

A Brief History of the Parish and a Guide to the Church

Saint David- The Man

Little is known of David, the earliest substantial document about his life being dated late in the 11th Century and authored by the writer Ryghfarch. This is over 400 years after David died and some of the author's claims have been questioned by modern historians.

David is believed to have been born around the year 500 and is thought to have died on St David's Day 589. It is said that his mother, Non, gave birth to David on a cliff top in the middle of a storm. The site is marked by the Chapel of St Non. David was educated at what is usually taken to be Whitland in Carmathenshire under Saint Paulinus of Wales and was baptised by St. Ailbe.

David became a teacher and a preacher and is credited with founding monasteries and churches in Wales, Cornwall and Brittany. David travelled to Glastonbury to re-dedicate the abbey. While there however he had a vision of Jesus who told him that He had already dedicated the abbey in the name of His mother Mary, and it would be unseemly for it to be rededicated by human hands. David chose to build an extension to the abbey into which was placed a travelling altar containing a large red sapphire. A document drawn up during the reign of Henry VIII indicates that the altar was taken when Henry dissolved the monasteries and unverifiable opinion says that the sapphire is now part of the royal crown jewels. St David was purportedly taught the Psalter by a golden beaked pigeon; the bird being represented on the front cover inside the church.

Why St David?

The church was named after David following a suggestion by Bishop Michael Parker that a Celtic saint might be appropriate.

St David's Church – A Potted History

At the end of World War II, the area which now forms St David's Parish was mainly farmland with a population of only a few hundred. The district was covered by St Laurence in Northfield and St Gabriel, Weoley Castle. During the 1950s Birmingham expanded considerable, farmland was built on and it became clear that another church centre would be needed to serve the growing population.

The seed was planted in 1958 when Deaconess Elsie Tongue, at the request of the then Bishop of Birmingham, began working in Shenley in the autumn of that year. Meetings were held in various people's houses, whilst communion was taken in the Deaconess' flat in Burdock Road. The Reverends W.E. Foster, W. Hamilton-Barker, Assistant Curate of Northfield; and on one occasion the Rt. Revd. Michael Parker, then Bishop of Aston

conducted Evensong Services in what is now Northfield Town Football Club and the Deaconess, with the help of Mr T. Grafton and students from the College of the Ascension at Selly Oak – started a Sunday school in the Pavilion.

In July 1959 the Revd. David J Pendleton had been appointed Priest-in-Charge, and he immediately started to take regular services in the newly built Lower Shenley Resident's Hall, later Shenley Manor Hall which was demolished in 2008. Choir practice and the Infants Sunday School continued at the Sports Pavilion, while an additional Junior Sunday School was also started at Shenley Court Residents' Hall.

The Baptismal Register shows that 151 people, mostly children, were baptised at Lower Shenley Residents' Hall. In the autumn of 1963 Miss Barbara Chatwin, who had been a member of the congregation in Lower Shenley Hall, came back as parish worker. In November 1965 she became a Deaconess. Amongst her other duties she acted as superintendent of the Sunda school until her departure in 1967.

Most of the land in the parish is owned by the Bournville Village Trust. When the decision to form a new parish was made, the Trust most generously gave the site on which the church, church hall and Vicarage were to be built. The church now stands on what was the orchard of Lower Shenley Farm.

Shenley Green was not the only district in Birmingham in which a new parish was to be brought into being. The city was expanding in many directions, and the Bishop was determined that churches should be built to serve the needs of people living in the new suburbs, and to form meeting places for both social and religious activities.

A cross was usually erected where a new church was to be built, and in February 1961 the Bishop placed a large red wooden cross on the site of St. David's. The cross had originally marked the site of the new church of All Saints at Shard End. The use of this cross was particularly apt since the Revd' David J Pendleton had himself formerly worked as assistant curate at Shard End.

The first building to be erected on the site was the church hall, and this was dedicated by Bishop Wilson on 25th September 1962, with Bishop Michael Parker (by then Bishop of Bradford) preaching at the service. Much of the cost of the hall came from the Bishop's Appeal Fund, with the remainder (around 25%) being given by local residents. The hall was designed as a multi-purpose building and has served both sacred and secular functions. The hall has an entrance lobby and cloakrooms at one end and a stage at the other: with committee rooms and a kitchen extending along one side. The main hall was used regularly for Sunday services, and the stage, separated from the hall by a folding partition, was used. The hall has since undergone extensive change with the total refurbishment of the kitchen and toilet facilities and the addition of a new vestry.

A Parish is Born

On 29th November 1965, the Statutory District of St David, Shenley Green, was inaugurated by the then Bishop of Aston, the Rt Revd David Porter. This brought us one stage closer to becoming a true Parish. The Revd David J Pendleton ceased being Priest-in-Charge and was instituted as the first Vicar.

In practice, apart from the absence of a parish church, there is little difference between a statutory district and a parish. Nevertheless, people from the district who wished to marry were free to choose to get married at St Gabriel, Weoley Castle, or St Laurence, Northfield, depending on where they lived in the district. Quite understandably, the church hall was not as popular for weddings as the neighbouring churches, and only 26 weddings were solemnised in the hall.

On the other hand, 638 children and adults were baptised in the hall. In addition, three confirmation services were held there, the first on 1st May 1963. The next building to be completed was the Vicarage, and the Vicar moved there, in January 1969, from 75 Spiceland Road, which had been his home for the previous ten years and had served as a temporary Vicarage.

Shortly afterwards, on 1st March 1969, St David's Day, a ceremony was held in the course of which the Archdeacon, the Ven. V. S. Nicholls, cut the first turf on the site of the church and also received several pieces of stone which had been given by the Dean of St. David's Cathedral in Dyfed, and which had formerly been part of the Cathedral. The stones were brought from Wales in a trek cart by twelve members of 281st Birmingham, St David's Scout Group. Although there is no formal connection with St. David's Cathedral, it is pleasant to have this symbolic link with a Cathedral church dedicated to the same patron saint and which has been established for so long. The Cathedral has a list of all the other churches in the world dedicated to St. David. Each is remembered on a different date, our church on 29th June.

It should be mentioned that there was no overriding consideration which led to the choice of St David as the patron saint of our new parish. Birmingham has gained much from the many Welsh people who have come to live and work here and has the benefit of using water from Wales. The pipelines from Wales enter Birmingham near the western boundary of the parish.

Work on the church was started immediately after the St David's Day ceremony, and it was hoped that the building might be completed in the twelve months and be ready for consecration on St. David's Day 1970. This was not possible, however, and the date chosen for the consecration was 9th May 1970, the new Bishop of Birmingham, the Rt Revd Laurence Brown, performing this important ceremony with Bishop David Porter in attendance.

The Building

At the time the church hall was built, it was intended that the church itself should be octagonal in shape. This scheme was later dropped, and the present building was designed to a large extent from the inside outwards, and without the somewhat false restraints which

would have been imposed by having to fit it into a box of a chosen shape. The church was designed by the architects' department of the Bournville Village Trust, of which Selby Clewer was the Chief Architect. Peter Carrick as the architect in charge of the project, as he had been of the vicarage and the alter stages of the building of the church hall.

Before Mr Carrick started work, he was given a brief by a committee of the Parochial Church Council which stressed the main functions of the building. This committee was chaired by Mr E Lazenby, who unfortunately died before the building was completed – the altar was given in his memory. Mr Carrick clearly gave close attention to these ideas when designing the church.

The principal purpose of the building is, of course, to provide a suitable setting for Holy Communion and the other services, including Baptism, and the altar is placed so that the priest can stand facing the congregation when celebrating Holy Communion, while the congregation including the choir is arranged in a wide arc around the altar. There are seats for 300 people, but none is more than 45 feet from the altar.

In addition to the church proper there are other smaller rooms, and a large entrance porch or narthex where people can meet and talk before and after services, and where exhibitions can be held. From the outset it was intended that the church would also be used for meetings, instructional groups, music and drama; and in fact, this has been done. The interior walls have proved very suitable for the projections of slides during talks, and the acoustics are good for concerts of both sung and instrumental music. A popular, regular feature is the inclusion of a music group at certain services.

The sanctuary rails can be removed, and all the sanctuary furniture can be moved back, to give uninterrupted space for such activities. The plan of the building was largely determined by these combined requirements, and the outside appearance designed to form the central feature of the surrounding group of buildings.

Most of the church building is enclosed within a curved wall of special white concrete, moulded with vertical grooves and hammered to reveal the aggregate. A large lantern rises from the middle of the roof and serves both to illuminate the sanctuary and as a landmark, thus making the provision of a separate tall tower superfluous. Both the roof and the lantern are clad in copper. The church bell, newly cast by Taylor's of Longborough and weighing 2cwt. It is hung in a small bell-tower near one end of the narthex.

The church is approached through a square which was specially laid out by the Bournville Village Trust, and which has recently been extensively landscaped by the trust. The wall containing the main door is largely transparent so that it should not appear to form a barrier. The glass panels are mounted in aluminium framing with a dark grey acrylic finish. Similar framing is used elsewhere in the building. The fascia above the glass is of white glazed asbestos.

Visitors may enter the narthex either by way of the main doors or through the old doors to the church hall and then via swing doors which lead from the lobby of the hall into the narthex. The narthex is paved in grey quartzite slabs, and by the foot of the bell-tower a

piece of stone from St David's Cathedral has been let into the floor and carved with the words St David's Stone. The main doors of the narthex, and the screen and doors dividing it from the church interior, are made from utile, a hardwood similar to mahogany. They are decorated with carved ceramic plaques designed and made by Peter Thompson, those on the doors acting as push-plates. Angels are represented on the outside of the main doors, with the birth and death of Christ represented on the left and right parts of the screen. The push plates on the inner doors, following an old tradition, represent the symbols of the four evangelists: living creatures with the faces of a man (St. Matthew), a lion (St. Mark), and ox (St Luke), and an eagle (ST John). Finally, the push-plates on the inside of the main doors represent the Resurrection. Thus, as we leave the building, we are reminded of the continuing presence of the Risen Christ.

From the broader end of the narthex, a corridor leads past the prayer room and the choir vestry to the sacristy. These rooms are housed in a brick-built section which in effect constitutes an extension of the previously existing block running along the back and end of the church hall. Double doors, for the clergy and choir, open from the corridor into the body of the church. When we enter the church, we see that all the seats are arranged to face the sanctuary so that all can participate in services being taken by a priest at the altar, The upholstered pews in the baptistery and the remainder of the church were specially designed by the architect and are made of utile.

The floor of the main body of the church is of afzelia wood blocks. The sanctuary furniture, also designed by the architect, is of ash framing with ash heartwood panelling. One of the aims in using pale wood was to avoid a heavy, dark appearance in the sanctuary. The effect of lightness is heightened by the walls which were finished with a creamy-white lime and sand mix which should need no decoration. Colour is added by the carpet, patterned with a Celtic design and lite by two floor-to-ceiling windows of coloured glass blocks, through which the afternoon sun projected a mass of colour on to the rear wall of the sanctuary during the first years of the church's life. The design for the font cover was suggested by Edwin Mason, modified and carved by Graham Benham who also made the alms dish and altar book stand. All are carved from utile.

Unfortunately, there has been a steady loss of colour from the windows, only a trace of the original beauty now remaining, and it has been impossible to replace the glass blocks since they are no longer made. Two parishioners were able to attach coloured glass to the inside of the window the recreate the original look of the windows.

Set into the wall between these two windows is another piece of stone from St. David's Cathedral. This is incised with a cross to perpetuate the mark made by the Bishop when consecrating the church, and also bears his initials... 'L.B.' for 'Laurence Birmingham'. The candlesticks, communion plate, and processional cross were designed by Edwin Mason and made by his colleagues at Shenley Court School, Robert Booth and Peter Crewe.

These, too, incorporate a reminder of St David in that they include wavy patterns representing the miraculous spring of water associated with him. The cross, mounted on the wall behind the altar, was made by Jack Wilson of fumed oak from a design by the architect.

During Eastertide, and at Baptisms, an Easter candlestick, designed and made by Robin Spain of Shenley Court School – stands near the font. Three large, horizontal nails which form part of the stem remind us of Good Friday, with the lighted candle above symbolising Easter.

The ceiling of the church and interior of the lantern are panelled in light-coloured softwood boarding. Behind the ceiling panels are electric radiant sheets which extend over a large area and operate at a relatively low temperature. This radiant heat makes for comfort without the need to heat the large volume of air in the church to a high temperature. Additional heat is supplied by electric wiring beneath the floors, operating on the storage principle. This provides background warmth for the whole building and operates when the outside temperature falls to a predetermined level. To the left of the sanctuary are the choir stalls and the organ. The pipe work is mounted above the choir, while the organ console, which has been turned around through 180 degrees since it was first installed, gives the organist a full view of the sanctuary, choir, and the entire congregation.

The organ case and the console are also made of utile. Michael Thomas, one-time diocesan organ adviser, prepared the basic design of the organ. His successor, Roy Massey, then organist at Birmingham Cathedral, made certain suggestions for re-voicing it. The organ was built by John Bowen of Northampton and incorporates a swell box and some pipe-work from old organs to which new pipes have been added.

An inclusive church to which all are welcome.