New lighting and decorations at St Giles' Church, Camberwell, London SE5

by Tim Gough of Austin Winkley & Associates

photographs by Helen Robertson

The interior of St Giles' Church, Camberwell, has recently been refurbished with grant aid from the Heritage Lottery Fund as part of an ongoing programme of repairs and upgrading works.

St Giles' is one of London's more significant early Victorian churches, having been designed by Sir George Gilbert Scott (of Scott and Moffat) as a result of a competition in the 1841 following the destruction by fire of the earlier parish church. Completed in 1844, Pevsner describes it as in a "rather raw early English" in flavour and not as refined as Scott's later work, but in its time it was regarded as a "magnificent work" and, "in the neighbourhood of London, no church was considered in purer style".

The programme of repairs began under the then church architect, the late Nigel Melhuish – formerly editor of this magazine - in the late 1980s and early 1990s when the main roofs were reslated and some stonework repairs carried out to the north west corner of the nave. Also under his direction, the very fine west window, of medieval German stained glass reputedly from Trier, was carefully restored in 1995. Austin Winkley & Associates worked with Mr Melhuish from 1994 onwards on the reconstruction of the spire, which has been the subject of an earlier article in Church Building, and this work was completed in July 2000.

The next and recently completed phase of work has been the upgrading of the interior of the church, involving repairs to the plaster finishes where water ingress had occurred over the years; decoration of the church; rewiring; and the installation of a new lighting scheme. The electrical system in the church had been condemned a decade or so ago and since then the church had been forced to use temporary builder's lighting. An initial scheme for relighting the church was designed by Anthony Easterbrook, whose recent death Church Building is reporting this issue and who also served on the Editorial board of the magazine. This scheme was not immediately implemented, since the spire repairs took priority, and when we came to look again at the lighting design more recently it was clear that the health and safety issues associated with fitting lamps and access to the fittings for cleaning now needed to be addressed more thoroughly.

The *Construction (Design and Management) Regulations 1994* require architects and designers to consider the safety risks associated with their designs, and one of the main concerns for any new lighting installation in churches is the question of how lamps can be changed in the future. Church lighting often has to be installed quite high up in order to provide appropriate lighting angles to the congregation and to the chancel areas, and this immediately introduces difficulties in the design. Falls from height are one of the main causes of death and injury amongst construction workers, and many of these falls relate to maintenance work. The risks are all the more predictable when – as often happens - incumbents or volunteers such as churchwardens routinely carry out these tasks, and the combination of pews, ladders access and high light fittings can make the changing of bulbs unpleasant and dangerous. The alternative of using an electrician to carry out the task does not remove the risk, and has the disadvantage of relative high cost; often the relamping is simply not carried out leaving the design of the lighting scheme in compromised, some of the congregation in gloom and the church interior not looking its best.

At St Giles' Church, this question was further complicated by the historic significance of the building, and its Grade II* status. Care had to be taken to satisfy English Heritage, the Victorian Society and the Diocesan Advisory Committee, all of whom wished to have input into any design for the lighting and interior decorations.

At Austin Winkley & Associates, we wanted to try to deal with all these issues in as simple a manner as possible, and having researched what was available on the market we decided that a purpose-made fitting might be appropriate. The basic design of the fitting was inspired by the lighting installation at Padua Cathedral in northern Italy, carried out as part of a very fine reordering scheme there in the mid 1990s. An innovation which we think is unique to this design was to incorporate into the fitting an integral rise-fall mechanism by way of a counterweight and pulley. This means that once the fitting is installed, the main part of it can be lowered (using a rod and hook similar to that used to open high-level windows), the gimbel mountings of each light adjusted in order to shine light in appropriate directions, the lamps changed as necessary and the whole assembly cleaned, all from within reach of the ground. The detailed design was carried out by us with Steve Lewis, a metalwork artist and craftsman, who also constructed and installed the fittings.

We were eager for the light fitting to be modern, discrete and appropriate in appearance – in no way a pastiche – and found support from both English Heritage and the Victorian Society for this approach. We consider this to be in accordance with the conservation principles of the Venice Charter, which requires that new work in an historic context not confuse the historic record of the building; rather than attempting to hide the light sources within the building we felt that a simple but visible and consistent fitting would be appropriate. An unintended result of this was that on completion the existing rather unsightly (but effective) heating system, which is suspended from the walls and ceilings and which cannot yet be removed due to budgetary constraints, appeared much less prominent than had previously been the case.

In total, 32 light fittings were installed on a dimming system which, together with the adjustable lamp mountings, gives a flexible installation which can be changed with ease. The balance between lighting of the congregation and the features of the building and be changed from ground level, as can the location of intense pools of light if the focus of worship (or other functions, such as concerts) were to vary.

Other aspects of the project involved the use of a lime plaster for repairs to the wall surfaces and the use of vapour-permeable Classidur paint. The building had been limewashed – records indicated that this had been done in the 1950s – but emulsion paint had been used in the 1960s redecoration and this proved too expensive to remove, thus ruling out limewashing which would have been the ideal solution. Classidur paint provided a practical substitute, although its flat appearance is not as attractive as the variegated appearance of limewash. The reredos, designed by Scott and previously refurbished by Ninian Comper, a former architect to the church, was conserved by Granville and Burbage, and a sound installation was provided by RG Jones of Morden.

Regrettably, whilst this project was proceeding, evidence of dry rot in the high level roof timbers of the church was obtained, and it became necessary to survey all the timbers whilst the scaffolding was in place in order to establish the extent of the problem. Remedial works to eradicate the dry rot and associated external repairs to the stonework will be proceeding soon, again with the aid of funding from the Heritage Lottery Fund/English Heritage.

List of consultants etc:

Client: The Vicar, Churchwardens and PCC of St Giles' Church Camberwell, London SE5

Architect: Austin Winkley & Associates

Job Architect: Tim Gough

Contractor: EW Rayment & Co Ltd, Woodland Works, Potten End, Berkhampstead, Hertfordshire, HP4 2SJ contact Mr Mark Rayment tel 01442 864 422

Note: contact EW Rayment for details of subcontractors such as the electrician, scaffolder and painter

Plastering subcontractor: AG Joy & Son Ltd, Marsh Farm, Thrandeston Little Green, Diss, North Suffolk IP21 4BU tel/fax 01279 421 457

Metalwork artist/craftsman: Steve Lewis, 6 Creekside, Deptford, London SE8 4SA tel 020 8692 2407

Conservator: Granville and Burbage, 111 Kingsmead Road, London SW2 3HZ tel 020 8674 1969

Dry Rot investigator: Environmental Building Solutions Ltd, Galley Cottage, Galley Lane, Great Brickhill, Milton Keynes, Buckinghamshire, MK17 9AA contact Huw Lloyd

Sound engineer: RG Jones, 63 Endeavour Way, London SW19 8UH tel 020 8971 3100