

St Margaret's Berechurch

The History

"And on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it"
Mathew 16:18

In the early 1950's the Monkwick estate in Colchester was built.

As well as the houses and shops a dual purpose Church Hall and vicarage was built for use as a Community Hall during the week and a Church on Sundays.



Dual purpose building and Vicarage. Photo- Church archives



Church Service in dual purpose building. Photo - church archives

This was called St Margaret's Church and this building served the community and parish well for a number of years. The Parish of Berechurch had been formed in 1954 to meet the growing needs of the estate. Previously, the church at St Michaels in Berechurch Hall Road had been held with All Saints Shrub End and Layer-de-la-Haye. There has been a chapel in the parish since 1275. In 1954, Rev. Stuart Holden was the first vicar of the new parish. He was succeeded by Rev. Sam Tyler in 1961, followed by Rev Christopher Sly in 1965

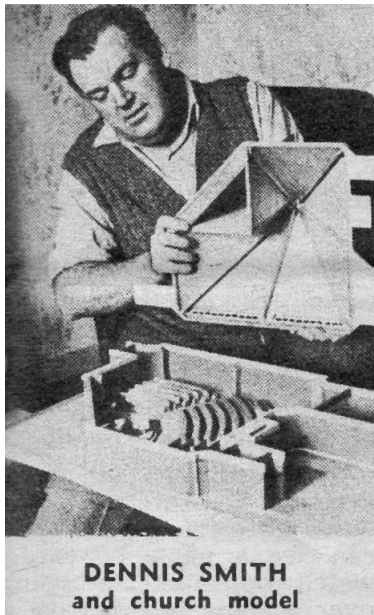
In March 1966, at a meeting of the PCC, the possibility of having a building for the sole use as a church was discussed. The Reverend Christopher Sly felt it was right to explore all the possibilities and had been in discussion with the Diocese, but of course the cost was a big concern. The PCC did not have a pot of money sitting in the bank waiting to be used for a big project like this and using a construction company would put the total cost up quite considerably, so Jean Sly, (the vicars' wife,) said *"Why don't we build it ourselves"*. So it was decided to put their faith in to action and build the church on wasteland next to the existing building. Rev Sly asked the architects, Tooley and Foster to design a new church to hold about 200 people. As they had no builders in the congregation, the Vicar and six men from the congregation went to evening classes for a year to learn the art of bricklaying.



Bricklaying classes at Colchester institute.

Photo- East Anglian Daily Times. Saturday October 1st 1966

It was a real community effort. After the decision was made a letter was composed by the Rev. Sly and sent out to everyone in the parish explaining the project. *“We want to say to you that this will be your church, the place where your children will be baptised, the place they will be married in surroundings as beautiful as we can make them, and the place where the last rites of your loved ones may be performed with words of comfort and hope. We trust that it will also be the place, where in between these times, you and your family may find fellowship and inspiration for your life. In every sense of the word it will be YOUR church”*² An appeal was also made in this letter for voluntary help with labour (skilled and unskilled) and financial help by “buying a brick”. Many people in the parish who did not attend the church also helped by attending the fundraising events.



**DENNIS SMITH
and church model**

On 14th March, 1968, a ‘Site Warming Supper’ was held and all those who had offered practical and / or financial help were invited. At the supper a model of the ‘New Church’ was on display. This model was built by Mr Dennis Smith, a local man who had suffered polio which had affected his left hand and legs. After falling ill, Mr Smith had been keeping his mind occupied by making toys for his three children and on hearing about this hobby, the Rev Sly asked him to make a model of the new church. Everything on the model was built according to the plans, even down to the copper roof and the slate gray colour of the walls.

Photo- Colchester Gazette, March 12th



Photo- church archives

All the building materials arrived during the day when the men were at work and so it was the ladies of the church who unloaded the lorries. The bricks did not come on a pallet as they do these days, so each one of the 30,000 bricks were handled individually from the back of the lorry into piles ready for the men to lay in the evening when they got home from work. The younger children had great fun playing in the piles of sand whilst their mum’s were busy working.

*“The lorry driver’s face was a study the day he and his load of 8,000 bricks arrived at the site of the new church, for waiting to unload the bricks were a group of eager housewives. “You’re never going to do this yourselves!” gasped the lorry driver. “Why not?” retorted the group proudly. “We’re helping to build the church.”*³

All sorts of fundraising events took place over the six years it took to build the church. There were the usual fetes and bazaars, tramps suppers, coffee mornings and rummage sales but they also collected newspapers, periodicals and egg boxes which helped to raise a considerable amount of money. The faith of the congregation was tremendous. They did not wait until they had enough money to undertake the next part of the building works they just trusted that God would provide, and he did, every time. The Rev Sly was concerned at the beginning that his congregation may not have realised the commitment that was needed to take on such a project but his fears were soon allayed when he was told they felt it was a real privilege to have the opportunity to take part in such a project. Although many of them have said since that if they had realised that it would take them seven years to complete they are not sure if they would have started. Which only goes to prove that God's Holy Spirit enables you to do the specific task asked of you. These people had a vision and with God's help they completed it.

The Soldiers in the Military Corrective Training Camp in Colchester helped to dig the foundations. They were all dug by hand – no machinery was used.

The soldiers of the 1st Bn. The Prince of Wales Own Regiment of Yorkshire, stationed in Colchester at the time, shown here in the picture also helped in the building of the church.

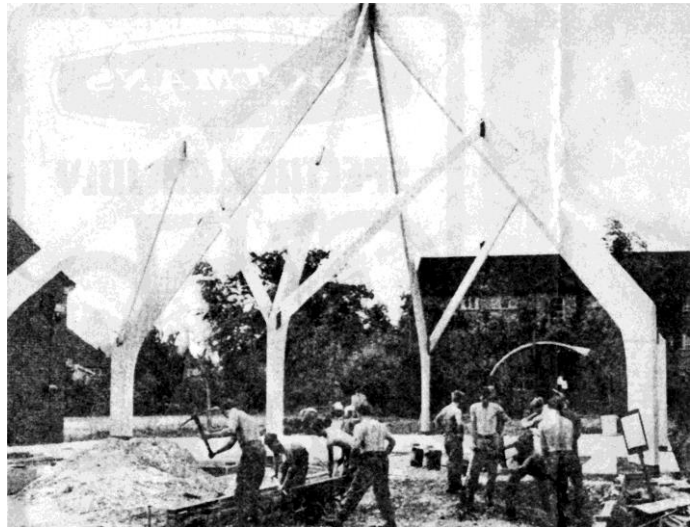


Photo- Evening Star Thursday June 27th 1968

The Reverend Sly is quoted to have said that one of the most difficult problems they had was casting the concrete beams which girths the building. First they had to work out the 'jigsaw' of fitting interlacing steel and shuttering, and then came the problem of 'shooting' in the concrete. He said they had to hire a fork lift truck and hoist the concrete up in wheelbarrows, and to add to the problem, the ready-mixed concrete arrived during the daytime so it meant the ladies had to help with the vibrating. Rev Sly said "they were marvellous"



"Do it yourself builders at work" Photo- Evening Star, Thursday October 2nd, 1969

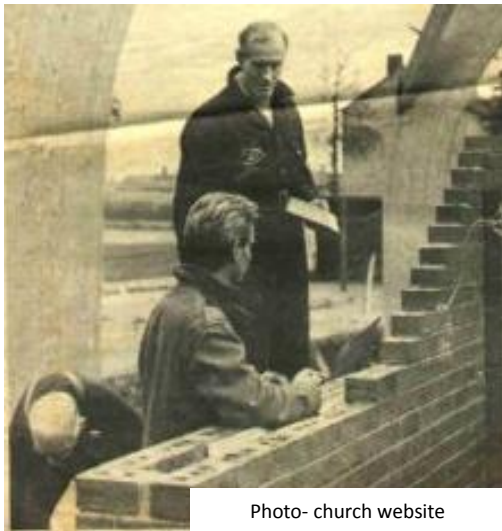


Photo- church website

The then Bishop of Colchester, Dr Roderick Coote was a regular visitor to the new church site and was quite happy to put on a pair of overalls and join in the building work. As well as bricklaying he also helped out with some carpentry.

A press photographer arrived and managed to take this photo of the Bishop who had just arrived for a 'quiet' afternoons work.

In July 1972, the workers were very tired. They had been working six days a week on the new church for four years. Sundays were always kept free from any site work. It was 'the day of rest' and time to spend at church worshipping and with the family. Although the work was not finished, it was decided to have a blessing service in the church to thank God for what had already been achieved and to ask for His guidance and strength to carry on. The service was taken by The Bishop of Colchester on Saturday July 22nd 1972 and everyone who had helped, given professional advice and supplied materials were invited.

On the Friday evening before the blessing service on the Saturday, the choir met for a rehearsal. They decided to practice in the new church and using a piano hired for the weekend they began their practice. Mr Derek French remembers this event very vividly. He was on his way round to the church after work as normal for an evening's work on the site, he was just approaching the church when he heard an



Photo – Essex County Standard, Friday July 29th, 1972

amazing sound. The Pianist struck up the opening chords of the hymn 'Angel Voices ever Singing', the choir began to sing and the most glorious sound filled the building and flowed out through the space where the doors would eventually be. Derek said he will remember that moment for as long as he lives, it was one of the most amazing experiences he has had. When he entered the building, he could see his fellow workers had experienced the same feeling. *"But by the end of the second line the only sounds were intermittent sniffles, as uncontrollable silent tears streamed down every cheek and emotions blocked every throat"*⁴

The Blessing Service on the Saturday was a real blessing to all who attended and boosted the congregation, replenishing their tired bodies and enabling them to complete God's work.

It was another seventeen months before the completion of the building and the dedication service in December, 1973. The friendships made during those years of hard work were very special in all the age groups because of the amount of time they spent together. They laughed together through the fun times and supported each other through the tough times. Many of those families are still worshipping in St Margaret's and two of the families now have four generations worshipping in the church.

The Rev Christopher Sly felt he had achieved the work God intended for him in the Parish and he soon felt the need to move on. He said that he had "helped to build the church as a building and it was now up to another to build the church as a people."

The Rev Christopher Harvey was inducted in September 1975 and the church did go through a lot of changes. The choir and organ was replaced with a music group and worship leader. Mid-week groups met for prayer and bible study and the already vibrant youth group continued to grow.

In 1994 Rev Robert Wilkinson continued the good work until he retired and the current incumbent Rev Andrew Fordyce arrived in 2007.

Scriptural reflection on the building of the church

After speaking to some of the people involved in the building, it was clear that God supported them. Their faith was tremendous and they trusted God completely every step of the way. *1 Corinthians 10:13 "Every test that you have experienced is the kind that normally comes to people. But God keeps his promise, and he will not allow you to be tested beyond your power to remain firm; at the time you are put to the test, he will give you the strength to endure it, and so provide you with a way out."*⁵

There were times when they were tired and worn out, but they turned to God for help and he gave them what they needed. This was particularly true when they recognised the need and organised the blessing service to give thanks for what they had achieved and to ask for support and guidance for what was left to do.

It is very clear from talking with people that they "*walked by faith and not by sight*"⁶ 2 Corinthians 5:7. Before they began building the church it had taken them five years to raise £1500 for an organ, so it was a real walk of faith to trust that the money would come in as they went along. They never once stopped working because of lack of money.

Every day after work, the men would continue working on the new church and during the day the women would be pointing the brickwork or taking delivery of the building materials. I'm not sure when the housework or gardening was done. Even when there was a lot's to be done they did not work on a Sunday. This was always kept as a day of rest as God did in Genesis 2:3 "*And God blessed the seventh day and made it holy, because on it he rested from all the work of creating that he had done.*"⁷ And as the Israelites did in Exodus 16:30 "*So the people rested on the seventh day.*"⁸

God has remained faithful through the generations since the parish of Berechurch began as in Psalm 119:89-91 "*Your word, O LORD, is eternal; it stands firm in the heavens. Your faithfulness continues through all generations; you established the earth, and it endures. Your laws endure to this day, for all things serve you.*"⁹

This church was built with love - God's love - and that love is still felt very strongly today by all who step foot into it. Psalm 100:4-5 *"Enter his gates with thanksgiving and his courts with praise; give thanks to him and praise his name. For the LORD is good and his love endures forever; his faithfulness continues through all generations."*¹⁰

The history of St Margaret's Church is not concluded because the good works started all those years ago is still going on now. As a church we continue to encourage others in the community to get to know Jesus Christ as their Lord and Saviour. The church plays an active part in helping others including Food Bank, Soup Run, Street Pastor and Christian Aid as well as supporting Tear Fund the Wycliffe Bible Translations and other local, national and international charities. I was just a small child when the building work began in the 1960's. The fact that my dad came home from work, had his tea and went straight back out again to help build the church seemed just normal to me. When I think about the enormous task that was taken on by God's faithful people the words of Jesus from Luke 18:27 become very true. *"What is impossible with men is possible with God."*¹¹

¹ NIV Bible 1984

² Parish letter from Reverend Sly 1966

³ Quote from church website

⁴ St Margaret of Antioch Berechurch Booklet compiled by Fred Radley

⁵ Good News Bible

⁶ King James Bible

⁷ NIV Bible 1984

⁸ NIV Bible 1984

⁹ NIV Bible 1984

¹⁰ NIV Bible 1984

¹¹ NIV Bible 1984