

A Building And Its People



Clapham needs a new Church

Holy Trinity Clapham opened for worship in 1776 - the same year as the American Declaration of Independence. A plain, simple building, it reflected the calm spirit of those rational and enlightened times.



Original Church in 1700s

The old Parish Church in 1815

It is the new Parish Church of Clapham. An old church had existed since the middle ages, in Rectory Grove, where St Paul's Church now stands. It had grown over the years in a haphazard sort of way, and by the mid-eighteenth century was in a poor state of repair and far too small for what was by this time one of the fastest growing villages round London. The centre of the village had shifted, and the emphasis was now on the area around the Common, where rich Londoners had their new mansions.

After much debate, the parishioners decided to build a new Church on the Common. An Act of Parliament was obtained, to allow the land to be bought from the manorial family and to set up a Trust to manage the construction. The leading trustees, headed by the Speaker of the House of Commons and by John Thornton, a wealthy merchant banker, met at the Plough Inn (still at the centre of Clapham by the Tube, but renamed) and in 1774 set the work in hand.



The church on Clapham Common

The Trustees chose as their architect Kenton Couse, who was employed by the Office of Works, the body responsible for Government buildings, and whose best known work is the front of 10 Downing Street. He provided a very simple design - a rectangular brick building with three doors at the west end, leading to the ground floor and galleries. There was a stubby tower, with a large clock from Thwaites of Clerkenwell, and four bells.

When John Venn became Rector in 1792, ever larger congregations were attracted by his preaching. New vestries were built at the east end, and at the west end a new porch was constructed, to give shelter to those alighting from their carriages. A big organ was installed in the west gallery. The seats in the nave were high box

pews, for which their occupiers paid rent (that was how the church was financed in those days), while the poor occupied plain benches in the middle. Communion services were infrequent - Venn introduced the reform of holding them once a month - and the few who took Communion gathered at the east end in front of the beautiful mahogany table, made for the Church in 1776, which we still use each Sunday.



Inside Holy Trinity c. 1805

The Church has changed since those days, to reflect changes in approaches to worship. During the nineteenth century, the emphasis shifted away from the long sermon, and more towards congregational participation in hymns and music.

Changing times, changing Church

In 1875, the old box pews, dismissed as "horse boxes", were reduced in height and converted into the present bench pews. The big three decker was cut down and the pulpit, all that survives from it, moved to the north side of the church, to allow room for a choir. There was a new font at the west end in a sort of medieval style - the novelist EM Forster was one of the first to be baptised in it.

Those changes left the overall shape of the church unchanged. But by the late nineteenth century it was seen as ugly, and not looking as a church should. There was even a move to pull it down and replace it by a Gothic Revival building. Fortunately that did not happen; but in 1903 the east end was reconstructed and considerably enlarged. The architect was a distinguished scholar, Professor Arthur Beresford Pite, who produced a scheme which was in sympathy with the classical plainness of the original building, but also brought the richness the Edwardians preferred.



Rededication of the church after the Second World war.

During the Second World War, the Church suffered serious damage; all the windows were destroyed, the Lady Chapel gutted, and the main roof near to collapse. For a few years, the congregation had to sit under the galleries for safety. Restoration was completed by 1952, bringing the Church back to its early twentieth century appearance. The main differences were that the old organ in the west gallery was not replaced, and there were new windows in the east end and Lady Chapel.

Holy Trinity today

The most recent changes were made in 1991-94. While preserving the essential character of the Church as a place of worship, these changes sought to make it more available for community uses. The platform in front of the chancel steps was built; this now serves as the focal point for our main Sunday worship, but can also be used as a stage for music or drama.

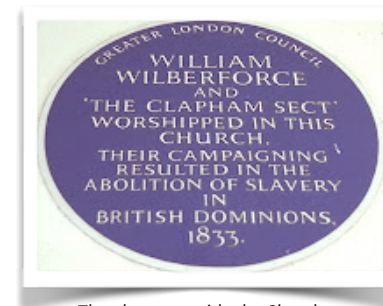
At the west end, the screened area under the galleries provides both a meeting area and a chapel for small services or meetings of small groups, now known as the Thornton Chapel. The Victorian font was replaced by a smaller font on a wooden base, more in keeping with the style of the church. The Lady Chapel, a fine room but difficult to use for services, was converted into the William Wilberforce Centre. The Chapel was divided horizontally, creating a large meeting room upstairs, with a smaller room, kitchen and toilets below.

Our Church is Grade 2* listed, so any changes must be made with sensitivity to its architectural qualities and historic past. But as it has been adapted over the years, it is likely to continue to be adapted to give our best in the worship of God and service of His people.

The Clapham Sect

Holy Trinity is associated with the group of friends known to history as “The Clapham Sect”. They lived around Clapham Common and worshipped here. As devout Christians, they fought for religious and humanitarian causes, notably the abolition of the slave trade.

Their campaign was led in Parliament by William Wilberforce, and in 2007 we celebrated the 200th anniversary of the passing of the Act to Abolish the Slave Trade. But they took up many other causes; the heritage they have left us includes the Church Mission Society and the Bible Society. Their standards of integrity left a lasting stamp on this country’s public life.



The plaque outside the Church

They threw down a challenge to their times. Britain, they believed, was uniquely blessed by Divine Providence: our nation had been kept safe in times of war, and we had received so much material wealth from others that we must return to them treasures more valuable than silver and gold - the treasures of the Gospel and Christian freedom. We must set right the wrongs that Africa had suffered at our hands.



William Wilberforce

Prior to the eighteenth century, few Christians had questioned the ancient institution of slavery. But gradually, concern and opposition started to rise, against slavery in the most vicious form ever known, the Atlantic slave trade. The first organised group to voice opposition was the Quakers, in America and then in Britain. They allied themselves with Granville Sharp and with Thomas Clarkson, a young

Cambridge graduate convinced by his studies that slavery was wrong, and in 1787 an Abolition Committee was formed.

To campaign effectively, they had to have a champion in Parliament; so they approached a man who had the drive, skills and sympathy - William Wilberforce.

Wilberforce was a rich and talented young man, who after a long and slow process had become converted to evangelical Christianity. He agreed to take up the cause and in 1789 made his first speech on the subject in the House of Commons. Shortly afterwards, he moved to Clapham, to share a house overlooking the west side of the Common with his cousin Henry Thornton.

Others came to Clapham to join them. James Stephen, a lawyer, had been horrified by what he seen of the brutal treatment of slaves in Barbados. Zachary Macaulay came here after serving as Governor of Sierra Leone, a new colony founded by Granville Sharp and others as a refuge for freed slaves. Here in Clapham he set up an African Academy, a school for boys from Sierra Leone who could be educated as future leaders of their country. Another Clapham ally was the radical MP William Smith. Outside Clapham, information about the trade was provided by Clarkson and by the Revd John Newton, Wilberforce's mentor and himself a former slaver (and author of the hymn "Amazing Grace".)

To sway Parliament, the campaign was taken to the country. Olaudah Equiano, a freed slave and a talented writer, toured the country promoting his book, which described the horrors of the Middle Passage. Clarkson had an engraving made, showing how slaves were packed together on the Middle Passage - a picture with a power to horrify us today. Wilberforce had a model made of it, which he demonstrated to Parliament. Josiah Wedgwood made a ceramic medallion, of a kneeling slave with the words "Am I not a man and a brother" - a modern audience might well find this condescending, but it was powerful in its time. Petitions against the trade poured into Parliament.

But the times were against the campaigners. The French Revolution had overthrown the established order in France, attacked Christianity and plunged Europe into a series of wars, in which Britain found herself as isolated as we were in 1940. The reaction in Parliament was to resist all change. It was not until the Battle of Trafalgar had removed the threat that the tide turned. Despite a last



Wedgwood Medallion

resistance from the West Indian plantation interests, led by George Hibbert of Clapham, in early 1807 Parliament passed the Act which made the slave trade illegal.

That was not the end of the story. The illegal trade continued, with the Royal Navy doing its best to stamp it out. Wilberforce and his friends campaigned for the British Government to persuade other countries to follow our lead. In Britain, there was reluctance, which Wilberforce shared, to take the next step of freeing the many slaves who were still exploited in the Caribbean plantations. It was not until 1833 that Parliament took that last step, the Act passing through the Commons as Wilberforce lay on his deathbed. On 1 August 1838, slavery in the British Empire at last ended.



George Hibbert

The Great Awakening

The eighteenth century was a sceptical age. Formal religion was accepted as necessary, but after two centuries in which Europe had torn itself apart in religious strife, anything approaching religious enthusiasm was distrusted. But a revival was beginning - the movement of the spirit which we call Methodism, or the Evangelical Revival, and American historians call the Great Awakening. Those touched by it often used the term "vital religion" - religion that was alive within them. The Clapham Sect were part of this great movement.

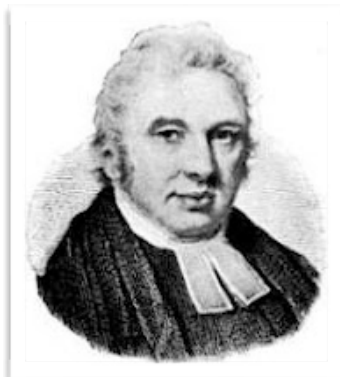


John Thornton

The story of the Clapham Sect starts in the 1750s with John Thornton. The Thorntons were Russia merchants, trading from Hull with the Baltic. They prospered, came to London, and bought a country retreat on Clapham Common South Side. John Thornton was a man both of great wealth and of great piety. He became a close friend of the Revd

Henry Venn when the latter was Curate at the old Parish Church here in Clapham in the 1750s. Venn had felt the call to a more serious religion and he and Thornton supported and encouraged each other.

Thornton also used his wealth to support poor clergy, to finance clergy training and to buy the right to appoint to parishes clergy of his own persuasion. It is to Thornton we owe not only the building of Holy Trinity Church in 1776, but the appointment as Rector of Henry Venn's son John in 1792. John Venn was not only a great preacher, but an assiduous worker for the health and well-being of his parishioners.



John Venn

Spreading the Gospel, and social reform

Another member of the group, Charles Grant, had returned from India convinced of the need for Christian missions to the sub-continent. Existing missionary societies served only English speaking colonials, and Grant and his Clapham friends saw the need to take the Gospel into Asia and Africa.

Led by John Venn, the Clapham Sect were the nucleus of the group which in 1799 founded what is now the Church Mission Society. In 1804 the group founded the British and Foreign Bible Society, its first President being Lord Teignmouth, a former Governor General of India, who had come to live in Clapham.

In this country, the Clapham Sect supported Sunday Schools and other schools for the poor. They opposed cruel sports and were among the earlier supporters of legislation to protect factory children. In politics they were conservative, even repressive; but in an age when political corruption was the norm, they brought their moral standards into politics, fighting elections without bribery, and voting on issues as their moral sense and not as party politics told them. British political life was changed by their example.

Location of events

Holy Trinity was opened in June 1776, replacing an older church, also Holy Trinity. This stood in Rectory Grove on the site now occupied by St Paul's Church Clapham. Baptisms and marriages prior to June 1776 all took place at the old Church. After Holy Trinity was opened, the burial ground round the old Church continued in use until it was closed in 1855. Now known as St Paul's Churchyard, it was also described as the Holy Trinity burial ground.

No burials took place in the churchyard surrounding the present Holy Trinity.

St Paul's Churchyard has been largely cleared of gravestones, but in the 1920s, the Revd TC Dale made a record of all gravestones and monumental inscriptions existing at that time. This was published locally in a booklet called "Our Clapham Forefathers". Holy Trinity does not hold a copy of this book, but St Paul's Church (office open on Thursday mornings) does. Copies may also be held at Lambeth Archives and the Wandsworth Local History Library.

Other Records

As well as the registers, our deposited records contain information about the life of the church and bodies associated with it - the Parochial Schools and a number of charitable trusts.

From Tudor and Stuart times to the mid-nineteenth century, the governing body of the parish was the vestry, and our deposited records include the minutes of the Vestry and associated committees and trusts.

Finding out more

There are numerous books about the Clapham Sect and individuals, notably Wilberforce. A recent and comprehensive account is *The Clapham Sect* by Stephen Tomkins (Lion Hudson, published 2010). The *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* includes an essay on the Clapham Sect by Professor John Wolffe. A short account by a local historian is *The Clapham Sect* by Margaret Bryant, published in 2004 by the Clapham Society (www.claphamsociety.com) and obtainable from them.

Notes For Enquirers About Church Records And History

Anglican churches are encouraged to deposit their records at an appropriate public record office. Most of the ancient records of Holy Trinity are held by the London Metropolitan Archives (address etc below).

Family History: Baptisms, marriages and burials

All but the most recent parish registers are at the London Metropolitan Archives, where they may be viewed on microfilm. Holdings are as follows

Baptisms: 1552 - 1664, 1678 – 1689, 1706 - 1957 Confirmations: 1888 – 1896, 1899 - 1968

Marriages: 1551 – 1688, 1705 - 1967

Banns of marriage: 1755 – 1807, 1895 – 1901, 1912 - 1968 Burials: 1555 – 1691, 1700 - 1854

More recent registers are held at Holy Trinity and may be inspected on application to the Parish Administrator.

The parish registers up til the early 20th century can also be searched on the Ancestry website (www.ancestry.co.uk), but note that this is a commercial service and accessible only on payment.

On-line catalogues

Holy Trinity's deposited records can be searched for on-line. Most are at the London Metropolitan Archives, while a few, mostly relating to civil administration in the 19th century, are at Lambeth Archives. The most convenient way to search is to go to Access2Archives (www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/a2a), enter Holy Trinity Clapham in the Search box, and then use the Summary of Results table on the right-hand side of the screen.

Useful addresses

London Metropolitan Archives

www.cityoflondon.gov.uk/lma

Lambeth Archives

www.lambeth.gov.uk/Services/LeisureCulture/LocalHistory/Archives.htm

Wandsworth Local History Library

www.wandsworth.gov.uk/a_to_z/service/429/archives