



THE TWO THAT BECAME ONE

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THE TWO THAT BECAME ONE ST MARK WITH ST MARGARET CHURCH

Historical Background

The Plumstead Common area has had Church associations for over a thousand years. King Edgar gave this district to the abbot and monks of St. Augustine's, Canterbury in 960; over one hundred years later, at the Norman Conquest, it passed to Odo, Bishop of Bayeux, who commissioned the famous tapestry. He was a proud, ambitious man, half-brother of the Conqueror and of dubious morals; the return of the manor to the monks would seem to have been, therefore, an act of surprising generosity on his part.

It remained monastic property until the dissolution of the monasteries, when Henry VIII granted it to Sir Edward Boughton, whose family sold it to John Michel of Richmond, who, in turn, left it to Queen's College, Oxford. In the 19th Century, Queen's College made grants of plots of land to local builders while the Army sought to acquire the area for training purposes. The argument that Plumstead Common was literally 'common' land led to riots, prosecutions, and judgements in the 1870s. The least 'regrettable' enclosures were, in contemporary opinion, those for the Plumstead Central Schools and for the Slade School. Both these establishments played their part in the story of our Churches.

Plumstead was originally a fishing village and the inhabitants stayed close to the river, which, in earlier days, was much wider than it is now.

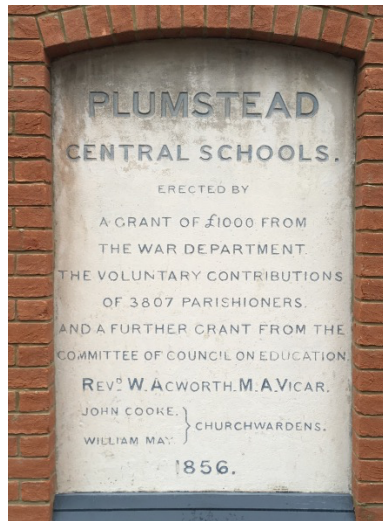


The first Parish Church of St. Nicholas, therefore, dates from the 12th Century and the first Vicar of Plumstead was one Siward, appointed in 1109.

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In 1852, the Reverend William Acworth was installed at St. Nicholas. He seems to have been a lively and active man. He was interested in opening schools and, now that more houses were being built on the higher ground around the Common, he played a large part in founding the Plumstead Central Schools, which were opened on 10th October 1856.

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£3500 had been subscribed, the buildings completed in five months and the inauguration was very festive with three hundred persons sitting down to a meal, music by the R.A. Band and fireworks donated by the Royal Arsenal.

St. Margaret's Church

The Reverend Acworth was pleased with his work and started a new campaign, in 1856, for a Church near the School. His efforts were crowned with success. St. Margaret's Church was built.



The new Church was consecrated by the Bishop of London on Easter Sunday, 20th April 1859, the architect being W. Rickwood. Despite the remoteness of the area in which the church had been built, a large congregation heard him take his text from Psalm 91: 'He that dwelleth in the secret place of the most high shall abide under the shadow of the Almighty.' The *Kentish Independent* reported, with scant respect for the Prelate, that the sermon had no special feature in view of the local circumstances and 'might have been preached on any occasion and at any Church in the Diocese.' The paper commented that 'there was an excellent organ and a powerful choir.'

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The Vicar still retains the duty of religious instruction in the Plumstead Central Schools (which became St. Margaret's School in 1928) and the Chairmanship of the School Managers' Committee.



(Copyright © photograph by Christopher Martyn)

This tradition has, over a century and a quarter, generally maintained a harmonious relationship, but, in 1864, the restless Reverend Acworth resigned the living. He was succeeded by the formidable Reverend James McAllister. His incumbency made an impressive start when, in 1865, St. Margaret's became the Parish Church instead of St. Nicholas. It has remained so throughout all subsequent changes. The Old Parsonage of St. Nicholas was sold (and became the 'Volunteer' Public House) and a 1790 building was obtained for use as St. Margaret's Vicarage – this was 'Bramblebury' (originally Bramble Briars) in Vicarage Road, which put the Reverend McAllister



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on the School doorstep, and, as can be seen in the School Logbooks for the period, his visits were frequent and often terrible. In 1866, for example, he gave the School-Mistress notice to leave within three months. Other dismissals followed. His management of the Church, however, survived a 'visitation' by the Bishop of Rochester in 1892, who had no adverse comment to make.

It is interesting to note, that in 1894-5, St. Margaret's receipts and expenditure balanced at £160.1s.11d., with collections in the pews yielding £72.16s.3½d., no mean sum in those days. Laundering of the surplices for the year was a reasonable 12s.6d. in view of the Choir treat costing £9.00. The organist received £20.00 per annum.

In 1886, a flourishing Sunday School and Mission was established in St. Alban's Hall, Admaston Road and continued until the Second World War.

The Parish was passed from London to Rochester Diocese in 1863 and remained there until the establishment of the Diocese of Southwark in 1905.

The Reverend McAllister died in 1895 and was succeeded by the Reverend Albert Baillie, a godson of Queen Victoria, and grandson of the 7th Earl of Elgin (of the Elgin Marbles fame). The new Vicar was energetic and influential, and had already played a part in the founding of St. Mark's Church.

In 1897, realising the limited size of St. Margaret's Church, he launched an enlargement fund. In February 1899 the foundation stone of the enlarged building was laid, and, on October 19th 1899, the Church was reconsecrated. The extensive alterations cost £2750.00.



(Copyright © photograph by Christopher Martyn)

The Reverend Baillie resigned the living in 1899, but, remembering that he preached before Queen Victoria and the Royal Family at Osborne in 1897, it is pleasing to know that he was Chaplain to King George VI from 1944 and to Queen Elizabeth II from 1952, in which year he wrote to the

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Vicar of St. Mark's, Reverend Percy Sharples Davies, apologising for his non-attendance at the Church's Jubilee, as he was then 88 years old. He died in November 1955 aged 91.

The fourth Vicar, the Reverend Hugh Ogle, was succeeded in 1906, by the Reverend W. Faulkner Baillie, who, in turn, gave place to the Reverend E. Basil Armstrong Hughes in 1914.

In 1917, the wooden floor of the Baptistry collapsed and, due to a wartime shortage of wood, was replaced with a solid floor obtained, with casual disregard for archaeology, from the tiles of Lesnes Abbey¹.

In 1936, during the incumbency of the Reverend G. F. Cartwright (1928-1938), certain roads in the Parish were handed over to the newly formed Parish of All Saints, Shooters Hill.

The Reverend Canon Reginald Morecombe, who succeeded to the living in 1938, retired in 1962 and the last Vicar, from 1962 until 1966, was the Reverend John Southgate, who later became Dean of York (1984 – 1994).



(Copyright © photograph by Pace of 154 Longlands Road, Sidcup, Kent)

In 1965, there was a feeling in the Diocese that there were too many Churches in the Deanery and that many of these were too expensive to maintain. In spite of its local popularity, St. Margaret's, with its 'village green' setting, was structurally in poor condition and the decision was taken to close and combine with St. Mark's. The last Service took place on July 24th 1966. The building

¹ Lesnes Abbey, situated in the suburbs of south east London, west of Erith in Kent, was founded, in 1178. It was one of the first monasteries to be closed after the Dissolution of the Monasteries in 1534. (Wikipedia)

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was demolished and Greenwich Council erected a huge twelve storey block of flats on the site in 1976/7.² The Vicarage became, once more, a private house.

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St. Mark's Church

In 1893, the Reverend Albert Baillie, later to be Vicar of St. Margaret's, was sent to form the new Mission District of St. Mark.

Meetings were held in the Slade School Buildings and, even without a Church, the Mission was soon sufficiently well established to form a choir and to produce, by 1897, a 'Choir Boys' Magazine', which was issued free and printed at 'St. Mark's Choir Boys' Press'.

A Church was, of course, the prime objective and by 1897, the original design was produced. The ambitious plan for a two-storey building was envisaged. On the ground floor was to be a large hall holding six hundred people; on the first floor was the Church, modelled on the style of Wren. It was described, in a contemporary report, as 'specially adapted for the requirements of a large, but poor Parish'. The splendid plans, however, ran into difficulties when it was realised that the huge structure was too heavy for the site.

With modified single storey design, the foundation stone was laid in October 1901 and consecrated by Bishop Talbot, Bishop of Rochester, on All Saints' Day, November 1902.

The first Vicar was the Reverend John Cox Leeke until 1905, when he became the first Bishop of Woolwich.

The second Vicar, the Reverend Derman Christopherson, carried forward plans to enlarge the building and the well-known landmark, the twin towers, were added, to the design of Charles Milcham.

Bishop Leeke dedicated the new building on June 8th 1911. He remained Bishop of Woolwich until 1918 and died in 1919, aged 76.

The Reverend Christopherson was followed by: L. Wyatt Lang, J. V. Marsh, E. Pierce-Goulding, John Williams and finally, from 1951-1977, Percy Sharples-Davies.

² 'Our Common Story: A Celebration of Plumstead Common' published by Plumstead Common Environmental Group, 2nd Edition, 2004

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An earlier link with St. Margaret's was the forming, in 1895, of St. Margaret's Cricket Club, membership of which was originally confined to members of the Church. Later it was found that recruitment was too severely limited if the original qualification requirements were retained, but the subsequent dilution made the Club name inappropriate, so it was changed to Old St. Margaret's, under the title of which it continued until the First World War. After the War, most of the remaining members seemed attached to St. Mark's Men's Social Club. Discussions led to the incorporation of the Cricket Club with the Social Club with no stipulation as to Church attendance or even of denomination. Many fine cricketers played for the Club before it eventually closed in 1975.



Malcolm Christopherson, brother of the second Vicar, instituted and financed the Social Club Building and its equipment so that, although the grand original plan had been deemed impractical, the Church had two halls for Parish functions in front of the main Building.

The Old Vicarage at 2, Tormount Road, was replaced during the Second World War, by the present, modern building in Old Mill Road.³

After the closure of St. Margaret's Church, the benefice was united from July 1968. The familiar difficulties of heating and maintenance that had beset St. Margaret's precipitating its demise now reared their ugly heads at St. Marks'. This led to a scheme begun in 1968, to create a smaller and more manageable Church building. In the face of rising costs and many delays, the Vicar and Churchwardens and the Parish Council pursued this objective.

On 15th September 1974, St. Mark's Church was closed and, later, demolished. Services were held in the Church Hall and weddings, by kind permission of the Reverend F. Harte, at St. Nicholas' Church.

³ The building has since been demolished having been compulsorily purchased for the enlargement and extension of Plumstead Manor School. The additional buildings were opened in 2013. Included in that purchase was the Prince Albert Public House which was also demolished. (Note added February 2022)

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The new building was started in August 1975 and consecrated on October 7th 1976.

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St. Mark with St Margaret

The present Church seats one hundred, with an extension for a further fifty. It is integrated with the restored Church Hall.



The building was financed by the sale of the previous Church sites; additional funds were provided by the Caudwell Bequest, administered by the Incorporated Church Building Society. The architect was David Bush of Blackheath; the builders were F. C. Steele and Partners of Sydenham.



The altar from the Church of St. Margaret was adapted for re-use; the sanctuary furniture and choir stalls and the cross over the entrance were designed and made by John Hayward of Edenbridge. The tubular bells from the Church of St. Margaret's were overhauled and installed by the Kent Ringers' Association. The crucifix on the East wall was from the Lady Chapel of the Church of St. Mark. The two Lions of St. Mark were placed on corbels in the West wall from the Choir Screen of the Church of St. Mark. The stained glass was been adapted, from existing material, by John Hayward. The windows in the North wall contain glass from the Church of St. Mark, and

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the window in the entrance is from the Church of St. Margaret. A stone cross, from the apex of the 'East' gable of the Church of St. Mark, was laid in the paving outside the entrance.

The organ was recently reckoned to be one of the most travelled of such instruments, in view of the number of sites it has occupied in the hundred plus years of its existence. Having been installed in the original St. Margaret's Church between 1856 and 1859, and re-sited within that building twice, moved to St. Mark's Church in 1966-1967, stored on the Church Hall stage while the new church was built and finally installed in its present position, it might be so argued.

The Consecration, by the Right Reverend Mervyn Stockwood, Lord Bishop of Southwark, took place on Thursday 7th October 1976.

The Reverend Percy Sharples-Davies retired in February 1977 and, on July 14th, 1977, the Reverend David Johnson was installed as the new Vicar.



This is not the end. Much has happened in the Parish since and is worthy of record.

'The Two That Became One' by Hugh Walsh, former Borough Librarian for London Borough of Greenwich. Original edited and transcribed by Martin G. Gostling (1949 -) on 12th February 2022