Church Architecture

Sir Charles Nicholson was responsible for the church’s design, many of its fittings and its decoration. His brother, Archibald, designed much of the stained glass, including that for the west window. St. Alban’s is believed to be Charles Nicholson’s first church and he went on to become one of the most eminent church architects of the early 20th century. His work in the Borough includes St. Michael’s, Leigh Road (1924) and St Margaret’s, Lime Avenue, Leigh (1930). They make interesting contrasts with the design for St Alban’s.

The church is in a ‘free Gothic’ style. This takes elements of medieval gothic architecture, such as the tower, its ‘embrasures’ at the top, and pointed arches and gables, and uses them in contemporary ways. The tower is given an unusual design with chamfered corners and an unusual position at the south-east corner of the church rather than the more conventional west end. The materials used are especially effective, combining flint and stone rubble with red brick and dressed stone for details at window openings and elsewhere. This gives the church an attractive rustic appearance.

Inside the church, the fittings and decoration are largely complete, as originally designed by Nicholson. Note in particular:

- The richly painted barrel roof to the chancel and the choir.
- The Great West Window which illustrates the words of Our Lord “I am the vine, you are the branches”. The vine rises up from behind a picture of the Nativity.
- Other stained glass windows which represent various saints.
- The elaborately carved Rood Screen between the nave, the choir and the Altarpiece.
- The Font which is the only fitting which pre-dates the Church. It is made from alabaster to a design by Sir Christopher Wren, and dates from 1675. It was originally a gift from Francis Dashwood Esq. and came to St Alban’s from St Mary le Bow, London, in 1899.
St Alban’s Church was founded in 1892 as a daughter church of St Mary’s, Prittlewell, when housing development from Southend began to spread into Westcliff towards Hamlet Court Road. A temporary corrugated iron chapel was initially erected to serve the expanding population. This was superseded in 1898 by the present building.

As well as marking the growth of Westcliff, the church is architecturally important, having been designed by Nicholson & Corlette, eminent church architects, in a free Gothic style. Its use of materials makes it particularly attractive. It is now protected as a Grade II Listed Building.

**Church Name: St Alban the Martyr**

St. Alban is the Church’s patron saint. In AD 209, during the persecution of Christians ordered by the Roman Emperor Diocletian, a Christian priest fleeing for his life, came to the house of a pagan named Alban, living in Verulamium (now the town of St. Albans). Alban gave shelter to the fugitive, hiding him for several weeks, and was so struck by the religion he preached and practised that he was converted to Christianity. After some time, the Roman Governor of Verulamium learnt that the priest was in Alban’s house and sent soldiers to arrest him. Alban changed clothes with the priest and, having sent him away secretly, gave himself up to the soldiers, who brought him before the Governor. The Governor ordered Alban to be flogged, hoping to shake his new faith, but when he refused to denounce Christ, he ordered him to be beheaded. A statue of St. Alban stands in the church.

**Historic Development of the Church**

The Borough of Southend-on-Sea comprises six historic rural parishes - Leigh, Eastwood, Prittlewell, Southchurch, South Shoebury and North Shoebury. When the town began to develop rapidly as a seaside resort in the closing years of the 19th century, the Church of England (as well as other denominations), began to cater for its increasing population by establishing new mission churches. Some of these in the course of time became separate parochial foundations serving their own parishes.

A number of the new mission churches were initially housed in temporary corrugated iron chapels. These chapels could be bought from catalogues and erected quickly and relatively cheaply. Most were subsequently replaced by more permanent and larger churches, as the surrounding areas became more densely built up with houses. Few of these early corrugated iron chapels now survive.

St. Alban’s is an early example of this church expansion. In 1890 the St Mary’s Prittlewell Church Extension Committee was set up to raise funds for a church to be built to the west of Southend to meet the spiritual needs of the growing population of Westcliff. The funds came from a variety of sources including subscriptions from local inhabitants, bazaars organised by the Ladies Sub-Committee and donations from Canon Heygate.

The first church on this site, the ‘Mission Room’, was a corrugated iron building erected in 1892. Although replaced by the present church, this building still stands and is now used as the main hall. The iron church soon became too small for the needs of the community and by 1897 sufficient funds had been raised (£1,290) to begin construction of the main building. Advertisements appeared in the best building papers inviting architects to submit plans for the building of a church to accommodate 400 people, 500 if possible, at a maximum cost of £3,000. An architectural competition attracted designs from nine architectural practices. Entries were assessed by Sir Arthur Bloomfield who advised acceptance of the design by Nicholson and Corlette.

On 17th June 1898 the foundation stone under the West Window was laid by Bishop Vestiging of St. Albans. It was Westcliff’s first Parish Church.

It is difficult now, with the church situated in a thickly populated built-up area, to imagine the semi-rural surroundings of that time. We have to imagine a large expanse of land, mainly agricultural, lying between Prittlewell and Leigh. Despite some development, Hamlet Court Road remained little more than a country lane, with the two farmhouses of Hamlet Lodge and Hamlet Court on the west side. Some streets had been laid out for development. St John’s Road had semi-detached houses separated by wide gardens - and there was a scattering of houses in elsewhere in the immediate area.