



# The Otford Society Newsletter

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Societies

OCTOBER 2004

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## A new Church Hall for Otford



*An impression of the planned building. The biggest addition for 900 years.*

## **ST BARTHOLOMEW'S CHURCH EXTENSION**

THE PROPOSED addition to St Bartholomew's Church, of a new wing comprising a church office, a meeting room, toilets, a small kitchen and a choir vestry, will be by far the largest extension in the church's 900-year history.

The oldest part of the church is the north wall of the nave, which dates from about the time of the Norman Conquest, 1066. The tower was added about a hundred years later – its doorways and windows have plain pointed arches of the earliest Gothic style, of 1180-90. After another 150 years, in the early fourteenth century, there was a complete redesign. The nave north wall was given its two windows, with Decorated tracery, and the then-existing south wall of the nave must have been given similar windows. The present chancel was added, and this originally had two decorated windows on each side (one survives blocked-up behind the Charles Polhill monument) as well as the great east window. With stained glass in all windows, the whole interior must have been brilliantly lit.

Two hundred years elapsed, and a really large extension came in the early sixteenth century, when the south aisle was added – its date could have been guessed from the Perpendicular style of its windows, but is certain because a will of 1532 describes it as a 'newe Ile'. To build this, the south wall of the nave had to be replaced by an arcade, probably in an elegant Perpendicular style like that of Shoreham church, which was given a south aisle at about the same time. The small vestry of Otford church also dates from the early 16th century. The buttresses against the south wall of the aisle are just like those on the north wall and are probably re-used from the demolished south nave wall – buttresses would have been needed to support both the nave walls when their Decorated windows were put in.

A disastrous fire in about 1630 largely destroyed the interior of the church as well as the upper

stages of its tower. The present quaint wooden porch which still bears the date of 1637 at the west entrance to the tower, and which may mark a finishing touch to structural restoration after this fire, just about brought St Bartholomew's up to its present size.

There has been a lot of internal re-ordering since 1637, of course. Funds evidently weren't available for a new stone arcade after the fire, and the roofs of nave and aisle were supported for the next 200 years on a row of great wooden posts. In the Kent County archives there is a manuscript description of the church in 1840 by a surveyor, Mr W.P. Griffith, who described the posts as octagonal and whitewashed, with black painted capitals. He mentions a wooden gallery at the west end of the nave, lit by a 'modern' window on its north side; now blocked up, the window's position can be seen in the outside stonework of the nave. The font in 1840 was wooden, with a pyramidal cover, so the present stone font and its ornate Jacobean (seventeenth-century) cover must have come later.

Wholesale restoration of the interior came in the 1860s, when the eminent architect G.E. Street (responsible for the Law Courts in the Strand) was called in. At Otford he designed the present nave arcade of Bath stone in a heavy Early English style, as well as the chancel arch and another big arch, now concealed by the organ, between chancel and Lady Chapel. The stone pulpit is probably his, too.

In his design of the proposed extension the architect, Jim Lidbetter, and the church council have been involved in long-continued discussions with interested parties such as Rochester Diocese, English Heritage, Otford Parish Council and Sevenoaks District Council. It will be very interesting to see how it works out in practice.

# COMMENT

THE PLANNED extension to St Bartholomew's will provide Otford's Parish Church with facilities that have long been needed. As well as the provision of toilets, there will be office space for the administration of the Parish. The problem has always been where to place these facilities without detracting from the beauty of the ancient structure and with the least disturbance to the harmony of the buildings grouped around The Green and the Pond at the heart of the Conservation Area.

The changes made over the centuries are described by Bernard Worssam in his article. In recent times we have seen the roof repaired under the supervision of Eric Dillely after severe damage from death-watch beetle. Four new bells were installed in 2000, this event captured on a memorable video filmed by Barbara Darby.\*

The alterations made to the Chancel and Chancel roof in 1863 resulted, we are told in 'The History of Otford',\*\* in the church being closed 'almost certainly for only the second time in some 800 years'. Jim Lidbetter, architect of the new extension, says that the church will *not* be closed this time. The new hall will be built before the entrance from the main church is finally made; not an easy task as the arch and doors will be fashioned to match the existing entrance.

Many will be wondering what will happen to the existing Parish Church Hall in the High Street. Residents have been re-assured by the news that the building is to benefit from some interior improvements. This hall has been for many years a venue for village events and functions. It opened in 1910, cost £500, and was originally known as the 'Institute' – but generally called the 'village hall'. Not until 1952 was it officially named by the Parish Council as the 'Church Hall', when they also designated what these days we usually call 'the village hall' as the 'Otford Memorial Hall'.

The Rev. William Lutyens, Vicar of Otford 1907-1914, is credited with the building of the Church Hall, which replaced the old Parish Room.\*\* The plans were provided, without fee, by his famous architect brother Sir Edwin Lutyens, designer, amongst other things, of The Cenotaph and the old red telephone kiosks. The Otford Society's millennium mosaic portraying the history of our village adorns the High Street wall of the hall, by permission of the Parochial Church Council. I like to think that if and when another panel is added in the years to come, it will depict the 21st century addition to the ancient church of St Bartholomew.

K.L.G.

\* *The Bells of St Bartholomew's*, Barbara Darby. (Available from the Heritage Centre)

\*\* *Otford in Kent. A history*, Dennis Clarke and Anthony Stoyel, Otford & District Historical Society.

*Otford's scale model of the solar system at the moment of the Millennium brought international fame to our village, and an entry in the Guinness Book of Records. It is indeed the largest in the world; Otford can now truthfully say it is a unique place.*

*The project was the brain child of David Thomas and Barry Keenan. DAVID THOMAS writes on the latest developments.*

THE SOLAR SYSTEM MODEL slowly matures. Our aim is for it to be fully mature by 3000 AD! It was visited by the vintage Sir Patrick Moore last year who was very impressed and described it in a radio interview as 'deadly accurate'. My wife Audrey and I visited the model of the nearest star Proxima Centauri 4.3 light years, sorry 5,457 miles away in the buildings of the prestigious Griffith Observatory in Los Angeles. We saw with our own eyes the words below their 38mm model, 'To see the rest of this large scale model, please visit Otford, England'. A model of Sirius similar to the one in the Heritage Centre is available to the public in the Sydney Observatory in Australia and the Stanley Museum on the Falkland Islands houses a model of Barnard's star.

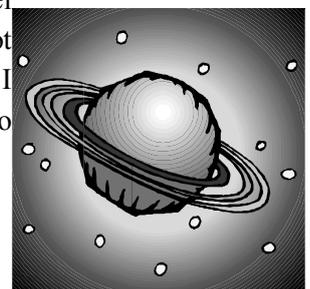
From some of the £4,500 prize money the model has earned, we have bought a GPS guided 8" telescope and were able to get it set up just in time to follow the transit of Venus on the 8th June. We had expected to be visited by 20 or so people. But not only did some 50 adults turn up but due to the intervention of the Parent Teachers Association and the flexibility of the school staff on that very morning about 250 Otford Primary children abandoned orthodox lessons and saw the event through the telescope. The series of photos I took through the telescope show a gap between 9.30 and 11.30 when we were too busy to stop to fix up the camera. For the more technically minded we were able to show through the model and its orbits, why this unique event took place. Many thanks to all the helpers, including Audrey, David Sealey, André Horntvedt-Phillips and Ray Gulliver.

More of the prize money is being used to construct an information board near the centre of the model. So far graffiti vandals have caused minimal damage

but I fear this could become a target. If any readers become aware of damage on this or any of the pillars, would they please inform the Parish Office as quickly as possible so that I can effect repairs.

Accurate orbits of the inner planets have been mown into the grass and fed with fertilizer to make them look dark green. We can show with temporary photographic markers where these planets are on a particular day and time. We can illustrate quite complex astronomical concepts but one needs no technical knowledge to appreciate what the model indicates about the real system on which we live. So far as we know this model is unique in that it is the only one which can show the planets at a particular moment in time. It is the only one on our planet which shows the Solar system as a whole. All other accurate models, beautiful though they may be, only show sizes and distances. I have asked a friend who quite often flies in micro-light aircraft, to see whether the model and its orbits can be seen and photographed from the air.

The model shows clearly the size and emptiness of the sky and how small we are. The walk to Pluto is a special experience and Wilmington Grammar School for Girls now makes a regular annual visit with 120 pupils for the full guided walk. On another occasion when I was cleaning the Sun (!), I fell into conversation with someone from the village whose face was familiar but I did not know her name. I asked her if she visited the model often. She replied, 'Not often, but mainly when I want to get things into perspective.'



## **BOOK REVIEW**

### **St Michael's, Otford Recollections, Observations, and Celebrations**

The Story of St Michael's School, Otford, since its foundation in Hatcham, New Cross, in 1872

Sally Maria Jones  
Amherst Publishing Ltd  
£20

ANYONE WHO has known Otford for any length of time will have observed the transformation that has taken place at St Michael's School, Row Dow, with its glorious panoramic views of the Darent Valley. The imposing grounds have been developed in a most attractive way, and the school itself has been transformed in the last ten years or so from a small boarding establishment for boys to a high quality co-educational day school with more than 400 pupils. Fees are high, but facilities are first class – and there is a waiting list.

The school moved from Croydon to its present site in 1924, taking over Otford Court, built in 1886 on part of the old Beechy-Lees estate. It was founded in 1872 in New Cross by the Rev. Arthur Tooth, who came from a well-to-do Kent family with brewing interests in England and Australia. Arthur Tooth, who was of Anglo-Catholic persuasion, fell foul of an Act of Parliament (Public Worship Regulation Act, 1874) which was designed to eradicate 'ritualistic' practices. He refused to comply, on the grounds of conscience, denying the authority of Parliament on these matters. A famous trial and some public disturbances followed, and he was jailed for a short time for Contempt of Court.

Father Tooth described the Otford he found in 1925 as '... quite in the country, a place of great interest in the past ... there is the well of S. Thomas and the Pilgrims Road, full of devotion and romance in those days; it is pleasant to be living in the twilight of such history'.

Sally Jones, with a love of history and three children at the school, took on the task of assisting with an archiving project, which expanded into research into the beginnings of the school and its famous founder. Helped by newspaper advertisements, radio appeals and searches on the internet, she went on to trace many Old Michaelians, who contributed their own memories and anecdotes. The result is a book which brings to life a vivid picture of boys, Masters and schooldays over the years. Lean years, wartime years, and modern prosperous times.

These days the pupils come from a privileged section of the community – but conditions were surprisingly spartan even to fairly recent times. In the pre-war days, and perhaps into the 40s and 50s, boys seem to have been encouraged in a variety of outdoor activities and pastimes.

'Hares and Hounds' through the vast acreage of scrub and woods, rabbiting with ferrets for the



school kitchen, even following on foot dressed in red jerseys and white shorts the West Kent Hounds from Otford. Modern parents might frown – we live in a politically correct age; but one gets the impression from the pages of this record of childhoods enjoyed to the full. Douglas Keddie, a pupil between 1923 and 1931 recalls time spent 'pulling up ragwort, and catching butterflies and moths, including a rare Clouded Yellow'.

Sally Jones was greatly helped, not only by the Old Michaelians Association, but by the Parents

and Friends Association formed in 1984, of which a former Chairman of the Otford Society, Lyn Metcalfe, was the first Secretary. Her book is a valuable record, of interest not only to those connected with the school, but to anyone interested in the story of our village.

Father Tooth seems to have been a remarkable man, steadfast in his religious views, perceptive in his attitude to the educational needs of fitting children to their lives ahead, and with a gift for the right words.

He wrote: 'There lies before me a beautiful world full of sunshine and promise – life everywhere a gallant struggle for the good, for the best.'

K.L.G.



THE TREE COUNCIL is 30 years old this year, and is marking the anniversary with an awareness campaign on the importance of trees in the environment. **SEED GATHERING SUNDAY** takes place on 10th October, and the Council's Tree Week will run from 24th November to 5th December.

Further details: Kevin Hand 020 7407 9992 or 020 7940 8180 and [www.treecouncil.org.uk](http://www.treecouncil.org.uk).

### **NEW COUNTRYSIDE CODE**

An update of the original 1950's version has been issued by the Countryside Agency, which incorporates new legislation such as rights of access. Common sense requirements remain the same, such as taking home litter and protecting the environment. A new Countryside Agency website provides advice on public rights of way, national trails and other useful information. Included is a copy of the Code which can be downloaded.

[www.countrysideaccess.gov.uk](http://www.countrysideaccess.gov.uk), or 0845 100 3298 for further information.

# OTFORD MATTERS

## FOOTPATH 49 AND OTFORD LEVEL CROSSING

The Railtrack (now Network Rail Infrastructure) application to close FP 49 is in the hands of DEFRA. In view of the number of objections, a public inquiry is expected to be held before the summer of 2005. The Noise Abatement Notice appeal hearing has been set for 22nd August.

Sevenoaks District Council has written to Paul Dunn, Chairman Footpaths Section, Sevenoaks Society, one of the objectors to FP 49 closure. The letter, printed below, sets out the current position.

‘... The article in the Sevenoaks Chronicle is not clear. In fact this is a difficult problem which the Council has been trying to resolve for some time. For some years, residents near this crossing have had to put up with an increasing level of noise from train horns. The Council initially served an Abatement Notice in 1999, requiring flashing warning lights to be installed at the crossing. An appeal was lodged against this notice and, after very lengthy discussions, the notice had to be withdrawn following a decision of HM Railway Inspectorate that, because of the curve in the line and the proximity of the station, flashing lights at this position would be unsafe.

The Council then served another Notice (on 27th May 2002) not specifying the steps to abate the nuisance and leaving this to Railtrack (now Network Rail Infrastructure). The preferred Sevenoaks District Council option was a bridge, but Railtrack said that there was not enough land available. SDC did not agree with this, but Railtrack started the procedures for a formal closure of the footpath. This is a lengthy process, involving a public inquiry in the event of objections. Because of the time taken by this procedure, the appeal hearing into the Abatement Notice has now had to be adjourned twice. The hearing date is now fixed for 22nd August 2005 when, it is assumed, the procedure for Footpath Closure will have been completed.

The matter is now in the hands of DEFRA who will presumably arrange a public inquiry into the Footpath Closure in view of the number of objections. The District Council is still trying to get Network Rail to reconsider a bridge, as the Council may own land which could enable a bridge to be constructed. In the meantime, unfortunately, local residents are suffering considerable disturbance from the train horns.

The reference to irregularities\* related to one of the standard grounds of appeal. So far as I am aware, there are no irregularities in the Abatement Notice.

Yours sincerely

Strategic Services Director’

\* Refers to Sevenoaks Chronicle report.

## STATION ROAD COAL YARD: LAING’S DEVELOPMENT

Work has started to clear the site for the seven detached five-bedroomed houses. Laing’s brochure, which is calling the new road Becket’s Place, says that the project will not be advertised until the show house is built. Prices, we understand, start at around £650,000.

## THE POND

The Parish Council is studying a report it commissioned on the Willow trees, and a technical paper on the pressure of roots on walls and structures.

Meanwhile, the single remaining white duck presents a lonely mournful figure without her companion nestling beside her, presumed to be the victim of one of the many foxes abounding in the neighbourhood.

### STOP PRESS

The remaining duck has been injured by fishing tackle and taken into care by Brian Thomas at Hill Drop Farm.



# Dates for your Diary

7th October      Otford Society Autumn meeting, 8pm, Village Memorial Hall.  
There will be an opportunity to chat with fellow members, discuss village matters, and put questions to the Chairman and committee on the present policy of the Society and its future.  
All are welcome. This is our last general meeting before the AGM in the New Year.  
During the evening Barbara Darby will be showing her new video film on The Lost Palace of Otford, scripted by Rod Shelton.  
The film on the building of Mill Bridge will also be shown, if time allows.

12th October      Spring House Family Support Centre Open Day, 2.30 to 5.00pm.  
Spring House is a facility at Sevenoaks Hospital for supporting families in difficulty.

14th November      Remembrance Sunday, 10am, St Bartholomew's Church.

November 11th, 12th, 13th, Otford Players  
8pm, Village Memorial Hall  
'The Noble Spaniard' by W. Somerset Maugham  
Tickets £5 (Thurs.) £6 Friday & Saturday  
Box Office 01959 522786

Somerset Maugham (1874-1965) was educated in Kent before training as a doctor in Heidelberg. He is better remembered these days as a novelist and short story writer than as a playwright, but in 1908 four of his plays were running simultaneously in London. 'The Constant Wife' (1924) is probably his best known play, with a recent successful West End revival. Many of his stories have been converted into films, including 'The Moon and Sixpence', 'The Razor's Edge' and 'Rain'.

'The Noble Spaniard' is a comedy set in the Victorian era, full of amusing caricatures of national stereotypes, which Maugham adapted from a French farce.

The Players regret the need to increase prices, but the economics of a production leave them with little option. A typical successful play costs about £1,000 to present; rehearsal rooms, hall hire and royalties alone usually amounting to around £800. Unlike the professional touring groups, they are not subsidised, but have to stand on their own feet.

Otford Players are grateful to audiences for the support they have given for many years. They count on the loyalty of the local community in their efforts to maintain the long tradition of amateur theatricals in village life – not an easy task in the face of powerful competition from TV and home entertainment.

Please note the date – NOVEMBER 11th, 12th, 13th. If you are interested in joining the Players in any capacity contact Secretary Sue Simpson 01959 522786.

## Otford Society

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Next Newsletter: letters/contributions welcomed

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