World War II
St John’s played a significant role in the community during the second world war. In 1939, the Pier was taken over by the Royal Navy and renamed HMS Leigh. The Thames Naval Control Service set up their Headquarters in Royal Terrace and requisitioned St John’s Hall. As the “Ship’s Club” it was used for canteen, instruction and social activities. Many stage shows were put on and Frankie Howard made one of his earliest public performances here.

From the Control Station, over 3,000 convoys were organised to ensure the safe passage of ships and crews throughout the War. The White Ensign that once flew over the Royal Terrace HQ now hangs in the North Transept.

Significant Features
St John’s has many interesting features including:

- The Chancel Screen, a carved beam surmounted by a cross with a dwarf screen erected in 1925.
- The Screen in the south transept was erected in commemoration of James Rumbelow Brightwell, the Town’s 3rd Mayor who was Churchwarden until his death in 1925.
- A fine organ built by Messrs. Bishop and Son of London and Ipswich, comprising a Great Organ on the north side of the chancel and swell, choir and pedal organs, on the south side.
- The fine ‘Rosie Bray’ stained glass window in the south transept erected in 1950.
- RNLI Standard situated near to the pulpit - Southend Pier is one of the busiest Lifeboat Stations in the Country and St John’s Rector is the RNLI Chaplain.
- The Churchyard is of special significance, containing much of the history of the Town. Burials and memorials include the first Mayor of Southend, Thomas Dowsett, who held office in 1892, Robert Buchanan, the poet, dramatist, and novelist, and Warwick Deeping, perhaps the best known Southend novelist.
St. John's Church, built in 1842 with subsequent extensions, is Southend's first parish church. It played an important role in the life of the growing seaside resort and had connections with many of the town's leading figures. The church is now seeking to rediscover its former role as the Town Centre Church for Southend. Under Project Rosalit plans to provide a range of new and improved community facilities, renovate the church yard and help improve the general environment around the church. This will complement other major regeneration projects in the vicinity.

**Church Name: St John the Baptist**

The church is one of many across the country dedicated to St John the Baptist. John 'prepared the way' for Jesus' ministry and was eventually beheaded by King Herod, as described in the Gospels.

**Historic Development of the Church**

St John's is Southend's first Parish Church. In the early 19th century, Southend consisted of two small settlements on the edge of the Thames Estuary at the south end of the parish of Prittlewell. The parish was centred on St. Mary's Church, a mile to the north. The Old Town (the lower town) was a collection of houses and small hotels along the shoreline where Marine Parade now runs, and the New Town (the upper town), built in the 1790s, was at the top of the hill slope in Royal Terrace and the former Grove Terrace. Together they formed the nucleus of a small seaside resort.

Southend's residents felt that the parish church was too distant from the developing resort. Consequently, in 1832 a meeting with the Bishop of London resolved that 'a Chapel of Ease should be erected on some spot convenient to the inhabitants of Upper and Lower Southend'. Despite initial opposition from St. Mary's vicar, funds were raised, a site between the lower and upper towns was bought and the church was completed by 1841 when Southend was made a separate parish.

The church was designed by Thomas Hopper in 1838. Hopper had no formal architectural training but he had designed and worked on a wide range of buildings for the Prince Regent and many of the nobility. An obituary in 1856 suggests that the building which best describes his art is Penrhyn Castle at Bangor in North Wales. He was also for many years County Surveyor for Essex and was responsible for converting Chelmsford gaol to the 'modern' cell system.

Hopper's plans for St. John's were for 'a building in the Norman style seating 500 worshipers'. A sketch of the first showing it to have been a relatively small stone building with a traditional arrangement of Nave, Chancel and short Transepts. A bell turret was over the west door. Window and door openings had round 'Norman' arches. It is difficult to believe that the building shown could have held 500 worshipers and Hopper's original design may, therefore, have been adapted and reduced.

As the town grew so did the congregation and it was not long before a sequence of enlargements were necessary. These mirrored the growing population of the Town at that period which rose from 4,589 in 1871 to 27,299 by 1901.

The North and South Aisles on either side of the Nave were added in 1869. The original Nave walls were consequently broken through and new pointed Gothic arches formed with decorated capitals. A new Chancel was added at the east end of the church in 1873. And major works for the 'enlargement and completion of the parish church' were completed by 1912 in order to "create a really fine central parish church, taking something of the place in the life of the great modern town of Southend that Hove Parish Church, Yarmouth Parish Church and St. Peter's Bournemouth do in the life of those great seaside resorts."

These works included raising the nave roof, extending the Nave westwards, the Chancel eastwards and both transepts, adding Yestries, a Morning Chapel and a Northex (Vestible) at the west entrance, and removing box pews. New pews were installed, many of which were free, some continued to be bookable at the Royal Hotel while church members paid for the exclusive use of a pew-slots for name plates are still evident on some of the pews.

The original building was now totally enclosed by the new additions. Thus the church took on its present Gothic appearance.