

St Martin's Church

Blackheath



A Brief History of the Church

&

The Anna Lea Merritt Murals

This beautiful little church was dedicated on 26 July 1893 by Bishop Thorold of Winchester. The initiative to build a church to serve the growing community in Blackheath was taken by Sir William Roberts-Austin K.C.B., one time Chemist and Assayer and later Deputy Master of the Royal Mint, who was a resident of Blackheath and a Lay Reader in Wonersh. Before the building was complete, services were conducted fortnightly in the cottage that is now the vestry of the church and worshippers were summoned by the ringing of a large dinner bell by his servant.

The church was designed by the Art Nouveau architect Charles Harrison Townsend and is a prime example of the work of the Arts and Crafts movement. It is said to have been modelled on an Italian wayside chapel, but it is admirably suited to its surroundings on an English heath. It is in basilican form (oblong hall) instead of the traditional cruciform (cross shape). Harrison Townsend is best known for designing the Whitechapel Art gallery (1897) and the Horniman Museum (1898), and he also designed many houses in Blackheath. The Arts and Crafts movement pursued sincerity and simplicity, avoiding lofty and grand design, and employed local materials where possible. Indeed we believe that St Martin's is built entirely of local materials, even down to the ironstone from the heath (smelted at the Royal Mint) from which the candleholders and lectern are made. The church cost about £600 to build.

The alabaster work lining the chancel walls and sanctuary arch is the work of Messrs John Daymond and Son of London. It was for the most part a memorial to Sir William Roberts-Austin and cost £500, almost as much as the church itself. The crucifix window in the pulpit recess and the copper pulpit desk are in memory of John Bell, the inventor of asbestos, who lived at Lockner and worshipped in this church. The gilded screen was given by Mr Henry Prescott, who also funded the construction of the Village Hall, and the alabaster font is a memorial to Miss Oliveria Prescott.



St Martin of Tours



The Resurrection



Angel
with Crown of Life

The striking wall paintings were painted in 1893-95 by the American born artist Anna Lea Merritt (1844-1930). Merritt was born in Philadelphia, but studied art in London under Henry Merritt, whom she later married. She was the first woman artist to have a work acquired by the Tate collection, *Love Locked Out*, which echoes Holman Hunt's *Light of the World* and is still owned by the Tate Gallery.

The St Martin's murals are unique for two reasons. Firstly, they were painted using a new process invented by Adolf Keim of Munich. King Ludwig II of Bavaria, famous for his fairytale castles, also had a great passion for the arts. He longed to have the fine Italian lime fresco work in his own kingdom but the harsh climate north of the Alps destroyed such frescos within a short time. He therefore appealed to Bavarian scientists to develop a paint that looked like lime fresco but which would survive the local climate. The scientist Adolf Keim successfully combined water glass (potassium silicate solution) with inorganic colour pigments to produce a paint that both penetrates and chemically reacts with the mineral substrate onto which it is applied.

Merritt and Roberts-Austin presented a paper on this new technique to a meeting of the Society of Arts in 1895 chaired by Holman Hunt. As far as we can tell the murals have indeed survived the damp for nearly 120 years without significant discoloration. They have remained surprisingly true to their original colours as shown in a preliminary sketch by Anna Lea Merritt which is in the National Museum of Women in the Arts in Washington DC. Incidentally, there is still a company called Keim which manufactures paint based on Adolf Keim's invention, although the process of applying it is much simpler than that employed by Anna Lea Merritt, who had to apply the water glass repeatedly and separately from the paint itself.

Secondly, they are the only surviving example of mural work by Anna Lea Merritt from the end of the 19th century and represent an outstanding achievement for a woman artist at that time. Merritt's work has recently been the focus of renewed



Mount of Olives



Raising the Widow's Son

interest and attention, for her success as a painter of historical, classical, and literary subjects as well as portraits, and has been the subject of both exhibitions and publications.

The larger paintings depict a number of scenes from the Life of Christ and she describes painting them in her book of memoirs entitled *Love Locked Out*. These paintings ensure that even the walls of the church point to the central focus of the Christian faith; to Jesus Christ the Son of God who died on a cross and rose again for us. As a parish our purpose is to know Christ and to make him known and this beautiful building serves us well in this mission.

The murals were cleaned and restored in 2011 by wall painting experts Stephen Rickerby and Lisa Shekede following a successful appeal to raise the necessary funds. This was the final stage of a restoration process that included redecorating the whole church, and as far as we can tell restoring it to its original colour scheme; cleaning the arches above the alabaster panels - this removed 100 years of dirt (or more likely the soot from 37 years of burning oil lights until electricity was installed in 1930) and revealed the original gilding which had been hidden by the dirt; cleaning and restoring all the remaining gilding; installing new lighting, as well as external works to the roof and walls to ensure they remain watertight.

This church has stood at the heart of the village for over 125 years and it seeks to serve and support the community of Blackheath through prayer and in practical ways. Services take place each week on Sundays at times displayed on the notice board, when all are welcome.

Until 1928 St Martin's was in the parish of Wonersh. Blackheath was then united with Chilworth, forming first a new Conventional District and later a Parish, until 1998. Following another re-organisation it then rejoined Wonersh and Blackheath is now a separate District within the Parish of Wonersh with Blackheath, sharing its Vicar and ministry team with St John the Baptist, Wonersh.



Angel with chalice



Virgin and Child



St John the Baptist