



St Matthias Church Centre

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A Brief History & Guide

The church is dedicated to St. Matthias; his figure flanked by two angels, is over the North Porch. Following the Ascension, after prayer, Matthias was chosen by lot to be one of the apostles, replacing the traitor, Judas Iscariot. St. Matthias served as a missionary and was martyred.

The site of the church was given by Sir Lawrence Vaughan Palk and his son Lawrence Palk, MP - and they also endowed the living - in the 1850's. St. Matthias' was built as a Chapel of Ease of St. Mark's Church, Torwood. It became an independent church and parish in 1880. In 1974, the Rector of St. Mark's became Priest-in-Charge of Holy Trinity Church. A few years later these two churches were closed and in 1979 the Vicar of St. Matthias' became Rector of the enlarged parish of St. Matthias, St. Mark and Holy Trinity. The foundation stone of the church, then St. Matthias Chapel, was laid on Easter Monday, 13th April 1857. It was designed in the decorated style, by Anthony Salvin, a leading exponent of the Gothic Revival. It was built by local builders, John Tapley Harvey and William Harvey. It was consecrated on the 14th October 1858 by the Bishop of Exeter, the Rt. Rev. Henry Phillpotts (who lived at Bishopstowe, now the Palace Hotel on the Babbacombe Road). The Vicar of Okehampton, the Rev. Prebendary Downall, preached on the text beginning "To whom coming as unto a living stone", from 1 Peter 2: 4 - 5. In more recent years we have links with the past. The cornerstone of the Church Centre laid on 20th October, 1985, has the words from 1 Peter 2: 4 in the Good News Bible version, "Come to the Lord, the living stone." The present church is considerably larger than the buildings of 1858. The South Aisle was added in 1865 and the Chancel enlarged in 1885. The main change in the considerable enlargement of the church in width, height and length, the formation of the West end and the addition of the North Porch were undertaken in 1894 by the notable Church Architect, John Loughborough Pearson, who was also the architect of Truro Cathedral.

Now let us walk round the church, noting some of the interesting features. We shall begin at the North Door, on the Babbacombe Road. Just inside is the Font. It was given by the family and friends of the Rev. Thomas Nash Hicks, the first Vicar of St. Matthias' under whose guidance and dedication over 24 years the chapel grew in size to the church we see today. The font cover was added later. It is made of British oak which has been seasoned for some 70 years. The engraving was supervised and partly executed by an elderly lady of 82 years. Sometimes babies are baptised at this font but more often a small portable font is used so that all the congregation can more easily see the ceremony.

Ahead and to the right is the beautiful central West Window above a fine oak carved screen. It represents the first part of the Te Deum, the song of praise.

As we walk up the left hand, North Aisle we notice the memorial tablets and windows. A marble tablet recalls a sad series of events for Henry Dundee Hooper; the death of his wife, second daughter and son, all within 18 months. He bequeathed a proportion of his estate to the Church and living of St. Matthias.

The second window on this side has at the top the coat of arms of Queen Victoria. Beneath are the figures of St. Ethelbert who became King of Kent about 560, and his wife St. Bertha who was a Christian. King Ethelbert was himself baptised by St. Augustine in 597. This window was put up to commemorate the Diamond Jubilee of Queen Victoria in 1897.

On the East wall of the North transept there is a window in memory of Briscoe Hooper, father of Henry Dundee Hooper, "for 38 years legal adviser to the town." The window depicts Moses with the Ten Commandments and John Hooper, Bishop of Gloucester, who suffered martyrdom at the stake in 1555.

The small Chapel to the left of the Chancel was originally the clergy changing room and was re-ordered in 1926/7 by the efforts of Major Garrett (who as Borough Engineer designed Torquay Pavilion) and a forceful church worker, Mrs. Kitchen. Notice the fine stained glass windows, one dedicated to St. Francis and the other to the theme that "those who sow in tears shall reap in joy". This small Chapel is kept as a place for quiet worship and is always available to members of the order of St. Francis of Assisi.

The Chancel was built in scale with the original chapel and as the church grew the chancel became too small. John Snelgrove, whose name recurs frequently in this period of the Church's history, suffered the loss of his son, James, at the

age of 17 and the chancel was enlarged in 1885 at Mr. Snelgrove's expense and dedicated to his son's memory.

The dwarf walls at the entrance to the Chancel are of alabaster capped with red Ogwell marble. The chancel gates of wrought iron are in the Art Nouveau style of the turn of the century. The letters I H C and X P C are based on the Greek word for Jesus Christ. These gates were dedicated at the Church's Jubilee of 1908. The altar rails are of brass wrought to a Venetian pattern.

The Reredos, the screen behind the altar, a memorial to John Spencer Meade who died in 1884, is of pure alabaster. The three panels record the Sacrifice and Triumph of Our Lord in the Crucifixion, Resurrection and Ascension. The prophets Isaiah, Elijah, John the Baptist and Daniel divide the panels. Notice the beautiful mosaics of angels and cherubs on the walls, and the fine floor tiles. . Above the altar is the East window. This has the oldest glass in the church. The window was re-leaded and renovated in 1998, the work funded by the Friends of St. Matthias' through a generous gift in memory of Peter Myott. The original inscription on the window is unfortunately hidden by the altar screen, but reads "I am the resurrection and the life, he that believeth in me, though he were dead, yet shall live." .

On the right side is a sedilia (from the Latin for a seat). These were permanent and often ornate items in a church from the 12th century onwards, used by the priest, the deacon and the sub-deacon, but in this church they are not graded in height. Beyond them is the credence shelf for the wafers or bread, and wine. Above is a window in memory of Charles Kitson, "active in local affairs". In the next window the glass illustrates "Feed my sheep, feed my lambs". It was installed after a Mission in 1888.

The lighting of the Choir Stalls was carried out in memory of Eric Watson, Warden of this church 1970-1980, a gift from his family and his fellow-warden.

At the front of the church, over the Chancel arch, there is a great wooden screen. The cross with a crown at the top - Christ crucified and risen, is King of Glory - standing on a beam which is supported by two life-sized angels whose wings stretch out in a great arch. This screen was given in memory of John Snelgrove who died in 1903, it is carved from oak trees grown in the neighbourhood of Exeter.

The lectern, or reading desk, is in the form of a brass eagle on a pillar. The eagle symbolises the carrying of the gospel, the glad tidings preached by Christ, to the corners of the earth.

The pulpit is made of alabaster with marble plinth and shafts. The recessed panels contain figures in relief of great preachers, Jesus Christ, Noah, Elijah, St. Paul and St. Chrysostom. Notice that Elijah has a raven and Noah has a dove in one hand and an ark in the other. In the Church Centre the children's room is called the Ark. Above the pulpit is a carved oak sounding board placed in memory of Mrs. Snelgrove in 1915.

The South Transept Chapel has a wooden carving of the Last Supper over the altar, and nearby a window depicting the same scene. Notice the brass tablet in this Chapel to the Rev. Rex Luckcraft who was only here for 6 months before he died - in 1970, but "won many friends and advanced God's kingdom."

The original organ was built in 1885 by Hill & Son (builders of the Westminster Abbey organ) at a cost of £1,100. It was re-built and enlarged by Rushworth and Dreaper in 1923, had a major overhaul and a further enlargement in 1949 as a memorial to Mr. W. L. Twinning who had been organist here for 41 years. It was substantially rebuilt again in 1975 when the organ console was moved to the North Transept.

On the wall of the South Aisle there is a carved wooden memorial to two brothers Gerald and Laurence Russell who both died in the Royal Flying Corps in the First World War. There is also a general War Memorial to all who fell in the 1914-1918 War.

Along this side of the church we continue to see fine stained glass. Notice the details of the flowering trees in the backgrounds. At the back of the church is a stand in memory of the Rev. Neville Rose-Price, Vicar here 1965 - 1970. On it lies a Memorial Book. It is open to show the names of those who died over the years in this particular month. Upon leaving the church and entering the Link Hall visitors will pass through the double doors with their panelled surrounds. The facings of the surround incorporate pews from St. Matthias' and sections of the Communion tables from St. Mark and Holy Trinity, thus symbolising the linking of our Church Centre to the three churches.