

St Pauls Church: A Short History

The ancient market town of Chippenham was a place of great importance in the Anglo-Saxon period. King Alfred the Great held court here in the ninth century and was defeated in a surprise Viking attack before winning back the town in a battle that saved not only Chippenham but all of Wessex from Danish domination. At this time the town stood mostly to the south of the river Avon and had formed around the church that is now St Andrews. All this changed in 1841 when the Great Western Railway Company opened its new line connecting Bristol with London. Isambard Kingdom Brunel, who designed the railway station and the impressive arched viaduct that now forms the northern entrance to the town centre, is known to have lodged at what is now the Brunel pub as the construction proceeded. The building of the Railway Station north of the river led to rapid growth of new roads, houses and industry, rapidly transforming the town into a vibrant industrial hub and a flourishing new community.

By 1852 it was clear that a new Church was needed to serve the new northern community and in 1855 a group of local supporters of the Church Missionary Society met in Collen's warehouse to set a plan in motion. Funds were raised by various grants and public subscription and a competition was launched for anyone wishing to propose the new building's design. Twenty architects submitted a proposal but the winning design came from the renowned neo-gothic architect George Gilbert-Scott. Scott's design, which was inspired by the decorated Gothic style of the 14th century, included a huge 176 feet tall tower and spire on the south-western corner, however at the Church's consecration by the Bishop of Gloucester and Bristol in 1865 the tower was just 12 feet high due to insufficient funds. In 1860/61 the spire was finally completed and fitted with an impressive clock (donated by W. H. Poynder) and Bell (donated by Fanny Colborne & Charles Bailey).

Inside the Church, stone pillars, alternately round and octagonal, are topped with the heads of the twelve apostles of Christ and similar stone carvings of Mary on either side of the eastern archway that forms the entrance to the ascension chapel. The first stained glass window was installed in 1892 in memory of Thomas and Harriet Pound, who had given generously to the original building fund. In 1905 the Church celebrated its Golden Jubilee by commissioning the stunning stained glass window depicting Christ's ascension on the eastern window, this was donated by Mrs Draper of Lansend. Two more windows depicting Christ were installed in the following decades, one the 'Good Shepherd' in 1909 (donated by Rosie Griffiths, the daughter of the Rector of the Parish), and the other of the risen Christ in the Garden Tomb with Mary Magdalene (in memory of the Brockway family).

During the second world war the Church Hall was requisitioned and occupied by the Army before being returned to the Parish in 1946 and hosting a children's mission led by the Church Army. In 1951 a Peace Memorial was dedicated on the south side of the nave. A niche was cut into the stone to display a gilded cross. Below this a Stone of Remembrance was created that bears a hand-made and hand written Book of Remembrance for all the parishioners who served in the war. In 1955 the Centenary of the Church was celebrated with a number of repairs and improvements including the Oak panel and seating on the eastern end, which bears wooden carvings of the four evangelists Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. The Church's dedication to St Paul is also seen in the stunning stained-glass window that stands above the four evangelists, depicting many events in Paul's life, from his conversion on the road to Damascus to being shipwrecked on his way to Rome. St Paul is also seen in the window of the south-eastern corner of the nave, which depicts him preaching the gospel to a large crowd of people.

In recent years the Church has undergone a significant re-ordering, having its Pews mostly removed and replaced with stackable chairs to accommodate the greater flexibility required by a modern community church building. St Paul's Church remains a vibrant worshiping community with flourishing youth work and a focus on being a light for Christ in the fast-growing northern suburbs of Chippenham. For nearly 170 years St Pauls has served the community through countless outreach initiatives from Church Army Children's missions to the modern HOPE project and messy church. Long may it continue.