

A LITTLE HISTORY OF SOUTHCHURCH

By Mike Penry

Episode 27: THE DESTRUCTION OF A VALUABLE LITTLE CHURCH

When we looked in the last episode at Sir Ninian Comper's vision for Southchurch, I noted that the decision to extend the old church rather than to build a completely new one was not without its critics. The critic-in-chief was The Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings, and I reproduce below a letter dated 7 February 1899 from the Society to the Reverend John Philpott.

"The Committee of this Society has carefully considered the case with reference to your Church which you explained to our Clerk, and it has desired me to lay before you its views.

This Church has undoubtedly suffered seriously from "restoration", but nevertheless its fine roof and unaltered plan and other points render it a valuable building. After the matter had been looked at from every point of view, the unanimous opinion of the Committee was that enlargement of the building could not, under the circumstances, be justified.

The only suggestion for an enlargement which could be made by the Committee would be effected by removing the south wall of the nave from the porch to the east end of the nave and widening it out for the width of the nave or even more, but even when this was done it would still be but a small Church, and great destruction from the artistic and historical point of view would have been done. Any enlargement beyond this it was felt would mean the practical destruction of the building.

The Committee gathers that Southchurch has greatly increased in population and is still increasing. If therefore the Church were enlarged the extra accommodation would probably, in a few years, prove inadequate, and after all a new church would have to be built.

The Committee therefore desires me to ask you whether you will consider the possibility of keeping this valuable little Church unaltered, and of building a new and commodious Church on a new site, which you would probably arrange so as to be capable of enlargement?"

As we all know, the Society thundered in vain. Comper's vision was realised, at least in part.



An application for funding by Canon Philpott to the Incorporated Church Building Society of 13 February 1906 provides the following information about the parish and the church:

- The population of the parish in 1901 was 1,612, rising to 2,895 in 1905.
- About half of the men in the parish earned under 30 shillings a week [but was that such a poor wage in 1906?], and the occupation of the chief portion of the inhabitants of the parish was “building houses”. Canon Philpott also refers to the parish’s “large artisan population”.
- The parish church had 141 seats (18 for clergy and choir, 123 for the free use of parishioners). The first stage of the proposed extension would increase these figures to 30 and 340 respectively.
- Canon Philpott noted that the licensed (but not consecrated) “mission church” in the Rectory Barn could accommodate a further 100 people, but that “even now the Church is uncomfortably crowded while the district population grows rapidly”.
- The estimated cost of the first stage of the extension was £3,000 plus architect’s commission (£150) and travelling expenses (£10) and the Clerk of the Works’ salary (£75). £2,130 had been raised from subscription, leaving a deficiency of £1,105.

The Church was endowed with glebe and tithe rent charge worth about £680 gross per annum (plus a modestly sized Rectory etc). Put another way, this means that the building of the main part of the New Church cost less than five times the Rector’s annual income. It is just possible that the present incumbent will tell us that this would not still be so today!

Come back in a couple of weeks’ time for Episode 28: “YEARS OF TOIL”.

- Who dared to claim our church was “an unattractive, indeed to some, an ugly building”?
 - Looking back to a time when our church was uncomfortably crowded.
 - Where did our wonderful pipe organ come from?

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