

THE PARISH

The United Parish of St Stephen & St Luke came into being in 1980. In 2006 St Luke's Church on Northumberland Street closed. In 2016 a new Ministry Team was appointed to the parish and a new partnership was formed with the neighbouring St Michael's Parish in Craven Street in the Lower Shankill.

St Stephen's Church sits on Millfield in Belfast, next door to Belfast Metropolitan College and facing the rear of Castlecourt Shopping Centre. The united Parish of St Stephen and St Luke's is an extensive area taking in part of Belfast city centre and a considerable area along the Shankill Road, ministering to people in a diverse range of settings. Most recently the parish area is home to thousands of students both local and international living in University and privately managed accommodation within walking distance of the church.

ARCHITECT

St Stephen's was designed by Thomas Drew an architect based in Dublin but born in Belfast to the Rev Thomas and Isabelle Drew. He was an apprentice to Charles Lanyon, and in 1865 was appointed architect to the Down, Connor and Dromore Diocese. According to the Dictionary of Irish Architect's list of his completed works, St Stephen's was the first new church building Drew completed as diocesan architect.

In 1900 he was honoured with a knighthood becoming Sir Thomas Drew. Other beautiful churches he designed include St Anne's Cathedral (original design) and St Patrick's in Coleraine.

'EXHUBERANT'

CEB Brett ('Buildings of Belfast: 1700-1914' Belfast: Friar's Bush Press, 1985) states that due to his 'exuberant personality,' Sir Thomas Drew may not have been 'an entirely suitable person to embark on a programme of cheap churches' for the diocese. He described the interior of the church as 'fussy and cavernous,' not the best example of Drew's preference for 'robust and virile' Gothic design.

FOUNDATION

The Irish Builder records that St Stephen's foundation stone was laid on May 8, 1868. The church was consecrated on October 28, 1869, and

was first included in the Annual Revisions in that year which valued the structure, and the rear single-storey schoolhouse (previously the church hall), at £250.

When originally completed, the church possessed a campanile tower on the north-west side of the building located to the north of its rounded apse; the tower was removed in the 1960s when the church was extensively renovated. The Belfast revaluation noted that St Stephen's Church was increased in value in 1900; at that time the building was owned by the church trustees. The revaluation also noted that the current single-storey schoolhouse to the rear of the building was installed with gas fittings and was individually valued at £55, the valuer stating that the schoolhouse was also used by the congregation for concerts and as a venue for lectures.

Remarkably the church survived the Blitz of Belfast in 1941, when much of Millfield was demolished. Minor damage to the building was repaired and by the end of a revaluation in 1972, the value of the site had been increased to £632.

The Gothic design of the church was irrevocably altered when, due to the widening of the road in 1963, the original facade and a significant portion of the church building was removed and the façade replaced with the current redbrick and limestone replacement.

It was at this time that the original campanile tower was removed and the replacement (also of redbrick and limestone) added to the new façade; the work was carried out to designs by E Seaton of Messers W & M. Given, Coleraine.

Neither Brett nor M Patton ('Central Belfast: An historical gazetteer' Belfast: Ulster Architectural Heritage Society, 1993) admired the alteration, Patton remarking that the church had been 'decapitated ... with its former entrance replaced by a boxy new front and fire station-like campanile with a glass box at its tip containing a neon cross; Brett merely noted his disapproval of a 'totally inappropriate refronting.'

Despite the alteration to the exterior facade and tower, Patton noted the significance of the interior of the church and recorded that St Stephen's contains 'the finest collection in the province of stained glass by Daniel Braniff.'

MODERN ERA

The church family, friends and invited guests celebrated the 150th Anniversary of St Stephen's Parish Church, Millfield, over the weekend of October 25-27 2019. It was a wonderful celebration of ministry over the years.

REFURBISHMENT

The parish has recently completed major refurbishment work. This includes demolishing the old parish hall which had fallen into major disrepair, the provision of a new car park and the internal re-ordering, refurbishment and decoration of the church. The modernised interior includes a Coffee Dock and seating area, meeting rooms, a kitchen, accessible toilet, comfortable upholstered chairs and carpeting.

MINISTRY

In partnership with the Church of Ireland and Methodist Chaplaincy (The Hub) in Elmwood Avenue, a vibrant ministry to students from the Belfast Metropolitan College Millfield Campus takes place with a weekly free lunch, chill out and chat time. This attracts both local and international students and staff from Belfast Met.

Ministry in the new Queen's University Student Accommodation across the street from St Stephen's is also taking shape. This is a very exciting time for ministry which is evolving as more than 10,000 move into living accommodation in the city centre. St Stephen's is strategically placed to minister to students, young professionals and city dwellers and it is a delight to see the church used for such greatly needed and valuable ministry.

Visiting St Stephen's

We love to welcome people into St Stephen's at any time. A particularly favourite time is the annual European Heritage Open Day during which we regularly meet and greet 100+ people as they tour the city's beautiful buildings. Telling the story of St Stephen's and talking about the fabulous stained glass windows is something we very much enjoy.

If you visit St Stephen's Church, there is much to see and to enjoy however there are three particular things to note.

- ❖ The building of the church was funded at the time by many of the Belfast philanthropists of that era and it was the first 'Free Church' in Belfast meaning that all the seats in the church were free of charge, parishioners did not have to pay the traditional Pew Rent charged in other local Belfast parishes.
- ❖ St Stephen's Church is beautifully adorned by stained glass much of which is the work of Daniel Braniff 1911-1999, a locally renowned designer. Both coloured and monochrome windows can be seen in the church. Other windows designed by Daniel Braniff can be seen in Belfast City Hall and in many other churches, however, St Stephen's contains the greatest number of windows in one building designed by him.
- ❖ You will find a warm welcome any time you visit, from faithful parishioners who have been worshipping in the church and contributing to the life and ministry of the parish for many years.