

# 1 A Church eager to worship God and serve the local community

Christians have been worshipping in Southdown ever since the arrival of the railway in 1865. Since then the local Anglican community has worshipped in no less than five different places of worship; some temporary, some more permanent. There have been fires, charismatic personalities and lots of change, but the same God at the heart of it all.

This exhibition charts that journey to the present day, and also looks to the future. It will show how each generation has responded to what God has been calling them to do. Without the faithful witnesses of the people in years gone by, we would have nothing of the present building, nor the hall. Not to mention the thriving community of which we are a part and all are welcome to join.

Yet God is calling us to do something afresh in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, so that we can serve the local community in new and different ways. We hope this exhibition inspires you to wonder what God is calling us to do next.



Watercolour of St John the Baptist Church and Vicarage. © John Hunt. 2010.



St John's Church Family, Pentecost 2022. © Michael Readman.





## 2 First beginnings: the coffee room and worship at the local school

Christians have been living in this part of Hertfordshire for hundreds of years. Our story begins in 1865, not with the church, but with the arrival of the Midland railway.

As the railway arrived the population grew and needed to be served by the local church. In 1865 a small 'coffee room' in the playground of St John's Infant Day School was built to minister to this rapidly growing population. Mission services were held in this little room on Sundays and weekdays, until the railway was completed in 1869. In 1875, after a lapse of some years, a permanent school was built and divine service was held in this building for twenty years.

At this time South Harpenden was part of the Parish of St Nicholas, and the church in Southdown was one of three missionary communities founded as the town grew. We know them now as All Saints, Batford; St Mary's Kinsbourne Green and St John the Baptist, Southdown.



Empire Day in Southdown c.1900. © Harpenden and District Local History Society.



Southdown - Hospital Sunday 1913. © Harpenden an District Local History Society.



Southdown - Wheathampstead Road showing the railway c.1910.  
© Harpenden and District Local History Society.





# 3 From strength to strength: the Paper Church

As Southdown grew, or Bowling Alley as it was known then, a new church was needed to serve this community.

The first church was built in 1895 on a leasehold facing the common on Crabtree Lane and dedicated to St John the Evangelist. It was designed as a temporary church – hence gaining the name ‘Paper Church.’

We know precious little about the origins of this church – why was it built, how did they raise the money, and why was the name St John the Evangelist chosen? What we do know is this church was evidence of a vibrant and growing Christian community in this area.



Black and white photograph of St John the Evangelist being consumed by fire, 31<sup>st</sup> December 1905. © Harpenden and District Local History Society.

Yet disaster struck! On the morning of Sunday 31<sup>st</sup> December 1905 the church burnt down in less than an hour. Thankfully, from the scene of disaster rose an energetic and much loved priest at St John’s, Revd William Wingfield Colley. He was determined not to let the people of Southdown be overwhelmed by this misfortune. A new vision for a more permanent home was born.



Black and white photograph of St John the Evangelist Church, c1900.



Black and white photograph of the interior of St John the Evangelist Church. Christmas 1896. Photographer H Valentine.





# 4 Out of the ashes, a new vision

‘Where there is no vision, the people perish’

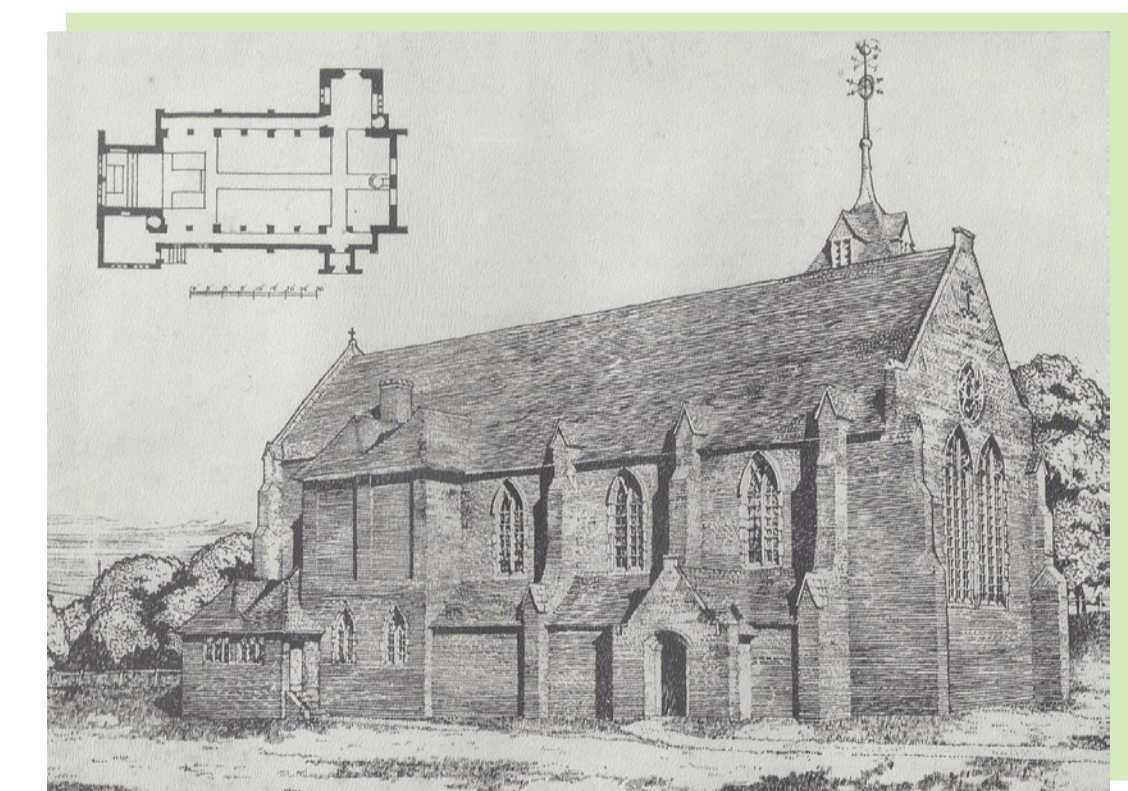
The vision for a new church came from the curate-in-charge, Revd William Colley. The place chosen for Southdown’s new brick and stone church was in the midst of an old orchard on the edge of Harpenden Common. The architect was Frederick Eden.

Revd Colley’s ambition for this new church was shared by the community, and the whole cost of the building project was raised, leaving the church debt free! The first building work took place on 24<sup>th</sup> June 1907, the Feast Day of the Birth of St John the Baptist, who became the patron saint of the new church. This new church was consecrated just two years and 3 months after the destruction of the old St John’s on 2<sup>nd</sup> March 1908.

At this point, St John’s was still a part of the Parish of St Nicholas. But a growing population and the vigour of life in the church encouraged the people of St John’s to work towards separate parish status in order to be in charge of its own destiny.



Inscription on the pulpit at St John’s  
© Michael Readman.



Black and white pencil sketch of ‘Proposed church of St John Baptist, Harpenden’ Eden and Hodgson, 3 Staple. © Harpenden and District Local History Society.



Black and white photograph of St John’s being built. Laying of the foundation stone by Mrs Tylston Hodgson, 27<sup>th</sup> July 1907.



St John’s c.1915.  
© Harpenden and District Local History Society.



St John’s interior, c.1920s.  
© Harpenden and District Local History Society.



The Vicarage was built in 1926.

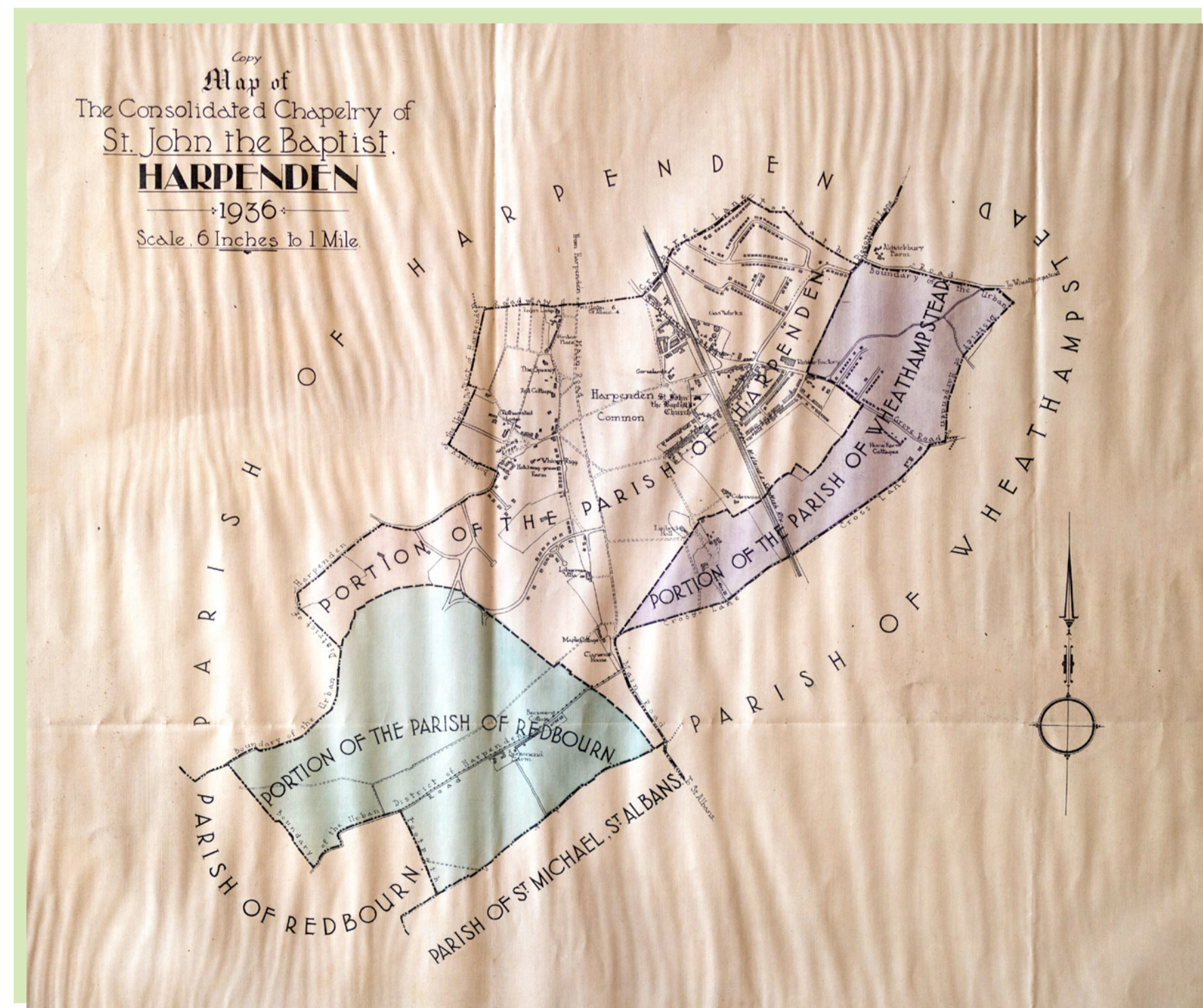


# 5 A new Parish is born

As St John's grew, so too did its status as a church. Something had to be done.

Fr Frank Conquest Clare was licensed as perpetual curate on St John's Day (24th June) 1932. As a former solicitor he was an ideal person to guide the church onto the next stage of its journey: the formation of a separate parish.

And so, on 10th November 1936, the Order in Council of the Privy Council was published bringing the Parish of St John the Baptist Harpenden into being. To be a parish was not just about financial independence but a sign that St John's had grown to sufficient size to be able to support itself.



Map of the consolidated chapelry of St John the Baptist, Harpenden, 1936. Showing the creation of the parish and additions from Redbourn and Wheathampstead Parishes.

Fr Clare was an energetic first vicar (1937-43) of St John's and was very much within the Anglo-Catholic tradition of the church. During his time the sacristy was built and the altar enlarged. With the assistance of others, he also oversaw a vibrant Sunday School for children of senior, junior and infant school age. Yet even though these classes were such a vital part of church life, there was no room available at church for them to meet. Instead they had to rely on the hospitality of parishioners. This wasn't something that could go on for ever!



Evidence of the work of Fr Frank Conquest Clare (FCC) at the Vicarage.



Evidence of the work of Fr Frank Conquest Clare (FCC) at the Church.

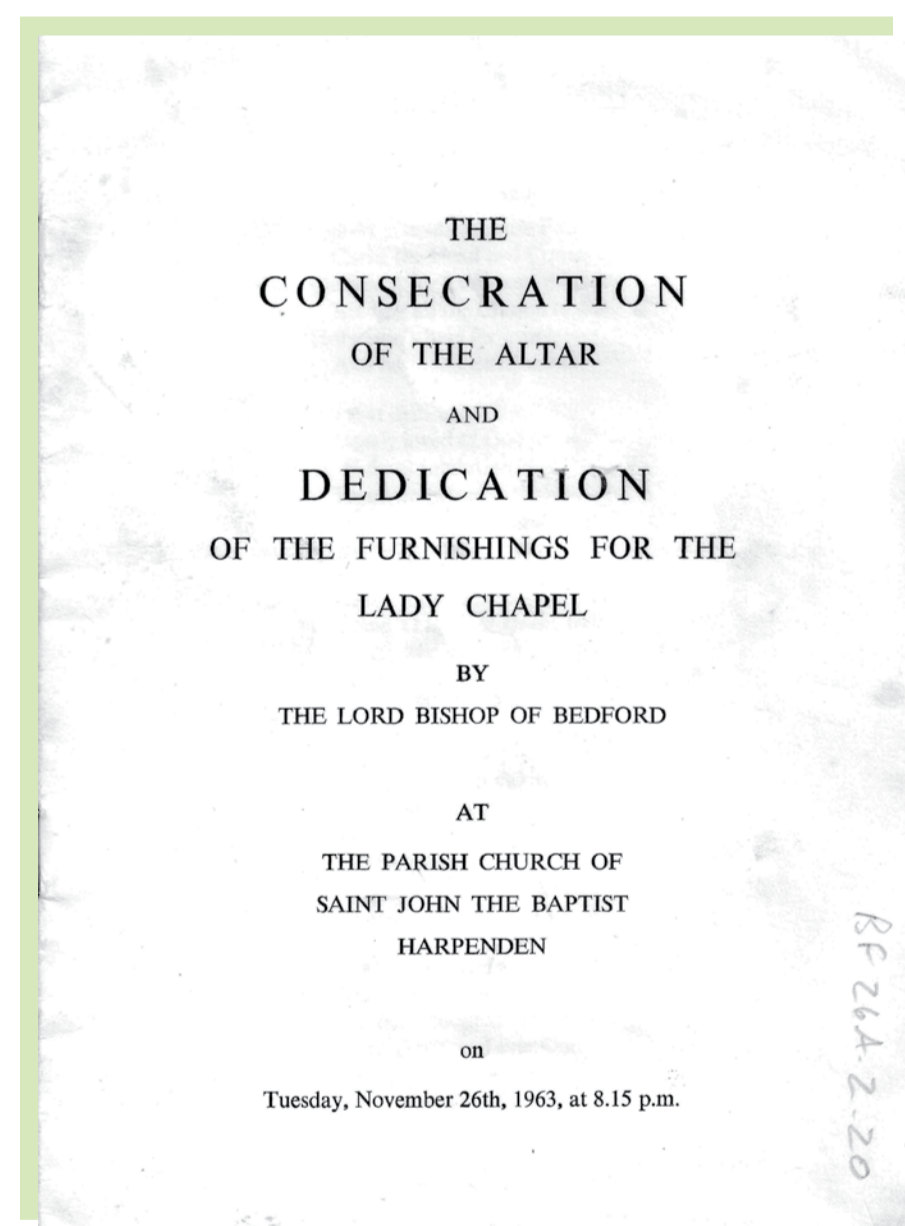


# 6 A vision fulfilled: St John's expands

After the Second World War, the people of St John's saw that changes were needed to accommodate the growth in population.



St John's interior 1961. © Harpenden and District Local History Society.



Order of service from consecration of the Lady Chapel, 1963. © Harpenden and District Local History Society.

In the 1950s, under the leadership of Revd Mark Potts (Vicar 1943-1963) a new westward extension was planned to accommodate the increased congregation. This would seat an extra 100 people and include a Lady Chapel. It proved too much, both in cost and also structural work required. But the congregation adapted and the result was our beautiful Lady Chapel. Designed by Stephen Dykes-Bower, it was described as 'a place to be still and in which to pray'.

Fundraising began in earnest, with some of the largest contributors coming from the Christmas markets of 1958, 1959 and 1960. In 1961 Christian Stewardship was introduced, which meant that by 1962, building work on the Lady Chapel could commence.

When it was consecrated and dedicated on 26th November 1963, more than 300 people passed through and experienced for the first time the stunning beauty of this new chapel.



Photographs of the stained glass windows in the Lady Chapel. © Michael Readman.



St John's Lady Chapel 1960s. © Harpenden and District Local History Society.



Black and white photo of the interior of St John's taken sometime between 1938 - 1961. Photo by R Hewson.



St John's Exterior 1962. © Harpenden and District Local History Society.





# 7 A vision for the community: building the hall

Gerald Emmett (Vicar from 1963 – 1976) had a real desire to share the gospel with the people of Southdown.

Since the beginning, the focus at St John's had rightly been on building and enhancing the church. Now the focus turned to serving the community and strengthening parish life.

At the time St John's Hall on Southdown Road (now the Harpenden Trust Hall) was used for Sunday school, youth groups and other church meetings, not only on a Sunday but also during the week. A new, more comfortable and convenient Hall was needed to help strengthen parish life. An area of land, which included a part of the Vicarage garden, was chosen as the site for the new Hall.

There were many challenges of working with the ecclesiastical commission, the Diocesan Board of Finance and the local authorities. However, they were all overcome. The Hall was eventually opened on a bitterly cold winter Sunday morning in 1968. After an extension in the late 1980s, the Hall continues to serve a variety of church and community groups and organisations such as Daylight, Harpenden Musical Theatre, Rainbows and Brownies.



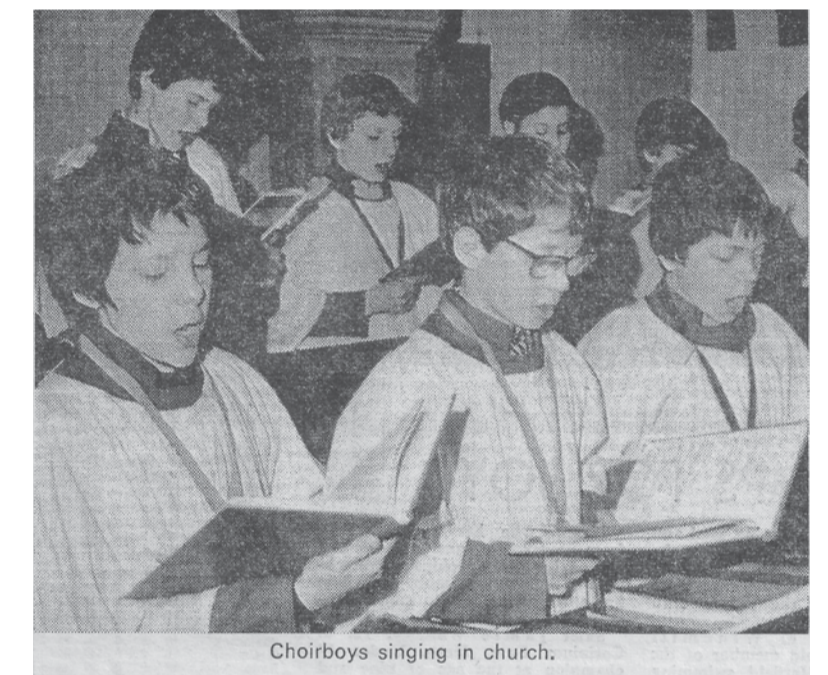
St John's Church Hall, external. 2022.



St John's Church Hall, internal view. 2022.



Church Hall, inside and out 1984.  
© Harpenden and District Local History Society.



Life at St John's 1980s. © Harpenden and District Local History Society.





# 8 A vision of transformation: Project 99

As an old building St John's requires a lot of time and money to keep it looking so beautiful.

Any great transformation needs funds. The generous legacy of a beloved member of the congregation enabled St John's to renew the building as it entered the 21st century. This came from Ted Ward, the local butcher and long-standing, faithful member of St John's on his death in December 1984. He left part of his estate to the church with the wish that anything given should be used for the beautification of the building and the benefit of St John's.

With that in mind, the Parochial Church Council (PCC) decided on a program of re-ordering and refurbishment of St John's, called Project 99. The inside of the church was transformed, with the most obvious changes being the addition of a new porch and toilet.

During the refurbishment, the church was fortunate to have the Hall next door where worship could continue, even if in a very temporary way. The newly refurbished St John's emerged, marvellously capturing the intrinsic spirit of what was there before, when the church was re-opened in January 2000.



St John's West End before Project 99.  
© Michael Readman.



The Nave looking East before Project 99.  
© Michael Readman.



Cross in memory of Ted Ward.



The High Altar before Project 99.  
© Michael Readman.



St John's Lady Chapel before Project 99. © Michael Readman.





# 9 A new vision for the 21st century: a new Parish Centre

St John's started the 21<sup>st</sup> century in very good heart.

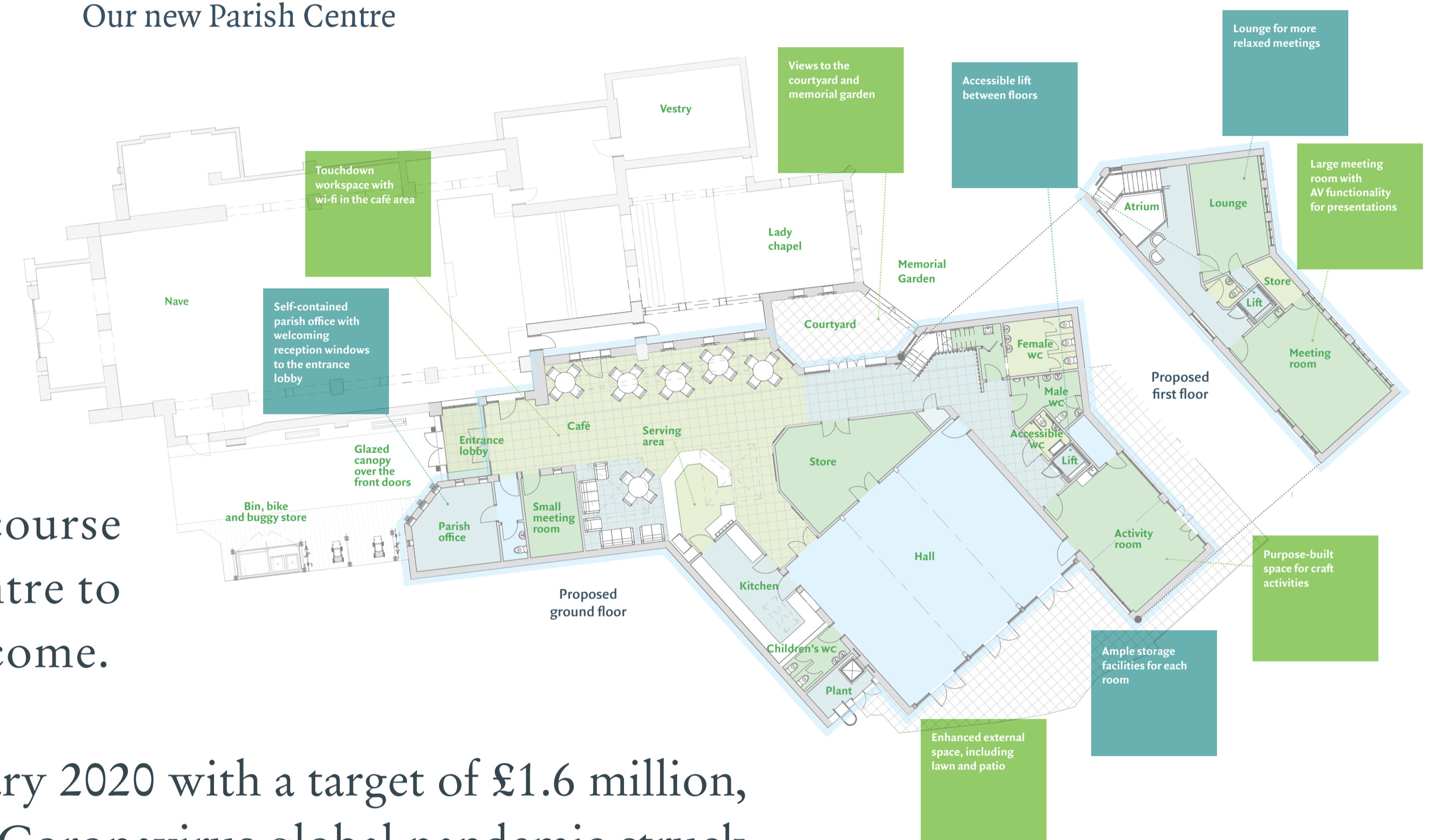
In 2008 the church celebrated its centenary under the guidance of Venerable Jonathan Smith (Vicar 1997- 2008), who was later appointed Archdeacon of St Albans.

However, it was becoming clear that the Hall was in dire need of work. After over 50 years of service, the Hall had done its job. It was decided, after extensive consultation, that the best course of action would be to knock it down and build a new Parish Centre to serve both the community and church for many more years to come.

The project to build the new Parish Centre was launched in February 2020 with a target of £1.6 million, with over £500,000 being pledged in the first few weeks. Then the Coronavirus global pandemic struck and work was put on hold but the new Parish Centre is needed more than ever.

If you are reading this and you would like to find out more about how you can contribute to this stage in the story of St John's, please get in touch with the Parish Office on [parish.office@stjohnsharpenden.org.uk](mailto:parish.office@stjohnsharpenden.org.uk)

Our new Parish Centre



Graphic representation of the external area of the Parish Centre.



Graphic representation of the new Parish Centre entrance.



Representation of the Parish Centre Café.



# 10 Timeline of St John's

1865

'Coffee Room' on St John's Infant School playground hosts the first mission services in Southdown

1875

Divine services continue in St John's School Hall

1895

St John the Evangelist church is built, on the corner of Crabtree Lane and Southdown Road

1905 31<sup>st</sup> Dec

St John the Evangelist church burns down

1907 24<sup>th</sup> June

The building of St John the Baptist begins

1908 2<sup>nd</sup> March

St John the Baptist church is consecrated

1926

St John's Vicarage is built

1936 September

The Sacristy is built

10<sup>th</sup> Nov

Formation of the new Parish of St John the Baptist, Harpenden

1963 26<sup>th</sup> Nov

Consecration of the Lady Chapel by the Bishop of Bedford

1968 winter

Church Hall is completed

1978 June

Pews from Hill End Hospital Chapel installed

1984 31<sup>st</sup> Dec

Death of Ted Ward

1997 February

Refurbishment work in the Lady Chapel

1999

Project 99 to re-order and refurbish St John's

2000 29<sup>th</sup> Jan

Dedication of refurbished and reordered church

2020 28<sup>th</sup> Feb

Project to build the new Parish Centre launched

23<sup>rd</sup> March

The pandemic arrives and St John's focus turned to supporting the vulnerable members of the community and congregation

2022

A revitalised St John's is now looking to an exciting future serving the local community in all their needs

2026

With God's blessing, work commences on our new Parish Centre!



St John's under construction.  
© Harpenden and District Local History Society.



St John's foundation stone laid 27th July 1907.



St John's Youth Club 1960s.  
© Harpenden and District Local History Society.

All Maps  
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St John's Ladies Choir 1912.  
© Harpenden and District Local History Society.



St John's Interior c.1950s.  
© Harpenden and District Local History Society.



St John's chancel before Project 99.  
© Michael Readman

**Our new Parish Centre**

**BUILDING IT TOGETHER**

