



The Church of Our Lady St John's Wood

by *Francesca Weal RIBA SCA*

1> View to south
transept with former
organ removed

2> Before the works
commenced.
*The image on the
front cover shows the
contrast on completion.*



The aim of this project was to develop, adjust and renew an earlier 1970's reordering, but also make the church welcoming and interesting for all. In order to understand the thinking behind the reordering of this church, it is very important to understand its history.

The history:

The Church of Our Lady, in St John's Wood, is one of the first Catholic churches to be built after the Catholic Relief Act of 1829. It features an early use of cast iron.

Designed by J.J. Scoles, said to be influenced by the Lady Chapel at Salisbury Cathedral, it opened in 1836.

The plan was unusual: the two transepts (or more properly, 'pseudo-transepts'), housed the benefactors, the Gallini sisters, in the South and the priests in the North. The living quarters comprised a basement,

ground, first floor and attic; the latter set over the church itself. An early Victorian print shows a plain, somewhat austere interior, with the Gallini sisters viewing Mass from the first floor of their house, but after a disastrous fire in the 1880s, the church was reconfigured and elaborately redecorated.

The transepts were incorporated into the main worship space in the 1930s. The east end was destroyed in WWII. The church was extended in the fifties to the east by a further bay, resiting the altar (but destroying sightlines from the transepts in the process). The church was nearly lost in the early seventies. It had fallen into disrepair and there were plans to pull it down and rebuild. A campaign led by Sir John Betjeman, ensured it was Statutorily listed and as a result, it was repaired and reordered.

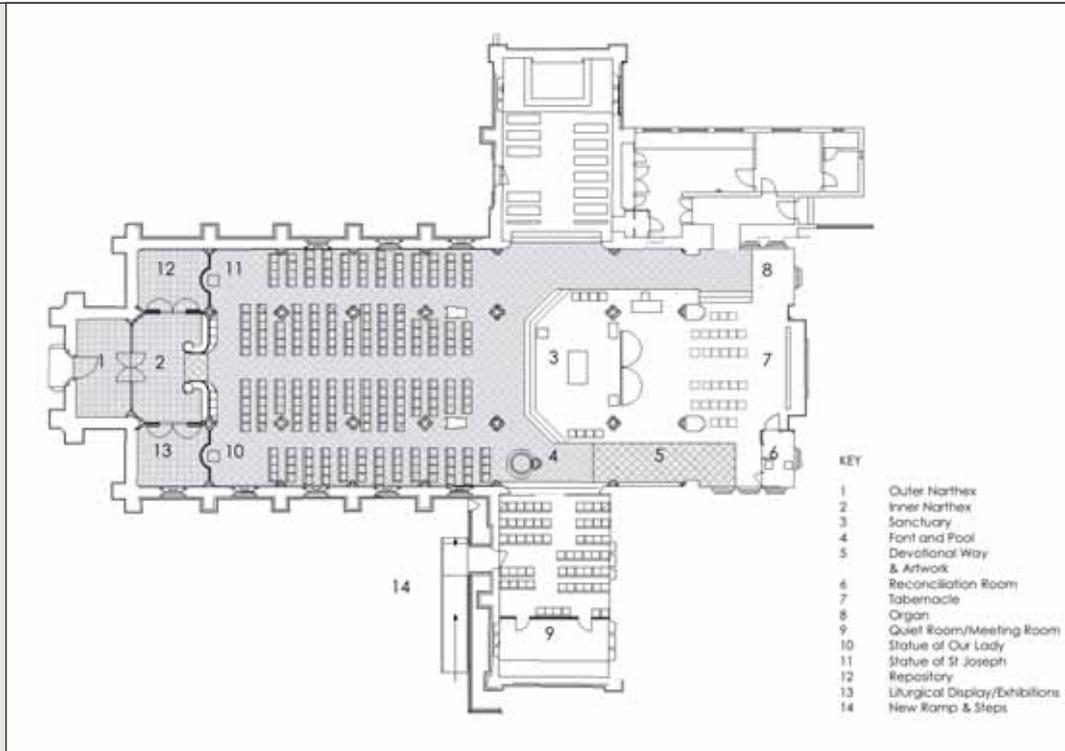
The 1970s reordering pulled the altar back to its historic location at the crossing of the pseudo-transepts and also incorporated fine, modern artwork by Michael Clarke including a fine Risen Christ at the east end.

But the sanctuary was set far too high, with steep steps, and it was too small. It felt dangerous. Bringing the altar (and tabernacle) forward had helped the transept sightlines, but did little to define a use for the area left behind. The choir occupied the south transept and it was untidy. The organ was wrapped around the crossing, and was a very dominant feature as seen from the nave but much of its sound 'spoke' into the transept rather than into the main body of the church rendering it unsuitable for congregational use. There was no font and ambo; the confessional and repository were both in matching chipboard at the west end. The lighting system was very poor and the heating reaching the end of its life. ➤

PROJECT TEAM

- Client:
RC Diocese of
Westminster
- Architect:
WEAL Architects
- Quantity Surveyor:
Ridge
- Lighting Designer:
Light Perceptions
- Structural Engineer:
John Gregory (RIP)
- Services Engineer:
Pasion Star Ltd
- CDM Coordinator:
Arnold Faulkner
- Organ Consultant:
Dr John Rowntree
- Organ Builder:
Peter Collins
- Contractor:
RJM Building
Contractors
- Underfloor Heating:
Jupiter Heating
Systems Ltd
- Tabernacle
Surround:
Stephen Foster
- Craft Metalwork:
Hammer and Tongs
- Font Stone:
McKeon Stone

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- 3> The font in front of the devotional way leading up to the reconciliation room and tabernacle
- 4> Michael Clarke's statues of Our Lady and St Joseph relocated to aedicules at the west end
- 5> View from the outer narthex to the altar and tabernacle at the east end

The Design:

The tabernacle and reconciliation room were resited at the east end. This gives a sense of moving from the more worldly west end with its church shop, notices and bustling business of the church, towards to an area for quiet private devotion via the 'Devotional Way.' The area for devotion is set at the foot of the Risen Christ and directly in front of the resited tabernacle.

The devotional way goes past the font, up an accessible slope, past an illuminated perspex 'Triptych of the Holy Rosary' by Arthur Fleischmann. It ends at the wheelchair-accessible, new reconciliation room (with a secret jib door), and the 1970's tabernacle; now set in a glorious new surround by artist Stephen Foster.

We moved the organ to the east end and choir behind the altar; this area also being

defined by a screen that folds right back with near-perfect juxtaposition. The artist blacksmith, Paul Elliot formed each bar by hand – flattening a square section into an ellipse, no two being the same. When the choir is not in session, or there is a need to extend the sanctuary area, the area behind the altar can become part of the sanctuary.

The south transept can now house the congregation. This in turn allows a bay to be removed from formal seating at the west end and given over to the 'inner narthex.' This area allows people to meet afterwards, or to stand more informally for a service. It houses a church shop and a place for liturgical display and exhibitions. It allows the outer narthex to be kept relatively uncluttered. It is notionally separate from the nave by use of a screen. We were inspired by the use of screens in cathedrals to define spaces.



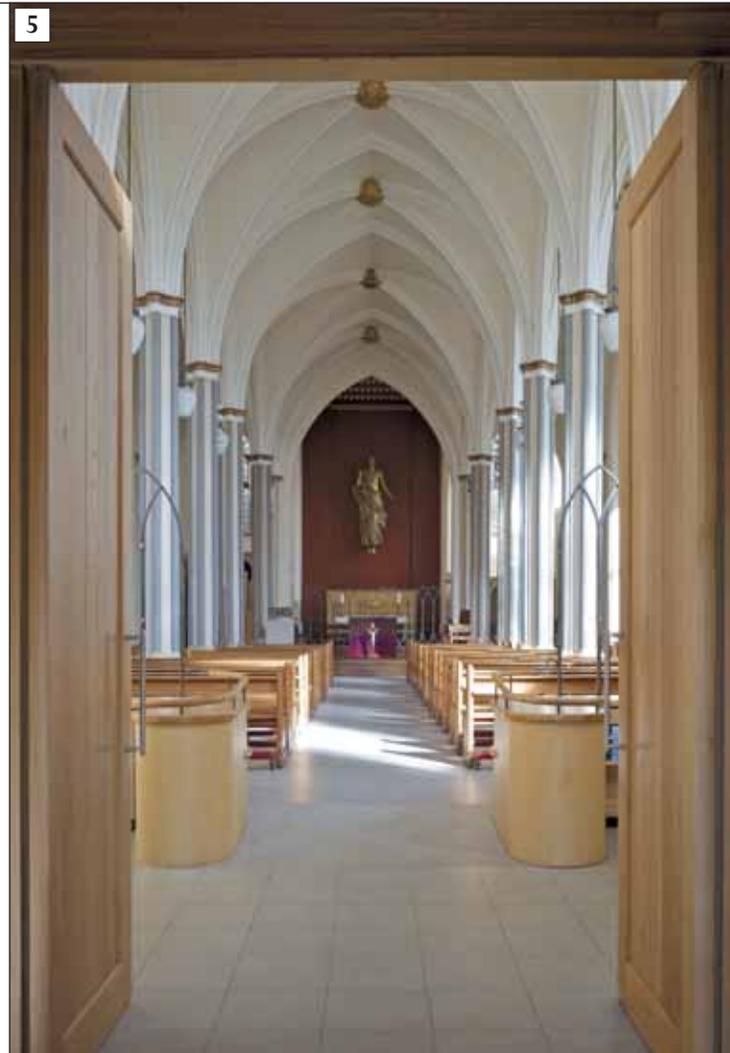
We solved the levels by raising the nave floor level by one step. This allows easier access to the sanctuary and transepts. The transepts could not be lowered as the floor level was historic and there is now a social club under the south transept. The sanctuary was set on huge in-situ concrete beams over graves in the crypt so lowering this was also ruled out. The floor slopes very gently at around 1:60 through the outer and new 'inner' narthex but with a short 1:12 ramp by the dividing screen to finish the climb. The devotional way allows wheelchair users to access the sanctuary and there are easy-climb steps on the other side.

The new font flows: it's Living Water. The location of the font was suggested by the huge existing painting covering the end of the south transept showing the Baptism of Our Lord. We thought the south transept could become a place for families – a new ramp is placed outside for pushchairs and the meeting room behind can double as a quiet room.

The Michael Clarke statues of Our Lady and St Joseph were removed from their location at the east end and set in aedicules of patinated copper in the new screens at the west end.

Bruce Kirk of Light Perceptions rose to challenge of lighting the church, which had never been designed for gas or electric artificial lighting. The introduction of specially-designed, low-energy, pendant fittings has resulted in good lighting without use of a lot of spotlights all over the columns.

The final account is around £543 500 which included the new heating and lighting. In addition were costs for asbestos removal under the sanctuary; paint removal and re-rendering of the nave walls, overseen by Mr Fanning, the Diocese of Westminster senior buildings surveyor; and direct costs paid for the organ and tabernacle surround. ■



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