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# TRULY THIS IS NONE OTHER BUT THE HOUSE OF GOD + THIS IS THE GATE OF HEAVEN



This bold claim identifies the church of **St. Paul's Bow Common** as you approach it from the north along Burdett Road. Unfolding on the lintels of the entrance porch, with lettering by **Ralph Beyer** in the original 'bull's blood' colour restored carefully in 2010, is the statement straight out of the Book Genesis in the Old Testament, 'Truly this is none other, But the House of God, This is the Gate of Heaven.' Indeed this church was known locally for years as 'The Gates of Heaven' and you could confidently ask any bus conductor up to about the year 2000 to put you off at the 'Gates of Heaven' and they knew exactly where to stop!

I was Incumbent at this church for 18 years, from 1995-2013 and during those years it was interesting to watch

the general perception and profile of this now renowned building change steadily. Even before it was consecrated in 1960 (but actually in use from late 1959) there was great interest in the building from the wider world of church architecture, some positive and some critical. Many of the locals, however, had their own opinions from the very start!

Even 35 years on, when I arrived in the parish, no matter what the architectural world thought, the local perception was often still one of puzzlement! For quite a few of our local East Enders this was not what a 'proper' church should look like! After a few months I had my first wedding enquiry from the sister of the last person to be married there a few years earlier. She lived in the parish and had the right to be married at St. Paul's but came specifically to inform me that she did NOT want to be married there! 'Sorry, Father, but it's not a proper



*church - I mean there isn't a proper long aisle for me to walk up in my dress and my sister's wedding was terrible there!* That continued to be a reservation held by brides right up to my departure for retirement!



The East End of London has long been a very traditional area and this strange modernist set of angles and expanses of bare brick walls and no grand windows or decoration (*the church with a greenhouse on the top,* as one person put it!) was not embraced by all as a 'proper' church! Some 20 years on from that slightly awkward nuptial interview there are still wrinkled brows! Many still don't know that this is a church - guesses at its identity have included 'a warehouse', 'a library', 'frozen food storage' and 'a factory' - even with its identity being so boldly proclaimed above the entrance porch!

The parish is now of majority Muslim faith population and most of the remaining parishioners are not practicing Christians. However, since 1998, as the building has been used by so many in the community, of every faith and category, for a variety of events and activities, I think an understanding has grown of its hidden genius within, behind the enigmatic exterior. But, from the outside, it gives nothing away! I still remember a conversation with a local man who had never been inside and didn't know what this building was. As we stood outside I pointed out the message of the porch lettering to him. His good-humoured reply was, 'Well if THIS is the Gate of Heaven then I don't want to go there! Can I cancel my booking, please?' Even so, as time has gone on there has been a growing admiration for the building, even beyond Britain, and an emerging discovery of an extraordinary versatility which was somehow implied by its founding principles but not realised until decades later. This has all now been recognised in a remarkable way!

### **Britain's Best Modern Church - it's official!** (<http://www.bestmodernchurches.org.uk/>)

In 2010 there was a major celebration of the **50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Consecration of St. Paul's, Bow Common**. By then the general awareness and appreciation of the building from beyond the parish had been growing - rather as if it had taken a few decades for the general, non-specialist perception of the building to 'mature' and come of age and to become established on a wider 'map' of notable buildings. When I first came to St. Paul's there were very few students or even general admirers coming to visit the church but, as time went on, I noticed that changing. Even though the local view was still a bit reserved, the church was certainly now on a national and even global map.



Thus, on **7 November 2013**, less than a week after I retired, I was privileged to be present at Lambeth Palace for the announcement of the **Winner of the National Churches Trust Diamond Jubilee Award for the UK's "Best modern (post-1953) church"**. There were over 200 nominations and a very prestigious short-list of 10 notable buildings. The judges were from the National Churches Trust, the 20<sup>th</sup> Century Society and the Ecclesiastical Architects and Surveyors Association. I was there with churchwarden, Julian Bream, and church

architect, Kelley Christ, and we were astonished to be in the final 10 and then in the final 3! The sense of shock was overwhelming, then, when our church emerged as the **winner** of this extraordinary accolade and we were presented with the prize from the Archbishop of Canterbury!

The judges commented that the building has been *"hugely influential and a signpost for future Anglican liturgy"*. They further went on to say that *"this building is the embodiment of the ground swell of ideas about Christian worship, loosely termed the **Liturgical Movement**, which swept Europe and the United States after the Second World War. According to this thinking, **the church as a building is first and foremost a liturgical space - a house for the performance of the liturgy and the gathering of the community.**"*

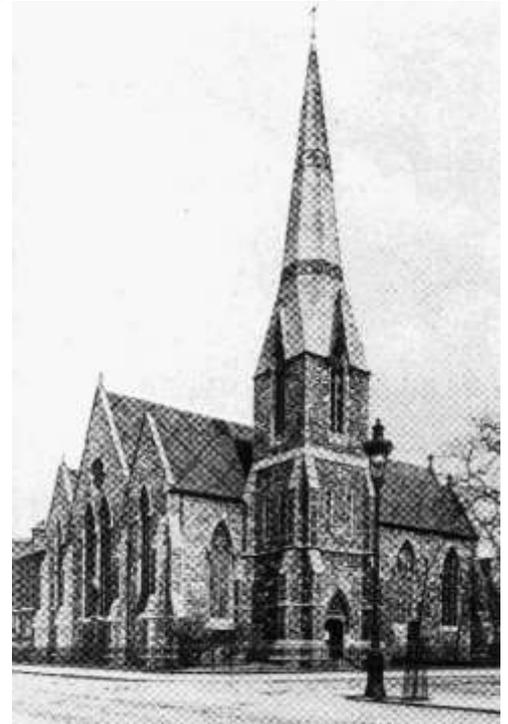
It is perhaps a little unexpected, perhaps, that Britain's best modern church should be in what is still such a very 'unprestigious' area of the nation's capital. At the end of these the social history of the parish of Bow Common since the mid C19 is traced and notes the pendulum swing of the fortunes of this area but, for the years in which I knew it and for some years before, the parish of St. Paul with St. Luke, Bow Common was the 4<sup>th</sup> poorest parish in the Diocese of London on the UK Index of Multiple Deprivation. Indeed, from the earliest days of this being a populated area, this was not a prosperous area, though fortunes have varied since that time.

Thus, in late 1847 correspondence in the Times included such judgements: *'In my own neighbourhood, that of the East India-road, a place exists called Bow-common, which is a nuisance to all the east end of London.'* *'The East-end of London is in the nature of things, as well as by common consent, the proper receptacle for everything which would be intolerable elsewhere.'* There is much more about these early opinions later on and why such views were held, in the final historical section of this account.

Every day, thousands of people go past the church or through the parish, perhaps to the prosperous nearby commercial areas of Docklands, Canary Wharf or the City of London, but no-one really has much reason to stop. There is significant history in the London Borough of Tower Hamlets and some remarkable buildings to be found, but few would include this church at first glance!

Most people going past St. Paul's would have no idea that this is now recognised in such a significant way! It gives nothing away from the outside. However, there is a great deal about St. Paul's, Bow Common which is unexpected and even revelatory, once discovered. The intention is to reveal and explore this in the pages which follow.

That such a remarkable building should be found in such an unexpected place is the result of various circumstances – some governed by world history, some by the force of human personality! After this account of the building which is to be found here now there are historical accounts of the area and of the first church which stood on the same spot from 1858 until its destruction in the 2<sup>nd</sup> World War. For different reasons to the present building, that church too was a focus of much controversy and more can be discovered later.



However much prestige attaches to this building now – and I have supported many MA students over the years with their theses, from Japan to Texas, as well as countless architectural visitors and buffs – its **primary** 'locus' is as an **East End Church of England parish church**, with everything which goes with that in terms of its ministry to a congregation and to the community of the parish.

### **How does somewhere like Bow Common come to have such a world-class building?**

Every building is where it is and is what it is for a variety of reasons. In our case, it was a combination of global and local history, the tragedy of a World War, the swings and roundabouts of government policy, war reparation funds and budgets, as well as the determined mind of a singular priest, all of which came together to give us the remarkable building which sits today at the **corner of Burdett Rd., & St. Paul's Way in East London**. When building started, times had changed greatly in the century since the first church by Rhode Hawkins was built there by **William Cotton**.



Churches were built in those days to be simply that – **a place for worship & prayer** – and any mixed use would have been inconceivable. The **'Liturgical Movement'** (see later) reviewed & revised how liturgy & liturgical spaces should operate, proposing a return to early forms & intentions but, even as an outcome of that Movement, the present church

was also designed primarily for worship & has even been described as a 'liturgical machine.' Primarily, the Anglican spiritual life of the parish has been focused in that spot since 1858.

However, times have moved on and since 1998 the church has been discovered also to have an extraordinary capacity for welcoming in the whole community – across every social boundary – for a wider use but still embraced within a **church** and not some dual-purpose community centre.

The Award judges spoke well when they said, *‘the church as a building is ... a house for the performance of the liturgy and the gathering of the community.’* When built, even in 1960, such usage would not have been in mind, and even more unthinkable when the first St. Paul’s, Bow Common was built. But the drive remains the same – to serve the **whole** of what is now very diverse community in the name of Christ. As seen in these pages William Cotton, who built the first church of St. Paul’s, Bow Common out of his own pocket, was a rich property developer and Governor of the Bank of England, yet he recognised the spiritual worth and spiritual needs of those already living in Bow Common and those soon to move into houses he would build and he built his church to serve their needs. That still remains the task of every Christian church, each in its own way in its own context.

## World War II and after ...



The bombing raids of World War II caused vast damage in our area of East London and especially the sustained, strategic aerial bombing of London in the Blitz. Starting on 7 September 1940 London was bombed for 57 consecutive nights and by 21 May 1941 major aerial raids took place in which more than 100 tons of high explosives were dropped in each raid on 16 British cities. Over a period of almost 37 weeks, London, was attacked 71 times with areas such as ours at grave risk because of their proximity to the prime enemy target of the London Docks. (Bow Common is just a mile or two north of the dark shapes of the docks shown in this view to the left). It was the luck of the

draw as to what was damaged or destroyed if it was not of strategic importance, such as people’s homes and churches and schools.

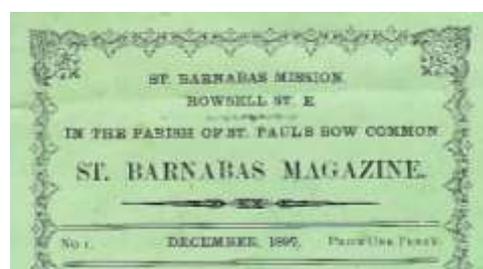
Often unused bombs were dumped on the way home and even more random patterns of destruction emerged. The website [www.bombsight.org](http://www.bombsight.org) has mapped known bomb strikes and it is clear that the church didn’t receive any direct strikes. The nearest hits were in Baythorne Street, just one block away and an incendiary strike over St. Paul’s Way. However, collateral damage was enormous with every bomb strike. The kind of devastation which could result from a direct hit can be seen in this view on the right, of wartime damage in very nearby Mile End Rd. In 2011 or 2012 for an afternoon those distant days were vividly present again as an unexploded WW II bomb was excavated at the other end of St. Paul’s Way during the demolition of the old secondary school building there, with widespread evacuation. Presumably the school had been built & stood over the unexploded device for years!



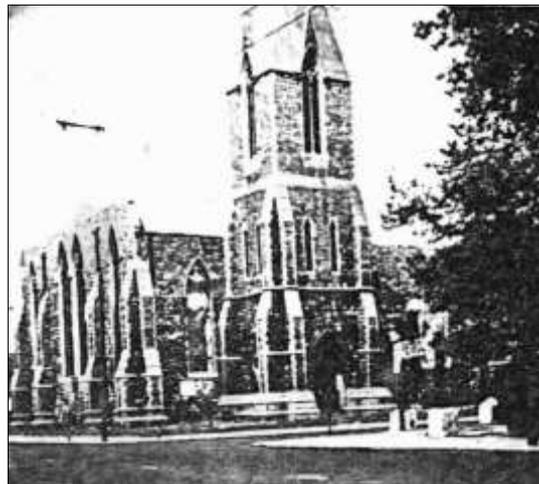
The church suffered collateral damage twice. The first view following shows the church in its heyday in 1900 with the fine terraced houses to the north, also built by William Cotton. The adjacent view shows the church with collateral damage suffered on Friday 20<sup>th</sup> September 1940, with most of the church windows blown in and the spire damaged – from the nearby direct hit by a landmine on Baythorne Street. The church organ was removed and stored first in the church school and then in St. Luke’s Church.



The church had to be closed and the congregation was moved first to the mission church of St. Barnabas in Rowsell Street, with baptisms held in Holy Trinity, Tredegar Square in Bow. Then on Wednesday March 19<sup>th</sup> 1941 the largely intact building was gutted by incendiary bombs and reduced to a shell, now fully beyond use.



There is no surviving record anywhere that I have found which explains the origins of the St. Barnabas Mission/St. Paul's Lodge. On the OS map of 1914 to the left it can be seen within the smaller red circle on the right with the parish church in the large circle on the left. The image above is of the magazine of the St. Barnabas Mission of December 1897 and the Mission Schools are mentioned in 1880. Presumably it was an early foundation of St. Paul's church. There is mention of the Mission as late as Church Council Minutes of February 1958 when St. Luke's Church had become too cold to use in winter, the new church had not yet even begun to be built and the Clergy House was being demolished. The proposal was to use the Mission for services but there is no record in the Minutes of this being followed up on. Robeson St. was due for demolition in 1961/62 and presumably the Mission went with it.



Also, it seems that flying-bomb attacks in 1944 damaged the Mission on 19<sup>th</sup> July of that year and repairs were urgently needed. The former glory of Bow Common had departed and the once grand vista of the sanctuary, below left, was now a bombed ruin open to the elements (below right). It must have been hard to believe that there would ever be a place of worship in that sacred space again. The whole nation was plunged into crisis, even in victory, and over a million homes had been destroyed just in London, and the heart of the parish had been bombed out, so one might have wondered what chance there was that a church would once again stand in that place!



In fact, however, the wartime and post-war **Parochial Church Council (PCC) Minutes** reveal a sure confidence, even during wartime, that this would happen! The following extracts from PCC Minutes track the efforts to continue regular worship in the parish:

At the Annual Church Meeting on **2 April 1944**, in his annual report, the Vicar, Fr. Carter, said that he felt confident: *'that St. Paul's would continue and that the church would be rebuilt. The parish was very much alive and was growing, not with a mushroom growth which he mistrusts but steadily and evenly.'*

**1 October 1944** *'After some discussion the Council agreed that we should ask for the use of St. Luke's Church on Sunday mornings as from the date of the Dedication festival (30<sup>th</sup> October) (this is when the first St. Paul's, Bow Common had been consecrated in 1858) and – to solve the long-term problem – for a prefabricated building within the ruins of the church.'*

**29 October 1944** *'The Vicar reported that he had consulted Diocesan authorities and had been advised that there would be a delay of at least eighteen months in getting a licence for the building of a temporary church, and that the Mission might be first-aided for about £150. Only the most urgent needs were being considered, but as the Mission had been in use as a church the Diocese would probably support an application from the parish for its repair. He reported that he had been making considerable use of St. Luke's Church and suggested that he should proceed as soon as possible to press for the Mission.'*

#### **4 March 1945**

##### 'Reorganisation Scheme

*The Vicar reported that the Diocesan Reorganisation Measure had been drawn up with the forwarding of the work of God as the primary consideration, and that alterations in the status quo had been proposed without fear or favour. It had been proposed that such treasures of our ecclesiastical heritage as Churches of architectural value should be retained but that apart from that **churches were to be placed where the population was planned to be.***

*The number of churches was to be cut down because of shortage of man-power and especially of ordained ministers and not for financial reasons. England has been divided into Reorganisation Areas and in London this has been necessitated as a result of the air-aid damage. The Deaneries of Bethnal Green, Stepney and Poplar had been scheduled as a Reorganisation Area. Formal notification of this had been received and we had an opportunity to register any objection to the inclusion of our parish.*

The Vicar went on to explain that it was proposed to reduce the former 27 parishes in the Deanery to 13 – and possibly later to 12. It was the intention of the Diocese that there should be no single-handed priests in charge of a parish, staffs were to be increased and the man-power in the Deanery was to be only one under the pre-war strength.

The proposed scheme for the Parish was then put before the Council.

The suggestions were then considered in detail:

1) There was **general approval of the provision for the restoration of St. Paul's Church and the union of the parish with St. Luke's, Burdett Rd.**

2) The **replacing of St. Luke's Church with a Mission Hall, north of the present site was disapproved** on the grounds that the Mission would then be too near that of Holy Trinity, and that moreover there is the danger of a Mission's growing away from its Parish Church.

The Vicar suggested that **St. Luke's Clergy House might be used as a social centre for the parishes of St. Paul and St. Luke with provision for a resident priest, with an oratory or chapel, but emphasised the desirability of only one centre of worship in a Parish.** The possibility of localised concentrations of population according to the County Plan were then referred to. Fr. Cobb formally proposed agreement with the provision for "replacing the latter church with a smaller building with accommodation for worship, social activities and a resident priest" omitting the rest of the clause and adding that St. Luke's Clergy House would be suitable temporarily for these purposes, so long as there was a population west of Burdett Road.

3) Parish boundaries were discussed and the proposals amended ...

4) It was decided that the redrawing of the boundary in the north-east made the future of the Mission Church attached to Holy Trinity, a matter for the consideration of Holy Trinity parish only.

#### Accommodation:

The Vicar reported that Prebendary Eley had said that **the rebuilding of St. Paul's Church would receive high priority; although the building of a permanent church might not be possible immediately.** He compared the advantages and disadvantages of the construction of a temporary church on or close to the old site and of the repairing of the Mission as a centre of worship or for social activities.

He suggested that **no temporary church should be built and that St. Luke's Clergy House should be used in conjunction with the school as a social centre** (adding that he had already had Fr. Murray's permission to adapt three top attic rooms for handicraft classes).

It was asked whether – in view of the Diocesan Regeneration Committee's proposals – it would be wise to move the centre of worship to the Mission. **The Council, after discussion, agreed that it might facilitate a possible future union of parishes to continue to share St. Luke's Church, decided against a temporary church and in favour of the repairing of the Mission for Sunday School work.**

#### Staff:

The Vicar said that he thought that the parish might possibly eventually be allowed an Incumbent, two assistant clergy and a lay-worker, but that this number of workers would not be available for several years and voluntary help would be vital. The Council decided that an early opportunity should be made to discuss the problem of man-power.

#### Rebuilding Fund:

**It was reported that it was presumed that the Government would pay a certain amount towards the rebuilding of blitzed churches and this together with a contribution from the Diocese, would probably provide essentials. The provision of decorations, furnishings etc. might have to be the result of our own efforts and we should therefore push our Restoration Funding Appeal.** The Vicar suggested that it might be wise to earmark all of the money as it is received in order to avoid the possibility of its leading to a reduction in the amount made available through central sources for bare essentials.

*Plans for the new church might soon profitably be discussed. Dr. Wilkins (church organist) had already been consulted as to the desirability of a West End Gallery for choir and organ.'*

The East Window of the neighbouring St. Dunstan's and All Saints, Stepney (the mother church of the East End founded in Saxon times) is by Hugh Easton. It has an accurate depiction of the bombed-out neighbourhood after the Blitz, looking in the direction of Bow Common. The spire with a circle around it is in the right area to be the spire of the old church of St. Paul's, Bow Common, no other local church having a spire.



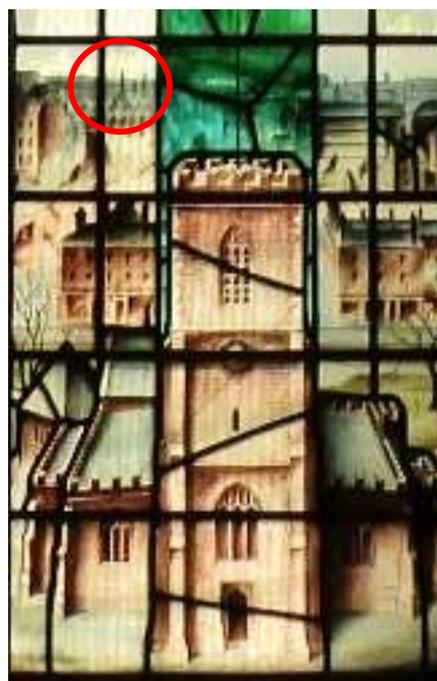
**6 May 1945**

### ***'The Rebuilding of St Paul's Church***

*The Vicar reported that our church would probably become of high priority on the building list and that there should be some plans ready for it. It was thought that remains of the old walls (and there was possibly £3000 worth of fabric still standing) were good enough for the church to be rebuilt*

*on the original foundations. Discussions followed in which various details were considered and the following decisions reached:-*

- 1) ***Architecture:*** *The church should be rebuilt as near to the old style as possible with Mr. Warner-Smith, the Diocesan Architect in charge and Mr. Martin Travers to do the interior. Fr. Cobb drew attention to the fact of the possibility of the site of the church having to be moved slightly under the County Plan.*
- 2) ***The East Window*** ... *which was very large and with clear glass would give rise to a glare of light, should have the original traceries kept but framing painted panels, until stained glass could be inserted.*
- 3) ***The High Altar*** *should remain as redesigned in the plans passed before the war – of which we have the crucifix.*
- 4) ***The West End*** *should take an Organ and Choir Gallery with possibly a Baptistry underneath. This would cushion the noise of the traffic from the road, reduce the area of the church to be heated and leave a most gracious sanctuary. '*



The Minutes here reveal the very **first proposal for an architect and designer – Messrs. Warner-Smith and Travers.**

It is also clear that the intention is to **'clone' the old building and not to do anything radical or different!** Who could have guessed what was to come?! None of which would have been proposed or come to pass without the vision and determination of the

next Vicar, arriving six years later!

## 2 September 1945

### 'The Joining of the Parishes of St. Paul and St. Luke

*'Fr. Cobb was asked to read the unofficial agreement which had been drawn up after discussion between the Vicar, Fr. Murray and Fr. Johnson on the future administration of the two parishes of St. Paul and St. Luke, the latter of which was to be committed to the care of our Vicar. He added he thought it was an arrangement between the clergy which the Council had to accept. The Agreement was discussed point by point and several items were clarified.'*

The nearby church of **St. Luke, Burdett Rd.** (view here in the early 1950's and described later in detail) had been damaged less seriously and eventually became a home for the displaced congregation of St. Paul's. The war-time Vicar of St. Paul's from 1938-1950, the Revd. Cyril Carter,



became incumbent of St. Luke's in 1945. He moved on to Holy Trinity, Hounslow in 1950.

In the Diocese of London just 70 out of 700 churches had emerged unscathed by bombing during the War and many had been completely destroyed. The challenge was enormous and after such global dislocation and trauma things would never be the same again. Early hopes and assumptions were that all the old institutions – including that of the church – would be reinstated exactly as before the War. To that end reconstruction of churches

got underway. At Bow Common it is clear that the intention was at first for a return to the security of the old order. However by 1960 it was clear that the old order would never return across the whole of society. The majority of the nation was now emerging as largely indifferent to religious organisations of any kind. There would be no special deals for churches thereafter!

However, immediately post-War, the impulse to rebuild a pre-War society suggested the rebuilding of religion as part of the nation's established foundations and so war reparation funds were to be made available for building churches with further reparation to replace stained glass if a church had lost its stained glass windows. But, even so, church stock had to be rationalised and not every church would be rebuilt. A condition for building a reparation church here was that it had to be capable of holding at least 500 people and, with the two churches of St. Paul and St. Luke being so close, would be replaced with just one large church. But housing, schools etc. had also to be repaired or rebuilt urgently and shattered communities gathered in again.

PCC Minutes continue to track the hopes – and the realities – of a post-war world for the local church. There were to be 25 more PCC meetings in Fr. Carter's incumbency before his move to Holy Trinity Hounslow at the end of 1950. It is interesting to note how seldom there is any mention at all about rebuilding the church during the next five years with 18 of those meetings recording nothing about this in the Minutes. What follows is a little of what was going on:

## 2 December 1945

### St. Luke's Church

*'Mr. Tutt remarked on the bad state of the church roof and Fr. Cobb explained that Preb. Eley – who apportions the small total amount of money allowed to be expended on repair work to churches of all denominations – had his attention drawn to it, but in view of the fact that repair work was being done at the Mission, the parish should not expect any further allotment yet.'*

## 27 January 1946

*'Vicar brought to the notice of the Council the plans of new site of Church, House etc. (ground plan of church, Vic and Hall). Same was passed round for Council to view. Council was quite satisfied with progress being made and plans were passed.'*

It is intriguing to know what these plans might have been! Alas, no records remain that I have been able to track down.

## 8 September 1947

### Diocesan Reorganisation Scheme:

*Extracts from the draft Proposals of the Scheme where they applied to the future parish of St. Paul's were given by the Vicar. The scheme generally differed but little from the outlines already known. There was a slight variation in the future parish boundaries.'*

## 5 June 1948

### Buildings

*After the Union of Benefices we shall be responsible for St. Luke's Church, St. Luke's Clergy House, the Mission Hall and the Parochial part of the Lodge and the expense of these buildings will be heavy, where possible to be self-supporting therefore the Vicar suggested that the Council consider the following arrangement. St. Luke's Clergy House to provide a flat for Fr. Whittaker and offices in the rest of the downstairs rooms which the Family Welfare might be willing to hire. The Lodge Chapel to revert back to a Club room for small clubs, the Mission to be available for the larger clubs and prices agreed to as to make it self-supporting. There was a general discussion but the scheme met with general approval.'*

## 17 October 1950

*'The Vicar stated that he had been offered and accepted the Benefice of Holy Trinity, Hounslow.'*

## The Arrival of Fr. Gresham Kirkby

### In 1951 two significant things happened for Bow Common.

Crucial decisions were made at high level in that year which would lead to the **construction of a new church** at Bow Common at the end of that decade. When St. Paul's suffered such devastating damage there was no longer a parish church and St. Luke's, Burdett Rd. became the focus for church life.



A decision was then made to build a new church - to replace St. Paul's Church and not St. Luke's. St. Paul's had the larger footprint and so a church capable of holding a minimum of 500 people could be built there with War Damage Commission funds of £50,000 with further reparation of £8,000 for the provision of stained glass, following the loss of large stained glass in the destroyed church.



The parish of St. Luke would cease to exist and would be divided up between local parishes. However the name of that church would live on in the name of the new parish to be instituted - the Parish of St. Paul **with St. Luke**, Bow Common. The die was cast.

Also in that same year the **appointment was made for a successor to Fr. Carter**. He would come initially as parish priest of St. Luke but when the new church was built he would become the first Vicar of the newly established parish. He was **The Revd. Reginald Gresham Kirkby**, native of Cornwall, high church catholic in tradition and radical both in politics and in his views on liturgy - he described himself as an anarchist socialist! The photo above on the right is from 1955 outside St. Paul's Lodge. He is shown in the image to the left at the altar of St. Luke's not long after his arrival in the parish (1951/52). The Church Council Minutes track these events, albeit briefly:

### 16 November 1950

*'The following Minute to be sent to the Bishop of London:  
'My Lord Bishop, in accord with our privilege, we the Parochial Church Council of St. Paul's, Bow Common wish to make request to your Lordship that the vacancy in this Parish caused by the preferment of the Rev. C. E. Carter be filled by a priest who is Catholic and loyal to the Book of Common Prayer'.'*

### 12 December 1950

*'Mr. W. Haywood introduced the Rev. G. Kirkby who addressed the meeting and stated his views. He was asked a number of questions and suitably responded. It was unanimously agreed by the PCC that a letter should be sent to the Bishop saying that we were pleased with the interview and would welcome Fr. Kirkby as our new Vicar.'*

## HIGH MASS IN RUINS

### Volunteers Cleared Debris

*To mark the commemoration of St. Paul, high mass was celebrated in the ruins of St. Paul's Church, Bow Common Lane, last Saturday.*

Local men and boys spent several evenings clearing debris from the blitzed church building, and erected the altar. The Rev. Fr. Kirkby, Vicar of the parish of St. Paul with St. Luke, was the celebrant and he was assisted by Rev. Fr. Whittaker, as deacon, and Rev. Fr. Hordern as sub-deacon.

Later in the afternoon there was a garden fete in the grounds of St. Luke's clergy house in Timothy Road, Bow. Members of the congregation manned the stalls and the Scouts of the 15th Stepney, St. Paul's Own, cubs and members of the Boys' Club assisted to ensure the success of the afternoon.

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### WITHIN THE DESOLATE WALLS

**E**VER since the war, the high walls of the fire-gutted church of St. Paul's, Bow Common, have remained desolate, but preparations for a High Mass in the ruins on the last day of this month are making a difference. Each evening of the week from Monday to Friday, members of the congregation are there from 7 in the evening, clearing the site and building an altar. Since the raids that created the ruins, the congregation of St. Paul's have joined hands with those of St. Luke's Church, on the opposite side of Burdett Road, and the official amalgamation of the two parishes is taking place this month.

### 27 February 1951

*'Union of Benefices.* It was agreed that this should take place as soon as possible.'

### 2 April 1952

*'Rebuilding of St. Paul's.* Vicar said that he had received a letter from the Archdeacon saying he hoped it would not be too long before rebuilding is begun.'

Fr. Kirkby was not merely the incumbent who oversaw the project of building a new church. It was **his vision and theology** which were embodied into the new building and his stubborn single-mindedness was crucial to the emergence of the building we now celebrate. Truly, the genius of Maguire and Murray, Lutyens and others moulded this vision but it was **Gresham Kirkby** who inspired the essentials of what we have today.

This was to be his one post as Vicar of any church and he stayed at Bow Common until his retirement 43 years later and I became his successor. The new parish was to be instituted and the two congregations amalgamated at the end of June 1951. Soon after his arrival, to celebrate the coming of a new church, he had the inspired idea of having a celebratory Mass in the ruins of St. Paul's, Bow Common!



← A clip from the East London Advertiser for 15<sup>th</sup> June 1951:

## A new church – but a most unexpected one!

On the surface, one might imagine that it would be a challenging but straightforward process, which led to the building of a new church at St. Paul's, Bow Common – following the grave disruption of wartime and the even graver destruction of the first church. A new parish priest had arrived and a new building was promised. However, with the arrival of the new Vicar came also the arrival of a new vision for the church which would take things a long way from the early desire for a church as close as possible to what had been there before! The national mood postwar was of enormous relief but also of great uncertainty. What would the future hold for anyone – would things ever be the same again?

The PCC Minutes continue but, again, it is notable how little is recorded about the building of the new church – there are 12 successive meetings from 1952-54 when nothing appears in the record about rebuilding. For sure, this is not a sign of disinterest on behalf of the incumbent and congregation! Without doubt Fr. Kirkby's vision for the new church was developing within his mind but he could not find any physical expressions of such a vision, either in the new churches of Europe or in this county. It was not until he met **Keith Murray** at St. Katharine's Foundation in 1954 (as described below) that he knew for sure that his ideas could become reality.

What the PCC Minutes reveal is something I have not seen mentioned anywhere else. As seen above, under Fr. Carter, there had already been an architect and designer (Messrs. Warner-Smith and Martin Travers, respectively) lined up by the Diocese in 1945. Clearly, nothing more became of this in practical terms. Then, early in 1955 the Diocese made a much more focused proposal for a very well-known modern architect to take on this commission. He already had commissions elsewhere in the East End, building St. Paul's, West Hackney, designing the copper spire of St. John of Jerusalem, also in Hackney. My own church of St. John-at-Hackney which I attended from age 15 was also redesigned by this man after a serious fire in 1956.

However, by the time the Diocese was suggesting its own notable Diocesan architect, Fr. Kirkby had already met **Keith Murray**, a young and largely unknown designer. It is very likely that Fr. Kirkby took a major hand in steering the discussion which was to turn down the proposed, well-known modern architect at the PCC Meeting on 17 January 1955. One has to admire Gresham Kirkby's purposefulness!

At the time of all this going on in the crucial PCC meeting being held in St. Luke's Vicarage, he just 'happened' to have Keith Murray present elsewhere in the Vicarage and promptly fetched him in and introduced him to the PCC, there and then, with his own suggestion that he should be appointed to the rebuilding project! Keith Murray impressed the PCC and won them over!

Four months later, untried architect **Bob Maguire** meets the PCC for the first time on 11 May 1955. As will be seen later, Bob Maguire was the skilled draughtsman for Keith Murray on the design commission for the Chapel at St. Katharine's Foundation. It was there that Fr. Kirkby first met him.

The PCC Minutes continue:

**17 January 1955...** A notable modern architect is proposed – and **rejected!** **Keith Murray** appears!

*'Church re-building: The Vicar said he had received a letter from the Diocesan Office suggesting N. Cachemaille Day as architect for the new church. The matter was fully and frankly discussed and it was decided not to accept Mr. Cachemaille Day.*

*The Council then discussed the type of church wanted. Fr. Kirkby said he had visited a modern built church at Crawley with Mr. Keith Murray, a designer and artist – they were very disappointed with it – it was like a cinema. (St Richard's, Crawley, was considered "too big" and demolished before it could be considered for listing; and its architect was, N.F. Cachemaille Day!)*

Father suggested that Mr. Keith Murray be invited to talk to the meeting about the type of church – and this was agreed. Mr. Murray who was in the Clergy House at the time (the meeting was being held in St. Luke's Clergy House!) was introduced to the Council by the Vicar. **Mr. Murray spoke very convincingly, presenting the disadvantages and advantages of Modern-built churches, and offered to help in every possible way – so that the most suitable church could be built in this parish of new flats and housing estates.** Mr. Murray was thanked for addressing the meeting and then retired. It was agreed that a Committee be appointed to study the book, '50 Modern Churches,' also when possible to visit Modern churches and to report back to the Council in the next meeting. '

Shown below is St. Richard's, Crawley, designed by Nugent Cachemaille Day, the noted architect proposed by the Diocese to build the new church at Bow Common but rejected by the PCC on the strong advice of Fr. Kirkby and Keith Murray after visiting St. Richard's. The church was built in 1953 but demolished in 1987 because of structural defects.



**14 February 1955 ...** Fr. Kirkby's proposal to appoint Keith Murray extends beyond the church.

*'Rebuilding the Church. The committee dealing with this matter had not yet met. Father said he had met the Archdeacon who listened attentively to what he said – and was impressed with the idea of the Church planned by a group. **The Archdeacon was meeting Mr. Keith Murray on Ash Wednesday.** What he (the Archdeacon) was most emphatic about – was the site. He said the School assembly hall could be used also as a parish hall and if this was arranged there ought also to be other rooms, such as a good size room for a Club room. He was also going very carefully into the house question.'*

**20 March 1955 ...** The Archdeacon has met with Keith Murray

*'.. Father had not heard from the Archdeacon, but **the Archdeacon and Mr. Keith Murray had met.** The Committee dealing with the building of the new church did not meet on 20<sup>th</sup> February.'*

**11 May 1955 ...** a guess is made at Reparation Funding and Bob Maguire meets the PCC for the first time.

*'Mr. Haywood and Mr. Edwards had been to see the Archdeacon to ask for a definite figure for the Rebuilding of Church. The Archdeacon had said he would have to wait for the War Damage Commission before he could give a definite figure **but gave a guess at £45,000 for exterior and £4,000 for fittings inside.**'*

'Church Rebuilding Committee

***An architect Mr. Robert Maguire was present at the meeting.** He said he would be willing to work with the P.C.C. in designing a church to our requirements and after asking some questions on what we wanted Mr. Maguire offered to submit a drawing & model to see whether we liked it before showing it to the Archdeacon. Mrs. Kingston moved a resolution that we ask Mr. Maguire to draft a plan of the church by June 8<sup>th</sup>. Agreed.'*

**6 July 1955**

'Church Rebuilding

*As the architect wasn't present at the meeting there was nothing to discuss but Fr. Kirkby had heard that the School Site had been changed and until we heard definitely we couldn't go ahead.'*

**12 October 1955** ... the church sees a model of the new church and likes it!

'Church Rebuilding

*Mr. Robert Maguire had made a model of the new church which everyone liked and subject to one or two minor alterations, it was proposed by Mr. Haywood and seconded by Mrs. Camp that the Archdeacon should be informed of our decision. This was agreed.'*

**11 March 1956** ... it's official – the church likes the design

'Church Rebuilding

*Fr. Kirkby had written to the Archdeacon letting him know we liked the design of the church. It was being estimated how much it would cost to build.'*

**4 April 1956 Annual Meeting** ... costing being worked on

'Estimate of new Church

*The cost of the new church depended on the number of bricks used. The estimate was being prepared before work could be started. Fr. Kirkby said that the model had been taken to Birmingham, where a number of new churches were being built.'*

**16 June 1957** ... signs of impatience

'Church Rebuilding

*Mrs. Kingston said that she was constantly being asked when the new church would be started. The P.C.C. expressed their dissatisfaction at the delay. Fr. Rowe suggested that the Secretary should write to the Archdeacon protesting at the delay.'*

**10 November 1957**

'Church Rebuilding

*The Secretary had written to the Archdeacon requesting an interview to discuss the condition of St. Luke's Church and a speeding up of the rebuilding of St. Paul's. The reply was that the Archdeacon would be willing to attend a P.C.C. meeting to discuss these matters.'*

**20 November 1957** (with the Archdeacon present)

'Building of New Church

*The Archdeacon said that the responsibility for the new church was now with the architect and **Mr Maguire was going ahead with the working drawings**. The War Damage Commission had agreed to pay £37,000. The cost of the rebuilding would be about £38,500 and it would take at least a year to build, possibly longer. He said he was rather worried about the furnishings for the church which were going to cost approx. £1896. The organ would cost about £2,200 to reconstruct. He asked what money we had in hand. Fr. Kirkby said we had £300 in the reconstruction Fund and £2,000 left in Trust by Miss Jeffery for St. Paul's Altar and Sanctuary and about £400 in the P.O. Savings.*

*The Archdeacon said he was relieved to hear that we had some money tucked away and once the rebuilding had started we could launch an appeal. There was still the surround of the church to be considered. The Town and Council Planning were going to build a Health Centre to the north of the church and it was hoped that the L.C.C. would look after the frontage of the church in exchange for some land. The Vicarage would not be built yet as there was not sufficient money.*

St. Luke's

*The Archdeacon then spoke about St. Luke's Church. He said that he had the greatest sympathy with us in the difficult conditions under which we worship in St. Luke's. He didn't think it was worth spending money on repairs and if we felt it was impossible to continue in St. Luke's, he would ask the Bishop to find a suitable place to hold our services. He suggested that we use the largest room in the Clergy House which now belonged to the London Diocesan Fund.*

*The P.C.C. discussed the furnishings of the new church after the Archdeacon had gone. Fr. Kirkby suggested that the £400 that had been left to St. Luke's be used for a Lady Altar. Miss McKenzie said that perhaps the old pews in St. Luke's could be cut down and replenished to make smaller pews and save the cost of chairs. The War Damage Commission would supply a new pulpit and the font would be provided in the rebuilding.*

*It was decided that we stay in St. Luke's Church. The Secretary suggested that two more oil heaters were purchased and other suggestions were that the bellows from the organ be put up against the doors at the back of the church to stop the draught and a curtain put at the side doors to stop draughts. Fr. Kirkby said that we would go into the House when the very cold weather came.'*

### **9 February 1958**

#### 'The Church

*St. Luke's was getting more difficult to use in winter & the Clergy House was being smashed to pieces, the Vicar suggested the possibility of using the Mission for services while the building of the new church was in progress. It was decided to visit the Mission in the course of the next PCC Meeting in order to help come to a decision.'*

### **23 March 1958**

*'The Vicar was going to get in touch with the contractors to find out when they would start on the demolition of St. Paul's.'*

### **11 April 1958 Annual Meeting**

#### 'New Church

*Fr. Kirkby had been in touch with the architect. The position at the moment is that the War Damage Commission are (as usual) quibbling over the cost of the demolition of St. Paul's. Father was going with the architect to see the organ builder.'*

### **30 May 1958**

*'The War Damage Commission had agreed to pay in full for the demolition of St. Paul's.*

*Fr. Kirkby had been to see the organ builder about St. Paul's Organ, and he (the organ builder) had suggested that we sell the organ, as it would be too big for the new church.'*

### **27 July 1958**

#### 'The Appeal

*The PCC agreed to start the Appeal on the same night as the Centenary Festival (in late October). Father said he would write to Lonnie Donegan asking him to launch the Appeal. Failing that to ask Mr. Donegan to the Bazaar.'*

Lonnie Donegan - the 'King of Skiffle' - was a pop superstar of the 1950's and early 60's! The Guinness Book of British Hit Singles & Albums lists him as "Britain's most successful and influential recording artist before The Beatles". He had 31 UK Top 30 single hits, 24 being successive and 3 at number one. He was the first British male singer with two US Top 10 hits. I remember

hearing somewhere that Fr. Kirkby had conducted one of his weddings (he was married three times) without really knowing who he was - hence the easy access to him! He is shown here signing autographs at a parish fund-raising event - Fr. Kirkby is standing just behind him.



No further PCC meetings seem to have been held until 8 Feb 1959. It was during this period that the walls of the old church were demolished and the Foundation Stone laid for the new church on 20<sup>th</sup> December 1958. None of this is recorded in the Church Minutes.

Victory in war was one thing but society and the world at large were now in a very, very different shape with so many long established certainties & structures removed and society emerging in a very different form, with new rules and standards and outlook and new forces at work.

Fr. Kirkby was 35 when he came to Bow Common, having served in 4 parishes as a curate before that, in his nine years of ordained life. His faith and his politics were integrated and inseparable.

I was a teenager for much of the 1960's and observed how post-War society seemed to be emerging along two broad strands. There was one strand in which all the strictures of pre-war days and wartime were thrown aside – and a world of 'Freedom' emerged – the counter-culture of the Beatles, psychedelics, colours and curves, hippies, free love, drugs and a loosening of all the bounds and bonds which had held things together for so long.



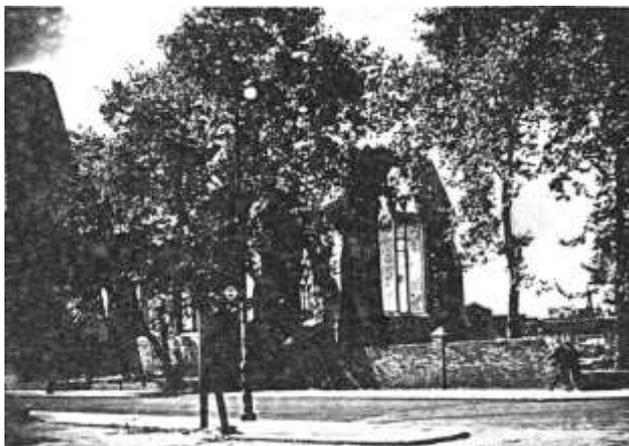
The other strand was one which questioned deeply what the social order had been and looked to what it should be. It was ascetic in style, straight-edged, shunning ornamentation and frippery; serious, purposeful, radical and revolutionary. Whatever had brought the world to such a pass must never prevail again. It was a strict and rigorous political world view.

And then there were the rest of us who just wanted things to get back to normal!

Fr. Kirkby and those he gathered round him were of this second stricter strand and St. Paul's Bow Common is no temple to the passing attractions of the hippy era! It is ascetic and even stern. It is a serious work which embodies what were radical views in church theology, liturgy and politics – even though returning to very early Christian thought. The building has always seemed to me to embody not just a 'Movement' which had been abroad for many years, but an embodiment of Fr. Kirkby's own particular theological and liturgical beliefs and principles.

For him the **Kingdom of God** was a central reality – even a political reality – to be realised and struggled for in this life and not just awaited passively in the next. He brought with him to the parish a sharp political outlook and a radical liturgical framework. He was an early supporter of CND (the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament) and those he soon gathered around him were of a similar mind. The late and great Fr. Ken Leech (1939-2015) said this, *'At the heart of Fr Kirkby's theology and priesthood was the view, that the "Kingdom of God is the regulative principle of theology." He was fundamentally a priest of God's kingdom and if that meant challenging worldly authority, so be it – even if it meant going to prison (he was imprisoned for civil disobedience offences in 1961).'* Ken Leech identified a pamphlet Fr. Kirkby had written as a crucial formative influence upon him when he was a young man.

The great theological and liturgical force for him was the '**Liturgical Movement**' (expanded upon here later) and the Award judges rightly see St. Paul's, Bow Common as the embodiment of that thinking, expressed for the first time perhaps in any church in the British Isles and ahead of the major liturgical revolution which



would emerge from the 2<sup>nd</sup> Vatican Council of the Roman Catholic Church, which would echo much of what was already present in Bow Common.

In the RC Church the roots of this Movement can be traced back to the mid C19. The major drive was to restore the active and intelligent participation of the people in the liturgy, for it to be both more attuned to early Christian traditions and more relevant to modern Christian life. Fr. Kirkby had long seen this as the way forward for the Church and for his church. He was uncompromising in this intent! Not only was he passionate for liturgical renewal but he also wanted these

ideas to be embodied in the new church at Bow Common!



Slowly the record helps us trace how this church on the right → came to be built and not some version of the one ← on the left, which is what the people of the time seem to have firmly desired at first.

### Embodying a unique vision ...

St. Paul's, Bow Common is not 'just another modern church.' It was ground-



breaking, standing in a unique place in the story of modern church architecture and still speaks to us nearly 60 years on and more with challenging views of liturgy and the meaning and relational place of

the People of God for whom that building is their 'locus'.

As the story unfolds there are many players about to come on stage, many of whom are no longer with us. I was fortunate in knowing personally some of the main players, such as **Fr. Gresham Kirkby, Keith Murray, Robert Maguire**, and artist **Charles Lutyens**. Even though we have only ever met twice face to face, Robert Maguire and I built up a very good friendship through correspondence and some very helpful papers which he wrote, some unpublished, have been a major resource in telling the 'back-story' to what we find in his church at Bow Common. **Prof. Gerald Adler's** 2012 book, *Robert Maguire & Keith Murray (20<sup>th</sup> Century Architects)* pub. RIBA is also an invaluable guide in exploring this.

Much of what follows comes directly from **Maguire's and Adler's words**. Fr. Kirkby left almost no records of his own that I have traced or any archive of that seminal decade from the 1950's into the 1960's - though a true scholar and theologian with a fine mind, he rather shunned the printed word and I remember his bon mot that *'the rot set in with Caxton'*! So I rely greatly on Bob Maguire's writings - and value his enthusiastic approval of what, in my time, we later discovered and explored of the flexible genius of that church, opening it into possibly a next chapter and understanding of its life.

### Tracing the paths which led to the design of St. Paul's, Bow Common ...

As already mentioned, **Gerald Adler** has produced a definitive <sup>29</sup> account of the work of Robert Maguire and Keith Murray and I was privileged to witness the beginnings of his researches when he visited St. Paul's, Bow Common and met with myself and I was then present when he met with Charles Lutyens. His comprehensive work very clearly maps out the paths of thought and of the 'architectural movement' which led to the design and construction of the present church - a successor to a first design which was put out for approval by the Church authorities. With considered words he states:

<sup>29</sup> *'St Paul's Church, Bow Common, London not only marked the launch of the architectural practice of Robert Maguire and Keith Murray, it was also the most famous and significant parish church to be built in Britain in the latter half of the twentieth century. It crystallised architectural and theological thinking about the form that the church should assume in the post-war era. This important church marks a critical moment in British architecture, poised between progressive attitudes to both design and theology.'*

There is indeed a back story to this church but on a far bigger stage than just the local setting of the replacement of one more war-damaged Victorian building in the East End of London. People such as **Fr. Kirkby, Keith Murray, Robert Maguire, Michael Murray** and others were pioneers in new thinking, both about liturgy and architecture and their paths of thinking need first to be traced, as well as the context of contemporary, radical thinking, as all of these influences came together in the mid 1950's.

## Fr. Gresham Kirkby: 11<sup>th</sup> Aug 1916 – 10<sup>th</sup> Aug 2006.



See above for some details of the arrival of Fr. Kirkby in the parish. He often features in the literature in a rather 'passive' role just as the commissioning client in an architectural contract but his part in this story is far more significant than that. When he arrived at Bow Common, as already seen from church records, the stated intent of the church was to replace what was lost in the War by a building as close to that as possible. But Fr. Kirkby was already totally absorbed in the thinking of the **Liturgical Movement** (see later).

He was born during the progress of one World War and, aged 35, was now faced by the devastating outcome of a second World War. For someone like him this could never simply be an architectural project but it had to carry within its very being, deep and important strands of his thinking about theology, liturgy and politics – thinking which was shared by other radicals as the world emerged out of such devastation. Born in Cornwall, he trained for ordination at Mirfield in W. Yorkshire. Ordained at 26 he served in curacies in Manchester, Middlesborough, Becontree and North Kensington before coming to Bow Common for the next 43 years.

His influences were people such as Pyotr Kropotkin, who died in 1921. Kropotkin was a prominent geographer, philosopher and anarchist. He advocated a communist society free from central government and based on voluntary associations between workers. He was also touched by social activist Dorothy Day, founder of the Catholic Worker Movement in the USA, a pacifist movement which combined direct aid for the poor and homeless with nonviolent direct action on their behalf. His other great influence was the **Revd. Conrad Noel**, Christian Socialist and the 'Red' Vicar of Thaxted – not only through his thinking but in the way he used his mediaeval Essex church as Vicar from 1910-1942. The words on Fr. Noel's tombstone, 'He loved justice & hated oppression,' for me also encapsulate Fr. Kirkby's driving beliefs.

Gresham described himself early on as an 'anarchist communist' but, following the Russian invasion of Hungary in 1956, he toned this down to calling himself a 'socialist anarchist.' A fervent supporter of CND and a member of the Committee of One Hundred he was probably the first priest to be arrested in 1961 in an anti-nuclear protest sit-down, along with people such as Bertrand Russell. It is said that worship in Brixton prison chapel was much enlivened by him! With such a man at the helm, it is clear that nothing bland or without deep meaning would result in a new church building! He knew what he believed and what he wanted and even in the design of the church there are major features in which Fr. Kirkby's will prevailed!



A lot of parallel radical thinking and stirring of the pot was going on meanwhile in the young minds (a decade and a half younger than Fr. Kirkby) of those whose energies would soon combine with his on the design of St. Paul's, Bow Common, but they did not come together until 1954 and it was his instinct which led him to offering them this commission. Even before receiving the final go-ahead for a new church to be built, Fr. Kirkby had been touring Europe and Britain to see how ideas such as his, about liturgy and church architecture and ideology, were being embodied in post-War churches. He was not impressed!

**Robert Maguire:** b. 6<sup>th</sup> June 1931.



We have Gerry Adler to thank for the following ...

<sup>29</sup> *'Robert Maguire grew up in Paddington, west London, the son of a successful cabinetmaker. In his Paddington primary school there was experimentation in using arts and handicrafts in its general teaching. The experience of his father's workshop and his progressive education stayed with the boy, informing both his choice of future career, and his involvement with it.*

*With the outbreak of the war he became a boarder at a minor public school in Essex from 1942-47, and received a sound education, studying woodwork under the tutelage of a Bauhaus-oriented master, and was able to build on the craft skills learned from his father. He already had an ambition, though, to become an architect.'*

Donald Williamson tells us this:

<sup>20</sup> *'Robert Maguire made up his mind to be an architect by the age of 12.*

*When World War II ended, at the age of 14, Maguire biked all around London to see the 'eight Modern Movement buildings created before the war.' Finsbury Health Centre, the Gilbey Gin Factory in Camden, Lawn Road Flats, the two modernist houses in Frognal, the two in Church Street Chelsea and High-and-Over in Bucks - he already knew several other important modern buildings like Ladbrook House near his home in Paddington and also Peter Jones in Chelsea). He was "bowled over by them".*

*At the age of 17 he entered the Architectural Association (AA) School where he stayed for five years (1948-53): most of his colleagues were much older ex-servicemen. The head of the AA was the "fiercely modern and socialist" Robert Furneaux Jordan, who cultivated the young Maguire. At the time the AA was the only school in the country actively espousing modern architecture - most still concentrated on "the rendering of classical facades, etc." The AA heroes were people like Maxwell Fry and Serge Chermayeff. The spirit of Asplund's 1930 Stockholm exhibition still reigned supreme, with its effect on the then contemporary interest caused by the Festival of Britain.*

*One particularly remembered personal AA influence was Sir John Summerson, whose guided tour of the Sir John Soane Museum contributed to what was to become Maguire's life-long preoccupation with exploring the use and possibilities of natural (e.g. overhead) lighting.*

*Another major influence on Maguire in his student days was Joseph Rykwert. Rykwert, a Jewish emigré from Poland, didn't fit into the AA teaching establishment and was eventually expelled. However Rykwert, a Catholic convert, drew around him an informal group from the AA including the Catholic Maguire who met for Compline once a week at St. Anne's, Soho, and then discussed the challenge of renewing the Catholic liturgy at a period when the priest was still "mumbling the Mass in Latin far away from the congregation, his back turned to the people. " Rykwert's group wanted to interpret church use, function and structure in a totally new way'.*

Gerald Adler continues: <sup>29</sup> *'In late 1947, at the age of 16, Maguire began unpaid work for a recently demobbed architect, Laurence King (1907 – 81) who specialised in church buildings and furnishings. As the sole draughtsman, he drew every job that came through the office, supplementing this 'learning on the job' by enrolling in an evening course at the Northern Polytechnic.'*



Alison & Bob Maguire 2011

<sup>29</sup> 'Here he learned the finer points of draughtsmanship: watercolour rendering, casting shadows, perspectives, and so on. By now he realised that only one school of architecture would do for him: the Architectural Association (AA) in London. The only way he could possibly attend was by winning the one annual scholarship - the Leverhulme - which he duly did, thanks to his drawing skills, and his rapidly developing interest in, and knowledge of, Modernism.

Maguire's stint at the AA was a continuous five-year period, from 1948 until 1953. On arrival he discovered that he was one of only three 17-year-olds, with the great majority of students being demobbed men and women from the services in their mid to late twenties. Through his friendship with Jake Nicholson, the eldest son of the painter, Ben, he was soon holidaying at Boothby, the house occupied by Jake's mother, Winifred Nicholson, and her widowed father Charles Roberts, and brushing up against Modernist artworks and objects of craft designs.

The AA that Maguire found himself in was changing quite rapidly. He proved to be a precocious student and was awarded the Howard Colls Travelling Studentship for his first year portfolio. Ever the keen cyclist, he decided to undertake a grand tour of selected districts of England and Wales, producing on his return the report '8 Districts', an elegant collation of notes and observations, illustrated by photographs and simple line drawings with applied colour-wash. This study convincingly related building form to topography and geology, and was precise and accurate about building material, form and junctions. These two strands, of European Modernism garnered at the Nicholson household and of a pragmatic British rural romanticism, of abstraction tempered by tradition, would run like threads through his life, affecting his attitudes to design. These twin threads would draw him to a like-minded individual, his future professional partner.'

### **Keith Murray: 25<sup>th</sup> March 1929 – 6<sup>th</sup> October 2005**



Keith Murray in 1969

Gerald Adler:<sup>29</sup> 'Keith Murray was born at Quetta, India (today in Pakistan). His father served in the Indian Army, and his mother was an artist who had studied at the Slade in London. Up to the age of 13 he was educated at Stone House School, Broadstairs (relocating during the war to Yorkshire) where his creative and artistic thinking was encouraged by his headmaster's wife, and then at Sherborne School, from 1942-46 where a lifelong friendship was formed with David Sheppard, test cricketer and later Bishop of Liverpool.

He served National Service from 1947 – 49 with his elder brother, Simon in the Sudan. He held the rank of 2nd Lieutenant in the King's Royal Hussars and impressed so much that he was asked to stay on and sign up as a regular officer. He chose, though, to leave the army to find an outlet for his practical and artistic skills

by joining Watts & Co. as their sole in-house designer. This firm of church furnishers was founded in 1874 by three leading architects of the Gothic Revival, Bodley, Garner and Scott (the younger). Their aim was to set up an establishment which would supply their stylistic requirements in the fields of silverware and other metalwork, fabrics, embroidery and wallpapers.

The late Victorian style persisted in the firm's work, but when Elizabeth Hoare, a great granddaughter of Sir George Gilbert Scott, took over with her husband in 1953, a brief period of modernisation occurred, including the employment of the young Keith Murray and the remodelling of their showroom in Dacre Street, Westminster, in a very non-ecclesiastical white emulsion on Miesian walls in concrete blockwork, designed by Robert Maguire!

Keith had two passions, religion and design, in all their manifestations. Both found ready outlets at Watts. He enrolled at the Central School of Arts and Crafts in London, the design School co-founded by the Arts and Crafts architect William Richard Lethaby (1857-1931), who was to be influential for Maguire & Murray, and from whom their future practice's slogan 'nearness to need' would derive. His evening course was in silversmithing and jewellery which he pursued for two years, by which time he was well established at Watts.'

In correspondence with myself, Bob Maguire picks up the story himself. <sup>27</sup> *'Keith and I met in 1952 inadvertently at the flat of a mutual friend and we immediately found an absolutely fundamental common cause in liturgical reform (which then seemed a far distant hope) and its implications for the design of churches and everything in them. At the time he was the designer at Watts & Co, doing, whenever he could persuade people, vestments in a rather French Dominican manner and working with the silversmith Michael Murray (no relation) on chalices etc.*

*Michael had been at Ditchling with Eric Gill, apprenticed to Dunstan Pruden and Keith had been a student at the (then) Central School of Arts and Crafts doing silversmithing. I was in my fourth year of the five-year course at the AA School of Architecture and had just finished a student project for a new church in which I set out my thoughts at that stage.'*



Michael Murray: Salt Cellar 1950

### **Michael Murray: 29<sup>th</sup> July 1923 – 20<sup>th</sup> January 2005**

Michael Murray's widow, Anne Nicholson, wrote of him for his obituary in **The Independent** on 8 February 2005: *'Michael's mother, Ruth, had been a student of Maria Montessori. While she taught the children of the Sinn Fein in Ireland, his father, Stormont, corresponded with Sigmund Freud. On returning to England they joined the Tolstoyan Anarchist community at Whiteway, near Stroud, where Michael was born in 1923. Here families and radicals built their own homes and a bakery, grew their own food, collected water from the "wet ground" and talked late into the night. Eighty years later Michael still needed chatter around him to fall asleep. The young family then moved to*

*High Wycombe, where his father's "Distributism" was developed, a social vision where everyone would work their own plot of land. Their home was frequented by Bernard Shaw, Eric Gill, Michael Tippett, Arthur Bliss & G.K. Chesterton, who impressed the young Michael by turning around two hecklers, who then set off that night to start a community at Laxton.*

*In 1938 Michael began a stained-glass apprenticeship with Eddy Nuttgens at Piggotts, near High Wycombe. He moved on to Letchworth Garden City, and then to Ditchling, to learn silversmithing from Dunstan Pruden. At just 16, he was teaching soldiers as part of their re-training at Brighton College of Art; butterfly watching on the Downs with the calligrapher Edward Johnston; and cycling 100 miles home to see his family.*

*Coming from a family of pacifists, Michael Murray was a vegetarian from birth and a conscientious objector. During the Second World War he worked single-handedly a 170-acre farm at Bradenham and helped returning soldiers set up a co-op at Bitterswell, Leicestershire, with his young wife Rosemary. At the end of the war he moved to London to train again in silversmithing at the Central School of Art and Crafts, then under W.R. Lethaby. Then began a career of crafting silver for churches.*

*Michael Murray was a poetic craftsman whose material was metal. His lifelong smiting of silver, bronze and aluminium, in the ancient way with a hammer on an upturned log, inspired students and clients of all ages and from all walks of life. With Keith Murray he furnished the New Chapel for the Royal Foundation of St. Katharine in East London, and six copes (huge processional robes) for the Coronation of Queen Elizabeth. In 1955 he made and fitted high up on Westminster Abbey a huge bronze phoenix, 12 foot in wingspan, which can be seen from the roads all around.*

*Murray was also an active organiser promoting the survival of the crafts. He joined the Art Workers Guild as their youngest member. In the 1950s he started the New Churches Research Group, proposing radical changes in church design which resulted in St Paul's Church, Bow Common (designed by Robert Maguire in 1956 and now a listed building). This got him excommunicated from the Roman Catholic Church which he had joined as a teenager, but as the years passed he watched all these ideas of "a church in the round" being assimilated and accepted.'*



Michael Murray: Silver mark

*'He would often tell of two childhood incidents that shaped him. The first was seeing the Jarrow marchers in the 1930s - he decided he would never be in a position where he could be made unemployed. The second was a meeting with Mahatma Gandhi at Kingsley Hall, in East London: Gandhi, being more interested in the 11-year-old amongst the adult devotees, taught him how to spin. He declared that the title to his autobiography would be 'Our Life is in Our Hands'. The philosophy of his working life was "learning by doing".'*

Clearly such people as Kirkby, Maguire and both Murrays shared much common ground ideologically. Enter, now, another remarkable figure, the legendary **Fr. St. John Beverley Groser**. 1890 - 1966

Like Fr. Kirkby he had trained at Mirfield and ministered in nearby tough East End parishes, at St. Michaels, Poplar, at Christ Church, Watney Market and St. George in the East. Like Fr. Kirkby he greatly admired **Fr. Conrad Noël's** stance in Thaxted and came into conflict with a lot of establishment clerical figures with his strong socialist views. Fr. Kenneth Leech has said this of him:

*'... Groser was profoundly influenced by Noël and the Catholic Crusade, and the Stepney chapter of the crusade was based at Watney Street. Like Noël, he saw the importance of festivity, of colour, music, and dancing, in the creation of a Christian social consciousness. The Watney Street church was an urban representation of what Thaxted was struggling to manifest in the countryside, with joyful festivals, folk-dancing, and processions. Here too was a democratic Christian community, and a strong sense of the liturgy as a sacramental prefiguring of a liberated world ...'*

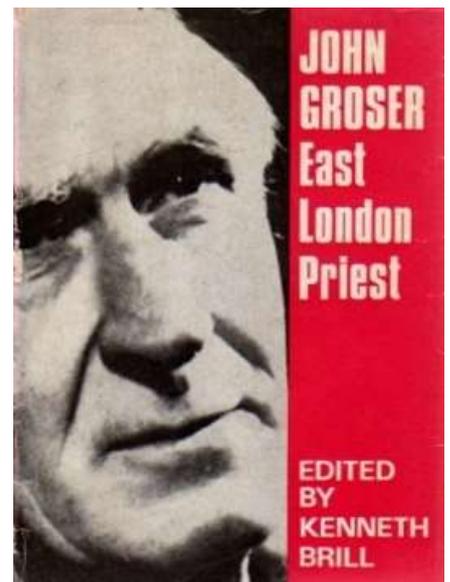
Elain Harwood in 'Liturgy and Architecture (1998) has this reference:

<sup>24</sup> *'A greater opportunity for innovation was provided by small clergy chapels than was often possible in parish churches. One example is the chapel built at the **Royal Foundation of St. Katharine** in Stepney, East London, a religious community was founded in 1148 by Queen Matilda. it survived the Reformation because it was a Royal Peculiar, only for its site to be sold by Act of 1825 for the building of St. Katharine's Docks.*



*The community moved to Regent's Park, where it languished until in 1943 a campaign began to restore it to the East End. In November 1948 Queen Mary granted the Foundation the site of the bombed St James Ratcliff with its surviving Vicarage. A new chapel was designed by Roderick Enthoven, and erected under a special licence from the Festival of Britain committee in 1952. It is a simple building which reflects the shortage of money and materials in the 1950s but in 1954 a freestanding altar was installed.'*

Fr. Groser was appointed as the first Master of the Royal Foundation in its new location. And in 1954 he launched a competition for fitting out the new chapel at St. Katharine's which had been designed by architect Roderic Enthoven. (The blue plaque here can be seen at St. Katharine's.)



Kenneth Brill wrote this autobiography of John Groser in 1971 (pub: Mowbray)

St. Katharine's, in fact, became the place where critical connections were made which were to lead to the creation of what we see now at Bow Common. Fr. Groser's presence drew Fr. Kirkby to St. Katharine's, where he saw the work of Keith Murray, met Robert Maguire & encountered the next figure of importance who was ...

## Ralph Beyer: 6<sup>th</sup> April 1921 – 13<sup>th</sup> February 2008

From obituaries in the Times and the Independent:

*'Ralph Alexander Beyer was born in Berlin in 1921. He was the son of the art historian Oscar Beyer, whose writings included a seminal work on the Early Christian inscriptions in the catacombs of Rome; articles on the Expressionist architect Erich Mendelsohn; and a monograph on the typographer and lettering artist Rudolf Koch. Oscar's academic interests, and his friendship with both Mendelsohn and Koch, were to have a profound and lasting influence on Ralph Beyer's life and work and as a young boy he was conscious of his father's work on Egyptian, pre-Columbian, African and Oceanic art, sculpture and architecture.*

*In the 1920s the family lived on an island in a lake near Potsdam. They moved to Dresden in 1928 then, with the rise of National Socialism, they emigrated. Ralph, in 1937, aged 16, Beyer visited England where, on the recommendation of Mendelsohn, he spent six months as an apprentice to Eric Gill. Like Gill, and doubtless enthused by him, Beyer was fascinated by the qualities of carved stone, by simple sculptural forms and especially by letterform. Ralph then studied in London, at the Central School of Arts & Crafts and at Chelsea School of Art where he met Henry Moore, for whom he worked briefly before being interned as an enemy alien at the outbreak of the war.*

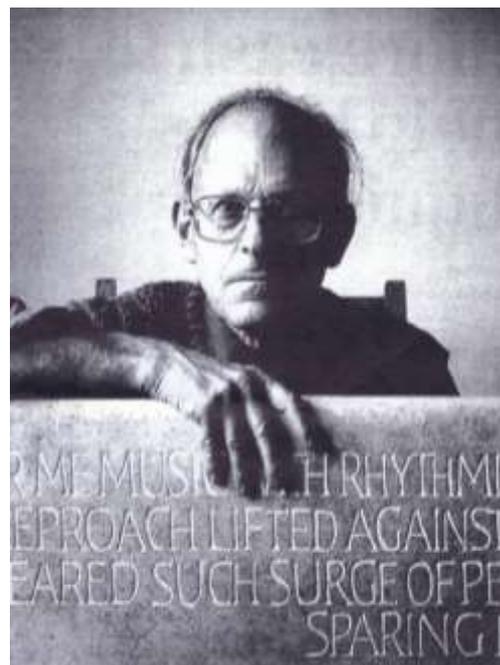
*Fellow inmates at the camp at Huyton, Liverpool, included the architectural historian Nikolaus Pevsner. Beyer became Pevsner's sounding board, reading and discussing each chapter as it was drafted in the author's illegible, minuscule hand. As a result of this shared enterprise, and their common interest in modernism, the two became lasting friends. He was soon released and drafted into the Pioneer Corps, finally working as an army interpreter in Germany where he found his father, brother and sister "in a pitiful state" outside Berlin and was given the shocking news that his Jewish mother had died in Auschwitz.*

*In 1954 he started the first of a series of collaborative ventures with the architects Murray & Maguire that continued until 1986. Beyer changed architectural lettering in Britain from the craft tradition of Gill and his disciples into an art form. He took the naive simplicity of those early Christian inscriptions, the lettering and symbols that so intrigued his father, and transformed them into something that seemed informal but was instinctively controlled. He was meticulous both about the delineation of each letter, never reproducing exactly the same shape, but also by the surrounding space.*



*Beyer's work on the altar, St. Katharine's Foundation*

*interested in, and generous about, the work of other artists and designers. He was gentle and humorous, and enjoyed nothing more than good conversation, especially to the accompaniment of good food and wine. '*



*Everything about Beyer's work, the outline letterform, the texture of the chisel marks on the stone and his use of light and colour is so carefully considered that it seems effortlessly and perfectly balanced. He became best known for the eight "Tablets of the Word" that dominate the nave of Basil Spence's Coventry Cathedral as one of the most ambitious epigraphic projects of modern times.*

*Everyone who met Beyer was struck by his modesty. He was unfailingly*

## The various elements of the 'back story' now start to come together.

Maguire and Murray had met and found much in common in 1952. It was now 1954 and Bob Maguire picks up the story:

*27 'Michael (Murray) and Keith were invited by Fr Groser to enter a design in the competition for the fitting-out of the new chapel at St Katharine's, which had been designed by the architect Roderic Enthoven on a conventional plan with the altar in a shallow niche on the east wall. They asked me if I would do the drawings as neither of them was much of a draughtsman, so I drew up their design with the gothic choir stalls in minute detail as 'context', and we won.'*

Ralph Beyer was also invited to work with the two Murrays and with Maguire and his work on the slate altar in St. Katharine's Chapel can be seen above. In recent years the Chapel has been very radically redesigned and re-ordered but Beyer's work can still be seen.

Maguire and the two Murrays were not only professional colleagues but their lives intertwined. Bob Maguire:

*27 'About this time (1965) I had to leave home, and Michael and Rosemary Murray offered me a room in their house/workshop in Regents Square. Keith had been living over the shop at Watts, but his boss Graham Hoare left to manage Hoare's Bank because of a death in the family; Keith was asked to be MD of Watts the Murrays invited Keith as well. I eventually found a room at the top of the dancer Dorothea Gage's house in Tufnell Park. The stay at the Murrays' was however quite formative as I came into contact with artists and craftsmen from various 'modem' traditions other than what I was receiving at the AA.'*

Fr. Kirkby clearly shared a great deal in common with the views and outlook of Fr. Groser, both theologically and politically, with Conrad Noel as a common inspiration, and he was a frequent visitor to St. Katharine's Foundation. He had not been over-impressed in his European travels with what he had seen of modern church design but clearly something struck a chord when he saw Keith Murray's design work at St. Katharine's. But Keith had never been an architect either by training or by qualification.

Maguire continues:

*27 'Gresham met Keith at St Katharine's and when the War Damage Commission had sorted out the payment on St Paul's, he asked Keith to recommend an architect. Keith introduced me to Gresham and of course I produced my student scheme and the hypothetical project I had done for a Catholic church as the only evidence of experience in the field (both shown below), and perhaps I also commended myself to Gresham as a fellow revolutionary.*

*He persuaded the PCC to appoint me. (I had in fact built something: a kiosk on the Boat Train platform at Victoria Station for International Travellers' Aid, a charity devoted to saving incoming foreign girls from the prowling pimps. I had also designed a house for my boss, the Editor of the Architects' Journal, but as he was building it himself it was not even out of the ground.'*

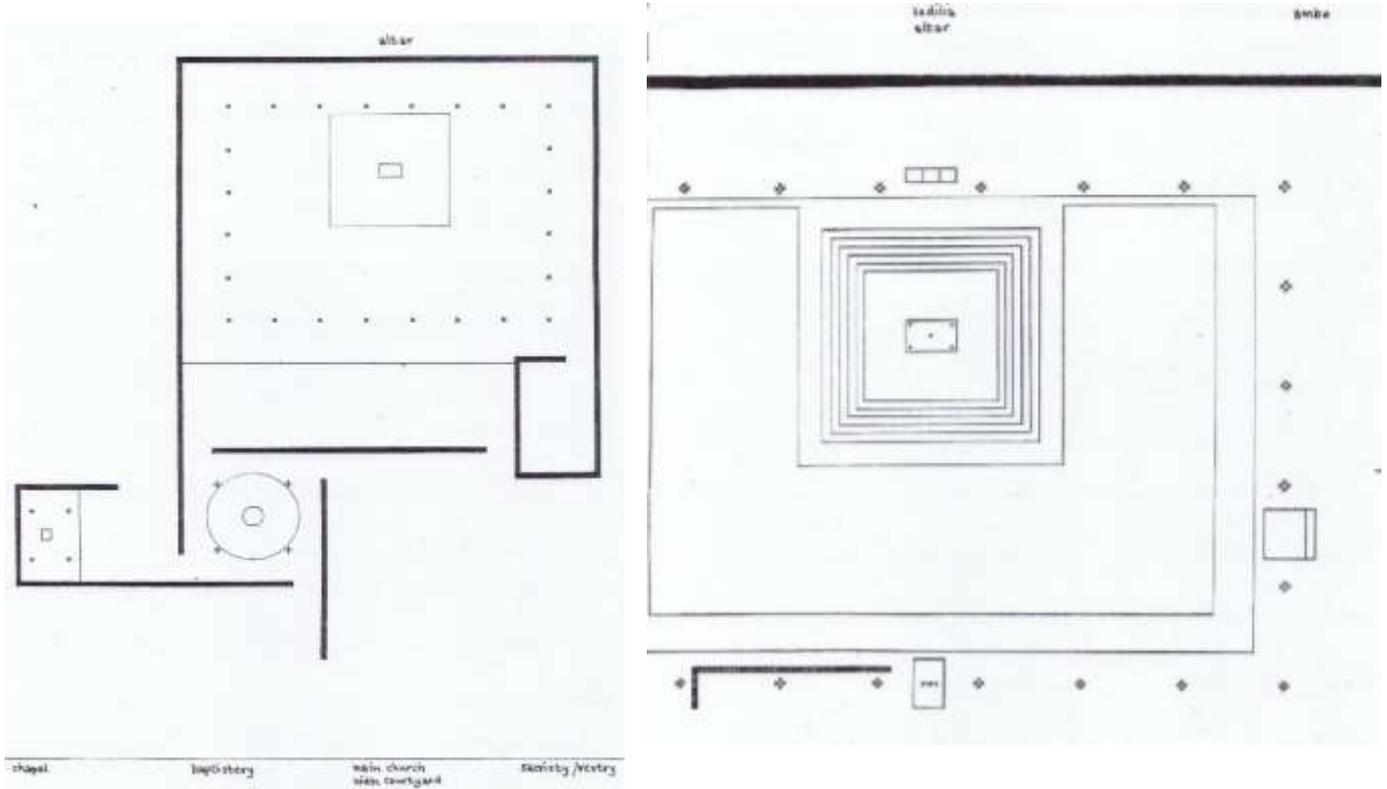
Out of this new partnership of totally untried skills on such a major scale arose what I call the '**First Design**' (described soon). Partly because both these men were so young with no sizeable portfolio this was a huge risk and it is a sign of how much confidence they inspired that the authorities ran with them – also because there was quite a belief at the right levels of the hierarchy in Fr. Kirkby's vision.

Even so, there was a lot of nervousness and Maguire found himself almost cornered and compromised and had to make a lot of uneasy concessions in that First Design to ensure it would be accepted.

Gerry Adler points out: <sup>29</sup> *'Maguire's credentials were scanty, to say the least.'* When offered the commission for the church, the only two pieces of design that Maguire could point to were his failed student project and ...'

<sup>29</sup> 'a hypothetical plan of 1955 for a Roman Catholic church (shown below) which he had prepared for publication in Edward Mills's book <sup>1</sup> *The Modern Church* (1956) and his failed AA student church project of 1952 in his own hand (left & right below). The germ of the executed church at Bow Common can easily be seen in these two designs.

The first one a bold, flat-roofed composition with a pronounced reinforced concrete diagrid structure, the second with parts more individually articulated ... in which the continuous enveloping wall gave the degree of enclosure required in a church.'

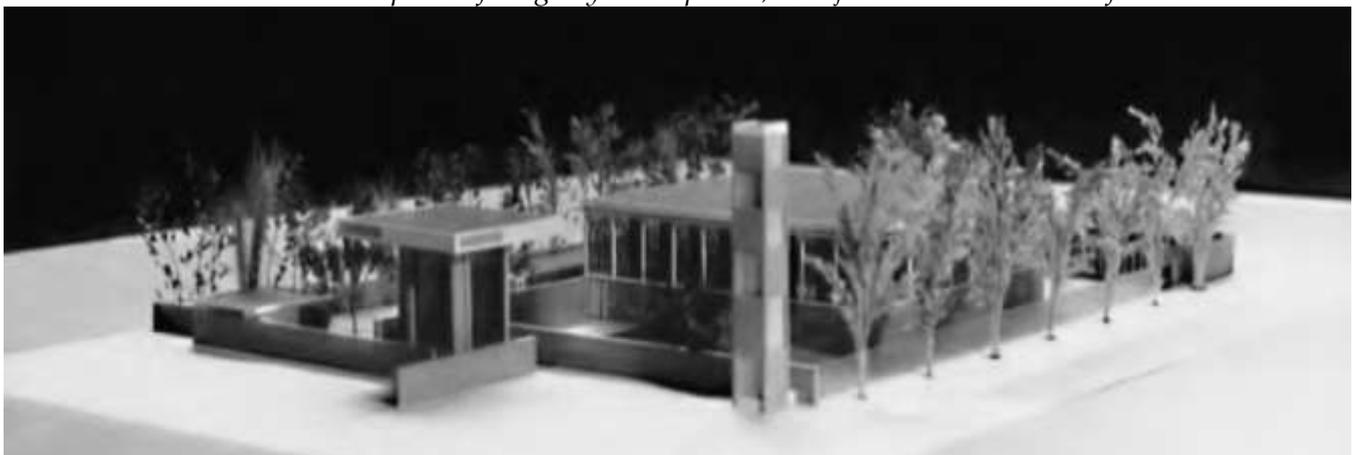


Bob Maguire refers with amusement to the irony of being failed on his student project!

<sup>27</sup> 'I was in my fourth year of the five-year course at the AA School of Architecture and had just finished a student project for a new church in which I set out my thoughts at that stage. The presentation had included little copies of the plan showing in sequence where everyone was at every stage of the Eucharist - lots of movement, people out of their seats.... My tutors found it unrecognisable as a church and failed me on that project, which really is the biggest and funniest irony of my life, considering what flowed later from that design.'

Donald Williamson also says:

<sup>20</sup> 'In 1952, while at the AA, Maguire worked on a student project to design a church. In an era when Churches were 'intended to create an atmosphere of "dignity and repose"', he rejected the school's brief and wrote his own.'

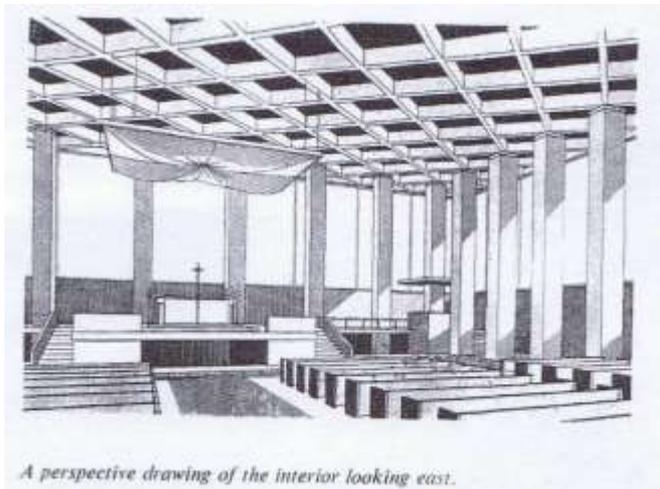


<sup>20</sup> 'His eventual submission was rejected outright by the jury of tutors, mainly because he had not placed the altar against the east wall. The plan was out of its time in this country, even in the avant-garde AA.'

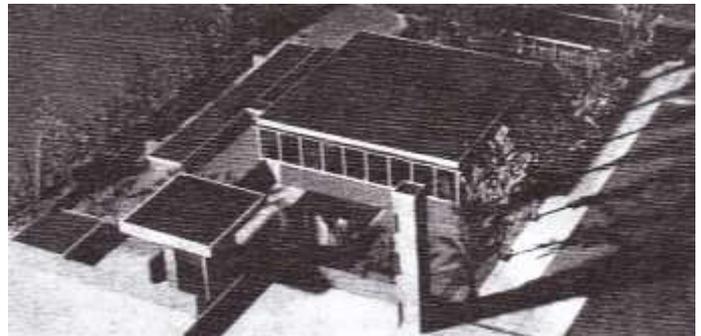
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**Project for a Roman Catholic Church, by Robert Maguire.** The Liturgy has always adjusted itself to the specific needs of any age while still retaining its basic form. In our own time certain needs and their corresponding liturgical adjustments are beginning to make themselves felt, and will have their effect on the church plan. This experimental project has been designed to meet the requirements of the Dialogue Mass (in which the congregation say the responses) and the Mass *versus populum* (in which the celebrant faces the congregation across the altar). The result is a square church-plan which, using the modern structural technique of pre-stressed concrete, is unencumbered by columns, except the one row around the outside which defines the processional way. In disposing the main elements within the church group, an attempt has been made to place each according to its importance and function.

In fact, what he was aiming to demonstrate - that HOW a building was used and the centrality to its design and structure of the natural movements and needs of those using it, was pivotal to the direction in which he was leading not only church architecture but the others themes of his future career as an architect. The scene is now set for the appearance in Bow Common of its new parish church, the likes of which had not been seen anywhere in Britain before. But first ... what were the formative influences on those who would produce such a remarkable building?



A perspective drawing of the interior looking east.



## The Liturgical Movement

There has already been mention of the **Liturgical Movement** as a major force for the new church at Bow Common being designed as it was. As noted, the Judges who awarded the church the **National Churches Trust Diamond Jubilee Award for the UK's "Best modern (post-1953) church"** had made the significant comment that the building has been '*the embodiment of the ground swell of ideas about Christian worship, loosely termed the **Liturgical Movement**, which swept Europe and the United States after the Second World War.*'

The origins of this Movement can be found as early as 1832 in the Roman Catholic Church in the French Benedictine community of Solesmes where liturgical scholarship began to lead to liturgical change, aiming to restore Roman liturgy to its medieval form. As the 19<sup>th</sup> century progressed interest grew as very early texts were discovered or consulted, to reveal early liturgical practice and Church order. Pope Pius X was influential in this trend, in 1903 encouraging the faithful to participate actively in the liturgy, which he saw as a source for the renewal of Christian spirituality. He called for more frequent communion of the faithful, in particular the young. This was not just some rarified scholastic exercise and in 1909 this Pope convened a conference in Mechelen in Belgium, now regarded as launching the Liturgical Movement.

Liturgy was to be the means of instructing the people in Christian faith and life. To enable this the Mass should be translated into the vernacular to promote active participation of the faithful.

It was argued that worship was the **common action** of the people of God and not solely performed by the priest – a very significant ‘political’ implication for a very stratified and hierarchical church governance.

From being largely contained within religious communities in France, Belgium and Germany after Mechelen this Movement spread further into Italy, Holland, England and then the USA, entering parishes and taking on a strong pastoral dimension by the time of the 2<sup>nd</sup> World War. In Germany, by the mid-twenties, the debate about church building was already being drawn into a wider debate concerning the Church itself, its nature, its structure, the worship that is its distinctive activity, and its function in the modern world. The nascent liturgical movement was beginning to provide the radical theological thinking that was so desperately needed, not only by church architects but by all who were seeking to embody authentic Christian tradition in forms of equal authenticity.

Architecture was beginning to be related to theology and it was becoming clear, that in order to understand the purpose of the ‘domus ecclesiae’ (literally, ‘the house of the church’, the first churches were, indeed, ‘domestic’ – in people’s homes), one must first seek to understand the purpose of the ‘ecclesia’ (the church) itself: that the first necessity for church builders was to forget all about architecture and to study the anatomy of Christ's body, the structure of the temple built of living stones. This idea of liturgy as an inclusive activity, subversive of individualism, while exciting to some, also raised anxieties at the Centre. In 1947 Pope Pius XII warned of false innovations and radical changes, fearing ‘protestantising’ influences within the liturgical movement.

In the Church of England the move for change and new vision was moving in the opposite direction. The Tractarians, inspired by the Oxford Movement in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, were exploring the richer liturgy and ritual and ceremonial of medieval Christian worship, deepening an understanding of liturgy and of Communion. This was regarded with much alarm and opposition and even legal action and was seen as nothing less than a move towards ‘popery.’ Later in this account when attention turns to the first church of St. Paul, Bow Common, research that I have carried out shows that such controversy was ablaze in our own parish with newspaper headlines in January 1910 showing grave suspicions of ‘ritualism’ at Bow Common!

Horton M. Davies, a professor at Princeton University, has made the interesting observation that *‘What is fascinating about (the liturgical) movement is that it has enabled Protestant churches to recover in part the Catholic liturgical heritage, while the Catholics seem to have appropriated the Protestant valuation of preaching, of shared worship in the vernacular tongue, and the importance of laity as the people of God.’*

In 1965, Nicholas Taylor reflects on ‘A Realistic Church for our Time’: <sup>12</sup> *‘Since the days of the great East End slum priests of the last century, Lowder and Mackonochie, Wainwright and Dolling, the Church of England has had its role in the local community drastically narrowed. It was, in fact, always a minority cult, but not until after the mass exodus of its congregations during and after the second World war did the Church begin to admit that it was no longer the all-embracing establishment of medieval tradition, but rather a battered sect in an alien world - a position superficially similar to that of the Early Christians.*

*At the same time, less obviously, its potential has been enlarged: the mass literacy, aimed at first in the Education Act of 1870, has gradually transformed the capabilities, both of comprehension and or self-expression, of the ordinary members of each congregation. This has made the old class distinctions of churchgoing increasingly meaningless; the separate services at 9.15 for the servants (simple, hearty and didactic) and at 11 am for their masters (elaborate, obscure and ritualistic) have become merged in most parishes into a single service of ‘Parish Communion’. It has also had a fundamental effect on the planning and architectural design of new church buildings.’*

<sup>12</sup> *'When the priest is no longer an isolated, patriarchal mediator and fount of learning, but merely primus inter pares the hierarchy of the medieval church plan, with its long screened chancel for the clergy and its separated nave seating the people, has become increasingly irrelevant. This is now widely recognised on the Continent, where a host of churches, by architects such as Schwarz, Bartning, Böhm and Le Donné, now reflect the principles of the so-called 'Liturgical Movement' – the democratic assembly of God's people centred on the Word and Sacraments, with every member participating fully in the action. This new thinking has cut across the petty differences of sects and has been a major force behind the 'Ecumenical Movement' for church unity.'*

All of this was now in the air and in the open, in what was a very traditional post-War Church of England and the Liturgical Movement truly flowered in its first architectural manifestation in this country in the new St. Paul's, Bow Common thanks to the vision of Maguire, Murray and Kirkby. In a lecture in 2000, speaking of two modern churches of 1960 and 1963 and speaking, too, of what he and Murray had created by then, Maguire said this: <sup>26</sup> *'So here we see a physical expression of something happening. That 'something' in very broad terms can be described as the Liturgical Movement - although I realise there will be many for whom the term suggests too Roman Catholic and too continental a movement for them to be happy with. But I am referring to a revolutionary set of connected ideas which stemmed from theologians of many Christian persuasions, and had its roots in Early Christian scholarship.'*

### **The New Churches Research Group:**

While the very definition of what liturgy is, was in full ferment, some who shared those views turned their minds to how this should impact on church architecture, on the relationship between a church building and its congregation. A remarkable figure on the scene in those days was **Canon Peter Hammond** (24<sup>th</sup> February 1921 – 1<sup>st</sup> March 1999). He was a many-gifted, multifaceted man with wide and deep interests – in art, architecture, the Eastern Orthodox Churches, music, drama, Greek history and much else. In the 1950's the focus of his interest once more shifted. In his tiny Cotswolds village church at Bagendon, his creative sense of liturgy was expressed in the way in which he celebrated standing behind the altar facing the people. This is now totally the norm but was pioneering and unheard of in those days and in such a traditional rural setting.

In about 1956, having seen Bob Maguire's contribution to Edward Mills book, 'The Modern Church' Peter Hammond made contact with Maguire, who writes this: <sup>27</sup> *'Peter Hammond wrote to me out of the blue to say that he was about to write a book on The Modern Renaissance of Religious Art and would I meet him to discuss the thinking behind the schemes illustrated in Mill's book. Keith and I met him in a coffee bar and we persuaded Peter that the religious art being produced (e.g. in Coventry) was ungrounded in a theology of worship, and he there and then decided to write Liturgy and Architecture instead.'* This book was a classic, as was his later work of 1962, 'Towards a Church Architecture.'

These established him as the Church of England's leading architectural theorist. His influence on the transformation of the design of religious buildings however went far wider and became truly international and inter-denominational. Nor did he mince his words! In 'Towards a Church Architecture', for instance, he says this:

<sup>4</sup> *'An ecclesiastical commission is regarded as a sort of architectural holiday; an opportunity to escape from the restraints of normal design procedure into the less exacting world of fantasy and individual self-expression.'*

He goes on to make a vigorous plea for a radical approach to the problem. He and his colleagues appeal to the architect and clergyman to think, seriously, before starting work; to ask, 'What is a church? What is it for, what is done in it? What space and what furnishings are required?' In other words, to apply the same research and analysis to a church as to a factory, school or hospital, and from the programme thus arrived at to construct from the inside out, instead of striving for effects and atmosphere.

Maguire continues: <sup>27</sup> *'We had no idea then that he was such a powerful writer. He and Keith and I had a great friendship, and it must have been in 1957 that we had the idea of forming the **New Churches Research Group (NCRG)**.'* As so often in the history of the Church, a small likeminded group of friends can change the thinking of a generation.

Centring on Peter Hammond, and his book *Liturgy and Architecture*, Maguire and Murray were joined by Donald Allchin, Fr Benedict Green CR, Victor de Waal, Esther Moir, and a number of others and, by means of articles, lectures, newsletters, and conferences, their ideas spread, and they became the architectural expression of the Liturgical Movement.

*'The NCRG has from the outset been an inter-denominational body, drawing its membership from most of the major Christian communities; it also includes a number of architects who would not describe themselves as Christians at all, but who recognize that many of the problems which the group has tried to face are problems affecting modern architecture in general: not merely a single building type, which, whatever its importance in the past, may seem today to be of somewhat marginal concern.'* (Peter Hammond).

In fact the New Churches Research Group was not a movement but rather a spearhead in these islands for the Liturgical Movement and highly influential & supportive of new design of this kind.

Elain Harwood reflects on the NCRG and the Liturgical Movement:

<sup>24</sup> *'The Liturgical Movement came late to Britain. However in the New Churches Research Group, collected around Hammond, Maguire and Murray, there is a consensus in building churches which are clear demonstrations of their ideals of worship. But there was much else going on besides. Far greater patronage was in the hands of the Roman Catholic dioceses because of their close involvement with a few designers, and there is a remarkable similarity in many of the works commissioned. The sacrifice of detailing to a powerful total effect gives a coarseness to many works, including Liverpool Metropolitan Cathedral, which is, however, offset by an intelligent use of works of art including some examples of exceptional quality.'*

*Only the Archdiocese of Glasgow chose to work regularly with an inspired firm of architects, Gillespie Kidd and Coia's work is less austere than Maguire and Murray's, rougher and so fanciful as to be almost unhinged from the reality of structure. While Metzstein and MacMillan's achievement belongs with that of Pace, Goalen and others firmly in the European sphere of expressionistic modernism, the Wittkowan sources of Maguire and Murray set them in the English classical tradition. This long-time dalliance with Palladianism, not found elsewhere, sets English Brutalism apart from its contemporaries; it is an extra dimension of sources which make it harder to understand. What is confusing about the work of the Smithsons is that they soon began to incorporate many other ideas in their work. By sticking to a classical inspiration, Maguire and Murray help clarify what was happening elsewhere in English architecture.'*

*Whither the Liturgical Movement? By 1969 David Bishop could write that 'liturgical insights that appeared to be the 'property' of the avant-garde are now almost universally accepted, indeed, are in danger of becoming cliché. 'He found that churches were no longer 'borrowing' from secular architecture but at their best were in the vanguard of modern design. But a new architectural form having been found for the post-war church, it was quickly abandoned.'*

### **Review of post-war Modernism ...**

In a lecture in 1995, Bob Maguire spoke of the lead-up to and the context of what he had created at Bow Common:

<sup>19</sup> *'... we tend to forget that the British hardly knew what Modernism was in 1945, even though Peter Jones was there for the upper classes at the centre of the known world. That year, at age 14, I cycled around to visit the other eight Modern Movement buildings in London. That situation was changed by the South Bank Exhibition in 1951, and many of the architects who did it were my tutors at the AA School. Ungratefully, as students some of us felt that they had somehow not been true to what we saw as the Modern Movement - the Movement in its heroic age and as recorded in the seminal books, the buildings we mostly only knew about from photographs, for the five years of war and the immediate post-war chaos and travel restriction had put them beyond our reach.'*

*I now see that the main reason for the subtle but critical change was that our tutors had spent those years fighting the war; they were the students of the late 30s, when Sweden and Finland had been the first countries to give Modernism a national blessing and straight away had set about softening its impact with a large dose of local tradition. And as neutral countries, they had continued building, and developing that architecture, through the war years.'*

<sup>19</sup> 'Our tutors' eyes were turned in that direction, and British post-1951 Modernism had a strong Scandinavian accent. This essentially pragmatic architecture, with few exceptions lacking freshness and hung about with clichés, quickly got itself a name - the New Empiricism. It was highly exploitable politically and commercially, for except in masterly hands it was simply stripped-down construction and so dirt cheap. By 1957 - a space of only six years since the South Bank - the bandwagon was fully rolling, everyone including a whole generation of neo-Georgians had climbed on, and almost the entire output of British architects had levelled itself down to a workaday, threadbare, uninspired travesty of Modernism.

... those of us who cared passionately that architecture should have a theoretical, philosophical base - and you have to see that my generation at the AA School were taught not only by the architectural tutors I have mentioned but also by John Summerson, Rudolf Wittkower, Robert Jordan and the engineer Felix Samuely, so the idea of a proper theoretical base was well planted - we, the passionate ones were only too aware that there was a discontinuity between what the works of the masters said, with all the eloquence of their architectonic language, and the rationality of the principles which the masters themselves said they had applied. Now, this will be no great surprise to you; ... you will be thoroughly used to the idea of architects, and for that matter every other kind of artist, saying one thing, usually emphatically, and doing, well, not quite another: it's just that as the oeuvre comes tumbling out there is so much more to be said.

The true high point in British post-war Modernism was an extension of the concept of function into the psychological, humanitarian realm. It was started by a group of passionate young architects and educationalists at the then Ministry of Education, broadening the theory out of a deeply felt concern for educational values and children's well-being, and they were looking at such matters as scale, colour, enclosure, glare, informality, emotive warmth and coldness. They are the reason why our post-war schools were better than anyone else's in the world. Being very much aligned with that movement, what Keith and I wanted to do was to push the boundaries out further - to mankind's need for symbolic meaningfulness, even to matters of the spirit in the broad sense, and because we were Christians, in the specific Christian sense.

What we (actually) applied was observation and intuition; one would like to say sensibility. And because Christian worship is two thousand years old, and draws on Jewish traditions much older still, the observation was of course observation of the historical phenomena we still have with us, and mostly - but not exclusively - architecture. Being observation, and being intuition, the process can make no claim to be objective.

But it can claim to be **authentic**, in the sense of the living eye of the artist drawing inspiration from the inherited physical manifestations of mankind's needs, feelings and experience. ... If you notice, for example, that all our churches are lit from high up and entirely by uncoloured daylight and that this is reflected and distributed in ways that are crucial to what may be called their atmosphere, then I can tell you that I was knocked sideways as a first-year student by Soane's highly deliberate use of daylight, and have never forgotten what it does, the nature of its effects; these are effects out of time, beyond style, and appropriate to certain limited circumstances and not others. But you will not find any square pocket-handkerchief domes, mannered lanterns, or quasi cornices.

So far as worship is concerned - and worship can be said to be the central, most important activity of the Church - it (churches such as the new Coventry Cathedral) spoke of a non-participating laity relegated during services to performing simultaneous but private devotions assisted by emotive art-works, or else listening to the exhortations of a clergyman sharply distinguished as a member of a separate religious caste. And this was at a time when the leading theologians of almost all Christian persuasions were agreeing with each other that the Church had lost its identity as the People of God, chiefly by denying the lay people their proper expression as - to use St Peter's own phrase - 'a royal priesthood, a holy nation'; that denial being explicit in the deterioration of the Eucharistic liturgy - the most characteristic act of Worship - to words and actions said and done, and jealously guarded, by one man with his back turned to everyone else, at the end of a long vista.'

<sup>19</sup> ... it seemed not to have occurred to anyone in this country that the kind of parish church which Churches of all denominations were building in the new housing estates up and down the country was a theological and therefore functional anachronism, however stylistically 'modern' the fancy-dress. Even the theologians, although they were propounding Eucharistic worship as essentially participatory, the act of the whole Church as one body, had not realized that the total transformation of relationships involved - priest to people, people to one another, people to God, priest to God - needed a radically new kind of building.'

In 1997 the RIBA held an important exhibition, 'The Twentieth Century Church' at the Heinz Gallery. In the write up it said this:

<sup>21</sup> 'The Renaissance period looked back to the earliest manifestations of man's intelligence and the simplest elements of geometry. 'With the Renaissance revival of the Greek mathematical interpretation of God and the world, and invigorated by the Christian belief that Man as the image of God embodied the harmonies of the Universe, the Vitruvian figure inscribed in a square and a circle became a symbol of the mathematical sympathy between microcosm and macrocosm.

How could the relation of Man to God be better expressed, we feel now justified in asking, than by building the house of God in accordance with the fundamental geometry of square and circle'. Here was the perfect architectural justification for the Liturgical Movement.

The Renaissance saw a crop of centralised churches, with circular, square or Greek cross plans set under a central dome. Giuliano da Sangallo's Sta Maria Delle Carceri at Prato, begun in 1485, is an early example. Bramante's Tempietto (1502) in Rome was itself derived from the martyria of early Christians, which were nearly always centrally planned in imitation of the Pantheon - itself put to this use; Palladio's Tempietto at Maser, in Ticino and built around 1580, is a later derivative. The influence of this planning ideal can be seen in the work of Christopher Wren and in early non-conformist churches.

Where other architects exploited organic forms of architecture while questioning their significance in the name of the Liturgical Movement, Maguire went for a geometrical purity akin to the aims of early Brutalism. 'The formal clarity is to be seen as part of a determination to make the whole conception of the building plain and comprehensible. No mystery, no romanticism, no obscurities about function or circulation', wrote Rayner Banham.'

## Maguire and Murray

Maguire and Murray were by no means the first examples of a 'brave new world' of church architecture in these islands. Here in January 2002 (re-arranged from 2000) Bob Maguire outlines the developing context of church architecture and the critical significance of WHAT church buildings were perceived as being for:

<sup>26</sup> 'We live in a time of accelerating change, one of the problems we have is that the last fifty years has seen more change in the design and layout of parish churches than is at first apparent to the eye. This is because although the vast majority of them look modern - in the sense of some variation of Modern Movement style (or aberration of it) - the **spatial concepts involved have shifted** according to **changing ideas about the nature of worship, of the nature of the Church as a body, of its relationship with the unchurched world outside, and also according to the differing degrees of understanding of those matters by their architects**, and lastly (and sadly) of the differing degrees of understanding of what the Modern Movement in architecture - the milieu in which they thought they were working - was about. Being designed in 1956 and consecrated in 1960 puts St. Paul's, Bow Common at the beginning of the major changes.'

In the introduction to his seminal work on Maguire and Murray, Gerry Adler says this:

<sup>29</sup> *'Both partners lived their faith through their work. Robert Maguire never abandoned the Christianity of his family background and Keith Murray's early work as a designer and maker of religious art and artefacts contributed to this orientation. Maguire & Murray was a practice little known outside architectural circles.'*

<sup>29</sup> *'The partners would have found self-aggrandising publicity inimical to their ethos of close engagement with the client. As a small-scale practice that resisted the allure of fame and fortune in the dogged pursuit of architectural truth, they were widely admired and emulated and never needed to advertise for staff: students and young architects regarded it as a privilege and an education to work for them.'*

*Even though the original partners decided to split up after three decades, their model of a small but high-principled office persisted longer. They were architects of the Welfare State and its public service ethos, their clients being institutions with strong social agendas and high ideals such as schools, universities and the Church. The world of property developers, luxury villas and corporate headquarters was outside their orbit. The values of Maguire and Murray were those of the Arts and Crafts Movement in England, with its respect for all kinds of proper making, informed by hand and eye, in the building trades as in pottery, textiles or lettering.'*

Gerry Adler continues:

<sup>29</sup> *'The early 1950s saw the emergence of a movement called **'New Brutalism.'** It was described as **'an ethic not an aesthetic.'** Such strong ethical concerns in English architecture seem to come in cycles, so that similarities can be found in the attitudes of Gothic Revival buildings of the 1850s, Arts and Crafts buildings around 1900, and New Brutalist ones of the 1950s. While never officially incorporated in what at best was a very informally constituted grouping, Maguire & Murray shared the New Brutalist anger at Modernism's loss of energy and direction in the immediate post-war period.'*

*The reduction of much contemporary architecture to thoughtless copying of motifs took its cue from the modern system of architectural education: Murray was convinced that 'material fabric and symbolic pattern' were two aspects of building still within the remit of the architects. He had a similar respect for the early stirrings of Modernism. The word 'authentic' characterises Murray's vision for contemporary design, as it does Maguire's respect for patterns of use and for architectural history.*

*Their designs invariably arose out of authentic considerations of place, people and construction. In our postmodern world it is hard to know what is authentic, immersed as we are in images virtual and meretricious. But it was during the 1960s and 1970s that concerns started to be voiced about succumbing to the 'hidden persuaders' of commercial imperatives. Architectural responses to this perceived want of authenticity were rarely voiced at the time, at least by practitioners. It was as if Maguire and Murray were prescient about the severe loss of authenticity heralded by the postmodern turn in architecture in the 1980s and beyond.*

*Understanding the motivations and achievements of Maguire and Murray, who made such a vital contribution to architectural culture from mid-twentieth century on, can only encourage and inspire those searching for an architecture of substance and authenticity. Knowledge of their work, their buildings, projects and writings, informs our debate and discourse about the direction of architecture today and tomorrow.'*

Nigel Melhuish, reflecting in 1970 on Church Building in the Sixties, comments on Maguire & Murray:

<sup>15</sup> *'For architects the dichotomy between the sacred and the secular is normally associated with the problem of historicism. The notion of a style of architecture especially suitable for churches originally came from Pugin and the Camden Society, though the Gothic revival got a new lease of life in the 1920s from Otto's theory of the 'numinous'. In this country a churchy historicism survived in modified form (as in Coventry) during the 1950's, and the decisive break did not come until Bow Common.'*



Maguire &  
Murray 1970  
© RIBA

<sup>15</sup> *'Maguire and Murray's parish churches are 'traditional' in the sense that they have an expected scale in relation to their environment and assume the normal parish plan of church, hall and vicarage. But their monumentality owes nothing to historicism or to preconceived notions of the 'sacred'.*

*A fundamental problem of modern church design is also a central problem for theology: to re-establish a valid and unaffected language of metaphor. The basic Christian objection to the survival of historicism in church architecture was that it no longer provided a metaphorical language which made sense.'*

*The parish churches of Maguire and Murray are all in working-class districts, and the architectural metaphors they employ come mainly from the world of industry. The environment of*

*industrial buildings provides the back-ground against which the spatial organisation and 'monumentality' of these churches acquire a Christian significance. These buildings are designed for a social purpose, and they provide an incomparable setting for parish church services. But when empty they also make a powerful impression, the nature of which deserves careful consideration in current discussions of the 'sacred' and the 'secular'.*

*The high-level lighting gives a withdrawn quality, but there is a lively, expansive atmosphere which is the antithesis of the numinous. The height of the interior - emphasised rather than played down - makes the visitor look up & 'stand tall': one feels that the God who is worshipped here would not expect to see anyone on his knees.*

*The complexity of the volume invites exploration and encourage movement. While walking about, the significance of the building unfolds and in its emptiness it becomes an 'image' - a kind of statement about its purpose and the people who use it. Anyone who is asked whether the place seems 'sacred' or 'secular' will find it difficult to answer. In this context one wonders whether the words do any real work.*

*Certainly the place is 'set apart', but it makes sense in a way which many people at first find unexpected and disturbing: the events which take place in church are set in an environment which gives us new eyes for the familiar world outside.'*

In 1995 Donald Williamson wrote his MA thesis around the Maguire-Murray story:

<sup>20</sup> *'Coming upon this church now one is struck by its quality of stylistic independence. At this early date in the Maguire-Murray partnership their modern-based approach could be said to be influenced by writings of Peter and Alison Smithson and to have affinities with the work of the James Stirling, e.g. his Leicester University Engineering Building. Although Stirling was not a man noted for his generous remarks to his colleagues, he particularly admired the crystalline crown over what he called 'that mausoleum,' St. Paul's, Bow Common. It is quite possible, Maguire believes, that Bow Common was an important influence on Stirling's work.*

*Architectural categorisation can be artificial but in this context the work of Murray and Maguire always seems to be straining from modern to constructivist, to expressionist or conceivably to what came to be called post-modern. Maguire now counsels that Bow Common and his subsequent new churches are "part of the modern movement, first and last". St. Paul's Parish Church, Bow Common seems a brutalist building, both completely confident and unapologetic while being aware of its daunting mission in a tough urban landscape and community.'*

<sup>20</sup> *'...the main overall elements, embracing the Church, the vicarage and its small garden - all playing their role in a very particular part of London, constitute a relevant architectural whole, a forceful Christian presence in the inner city. Like its Byzantine-style fore-runners, this modern work is based on a purposeful interior dictating its exterior. The degree of original thinking done by Maguire with the collaboration of Murray is evident. The revolution is absolute and appropriate.'*

In the Introduction to Gerald Adler's book on the Maguire-Murray partnership, Jonathan Glancey makes these important observations on their work together:

<sup>29</sup> *'Among architectural partnerships, Robert Maguire and Keith Murray were particularly attuned to changes in contemporary society. Their buildings testify to many of the social changes of the era, designed to deal with the straightened circumstances of clients but never appearing impoverished. Owing to Maguire's insistence on cost planning from the outset of a project - not something commonly done at the time - they were intelligently and sensitively handled, getting maximum value from everything that went into the building while avoiding waste.'*

*The buildings were not merely economical solutions to practical problems. Even those not designed for worship have a numinous quality, and schools, housing and university buildings were imbued with an essence transcending the banalities of use.'*

<sup>29</sup> *'In line with the avant-garde tendency of their generation, their buildings have a finely judged tectonic quality, a sense that construction matters. Sound and honest construction informed the ethos of economy and spirituality, the judicious blend of pragmatics and idealism that gave meaning to modest projects in the eyes and hearts of clients, users and passers-by.'*

*The partners were an unusual pair, for while Maguire had a standard architect's education of the time, Murray was a silversmith by training (as was Michael Murray) whose work for a well-known firm of church furnishers led him into the world of Modern architecture. John Craig, the partner of Peter Aldington in the practice that became Aldington, Craig & Collinge, the subject of another book in this series, resembled Murray in that he was not an architect by training.'*

*The mixed educational antecedents and professional loyalties of Maguire and Murray helped them to challenge the easy assumptions of the architectural establishment, in an age when books such as Ivan Illich's *Deschooling Society*, 1971, questioned the dead hand of the professions. They were though supremely professional, in the sense of being wedded to the vocation of design in pursuit of their clients' needs.'*

*The phrase 'nearness to need' used by W. R. Lethaby became their motto, as Maguire explained in his lecture at the RIBA in 1971. Before his death in 1931, Lethaby was scathing about the way that Modern architecture, having attempted to break away from historic styles, had apparently become another style itself.'*

*The superficiality of 'contemporary' - the post-war version of Modernism - was the target of the movement of the early 1950s called **The New Brutalism**, associated initially with Alison and Peter Smithson, and soon afterwards with James Stirling and James Gowan, and a mixture of individuals and larger practices such as Lyons, Israel, Ellis and Gray.'*

*New Brutalism was described as 'an ethic not an aesthetic', and strong ethical concerns in English architecture seem to come in cycles, so that similarities can be found in the attitudes and, to a considerable degree, the actual appearance, of Gothic Revival buildings of the 1850s, Arts and Crafts buildings around 1900, and New Brutalist ones of the 1950s.'*

*While never officially incorporated in what at best was a very informally constituted grouping, Maguire & Murray shared the New Brutalist anger at Modernism's loss of energy and direction in the immediate post-war period.'*

<sup>29</sup> ' In an essay of 1962 Robert Maguire maintained that 'There used to be something loosely called the Modern Movement, "movement" signifying something on the move, developing. The serious contributions to this movement showed the same profound concern, a concern with meanings and values in architecture.

Despite these contributions being 'undiscriminating, biased, self-contradictory, or unrelated to reality', Maguire, and Murray, too, believed that the artistic changes wrought by Modernism, brought about by the profound social, economic and technical developments of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, were bound to have their effects on the design and construction of buildings and settlements.' A focus for Maguire and Murray's frustration - as 'angry young men' in the early 1950s - was Basil Spence's Coventry Cathedral with its liturgically conservative plan, won in competition in 1951 and completed in 1962; this became their *bête noire* because its novelty only seemed skin-deep.

The buildings of the Festival of Britain attracted similar criticism. Churches were the area in which Maguire and Murray made their name and nowhere could ethics be more appropriately exercised. They were not only designers but also deeply engaged in the New Churches Research Group, through which the Liturgical Movement, originating in Europe between the wars, arrived in England with an impact equivalent to that of the Ecclesiological Society a hundred years before in terms of changing the manner of worship in conjunction with the conventions of architecture. For Maguire & Murray, the church became their most well-known building type, and it is largely due to their efforts, through their buildings and writings, that we began to have an authentic expression to the demands of the liturgical movement this side of the English Channel.

Maguire and Murray, as individual designers and together in the practice which bore their names, represented the best qualities of small-scale practice during a timescale that spanned from Harold Macmillan's 'never had it so good' era (whose values they doubted) via Harold Wilson's 'white heat of the technological revolution' (about which they had some reservations) through to the unbridled consumerism of Margaret Thatcher's Britain in the 1980s (towards the end of which their partnership was dissolved)? To be acquainted with their projects and writings is of intrinsic architectural interest; their work is additionally an index of the profound social and economic developments that the UK has undergone in the second half of the twentieth century.

They believed that architecture had to respond to these external pressures in an intelligent and creative manner, but that the response ought to be tempered by a positive respect for, and engagement with, the human condition. They were not alone in this struggle, among architects and others involved in the arts, as the critic Bryan Appleyard explains in his book *The Pleasures of Place*.

Maguire held that the radicalism of the Modern Movement of the 1920s and 1930s had subsided into the bland stylistic exercise that went by the name 'Contemporary Architecture', that it had 'undergone a premature crystallisation. We have a new Beaux Arts. Its success is transforming our cities. And not for the better, needless to say.

The Beaux Arts represented the French academic style and training that Modernism was meant to replace, so Maguire's assertion that Modernism had become the next academic style was quite shocking in the early 1960s. The reduction of much contemporary architecture to thoughtless copying of motifs took its cue from the modern system of architectural education.

In almost every architectural school in this country, students are taught to design according to such 'principles': garbled versions of a few ideas from the early days of the Modern Movement, applied with an intellectual licence and without understanding. To meet the practical demands of the situation, a whole series of architectural devices had been developed (mostly borrowed out of context from photographs of serious buildings) which appear to answer to these "principles", and are used in various combinations. The constant repetition of these devices gives an appearance of consistency to the products, hence the illusion of style.'

<sup>29</sup> 'At the same time Murray was convinced that 'material fabric and symbolic pattern' were two aspects of building still within the remit of the architects. He had a similar respect for the early stirrings of Modernism: 'The revulsion against fancy dress styles of architecture towards the end of the nineteenth century was due to a growing recognition that good architecture can only be created if it is rooted in the life and culture which it serves. Many and varied pronouncements were made as to how an appropriate relationship could be achieved, each concerned with one or more aspects of the rapidly changing ethos of the age, such as the changing social pattern or the advance of technology. Among those which have had a lasting significance are the concern for the basic elements of a building – and for function, in which both architect and client are involved.'

## Coventry Cathedral

This was popularly seen as the prime example of modern church architecture in Britain but, as already seen above, there was strong criticism from within the modern Church Movement. Maguire and Murray saw it as ungrounded in a theology of worship.



Image © Steve Cadman 2008 on Flickr

Returning to an earlier quote from Maguire:

<sup>19</sup> 'Coventry Cathedral epitomises all that was theologically retrogressive not only in the Church of England but also in the other mainline Churches at the time. So far as worship is concerned - and worship can be said to be the central, most important activity of the Church - it (churches such as the new Coventry Cathedral) spoke of a non-participating laity relegated during services to performing simultaneous but private devotions assisted by emotive art-works, or else listening to the exhortations of a clergyman sharply distinguished as a member of a separate religious caste.

And this was at a time when the leading theologians of almost all Christian persuasions were agreeing with each other that the Church

had lost its identity as the People of God, chiefly by denying the lay people their proper expression as – to use St Peter's own phrase - 'a royal priesthood, a holy nation'; that denial being explicit in the deterioration of the Eucharistic liturgy - the most characteristic act of Worship - to words and actions said and done, and jealously guarded, by one man with his back turned to everyone else, at the end of a long vista.

A focus for Maguire and Murray's frustration - as 'angry young men' in the early 1950s - was Basil Spence's Coventry Cathedral with its liturgically conservative plan, won in competition in 1951 and completed in 1962; this became their *bête noire* because its novelty only seemed skin-deep. 'The buildings of the Festival of Britain attracted similar criticism. Churches were the area in which Maguire and Murray made their name and nowhere could ethics be more appropriately exercised.'

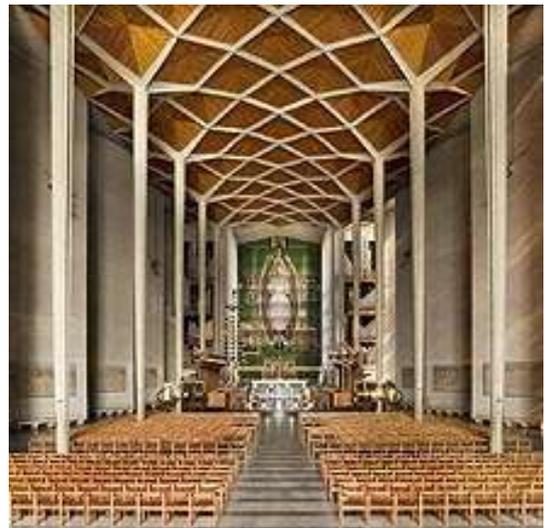


Image © English Heritage

Tanya Harrod commented in 1999:

<sup>25</sup> '... when Coventry Cathedral was completed clergy like Peter Hammond found that their fears had been justified. Hammond deplored 'the primacy of the visual', arguing that the modern church should not be 'a sort of jewelled cave in which the solitary individual may find some kind of worship experience.'

<sup>25</sup> 'His criticisms had some point. Coventry was unashamedly visual, its East end dramatically remote, dominated by the altar, which, Hammond pointed out, was unrelated to the human scale of a shared celebration of bread and wine. Hammond believed that for Spence the function of the altar was primarily sculptural, noting that 'its relationship to the worshipping congregation is far less important than its relationship to the great tapestry on the East wall.'

She also quotes Rayner Banham from the early 1960's

<sup>25</sup> 'For Rayner Banham, an admirer of the Smithsons and a member of the Independent Group, Coventry was 'the worst setback to English church architecture for a very long time'. He dismissed the Cathedral as 'trad, dad ..... a medieval long plan with aisles and off-lying polygonal or circular chapels, but executed in non-medieval materials (in part) and adorned with devotional art-work in various non-medieval styles.

Banham's hostility was based on a set of principles shared with architects he admired and with Liturgical Movement figures like Peter Hammond. He admitted he was almost seduced by the stained glass, by Sykes's eye-catching mosaic and by Spence's splendid entrance porch with its masterly handling of space.



Coventry Cathedral: Image © architectsjournal.co.uk

**But, in Banham's view, Coventry was neither architecturally nor liturgically modern and he recommended as a panacea the 'quiet austerities' of St. Paul's, Bow Common, in the East End of London. This 'unpretentious parish church', the outcome of 'a systematic application of functional analysis,' was also singled out by Hammond as a corrective to Coventry.'**

'Robert Maguire and Keith Murray's St Paul's, Bow Common (1958-60), was undoubtedly built to be an effective 'liturgical shed'. It also had its own craft aesthetic.'

Finally, she points out: <sup>25</sup> 'In his Cathedral at Coventry, Basil Spence had wanted to 'turn a visitor into a worshipper'. This was not Maguire and Murray's aim but a concession to passers-by was made in the form of mosaics of

angels above the colonnade which they believed would 'play their part particularly when the church is empty, helping those alone in the building to be aware of the relationship between their worship & the worship of heaven.

Ultimately it was the organisation of space in relation to the altar which they saw as 'far more important than any of the bits and pieces which shape it'. All the fittings in the church were intended to speak in an aesthetic language which the architects believed the congregation would understand and respect.'

<sup>25</sup> 'St Paul's was demonstrably highly crafted and had the effect of making Coventry seem overwrought because, in tribute to the priest and congregation, its architects sought to emphasise industrial craft skills rather than those of the artist crafts. Maguire and Murray went on to create some of the most humane architecture of the next two decades. **But the austerity of Bow Common was replicated less intelligently in many other contexts in the 1960s, above all in public housing. Coventry, on the other hand, led nowhere.** The crafts of stained glass, silver and metalwork and inscriptional carving had been given an opportunity which was not to be developed. (Frederick Gibberd's Roman Catholic Cathedral at Liverpool, completed in 1967, was really a populist rerun of Coventry, employing several of the same artists).'

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