

St Clement Notting Dale

a local church for local people

St Clement's is described by Historic England as "a very skilful if unusual example of an Anglo Catholic church of the 1860s; ... the ingredients are well disposed here and the exterior is also remarkably picturesque". While accurate, the description belies the true significance of St Clement's.

Designed by James Piers St Aubyn, a notable Victorian church architect, St Clement's was consecrated in 1867. It was built to serve the worst slum in London and service to the local community has always lain at the heart of the church's activities.

The Piggeries and the Potteries

Notting Barns farm, once lying north of the church, was primarily used to raise dairy cattle until the land was sold to Stephen Bird as a brickyard. The industry was uncontrolled and brickmakers, who lived where they worked, built their homes on whatever land they could find.

When pig keepers were forced out of Marble Arch, they decamped to Notting Dale. They built little cottages with one room for people and one for the pigs which were fed on waste collected from other parts of London. With no fresh water and no drains, the swill and sewage accumulated in excavations abandoned by the brickmakers. One area, dubbed 'the ocean', was an acre in size and seven feet deep. By 1840, Notting Dale was populated by 1,000 people and 3,000 pigs. Little wonder that the area was known as the Piggeries and the Potteries.

Cholera and other diseases were rife and in 1846-1848, the average life expectancy was 11 years and seven months, as opposed to 37 years in London generally.

Arthur Dalgarno Robinson

In 1860, Arthur Dalgarno Robinson, a curate at St Stephen's, Shepherds Bush, moved into this insalubrious 'plague spot' as Charles Dickens called it.

He erected a temporary iron church in 1862 and a school in Treadgold Street in 1866, a year before the adjoining church. He paid from his own resources for the land which had once been part of Bird's Brickfield and contributed his own funds for St Clement's construction.

Dalgarno Robinson then arranged for the building of a much larger school in St Clement's (now Sirdar) Road.

In 1881, Dalgarno Robinson built another church, St Helen's, just north of St Clement's, where he continued working with the poorest people in Notting Dale for the rest of his life.

Parochial Relief Society

Dalgarno Robinson's replacement at St Clement's was Sir Edwyn Hoskyns. He created the Parochial Relief Society and some Sunday collections were earmarked for it, though they were nowhere near enough to meet the needs. He also raised the funds to build a church hall and a mission church in Mary Place, named not after one of the figures in the Bible but after a woman who kept pigs there.

Even after the pigs were finally cleared away, water supplies were improved and sewage drains were installed, the death rate in Notting Dale remained high. Insanitary housing and overcrowding were largely responsible. In 1895, for example, there were 42 houses in what is now Sirdar Road with an average of 12.9 people per house.

St Clement's Parish Hall played an important role in tackling local poverty. At the beginning of the 20th century, it was running a soup kitchen offering a free meal to up to 100 children a day.

Better Housing and a Park

In 1899, CET Roberts, the vicar of St Clement's, persuaded Octavia Hill, the housing reformer, to apply her talents in Notting Dale. She took over the management of five houses in St Katherine's Road (now Wilsham Street) where she made repairs and improvements and both expected and received the collaboration of the tenants.

Earlier, Roberts had collaborated with the priest at St Francis Roman Catholic Church to raise funds to have 'the ocean' filled in. It is now Avondale Park.

Through the first quarter of the 20th century, the church records show a continuing concern with helping local people. Families were given coal, milk, groceries and meals because the adults were ill, out of work or not earning enough.

The original school building on Treadgold Street became St Clement's Day Nursery, largely funded by wealthy families not living locally. Nursing mothers were allowed into the nursery to feed their babies at lunchtime and were sometimes given free meals themselves. On Thursday evenings, donated clothes were sold for a penny, the proceeds going into the poor box for later distribution.

St Clement's Church

Electricity was installed in the church in the 1920s and new heating was introduced but little was done to the building itself until a V2 rocket landed across the street where the Lancaster West estate is now. The date, 12 December 1944, is commemorated in the damaged window at the west end of the church. The congregation decamped to the church hall in Mary Place and set about raising money for the restoration. Plain glass replaced coloured, the roof was mended and the organ repaired. The Lady Chapel was decorated.

In the mid 1970s, St Clement's was amalgamated with nearby St Mark's and St James Norlands. This reorganisation, coupled with the sale of St Mark's hall, St Clement's hall and the mission in Mary Place, brought financial stability to the parish for the first time.

A Local Church

After the war, an influx of immigrants from the West Indies changed the population mix in Notting Dale and the National Party and British Union of Fascists provoked the race riots of the late 1950s. While many churches turned their backs, St Clement's, led by curate George Austin, set about organising jazz gigs with musicians of different races performing together. The concerts were the first, tiny beginning of what became the Notting Hill Carnival.

Each summer, the church is transformed by the Notting Hill Carnival Project as young people create costumes for that year's theme. After the Carnival Mass at 10.00 am on August Bank Holiday Sunday, young people and adults take to the road in a double-decker bus.

In 2008, St Clement's commissioned an altarpiece from Mark Cazalet. It celebrates the Carnival as an outpouring of the creativity of God.

In 1978, the vicar, David Randall, reasserted St Clement's role in the neighbourhood. The minutes of the annual meeting that year report him as declaring 'Christians ... ought to be more concerned with the Community at large... [which] might benefit from the use of the Church building. Christians in Notting Dale must be concerned with social issues such as the fight against racialism and fascism; the strengthening of Christian education; the problems of violence on the local housing estates; high rents and decline in local health facilities'.

Projects for local young people were developed in the converted vestries and Fr Randall began to work with men suffering from Aids and HIV. He created CARA to support them, and when a hospice was needed, the former school building at St Clement's was adapted for this purpose.

The ClementJames Centre

The long tradition of reaching out to those less fortunate continues today. In 2002, while Hugh Rayment-Pickard was vicar of the parish, the ClementJames Centre was established. This project has rapidly expanded in recent years, and now provides an adult learning programme teaching English and other basic skills, an employment programme for young adults, and IntoUniversity, a programme of academic support for children and young people.

The Centre's community hub offers tailored support for local people, focussing on numeracy, literacy and well being, along with specific advice on practical matters such as housing benefit.

The vicar of St Clement's, currently Alan Everett, is a trustee of the ClementJames Centre and the church council has the right to appoint up to four other trustees, ensuring that the Centre reflects the role of the church in the wider community.

The former school building now hums with activity as people take advantage of the services on offer while a new space, created in the chancel in 2007, is now a busy classroom. The Centre has had an enormous impact on the people of Notting Dale, with remarkable success rates across all the programmes. The achievements of IntoUniversity were so outstanding that in 2007, it became a separate charity, headquartered at St Clement's but with branches throughout England. The original Notting Dale project still runs at the ClementJames Centre.

A Roof over our Heads

Between 2014 and 2016, a new roof was provided for St Clement's and promises to keep the church and all the activities in it dry for a long time to come. English Heritage and the Heritage Lottery Fund made generous contributions to this project and support also came from the J Paul Getty Foundation, the National Churches Trust, the Diocese of Kensington, the Garfield Weston Foundation, the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea, the Aurelius Trust and the Heritage of London Trust.