been almost obliterated by time.

Monuments in the church. The old parish church contained a large number of monuments but nearly all of them were demolished when the present church was built. One that survived is the "altar tomb" of Sir Thomas Urswick. This tomb was built and the brass put on the top in 1497. Sir Thomas, who lived at Marks Manor, was the Recorder of the City of London. He took an active part on the Yorkist side in the Wars of the Roses, and received his knighthood for the defence of London.

The brass depicts him dressed in his judicial robes with his second wife, Anne. His daughter by his first wife is shown, on the brass, as a nun. He had 8 daughters and 4 sons by his second wife. The chapel where the tomb stands may have been built by them for their burials. This is consistent

with the period of architecture, ie late 15<sup>th</sup> century. Unfortunately the brasses of the four sons and two coats of arms have disappeared.

The life-sized monument in white marble in the north chapel is to the memory of Sir Richard Alibon and his wife. Sir Richard is shown wearing the robes of a judge and holding a scroll of parchment. His wife is holding a clasped book. Sir Richard (1636-1688) came from Oxfordshire but lived in Dagenham. He was appointed a Judge of the King's Bench, and later knighted. The memorial is decorated with the skull and crossbones, and on each side of the lengthy Latin/English quotation appears the sword and scales of Justice. The monument is attributed to Jan van Nost, a sculptor who carved a number of legal figures.

A monument on the north wall of the nave is worthy of note. It recounts the generosity of a local farmer, William Ford. Two cherubs hold a scroll on which is the text "Take heed that ye despise not one of these litt1e ones". The inscription ends with the reminder to "Go and do thou likewise". Farmer Ford's bequest is given in greater detail on the board on the west wall of the nave.

Other monuments of note are those to:

William and Sarah Stone. This shows a widow weeping over an urn.

John Guillemard - a scientist.

Nathaniel and James Rogers, descendants of John Rogers, the first Protestant martyr in the reign of Queen Mary.

There are several bequest boards round the gallery.

In the chancel there are some interesting memorials to:

The Fanshawe Family of Parsloes.

The Uphill Family. This gives information about various members of the family, including the loss of the Earl of Sandwich at the battle of Southwold Bay.

In the vestry there is a memorial to Jonathan Lloyd, a former vicar. Tombs of other vicars can be seen in the south and east portions of the churchyard. There are several tombs in the north chapel, some under the organ console.

\* \* \* \*

The Windows. The stained glass windows are memorials to past members of the church.

The east windows showing Jesus, St Peter and St Paul (the patron saints of the church) are in memory of Vicar Fanshawe.

On the south side of the chancel there are windows showing:

Mary, mother of Jesus.

David, with harp and crook.

The parable of the talents with the inscription "Well done, thou good and faithful servant".  
Lazarus coming forth from the tomb.  
Jesus carrying the cross to Calvary.

Carvings of Peter, Paul with Jesus in the centre appear on the pulpit.

\* \* \* \*

Other gifts in memory of church members have been given: the wrought iron screen, the communion rail, and the Lord's Table being examples of this.