

The History of St Mary's Island Church and School

Research sourced from: Personal recollections of Canon Ernie Mann together with minutes of meetings and documents produced by: Gillingham Churches Together, Gillingham Inter-Church Working Party, Churches Together in Kent, Churches Together in the Countryside, The Kings Family Practice, Countryside Residential, Rochester Diocesan Board of Education, the Church Army, the Ecumenical Church Plan and St Mary's Island Church Committee and Working Party.

Recollections of Canon Ernie Mann:

The dockyard use of the peninsular of land was mainly for recreational purposes for the employees. There were few buildings and due to the relative quietness there was a lot of wild life in the area.

Buses operated within the dockyard due to the distances involved.

The purpose of a dockyard is for war. When this country was not at war many people were not overly employed. Some ships were in the dockyard for some time – HMS Sheffield came here for a re-design and was due to have a telephone exchange installed. However, the ship was scrapped before it could be installed!

When the dockyard closed in 1984 the hub was kept as the historic part – and in fact contains the greatest number of listed buildings. The remainder of the site was designated for residential and commercial development.

The red herring in the development of the island was concern over contamination. The top metres of soil were removed in red trucks. This set fear in people's minds and was one of the causes for delay in building the school.

General Introduction

The then Canon Colin Buchanan (now Bishop) was the visionary key lead in the building of the church and school on the island strongly supported by Cannon Jean Kerr. SMI Church sprang from a desire to plant a new church in the residential development taking place on the island. In 1994 the island was planned to be developed for mixed residential development of some 1700 properties.

The island area of this time was within the parish boundaries of St Luke's Church. But the Diocese of Rochester with the agreement of St Luke's and St Mark's PCC's decided that the parish boundaries should be changed. This change put the new development within St Mark's Parish Gillingham, which it decided it was better equipped to provide a church plant.

Earlier in the planning stage it was agreed by the Education Authority and the Diocesan Board of Education to provide a Church Aided primary school on the island.

Why a Church of England School on the island?

There had been a C of E school in Brompton (Holy Trinity) but this closed in 1958. However, there remained the right to have a C of E school in the area. This right was transferred to St Mary's Island as voluntary Aided school which meant the school is completely under diocesan control.

The school was designed to be dual purpose: primarily for school use but acting as a worship centre for the island as well and the brief to the architect was to design a building with this in mind. The cost of the initial build was £3.1 million. By 2004 numbers increased, which necessitated expansion of the building.

Whilst the development of the island commenced an ecumenical group met as an inter-church committee and planned the way forward. A number of social events were held and services held at Christmas and Easter in the open air prior to the building being constructed.

The first service held in the newly constructed building was in January, 1999, as an informal partnership of the Anglican, United Reformed and Baptist churches. In April, 2013, the church became fully Anglican under the auspices of St Mark's Gillingham.

Minutes of the various meetings reveal the developments, delays and frustrations of plans for the school building and the residential areas of the island.

February 1995

Document 'Shaping the Future of Kent' for Churches together for Kent highlight the two new unitary authorities to be established (N. West Kent - Dartford and Gravesham and Medway Towns). There were fears expressed that the whole of North Kent would become a concrete jungle. Medway was described as one of the biggest urban markets in the South East outside London. The main development opportunities named as Chatham Maritime, Rochester waterfront, Gillingham Business Park and the Frindsbury Peninsular - all to be beneficiaries of the £180 million Northern Relief Road.

The Education Committee held on June 9, 1995, approved the recommendation for the Rochester Diocesan Board of Education to issue Public Notice for the establishment of 'one form entry' i.e. one class per year group 210 place CE Aided School.

7.8.95

Canon Colin Buchanan sets up a core of persons 'who will commit themselves to evangelism on the island' via an informal seminar on the nature of church planting.'

22.8.95 Working party and others from CE, URC and Baptist churches conduct a walk across the island.

23.9.1995

First meeting minutes of the inter-church working party confirm no housing commenced and that the school proposals were out to public consultation. The consultation meeting was held on 19th April 1995.

21.10.95

2nd inter-church working party meeting. Minutes confirm building of housing had not commenced with no news of the final layout.

Working party shared their dreams for the school on the island, which would be a reasonably priced and reasonably sized dwelling and would be seen as an initial meeting place.

27.10.95

Draft documents (Statement of Faith, Baptism and membership) containing constitutional materials compiled in order for the Working Party to consider, discuss and comment on.

17.11.95

The island church referred to as the 'Island Church in Waiting.' In the notice of 17.11.95 it includes reference to details of house prices due to be released. The working party proposed to bring a plan of action to churches for decision in March 1996.

Inter-church working Party 25th November 1995

No building of houses commenced but show house projected for May 1996. Occupancy projected for August 1996.

Constitution of Board of Governors discussed.

Churches Together in Kent 5th December 1995

The bridges onto the Island (which cross the channels between the dock-basins) have been strengthened; and the ground - works are currently under way for the buildings to go up. The Medway Tunnel (opening in 1996) will give access to the West side of the river, so that the island may prove far less isolated than it appears from a simple description or glance at a map.

Easter 1996

Final Report of the Gillingham inter-church working party, which had met 7 times, quotes:

Statement re. Development of St Mary's Island

English Partnerships Ltd are the company responsible overall for the development of the Island (and neighbouring mainland area in the old Maritime area). They report that there have been delays in providing the residential accommodation, though in terms of sheer access to the island, ground-works on it, and actual building all now looks set fair. Broadly speaking, there have been three different issues which have been potentially delaying of bringing people into residence this year, namely:

- a) a responsible need to re-inspect their own actual housing designs, and to re-jig them in the light of reconsideration of amenities desired;
- b) the need to attach to the sales of the property positive obligations to belong to the right kind of 'residents' association' responsible for the general keeping in trim of parts of the Island for which the Borough holds no responsibility – and the forming of the right body under the right constitution to make this provision is an immediate task for English Partnerships;
- c) the opening of the tunnel – or, to be accurate, the provision of the right roads on either side of the tunnel. The tunnel will now be open in June without these roads!

As these are being tackled there is hope that show houses will be on view at the end of the summer, and the first occupants in residence by the early Autumn. After that, there should be a steady increase in occupation right through into 1997 and beyond.

Property prices are still expected to range from around £40,000 for a one-bedroom flat to £200,000 or more for the top-of-the-market four-bedroom plus detached houses. There is good hope that a three-bedroom terraced house could be available at under £100,000. The expectation is that ultimately there will be around 1,600 homes and up to 6,000 people on the Island.

English Partnerships express a strong desire that the Island should provide 'a community not a housing estate.' This in turn means that the management is interested in any provision for spiritual needs, and may well be glad to have as a contact a trustworthy community person belonging to the Church in place on the Island from the earliest stages.

The Island School will be a Church of England Aided Primary School (single-form entry), and will belong to the Diocese rather than to St Mark's parish. It should get the ministerial go-ahead during the Summer 1996. The use of the school premises for church purposes is being kept in view throughout the planning stages.

The minutes from the meeting contains also The Plan in which the denominational congregation responsibilities are listed regarding financing a church on the Island, overseeing the church, providing personnel and develop relationships between the growing Island Church and to pledge themselves to prayer and other tangible support.

SMIC Committee 28th February 1997

Church welcome leaflets now included in the pack given to residents as they move in.

School defined as a one-form entry Church Aided Primary School. The 'case of need' has been proved and public notices gone out. The design of the school has been agreed - the church will use the hall and facilities on Sundays and in the evenings.

SMIC Committee 29th September 1997

More governors being appointed. School still did not have a name and the Bishop has to be involved.

1,000 students now at the university.

50 houses occupied. Community hut planned for 1998.

SMIC Committee 31st October 1997

Head Teacher position advertised. Governor training scheduled.
70 houses now sold – several through the Housing Society scheme.

SMIC Committee 11th December 1997

Appointment of H.T. confirmed for 1.4.1998. School Governing Body personnel had been appointed.

SMIC Committee 16th January 1998

Carol Rookwood, the H.T. designate for the school attended the meeting. Her appointment was still being 'firmed up'.

SMIC Committee 5th March 1998

Update on school: soil tests still not finalised, costs of building the school had increased over the top of the budget and there were ongoing discussions between KCC and Medway.

An outdoor Easter sunrise service was planned and an Easter Day 4 p.m. service at St Georges centre.

Ernie Mann was recommended as becoming a Lay Reader and Lay Leader to offer Lay ministry to the Island.

SMIC Committee 25th June 1998

Confirmed delay in opening the school – deferred to September 1999. Reference to some of 'the bigger houses' being occupied. Mention of 'another developer building smaller houses'

SMIC Committee 26th September 1998

Minutes reflect that a temporary surgery was in place and 135 houses were occupied.

The committee had organised a Wine and Wisdom evening on Nov 6th and Carol singing would take place on 19th December 1998. Ernie Mann attended the (?first) committee meeting for SMIRA on 9th December 1998

SMIC Committee 5th December 1998

School site declared to be free of contamination.

Coombs of Canterbury appointed as contractors – due to move onto the site in January 1999.

Once 300 homes are completed there is a requirement for a school.

St Mary's Island Church Committee 19th February 1999

Update on the development of the school – foundations are being laid, piling done and a concrete apron on the way. A Head teacher will be in post from 6th April 1999 and the advertisement for a Deputy Head is due to be published.

School opened in September 1999 (at the cost of £3.1 million) with 60 pupils – partially complete with much finishing work to be done. The Head Teacher, Carol Rookwood, was finally officially appointed in April, 1999.

Church opened/ first met in the school hall on 16 January, 2000 and was officially recognised as an ecumenical church in 2003. Bishop Michael Turnbull and Bishop Nazir Ali both advised that the church waited for three years to see if the plant grew and became established.

Prior to the opening of the church/school building the church used the temporary King's Practice G.P. surgery - a prefabricated building on the island - for some meetings and there were open air meetings at Christmas 1998 and Easter 1999.

First wedding to be held in the new church/school building was on Saturday 29 March, 2003. The Bride and Groom being Sylvia and Owen Pascoe.

In the intervening years SEEDA (South East England Development Agency) floated the idea and made the offer for the church to have its own building added to the end of the existing Community Centre, but this would have been quite a small piece of land and offered seating for only 60. The church responded requesting a re-design but SEEDA seemed to lose interest at by this stage. Together with this package the new community centre was offered to the church to run/manage. However, there were insufficient personnel at the church at this early stage to contemplate this as a viable proposition.

Carol Rookwood retired as H.T from the school in 2005 (and, sad to report, died in June, 2012) and was followed by Mrs Sharon Day, who retired in March, 2012. The current Head Teacher is Mrs Christine Easton, who has been in post a year, commenced her post in September, 2012.

The school extended to a two-form entry in 2004 at the cost of an additional £3+ million.

Currently 60 % of the school pupils are island children, 10% places go to Christian families from anywhere in the Medway towns.

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