

St. Andrew's Old Church, Kingsbury

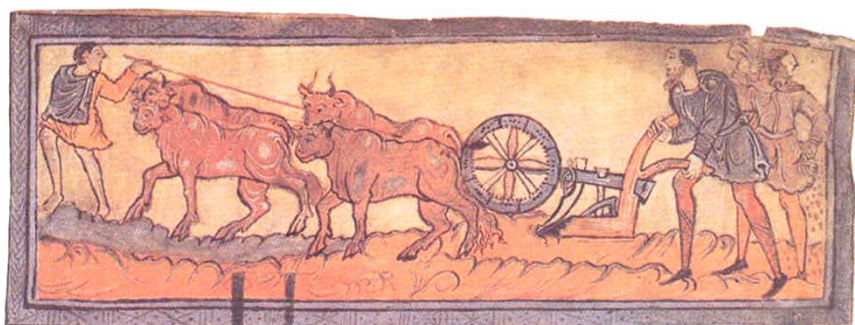
Hidden away in a wooded graveyard in Old Church Lane, St Andrew's Old Church in Kingsbury is Brent's only Grade 1 listed building, and probably its oldest building. Although the church's exact age is not known, archaeological work in 2006 suggests that it was built no later than the year 1100. Evidence from the church can help us discover a lot about English history, as well as local history. This article will tell you the church's long and interesting story, and something of the history of the Christian religion, as the building has served Roman Catholic, Church of England, non-conformist and Orthodox denominations during the 900 years and more that it has stood here.



The church from the south-west. [Photo by Philip Grant, 2009]

The Parish of Kingsbury dates from Saxon times. When the *Domesday Book* was compiled for the Norman king, William I, in 1085/86, *Chingesberie's* two manors of Chalkhill and Tunworth were held by St Peter's (Westminster) Abbey and one of William's knights, Ernulf de Hesdin, respectively. The document shows there were more than twenty tenant farmers, with holdings ranging from one *virgate* (about 30 acres, or 12 hectares) down to 5 acres, including one *virgate* of land held by a priest. There was no record of a church, as this would

not have been taxed by the king. The *Domesday Book* notes that on the St Peter's land, five villagers shared one plough.



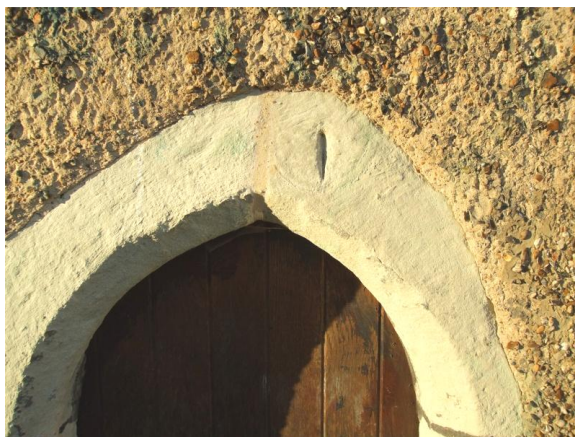
Ploughing in the 11th century.
[From the British Library collection]

St Andrew's Church was probably built at around this time, in the late-Saxon or early-Norman style. The four corners of the building have large sandstone blocks in a "long and short" pattern, and two of the corners are supported by sarsen stones, which were carried to the area by glaciers during the last Ice Age. The walls themselves are made of rubble (small rocks, and debris from other buildings, held together with mortar), and faced with flints which were probably brought here from elsewhere. In the walls there are numerous pieces of Roman floor and roof tiles, and of domestic pottery from that period, which suggest that the ruins of a nearby Roman building were used as one source of rubble. Within the church, just inside the original (South or "Saxon") doorway and either side of the altar, several complete Roman hypocaust flue tiles have been set into the walls, as small storage boxes to hold candles or tapers. These hypocaust tiles suggest that the lost Roman building was a "villa".

By 1244 the church, and the Chalkhill manor land, had been given to the Knights of the Hospital of St John of Jerusalem. This religious order had been set up to look after Christian pilgrims, and to provide care for the poor or sick of any faith, during the Crusades. Some of the monks and lay brothers came to Kingsbury to grow food for the Order's Priory at

Clerkenwell, in the City of London. Their farm became known as *Freren* Farm, from the Norman-French word for ‘the brothers’. The church was then dedicated to St John, Baptist, as well as to St Andrew, and during the 13th century a second (Priest’s) door, and two small windows in the north and south walls, were added, as well as a porch outside the main door.

The monks had to attend church several times a day. To help the priest at the church to know the times for these services, a simple sundial was made on the south wall of St Andrew’s. You can still see markings for this scratch dial in the stonework outside the priest’s door and window. When the shadow from a wooden pole crossed each mark, it would show the time for a service.



The scratch dial mark on the arch of the Priest’s Door at St Andrew’s Old Church.

[Photograph by Philip Grant, 2009]



Between the years 1325 and 1345 a bell was installed to call the monks from the farm or its fields; it was inscribed in Latin:

PETRVS + DE + WESTON + ME + FECIT

(Peter of Weston made me) and it is the oldest remaining church bell in Middlesex. It still hangs in the belfry at St Andrew’s.

The Peter of Weston bell outside St Andrew’s Old Church, on its way for cleaning and retuning in 1981.

[Source: Brent Archives – W.H.S. collection]

The St Andrew’s bell was soon tolling for another reason. A great plague, carried by rats and called the “Black Death”, spread across Britain killing over one million people, around 40% of the total population. The records of Kingsbury’s manor court for 1350 alone show 13 deaths ‘at the time of the pestilence’. The plague virtually wiped out the small village in the south of the parish, although individual farms across much of the rest of the parish continued to work.

The principal, or “manor”, farm in Kingsbury was Hill Farm. The land of Tunworth manor was given to All Souls’ College, Oxford, in 1442, to provide rents which would help to finance its work. The tenants at Hill Farm for more than a century were members of the Shepard family, and the oldest surviving memorial in the church is to John Shepard, who died in 1520, his first wife Anne (who died after bearing ten children) and second wife Maude (who bore him eight more children). The brass plate, originally on a tombstone in the church floor, shows pictures of the family dressed in the best fashions of the time.

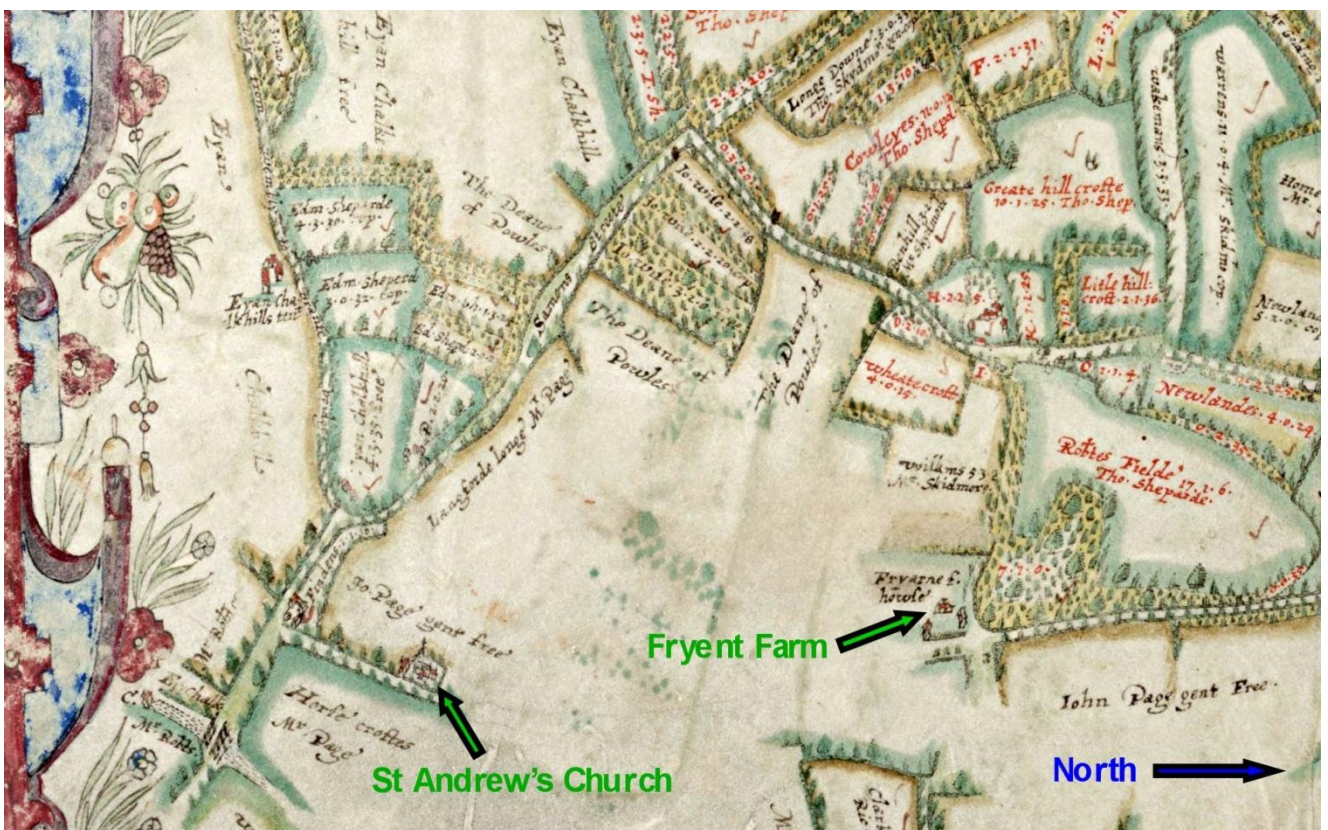


The main section of the Shepard memorial brass.

[Photograph by Philip Grant, 2009]

It may have been wealthy “yeoman farmer” families such as the Shepards who paid for improvements to the church in the 15th or early 16th centuries, such as a new main entrance door at the west end, with a large window above, a larger window behind the altar at the eastern end of the church, and three “two-light” windows in the south wall.

Although this was a period when local farms were generally prospering, it was a turbulent time in English history. During the 1530’s, King Henry VIII had fallen out with the Pope, and set up his own Church of England. In 1540, he seized the assets of the Knights of the Hospital of St John as part of his dissolution of the monasteries, and four years later he gave its Kingsbury estate to Saint Paul’s Cathedral. Although not drawn until late Tudor times, the 1597 Hovenden map of *Kingsburye* shows the area much as it would have been at around this time. The land which had been held by the St John’s Order is shown on this map as owned by ‘*The Deane of Powles*’.

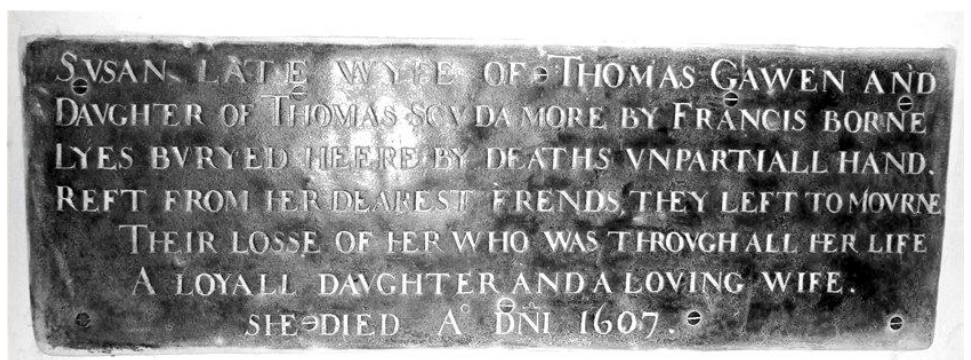


An extract from the 1597 Hovenden Map of Kingsbury, with locations of the church and farm added.
 [Source and copyright: The Codrington Library, All Souls' College, Oxford]

The change in worship from the Catholic to a Protestant form of Christianity is reflected in the memorials inside the church. Instead of images of the people remembered (as seen for the Shepard family above), by the early 17th century the memorials were simply in words. After Thomas Scudamore’s daughter Susan died in 1607, a plaque records her life in a short poem.

Memorial plaque to Susan Gawen (née Scudamore).

[Photograph by Philip Grant, 2009]



When this local gentleman died himself in 1626, his own memorial says: 'Here lyeth the body of Thomas Scudamore G^{ent}. Servant unto Queene Elizabeth & K^e James, 47 years. Who had two wifes Susan & Francis & had issue by them 6 sonnes & 5 daughters & changed this life in the feare of God the 10 day of September 1626 being of the age of LXXVII [77] years.' It may have been Thomas Scudamore who donated a second bell to St Andrew's Church in 1604, which has the following inscription to the new Stuart king cast into it:

ANNO DOMINI 1604 ✚ GOD SAVE ✚ KYNGE ✚ JAMES

St Andrew's Church did not escape the effects of the Civil War which tore England apart in the 1640's. Less than a mile away to east and west were the homes of Sir William Roberts of Neasden, a strong supporter of Parliament, and Richard Page of Uxendon, who fought for King Charles I at the second battle of Newbury in 1644. Thomas Fox, Kingsbury's parish priest, was thrown out of his church in 1649, and followed by a succession of three Puritan ministers during the 1650's. This short interlude as a non-conformist church was ended in 1662, when Benjamin Rowles was appointed as the new Church of England vicar, following King Charles II's restoration.

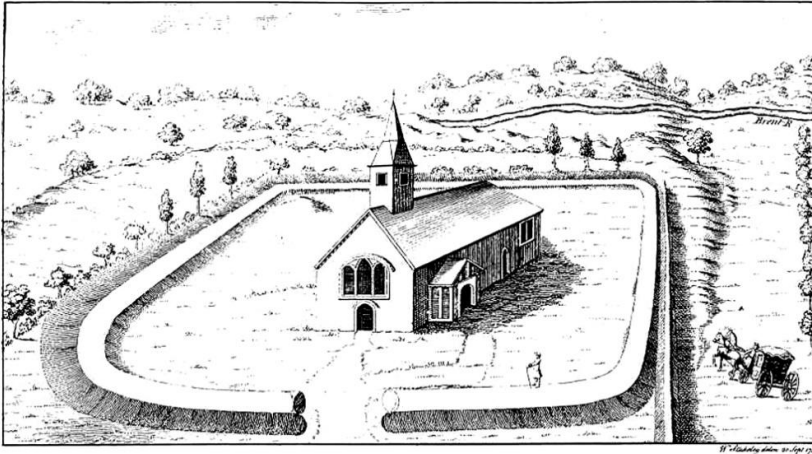
The newest of the church's three bells dates from the early 18th century, and includes imprints of Queen Anne coins (the last of the Stuart monarchs, who reigned from 1702 to 1714) between the words around its band. When John Rocque produced his map of London and the country around it in the 1740's, St Andrew's Church appeared near its north-west edge, just under the name "Kingsbury". Two hundred years after the Fryent land had been seized by Henry the Eighth, the footpath across the fields from the farm to the church can still be seen on the map. Although the fields have gone, the path can still be followed today from Church Lane (sign-posted first to Church Drive, then to Wells Drive and down the left-hand side of St Andrew's Road before the unmade path to the churchyard).



An extract from John Rocque's
1745 map of London.
[Source: Brent Archives]

St Andrew's was already a very old building by this time, and it became quite fashionable for London's increasing middle classes to visit the church. The famous antiquarian, Dr William Stukeley, claimed in 1749 that the church had been built in the middle of a Roman encampment, which he believed had been constructed by Julius Caesar during his 54BC invasion of Britain. Although it is possible that Caesar's Roman legions did pass nearby, after

crossing the Thames at Brentford on their way to a victory over the Catuvellauni tribe in Hertfordshire, the ditches of this “Caesar’s Camp” have now been dated to the 13th century.



A 1757 print from a drawing by William Stukeley, showing the church within “Caesar’s Camp”.

[Source: Brent Archives – Wembley History Society Collection]

The modern farming methods introduced during the “Agricultural Revolution” of the second half of the 18th century saw a major change in Kingsbury’s farms. The heavy clay soil was not suited to the new, deeper ploughs, and most of the local fields were turned over to growing hay, for which there was a ready market in nearby London to feed the city’s many horses. The local tenant farmers and farm workers tended to become poorer, and by the early 19th century Kingsbury Parish was giving financial help to a number of its residents. (For more details, see the article “The Poor of the Parish.”) St Andrew’s Church itself also suffered from poor maintenance at this time, which is evident in a drawing of the church made in 1822.



A drawing of St Andrew’s Church in 1822.

[Source: Brent Archives – Wembley History Society Collection]

By the 1830’s, some large houses were being built in Kingsbury (particularly in the Hay Lane and Kingsbury Green areas) as country retreats for wealthier families from London. At the same time, the Kingsbury Reservoir (now better known as the “Welsh Harp”) was being constructed, to improve the supply of water needed by the Paddington branch of the Grand Junction Canal, which had opened in 1801.

Tragedy struck in August 1835, when four brothers from one such family drowned while swimming in the newly filled reservoir, and a memorial plaque in the nearby church records the story.



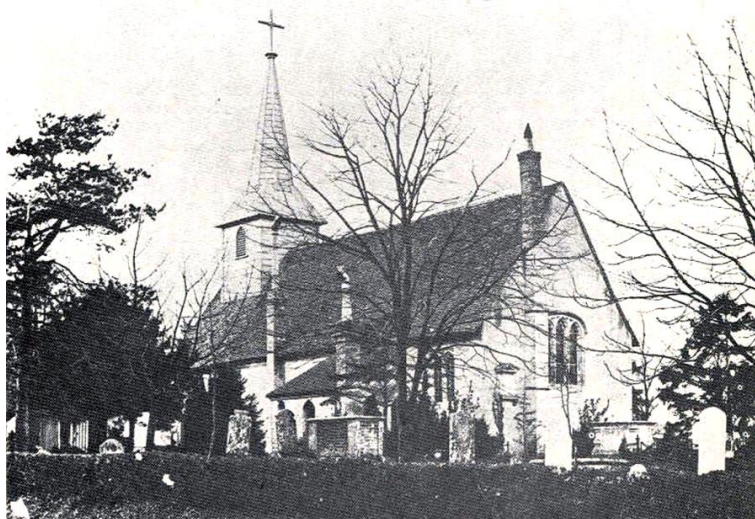
The memorial plaque to the four Sidebottom brothers, who drowned in the reservoir and were buried in St Andrew’s Church.

[Photograph by Philip Grant, 2009]

In 1840 the neglect of the church had reached such a state that a major restoration of the building was carried out. Unfortunately this showed no respect for its history – the ancient porch was demolished, and the original south doorway was bricked-up. Inside the church, the rood screen and ancient font were removed. A vestry was added to the church, outside the Priest’s Door on the south side, and heating was installed for the first time, which while making the building more comfortable to worship in also meant that there were three unsightly chimneys. Further repairs in 1870 saw the old steeple taken down, and reused in the construction of a new wing on a local mansion (“Lewgars” in Slough Lane), while a new steeple was built.

St Andrew’s Church from the south-east around 1880, showing some of the 1840 “improvements”.

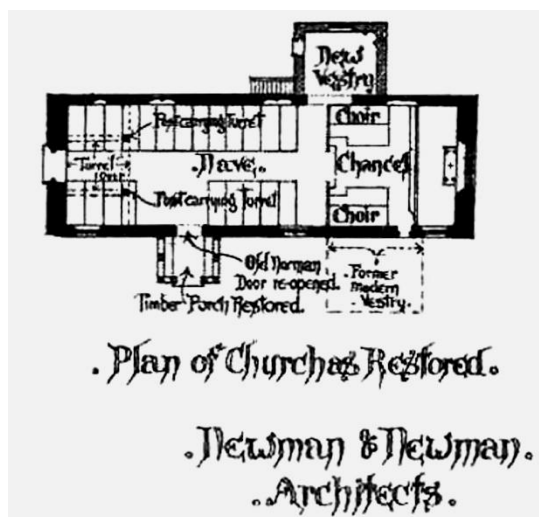
[Source: Brent Archives – Wembley History Society Collection]



When a new vicar, Rev. Lambart Edwards, took over the parish in 1883, he did not like the Old Church, and persuaded the Ecclesiastical Commissioners to pay for a new church, with a vicarage for his large family. This was soon built on land donated by All Souls’ College between Kingsbury Green and the Hyde, close to where most of the people in the parish then lived. When Holy Innocents’ Church opened in June 1884, Edwards made this Kingsbury’s parish church, but some of his parishioners continued to meet and hold services in St Andrew’s. The old church might have been abandoned if Rev. James Mills, the vicar of a “mission church” at the nearby Metropolitan Railway workers’ village just across the River Brent, had not agreed to take it on as part of a new “Neasden cum Kingsbury” parish in 1885.

In the late 1880’s the lesson at the church’s Sunday services was sometimes read by William Gladstone. This famous Victorian Prime Minister spent many week-ends staying with friends at Dollis Hill House. He often chose to worship quietly at St Andrew’s, as his attendance at St Mary’s Parish Church in Willesden caused crowds of sight-seers to gather. His visits to the

old church in Kingsbury helped its revival, which in turn lead to restoration and improvement work in 1889 by Messrs Newman and Newman. This included the removal of the 1840 vestry, which was replaced by one on the north side more in keeping with the design of the church, and the re-opening of the original south (“Saxon”) doorway.



A plan showing the 1889 improvements.

[Source: Brent Archives – Wembley History Society Collection]



The restored “Saxon” door >
[Photo by Philip Grant, 2009]

At the beginning of the 20th century Kingsbury was still a mainly rural community, but after the First World War its population grew rapidly. Local roads were improved ready for the millions of visitors who would attend the British Empire Exhibition at Wembley in 1924, and the

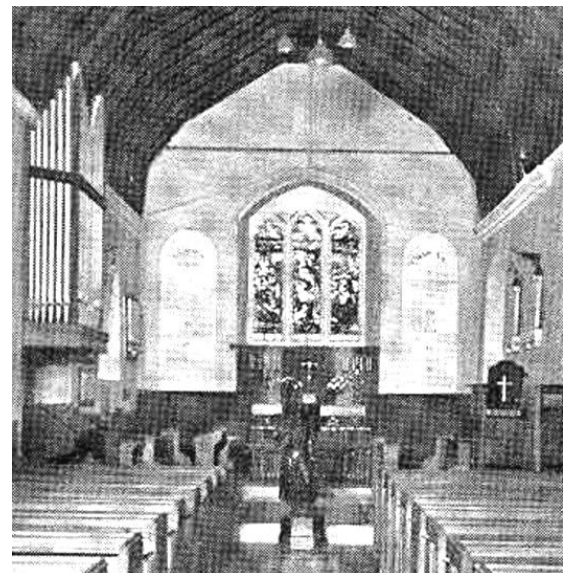


building of suburban homes soon followed. By the 1930's the church was too small for its congregation, and a redundant Victorian church was moved from Central London and rebuilt in an adjacent field (for details see "Kingsbury's Recycled Church"). When this new St Andrew's Church opened in October 1934, the Old Church was kept on by the parish, but only used for occasional services and concerts.

St Andrew's Old Church in 1904, with the sexton's hut beside the churchyard gate.

[Source: Brent Archives – W.H.S. Collection]

During World War II, the two churches survived the "blitz" of 1940-41, but an isolated air raid on the evening of 19 February 1944 did affect the area badly. A direct hit on a pair of semi-detached Council houses in Birchen Close killed seven and eight members respectively of the families living there, and they were later buried in the churchyard just across Old Church Lane from the ruins of their homes. An air raid warden who had been walking nearby also died in hospital from his injuries a few days later. The blast from this bomb blew out the east windows of both the old and new Saint Andrew's Churches, although new stained glass was installed in each after the war.



The interior of St Andrew's Old Church, from a 1930's postcard, showing the (Victorian?) stained glass east window that was lost.

[Source: S. Andrew's Church archive.]

In 1977 the Old Church was declared redundant, and was leased to the Wembley History Society Trust, which planned to use it as a museum, study and exhibition centre. It was soon noticed that the wooden frames supporting the bells were in poor condition, and £2,500 was raised which allowed the three bells to be cleaned and retuned, then safely re-hung with a new chiming mechanism. The Trust's plans were unfortunately never realised, and responsibility for the Old St Andrew's building was taken over by the Churches Conservation Trust in 2003. By 2009 another charity, Drama Workhouse, was hoping to convert the Old Church into an arts and heritage centre. Initial lottery funding was obtained to draw up more detailed proposals, but by 2012 these plans had also failed to reach a successful conclusion.

Despite being considered redundant, St Andrew's Old Church remained a consecrated building, and in 2008 the Church of England agreed that it could be used, on a temporary basis, for worship by the Romanian Orthodox Church. A priest was sent to Kingsbury to look after the needs of a growing Romanian community in north-west London, and there were soon hundreds of people attending services at the Old Church, while the search continued for



a more permanent home for the congregation. It was not uncommon for local residents passing the churchyard on a Sunday morning to see worshippers standing outside the west door, as there was no room for them all inside the church.

Romanian worshippers outside Old St Andrew's, December 2010.

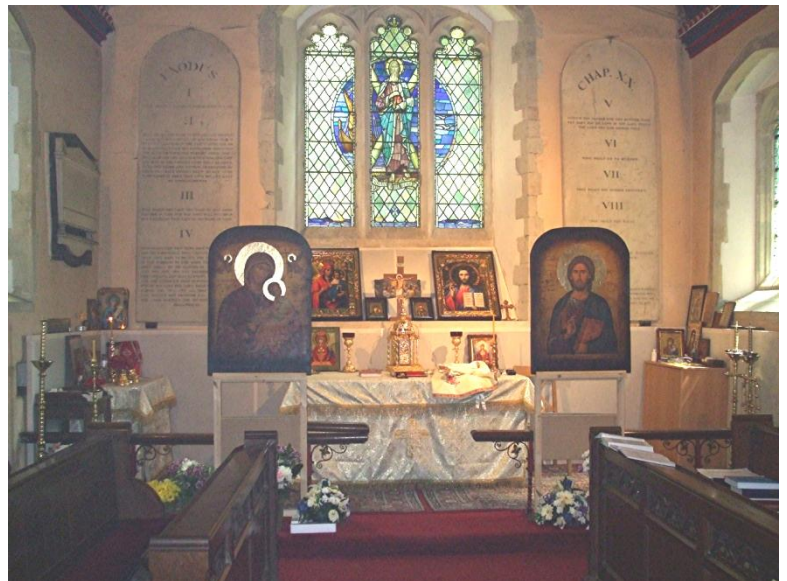
[Photograph by Philip Grant]

Once the Drama Workhouse plans had come to nothing in 2012, the Churches Conservation Trust agreed to give the Romanian Orthodox Church a twenty year lease on the Old Church, so that, 900 years on, worship will continue within its walls. After

centuries as first a Roman Catholic, then an Anglican church, with a short interval as a non-conformist church during the 17th century, Old St Andrew's is now home to an Orthodox church. This denomination can trace its origins back to the beginning of Christianity, when apostles like Saint Andrew spread the story of Jesus throughout the Roman Empire, and it is perhaps fitting that the Romanian Orthodox community are now using a church whose walls contain material from a nearby building which existed when the Roman Emperor Constantine issued the Edict of Milan in 313, giving official recognition to the Christian faith.

The Chancel and altar of St Andrew's Old Church, decorated for the Orthodox festival of Saint Constantine and his mother Saint Helena, 21 May 2010.

[Photograph by Philip Grant]



The story of Old St Andrew's, Kingsbury, and the fabric of the building which can still be seen today, have a lot to tell us about the past, right up to some aspects of Brent's present. The Old Church has a history which reflects history itself. I hope that you have found this article an interesting journey through the centuries of both local and wider history, and that it will encourage you to go and see the church yourself, at least from the outside, if you have the chance to do so.

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Wembley History Society
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