

The creation of a new church on the northern slopes of Bath was first considered in 1830 but it took a further 51 years before St. Mary's, Julian Road opened its doors to worshippers. On May 3rd, 1881, Cardinal Manning, Archbishop of Westminster, consecrated the newly built St. Mary's, dedicating it to Our Lady, Help of Christians. The founder of the church, Canon Francis Loughnan, purchased number 5 Harley Street for use as the parish rectory.

Inspired by the decorated English style of the 14th century, the church was designed by Dunn & Hansom of Newcastle-upon-Tyne and the building work was carried out by local Bath builder Mr. Joseph Bladwell. Consult the original plans prepared by Dunn & Hansom and you'll see the church was never completed, whether due to lack of land or money, or both, is not known.

The west wall (to your left as you enter through the porch) was due to be extended to incorporate two extra bays and the school was to be attached to the south side of the Lady Chapel balanced by a house for the clergy on the north side of the sacristy. None of these things were built but the temporary wall of cheap local brick still exists at the west end of the church as do rough unfinished panels of stonework where the school and priest's house should have been.

The final bill for the building of the church came to £7000, with £1,600 of this going on the carvings. At its opening, the Bath Chronicle commented on the excellence of the carving work, which had been entrusted to Mr. Roddis of Birmingham. In addition to angels, birds, flowers and a Green Man there were numerous fleur de lis, the badge of the Virgin Mary, carved throughout the church. Parish folklore has it that there are 110 carved heads to be found inside St. Mary's including the 12 heads overlooking the altar, believed to represent characters from Chaucer's Canterbury Tales.

St. Mary's school was opened in 1885 and about the same time Nos 1, 1a, and 6 Harley Street were purchased. In 1926 No 4 Harley Street was bought along with Burlington House, which stood on the corner of the church property at the bottom of Burlington Street. Unfortunately, many of these properties were completely destroyed and the whole vicinity of the church altered by Hitler's Baedeker Raids in April 1942. However, the church itself suffered only minor damage with the shattering of all the original stain glass windows and damage to the roof.

Apart from repairing the bomb damage, St. Mary's remained largely unchanged until 1981 when major restoration and refurbishment work was carried out on the interior of the church as part of the centenary celebrations. The high altar was moved forward to face, and be nearer to, the congregation. The reredos (wall decoration at back of altar) was cleaned and a Blessed Sacrament house erected where the high altar formerly stood. The baptismal font was transferred from the back of the church to the front and the pulpit was removed altogether as were the traditional dark wood pews.

In 1985, the eight panels in the reredos, which had formerly contained fabric, were filled with paintings of saints and martyrs by artist John Armstrong. Four of those portrayed had local connections: St. Dunstan, St. Alphege and the two Glastonbury martyrs, Blessed Richard Whiting and Blessed John Thorne.

In the original Dunn and Hansom architects plans, the north wall contained five stone panels which were to be filled, at a later date, with frescoes. In 1997 these panels finally received their frescoes. Painted by local artist Fleur Kelly, they depict the Annunciation, the Visitation, the Nativity, the Marriage Feast at Cana and the Deposition from the Cross.

In July 2015, the church was heavily damaged by fire after an arsonist set light to the wooden confessional. Ten minutes of fire led to over £500,000 worth of fire, smoke and heat damage. The parish came together under Fr Jeremy Rigden's leadership and ensured that not a service was missed. The parish Centre was transformed overnight into our temporary church, and continued to be improved as restoration work took place in the real church. Our Julian Road neighbours at Christ Church allowed us to use their church for our 2015 Christmas Eve and Christmas Day Masses. The parishes of St Alphege and St John the Evangelist both rose to the challenge and allowed us to transfer the weddings booked into St Mary's to their premises. St Mary's Primary School lent us chairs to ensure we could use the middle and front rooms of our Parish Centre for our Sunday and Easter Services.