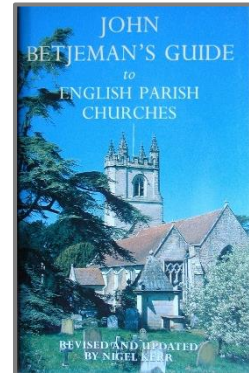


A LITTLE HISTORY OF SOUTHCHURCH

By Mike Penry

Episode 25: SIR JOHN BETJEMAN'S VIEWS ON CHURCH ARCHITECTURE

John Betjeman wrote an historical introduction in 1958 to one of the first guides to English parish churches. The introduction does much more than provide a dry historical narrative; and it includes a vivid description of the neo-Gothic churches built by architects such as Sir Ninian Comper, and of the style of worship they sought to promote. This is reproduced in full below. It is a fascinating read, both because much of the neo-Gothic vision can be seen at Holy Trinity and because much of it cannot. It may be hard to imagine Holy Trinity as a richly decorated Anglo-Catholic church, with chancel screen and gilt angels, but Comper's designs clearly point in that direction, and if we had not run out of money...



“See in your mind’s eye a church built in the neo-Perpendicular style. If you cannot see it, I will try to re-create such a church, and you will remember it in some newish suburb of a provincial town where you stayed with an aunt, or on a holiday in the outskirts of a south-coast watering place, and you can read of it in Compton Mackenzie’s *Sinister Street*. “Ting-ting” the single bell calls to Sung Eucharist, because the tower, designed for a full peal of bells, was never completed. Rather gaunt without it, the church rises above the privet and forsythia and prunus of its little garden, for there is no churchyard to these churches. Inside the church, the tall nave is filled with chairs, and the narrow aisles are not used on a Sunday, as they give a view only of side altars where the weekday Celebrations and the very early Sunday masses are said. The floor is of oak blocks, the walls are cream and clean, the woodwork of the thick Devonshire style chancel screen, carved by Harry Hems of Exeter, is unstained. In more recent times a coloured statue of Our Lady under a gilded canopy is seen against one of the eastern-most pillars of the nave. Through the screen we glimpse a huge reredos painted green and red and gold, with folding doors. The high altar has a purple frontal, because just now it is Lent. The floor of the sanctuary is paved with black-and-white marble. Riddel posts with gilt angels on them - the famous “English altar” introduced by Sir Ninian Comper in the eighties – hold curtains round the north, south and east of the side altars. The windows are filled with greenish glass in which are patches of dark blue, red and gold. These are the works of Kempe, and they allow more light into the church than earlier Victorian windows. The chief beauty of the church is its proportion, when they were building in the Gothic style – almost all of them designed Byzantine and classic churches as well – and they were either height and narrowness, or breadth and length. Their churches either soar or spread.

The Sung Eucharist is probably from the Prayer Book and with a crowd of acolytes at the altar. Blue incense rises to the golden reredos and the green Kempe window. The English Hymnal is used, and plainsong or, more probably, *Eyre* in E flat or *Tours* in C. Candelights twinkle in the mist. The purple Lenten chasuble of the priest is worn over amice, alb, stole and maniple, and there is discussion of these things after the service and before among servers and the initiated. We are in a world which feels itself in touch with the Middle Ages and with today. This is English Catholicism. There is much talk of Percy Dearmer, correct furnishings and vestments, the Prayer Book and how far one is justified in departing from it. After church the acolytes in their Sunday suits

hang round the porch, and the young curates too, and there is a good deal of backslapping and chaff. For months the Mothers' Union and the women's guilds of the church have been working on banners and a frontal to be ready for Easter. From these suburban parishes much of the Church life of modern England has sprung. They have trained their people in faith and the liturgy, they have produced many of the overseas missionaries and parish priests of today."

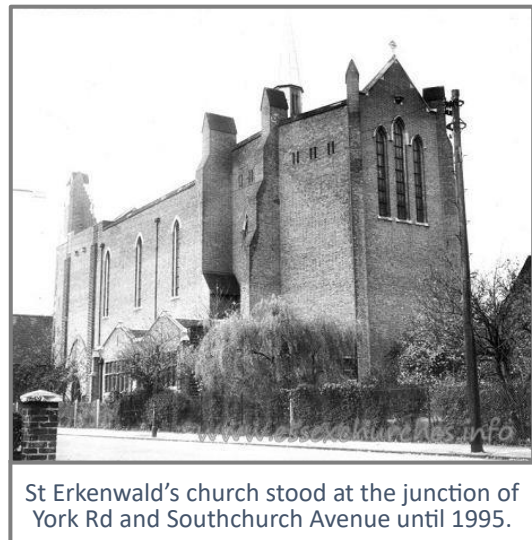
Those were the days! For the uninitiated the chasuble is the outermost vestment worn by the clergy whilst the amice is a white linen cloth worn on the neck and shoulders under the alb; the alb is a white vestment reaching to the feet which symbolises the purity of the soul; and the maniple is the decorated band, similar to the stole, worn over the left forearm.

Betjeman had a great affection for neo-Gothic architects such as Ninian Comper. Indeed, it is worth noting as a postscript that only three Southend churches - Holy Trinity, St Erkenwald, and St Alban's in Westcliff - were included in his guide. Our entry was somewhat laconic:

SOUTHCHURCH (Holy Trinity)
"Small Norman church to which Comper added."

St Erkenwald's entry was a little more fulsome:

SOUTHEND (ST ERKENWALD)
"A tall yellow brick church designed with great feeling for ecclesiastical architecture by Sir William Tapper in 1905..."



St Erkenwald's church stood at the junction of York Rd and Southchurch Avenue until 1995.

But, as St Erkenwald's was demolished in 1995, we've clearly had a much brighter future!

Come back in a couple of weeks' time for Episode 26: "COMPER'S VISION FOR HOLY TRINITY".

- Read, in his own words, Comper's vision for Holy Trinity.
- Should they have built a new church on a different site?
 - Did you know, Comper wanted to build us a turret?

See all Episodes of 'A Little History of Southchurch' [here](#)