

A History of the Church buildings

The first 100 years of the parish and its development are covered in *Pioneer Church - The Centennial History of The Church of the Nativity, 1861-1961* by the late Selwyn Vercoe.

Much of the material in this publication is taken from an earlier booklet with the same name compiled by the late Wilf Forbes in 1997.

- Parish established in 1857
- First church built in 1861
- First church on this site in 1879
- Present church completed in 1962

Brian Campbell
2003

A memorial of love

Our church stands today as a memorial to those who laboured for the love of God and their Parish over the past 140 years. The external beauty of the church buildings and the atmosphere within its walls are an inspiration to all who worship at Nativity, whether at the services on Sunday or during the week, for weddings, funerals and other special occasions. Visitors are welcome to share with us in giving grateful thanks for the efforts of those who have gone before us providing a wonderful venue in which to give praise and worship God.



TOP

History

The first Anglican Church in Blenheim was built behind where our present parish centre stands and was dedicated on 22nd December 1861. The rapid growth of church life in the new settlement resulted in a second larger wooden building being erected in the site of the present church and was consecrated in 1879. The brick chancel of the present church was added in 1908, the brick transepts were erected in 1937-38 to replace the wooden ones of the earlier building, and the present nave was completed in 1962.



TOP

A millennium of architecture

The Church of the Nativity represents three different styles of architecture spanning nearly 1000 years - Norman, Gothic and Modern. Thanks to the skills of the architect R C Muston of Wellington, only a discerning and knowledgeable eye would be able to pick the differences visible from outside the building.

The plain brick exterior of the chancel at the rear of the building is typical of churches built in England and France during the 11th century. The exterior corner buttresses of the transepts are a feature of Gothic architecture. The nave with its faced steel portal trusses is typical of 20th century construction.

The wooden nave and tower were demolished in 1960 to allow for the completion of building in permanent materials of reinforced concrete and red brick facings. Although the main structure of the church is nearly 40 years old and therefore 50 years younger than the chancel, the architect achieved a most successful merging of the old and new.

In the design of the interior the architect achieved a flow-on effect in both structure and colour to bridge the time gap to the much older transepts and chancel. The interior of the church has a restful cream and blue colour scheme.



Adornments

Exterior adornments:

- The foundation stone was laid in 1960 to mark the rebuilding of the nave, vestry and tower.
- The second inscription on the stone commemorates the completion of the building in 1962 and also the centenary of The Church of the Nativity, the mother church of the parish of Blenheim.
- The shield facing Alfred Street is the emblem of the Diocese of Nelson.
- The shield over the main entrance depicts the Star of Bethlehem irradiating the Cross of Calvary and reminds us of the purpose of Christ's coming to be our Saviour. The letter XP are the first two letters in the Greek name for Christ meaning 'The Messiah' or 'Anointed One'. The letters HIS are the first three letters in the Greek name for Jesus meaning 'Saviour'. The shield, which may be regarded as the emblem of The Church of the Nativity, symbolises that Christ the Messiah came into this world to be our Saviour.

Interior Adornments:

- The narthex or entry porch contains three stained glass memorial windows. These were originally separated in the former nave. The right hand panel was donated by early parishioners in memory of the family of the first vicar of the parish, the Venn H F Butt; the left hand panel is dedicated to his wife Serena; the middle panel is in memory of their daughter Mary Serena. (*Other memorial windows of the nave and chancel are described in a separate leaflet.*)
- Brass and marble plaques to the memory of other former vicars and a number of worshippers have been erected on the walls of hallway between the church and Nativity Centre.

- A plaque on the rear wall of the nave commemorates the consecration of the church by Bishop Peter Sutton on 23 March 1975, when the church was debt free.
- In the wall of the chancel is a small square of stone dated 1975, from the mother church of the Anglican Communion, Canterbury Cathedral.



Interior changes

Stepping into the church from the narthex attention is drawn to the Lord's Table at the front of the nave and to the permanently lit cross at the rear of the chancel. The high vaulted roof of the nave and its portal trusses blend in so well with the high ceilings of the transepts and chancel.

Changes in worship practices in the past 25 years have brought changes to the original interior layout. The choir stalls in the transepts have been removed and the floor has been raised up to the same level as the chancel. The front communion rails were removed to allow for the raised floor area to serve a multi-functional purpose.

The Sanctuary with the Lord's Table has been brought nearer the congregation. It serves two purposes - a large congregation can be served communion from both sides of the sanctuary, and a smaller congregation can be seated at the north end of the chancel bringing them closer to the sanctuary.

The pulpit, a gift from the Blenheim branch of the Girls' Friendly Society in 1935, now serves as a base for a data projector and computer. Preachers and speakers use a portable stand equipped with a microphone.

The lectern has been retained but is moveable. The late Mrs T Carter, a generous benefactress of the parish, donated the lectern along with two Glastonbury Chairs, the Episcopal chair, and the Hobday pipe organ.



The story of the Hobday pipe organ – Installed 1908

The present Hobday pipe organ in the Church of the Nativity is more than 90 years old and has been overhauled and renovated several times. The organ pipes are not immediately visible as you enter the church as they are located above the main south door, while the console is at the front of the pews on the left hand side.

The late Mrs T Carter donated the organ to the parish as a memorial to her husband who had been the owner of the big Hillersden station situated 50km west of Blenheim. The gift inspired a move to erect a chancel and organ chamber as a memorial to the late Archdeacon Butt. (*That promoted a suggestion to turn the church so that it would lie in the traditional east-west*

position instead of north-south. At the annual meeting of parishioners in 1906 the majority, being "mostly ladies", were in favour of turning the building but in the end the chancel and organ room were added to the existing building in its original position.) The new organ was installed in 1908 with its first public performance being given by Robert Parker, organist of St Paul's Cathedral, Wellington. The organ was acknowledged to be a fine instrument and for nearly 30 years was the largest in Marlborough and Nelson until the Nelson Cathedral organ was enlarged.

Floods and restorations

In 1923 an "old man" flood inundated the whole of the Wairau Plains. The floodwaters invaded the church and the big organ suffered water damage and had to be repaired. (*The Sunday school hall which had been the original church was not affected as it had been raised above flood level many years before.*) The organ was completely overhauled in the 1930s. In 1950 the vestry authorized the overhaul of the organ again with the installation of additional stops at a cost of \$450.00. However the work was not carried out until 1950. During the 1960s rainwater damaged the pipes and other parts. Through the generosity of Fanny Nosworthy the organ was rebuilt in 1975. A mechanical-electrical action was installed and the console was detached. In 1981 the pipes were moved to a mezzanine floor above the main doors at the rear of the nave, but much of the action collapsed.

In 1987 the vestry decided to proceed with a schedule of restoration work which had been recommended by the South Island Organ Company of Timaru and was confirmed at a meeting of parishioners that year. An independent organ consultant, John Dodgshun, also confirmed that the work was necessary and a start was made in November 1988. In December 1988 Mr Dodgshun wrote to the vestry: "I was very pleased with the results... the defects have been rectified and the result is a brighter, clearer sound. The action is much improved and the organ is a pleasure to play and listen." To mark the completion of the restoration, at a cost of nearly \$42,000, a special recital was held in the church on Saturday February 10, 1989. The organist was John Hargreaves of Timaru, the managing director of the restoration company, one of this country's leading organists.



Specifications of the pipe organ **Two-manual and pedal. Adjustable electric action and solid state switching.**

Manual 1

Open diapason 8'

Flute 8'

Viola Di Orchestra 8'

Viox Celeste 8'

Principal 4'
Nazard 2 2/3'
Principal 2'
Mixture 3 rank
Oboe 8
Cornopian 8
Swell Sub-Octave
Swell Octave/Tremulant

Manual 2

Open diapason 8'
Samba 8'
Dulciana 8'
Stopped Diapason 8'
Principal 4'
Harmonic Flute 4'
Fifteenth 2'
Trumpet 8
Swell to great Coupletr

Accessories

4 Thumb Pistons Manual 1
4 Thumb Pistons Manual 2
6 Toe Pistons
Swell to Great Thumb Piston
Great to Pedal Thumb Piston
Great to Pedal Piston Coupler
General Cancel Thumb Piston
Balanced Swell Pedal

Pedal

Open Wood 16'
Bourdon 16'
Bass Flute 8'
Viola 8'
Octave Viola 4'
Flute 4'
Great to Pedal Coupler
Swell to Pedal Coupler



Memorial Windows

As in many churches the windows in the sanctuary and the transepts of the Church serve as a record of parishioners who have served the parish faithfully over more than a century.

The Sanctuary windows

The Sanctuary windows are immediately visible on entering the church through the main door.

The three stained glass panels which comprise the east window of the sanctuary were presented by the Grace family as a memorial to their father, the Ven. T.S.Grace. He was the second vicar of Blenheim and Archdeacon of Marlborough, from 1885 to 1918. The windows depict the Annunciation, the Nativity, and the Dedication of the Christ Child in the Temple by the aged Simeon.

The three stained glass windows on the left at the rear of the sanctuary depict Mary, Sir Galahad and Martha respectively. They were presented by Mrs Russell Adams and the Grace family in memory of Rhoda Caroline, wife of Archdeacon Grace, High and Peter Adams who died in World War 2, and their grandmother Isabella Rose Adams, sister of Mrs Grace.

The three windows on the right at the rear of the sanctuary were dedicated at different times.

They depict Hannah and the child Samuel and were presented by the Nativity branch of the Mothers' Union and dedicated in 1954. The St Michael window is dedicated to the memory of the Ven.Oliver James Kimberley, fourth vicar of Blenheim and Archdeacon of Marlborough [1929 to 1939]. The St Nicholas window is in memory of the Ven. Donald Hautain, fifth vicar of Blenheim and Archdeacon of Marlborough, 1939-47.

East Transept

The Cleghorn window in the east transept was installed as a memorial to Annie Cleghorn, the wife of George Cleghorn, a noted medical practitioner in Blenheim in former years.

The Nave windows

In a break with tradition when the nave was being rebuilt in the 1960s its windows were sandblasted to designs and arranged to a plan by the vicar at the time, Archdeacon Kirkham. There are 30 windows in the nave: 15 on either side. The panes are clear with etchings of fleur-de-lis and other symbols, including a scroll at the base for appropriate wording. Some thought was given to the selection of suitable scroll names so that, as far as possible, there might be a continuing theme and association of ideas between the windows, reading from left to right; at the same time each name lends individuality to each window.

On the eastern side nearest the transept we start with Alpha, the first letter of the Greek alphabet, followed by Jesus, which means Saviour, then Omega, the last letter of the Greek alphabet. Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, the writers of the four gospels, followed by the names of the principal apostles. The others are John the Baptist, forerunner of our Lord, and St Stephen, first martyr of the Christian Church.

Hidden motif

Unfortunately the organ pipes obscure the southern wall window panes which are decorated with a delicate tracery of fleur-de-lis. A Christmas motif is also introduced in keeping with the name of our church - The Church of the Nativity. Accordingly, in the scroll at the base appears the Christmas text: *Glory be God in the Highest* (Luke 2:14). In the topmost pane, at the apex, is a five-pointed star under which is a crown-symbol of our Saviour's victory and the crown of everlasting life bestowed on all those who prove "faithful unto death". On the western wall starting from the south end the names in the first unit continue the Christmas theme with "Bethlehem" and the message of "peace and goodwill" proclaimed by the Herald Angels when our Saviour was born. The next unit develops the theme of the Christian graces further by stressing the three Cardinal virtues of Faith, Hope and Charity as enumerated by St Paul in his great and moving chapter in 1 Corinthians 13, where the theme is Charity (Christian Love). Then follows St Paul who was inspired to write these words, and next in order are Barnabas and the young man Timothy, who were associated with Paul in some of his journeys. It is appropriate that Lois, the grandmother, and Eunice, the mother of Timothy should be mentioned. Also Lydia, the seller of purple cloth who was Paul's first convert in Europe and Dorcas who was skilled with her needle, epitomizes the invaluable work of women's guilds. Thus, in these four windows we pay tribute to the love and devotion of women in the work and witness of the Church of God.

The last name, Silas, was also a traveling companion of Paul and the symbol of the "open door" reminds us of his experience in the gaol of Philippi when an earthquake shook the prison and the doors were opened.

The window symbols

Lion – Jesus, the Lion of the Tribe of Judah. Also strength, fortitude, courage and kingliness. Daniel. Hosea. Samson. David.

St Luke (The Evangelist): - the Ox. This is based on Matthew 11:30: "For my yoke is easy and my burden is light". The ox is the symbol of strength, patience and sacrifice, ready either for the plough or the altar. If the ox has wings it is the symbol of St Luke.

St John (The apostle. Lived to about 100 years): - A cross scallop shell and pilgrim's staff and hat.

St James the Major (Apostle. Lived to about 44 years): - St James lived for about 14 years after Jesus's crucifixion. Clemens Alexandrinus gives us a vivid account of his martyrdom. As he was about to be beheaded, the soldier who had accused him before Herod was so impressed because of the Apostle's great Christian courage and faith that he fell down and implored forgiveness, humbly confessing his sins. The Apostle absolved him, saying, "peace my son, peace be unto you and be pardoned of your faults". The soldier arose and confessed Jesus Christ and was beheaded by Herod soon

after the Martyrdom of St James. Little wonder then that so many churches have been named for this disciple who combined such noteworthy zeal, missionary courage and forgiveness. Francis Bond lists 41 churches in England alone that have been named for St James.

St Philip (Apostle): - A cross and two loaves of bread recall his remark when Jesus fed the multitude. After successful missionary labors in Galatia and Phrygia this Apostle is said to have suffered a cruel death. When scourging failed to silence him, he was stoned, crucified and finally run through with a spear to hasten death.

St Bartholomew (Apostle, lived to about 50): - This Apostle, thought to be the same as Nathanael, is said to have been flayed alive and then crucified. His most usual shield shows three flaying knives placed vertically.

St Thomas (Apostle) - This Apostle's shield shows a carpenter's square and a vertical spear. This gloomy and once doubtful man is believed to have preached the Gospel in India. There he was stoned, shot down with arrows and left dying alone until a pagan priest ran him through with a spear.

He is said to have erected with his own hands a building at Malipur in east India, hence the carpenter's square. He is the patron saint of builders.

St John the Baptist (died aged about 30) - Sometimes the Great Forerunner is shown together with the Twelve Apostles. His most usual shield is a nimbed lamb standing on a book and bearing the Banner of Victory because St John the Baptist pointed to Jesus Christ the Lamb of God.

St Stephen (A doctor; died about aged 34) - Cope - a vestment symbolic of dignity. Stones—symbolic of martyrdom.

St Barnabas (died aged about 58) - Referred to in St Matthew's gospel. Three stones of martyrdom.

St Timothy (Bishop, died aged about 97) - Club and stones—symbols of martyrdom.



Other Buildings

To the east of the church is the Parish Centre in which many activities take place. It also houses a reception area for visitors on the ground floor, with offices for clergy and staff on the first floor. The building was dedicated in 1980 and enlarged in 1998.

On the western side of the church is 'Barnies' which is home to parish youth activities. The building was originally built as one of the parish's early side churches – St Barnabas, at Springlands.



Historical Notes

First Church :

Dedicated December 22nd 1861

Remained in use as Parish Hall until demolished in 1981

Second Church :

Consecrated and opened February 21st 1879

Nave demolished 1960

Third Church :

Chancel consecrated June 13th 1908

East and West brick transepts built 1937-39

Nave, tower and vestries dedicated July 14th 1962

Nativity Centre:

Dedicated November 30th 1980

Extensions dedicated March 14th 1999