

# Guy Rowston's

# PARISH PROFILE



## All Saints', Plumstead

**It all began in a tent pitched on the grassy slope of Eglinton Hill above the Woolwich Arsenal.**

In 1867 the Diocesan Missioner (of Rochester in those days) the Rev William Nesbit McGuinness, an energetic man of great spirituality pitched the tent (holding 200) to preach the Gospel in this particular spot in South East London.

After a year the tent was replaced with an iron building. Five years on, in 1872, a Church day school had been built and was used for worship while land was bought for a church and vicarage by its side.

At this point anyone who suffers from RSI should move to the next paragraph, for it is estimated that for the next three years the Rev McGuinness wrote ten thousand appeal letters a year for the building of the new church.

By 1875 the nave was complete, the chancel in 1879 and the tower and thus the whole church was completed in 1881. Its cost had been £9,000 of which less than £60 came from the locality. The rest had

come from all over the world with donations from Germany, Italy, Austria and Switzerland.

A parish was created out of that of St Margaret, Plumstead. It had been a great achievement for McGuinness but also one suspects the cause of his death shortly after the church was consecrated.

The church's proximity to Woolwich Arsenal and Barracks was to be its undoing in the Second World War. The Victorian Gothic church suffered several hits and then was completely destroyed by bombing in 1944. Worship continued for 13 years in the church hall until the new church was built on the site of the old church school in 1957.

Last year the church celebrated its 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary. In addition to the usual celebrations for such an anniversary the congregation set up a vision group to look at themselves and achievable and practical goals for the future. Immediately and very practically, they proposed creating a new kitchen and a disabled toilet facility at the rear of the church. The work of the vision group of course continues.

After the solid brick built exterior with small octagonal tower and large floor-to-ceiling windows on the north and south sides, the interior comes as a complete surprise. It is early 19<sup>th</sup> century classical pastiche with shallow saucer domes over the nave. Greek key and honeysuckle motifs punctuate the sea green and white colour scheme with pale chocolate pews.

The spacious and light interior is dominated by a magnificent mural of the Ascension by Hans Feibusch. A German refugee, Feibusch's work can mostly be seen in churches in the Dioceses of Southwark and Chichester, though there is a notable one in St Alban's, Holborn in London Diocese.

Included in the newly-built church were the Holy Table, lectern, font and organ from the old Victorian church. The architect of the new church said he hoped 'to evoke, by means of the traditional use of space, proportion, light and colour, an earnest desire to worship God.'

On the day of my visit the morning service was a Holy Communion, using the modern version of the Prayer

Book celebrated in reverent Evangelical fashion at the north end of the table with 'Mission Praise' songs and hymns accompanied by piano and guitar.

As in many churches the fine organ up in the gallery is currently looking for an organist though at Christmas a small choir was formed for the Carol Service. The congregation was a typically mixed South London congregation, reflecting the vibrant and culturally mixed community. Non-eucharistic services and the Holy Communion alternate on mornings and evenings across the Sundays of the month with the non-eucharistic services comprising a Morning Prayer, an Evening Prayer, a Service of the Word and a Family Service.



The Vicar (and Area Dean) Harry Owen, has been at All Saints for 19 years. An Oak Hill graduate, he ministered in London and Newcastle Dioceses before crossing the river. He reckons the keynote of the congregation is friendliness and I was made very welcome on my visit. He spoke of being an evangelical witness in the community. He noted the great changes in the make-up of the parish and congregation over the last ten years. People who were born and grew up in the area have now been joined by those from Uganda, Nigeria and other countries from around the world.

All Saints now has a curate, Dele Ogunyemi who was deaconed last Michaelmas (in 1901 the church had seven curates – those were the days!). Dele hails from Nigeria and has been here ten years. He is an NSM and when I queried the effort involved in balancing study against the demands of a young family and a full-time job as an electronics communications engineer, he laughed and said that the grace of God had a lot to do with it.

The Second World War had not only seen the loss of the church but also the church school which was not rebuilt. However Harry Owen has built



National costumes at the International Evening indicate some of the nationalities in All Saints' congregation.

up links with schools in the district and conducts assemblies there. The 1970s church hall next to the church also houses a private pre-school group which in common with many other church halls makes a useful contribution to church funds. Speaking of funding, All Saints manages its Diocesan quota, whilst being generous in its outward giving. The day I visited, the congregation were recovering from a very successful International evening held the previous night when they ate dishes from all over the world in aid of TEAR fund. There is also a monthly fellowship meal after the morning service.

It is clear that the congregation sees as its major concern families and in particular young people. With Urban Church Fund money they were able to appoint a youth worker for three years. For various reasons they couldn't continue the appointment but the church now has a link with Greenwich Youth for Christ, an organisation with a high profile reputation for work amongst young people in estates. There is now a weekly after-school

club at All Saints for the 7-11 year olds with games and other activities. A Sunday school also meets in the Hall for part of the morning service. Study Groups meet regularly throughout the year. In Lent a course on the Lord's Prayer was stimulating and helpful.

A mother from All Saints spoke to me of the 'gang' culture in this part of London. Her own son had been beaten up for daring to play in the 'wrong' ball park. Recently there had been a stabbing a few streets away from the church. There must be many parishes in the Diocese who have similar problems on their patch.

The church website contains not only the usual useful information but a rich selection of congregational memories and pictures which initially were inspired by the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary but there is the intention to develop and increase the congregational contribution to the site. The website proclaims that 'All Saints Church exists to help people live the best life possible through our commitment to serving God, the community and one another'. Amen to that.

The interior of the church showing the congregation and the magnificent Feibusch mural. The photo was taken at the 50th anniversary celebrations in January 2007



Some of the congregation on a visit to Herne Bay and Canterbury during the 50th anniversary year