

Famous People Associated with St Marylebone Church

The part of London, now known as Marylebone, has been connected to its parish church for eight centuries.

In the Domesday Book, compiled in 1086, there are records of the district called Tybourn – a name which for hundreds of years had grim associations with the gallows, which stood a little way to the northeast of the site where Marble Arch now stands.

About the year AD1200, a small church, probably of timber, was built on the fringe of the Middlesex forest by the Tybourn stream which flowed from Highgate Hill to the Thames at Westminster. This little church was in every respect a country church. It stood near the place where the Tybourn stream crossed the Tybourn road (now called Oxford Street) and Stratford Place.

The church was called St John the Evangelist at Tybourn, and it served the spiritual needs of the agricultural folk who tilled the lands of the Manor of Tybourn, which belonged to the Abbess and Convent of Barking. In the Domesday Book the Manor was valued at 52s.

In the taxation record of Pope Nicholas IV, 1291, there is an entry:

Middlesex, ecclesia de Tiborne £6

Maitland's History of London, first published in 1739, says

The village of Tybourne going into decay and its church denominated St John the Evangelist, left alone by the side of the Highway, it was robbed of its Books, Vestments, Bells, Images and other decorations, on which occasion the Parishioners petitioned Robert Braybrook, Bishop of London, for leave to take down their old, and to erect a new church elsewhere, which he readily agreed to, and granted them a faculty or licence of 23rd October anno 1400, by virtue of which they erected the new church.

The bishop in the licence claimed the right to lay the first stone. This 'new church' was built in 1400 about half-a-mile higher up the bourne (within a few yards of the present St Marylebone church), and was dedicated to St Mary – St Mary by the bourne.

Records show that as early as 1453 the old Anglo-Saxon name Tybourn had begun to give place to that of Marybourne, perhaps because of the unpleasant associations in people's minds with the name Tybourn.

During the sixteenth century and even earlier, most of the forest land in the parish was used for hunting and little else, and kings enjoyed the chase. In the sixteenth and seventeenth century it was as rural as any countryside parish.

It was in this church, built in 1400, that Bacon was married. Hogarth chose the church as the scene of the marriage in his series of eight engravings called 'The Rake's Progress' which appeared in 1735.

In 1740 the church, which was in a very bad state of repair, was taken down and a new one built on the same site.

Nelson worshipped here and in our registers is the record of the baptism of his daughter Horatia, as also of Lord Byron.

Charles Wesley, the great hymn-writer and evangelist, younger brother of John Wesley, was buried in

the churchyard, and a memorial stone still stands in memory of him and of his famous son Samuel and of his other son, Charles, who was at one time organist of the church.

Among the memorial tables to be seen in this church is one to James Gibbs, the architect (pupil of Sir Christopher Wren), who was buried in the churchyard. Gibbs designed the churches of St Martin-in-the-Fields and St Mary-le-Strand, also the Radcliffe Library at Oxford and a quadrangle of All Souls College, Oxford, as well as the new building at King's College, Cambridge.

Extensive building took place in the Marylebone area at the end of the eighteenth century, and by 1807 the parish had a population of 70,000 people. The small church was not adequate and an insistent demand came for a larger and worthier building.

A letter to the press, dated July 1807, described the horror of a visitor to the church of so large and rich a parish when on entering he found five coffins in the pews waiting for burial, eight children being baptised and five women waiting to be churched. He described the church as being probably the smallest place of worship attached to the Church of England in London, and that for a population of 70,000 people living in the parish.

The strong popular demand for a new and larger church, induced the passing of an Act of Parliament in the session 1810-11 'to enable the vestry men of the Parish of St Mary-le-bone in the County of Middlesex, to build a new parish church, and two or more chapels.' Thomas Hardwicke (who also designed the Haymarket Theatre) was the architect, and the foundation stone was laid on 5 July 1813. The building, with a seating capacity of between three and four thousand persons, cost nearly £80,000 and was consecrated on 4 February 1817.

As designed and built, the interior of the church looked very different from that of the present day. The organ and choir were placed on a loft behind the altar; there were two galleries, one above the other, round the whole nave of the church, and boxes, exactly like those in the theatres of that period, on either side of the chancel. The interior suggested a theatre rather than a place of worship.

In 1884 an apse was added to the east end of the church – or rather the south end, since the church is built north and south and not east and west as is usually the case – and the dedication stone was laid by Mrs Gladstone. The top gallery was removed, except at the back of the church; the organ was placed in a loft above and of the left-hand side of the choir: the appearance of the building was greatly improved and made far more worthy of the purpose for which it was set up.

Among the memorial tablets on the walls of the church is one dated 1821, to Richard Cosway, RA, Principal Painter to HRH George, Prince of Wales, and one to the Revd Dr John Vardill, Regius Professor of Divinity in King's College, New York, dated 1811.

For almost two hundred years, the parish church, because of its situation, has been the place of worship of a very large number of people whose names are well known in every profession and service in the country. What so far has been written does not pretend to cover the history of St Marylebone, it has merely told in outline part of the story of how a village near London came to be a part of London as we know it today; and since the life of a village always centred round its church our story has been made to do the same.

Follow the links to some of the people whose names and achievements are known to all the world, who walked in the lanes and fields of Marylebone in olden days, or trod its streets in more modern times, all of whom had special associations with its parish church.