

St. Blasius CHURCH

Mark Fox continues his tour of Island churches by travelling to Shanklin to see the delights of stunning St. Blasius

St. Blasius in Shanklin is a picture book church. It sits prettily in its site, a distinct feature of the surrounding area with its covered gateway leading up to a solid building topped with bell tower.

Although the current church underwent significant change in Victorian times there has been a place of Christian worship on the site since at least the 12th century. The history of the building and its connections to nearby towns and

villages, as well as to local nobility and the Monarchy are fascinating. It is well worth having a look at the well kept website (<http://st-blasius-church.org.uk/index.html>) the parish runs for a detailed account of the history.

For much of its life the church remained as a small chapel serving the local village. The mid-Victorian enthusiasm for travel along with the development of travel by railway had its effect on Shanklin, as elsewhere.

When it arrived in the town in 1864 with the huge increase in visitors that followed, it meant change and expansion for the church was inevitable.

So St. Blasius expansion began in 1852. The investment in building represented a significant vote of confidence in the church's ministry and future by local people. Over the next few years a baptistery and aisles were added, the roof raised, and an organ installed. The

increasing importance of the church was recognised in 1853 when it was granted parish status.

The commitment by local people to go on investing in their church did not stop with the Victorians. Inside there are notable features that immediately catch the eye and which bear testament to a continuing care by those who worship there.

Looking towards the Sanctuary and Chancel you can see fine depictions of the 'Ten Commandments' dating from the 1950s. The paneling and floor were installed in 1912 and are a memorial to a previous vicar who served for a remarkable 42 years.

The pulpit sits impressively in its place at the centre of the church and

supports five panels depicting St. Peter with his keys, St. Thomas, patron saint of builders, with his block, the Virgin with the infant Jesus, St. Bartholomew, with the knife used when he was flayed alive, and St. Paul with an enormous Sword of the Spirit.

Further pragmatic and practical change was made in 1997 when the baptistery was converted into the Parish Room. As well as providing a useful and practical space it also houses items of interest which include the Silksted chest and a number of photos and engravings of the church in the past.

Writing in A History of Hampshire and the Isle of Wight W.M. Page said: "...it has been so altered and added

to that it is now of little interest." I could not disagree more. The church is beautiful outside and inside. It is an active place of worship and feels it. The site has been a place of Christian worship for over 900 years. Those who have gone before remind us that churches are living and dynamic buildings not museums. Each generation has a responsibility both to preserve but also adapt their churches for their needs to safeguard their future. St Blasius is a testament to this spirit.

Acknowledgement and appreciation go to St. Blasius website, <http://st-blasius-church.org.uk/>; The Buildings of England: Isle of Wight by Nikolaus Pevsner; and Wikipedia: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/St._Blasius_Church,_Shanklin

Picture by Laura Boynton