

Appendix 3

20/00688/LBC – Holy Family Church

Listing entry

<https://historicengland.org.uk/listing/the-list/list-entry/1464513>

Location

Statutory Address: 1 Cuddesdon Way, Blackbird Leys, Oxford, OX4 6JH

The building or site itself may lie within the boundary of more than one authority.

County: Oxfordshire

District: Oxford (District Authority)

Parish: Blackbird Leys

National Grid Reference: SP5526402781

Summary

Church. 1964-1965 by Colin Shewring with a timber hyperbolic paraboloid roof designed by Hugh Tottenham. The hall, kitchen and offices added in 1983 are not included in the listing.

Reasons for Designation

The Church of the Holy Family, Blackbird Leys, Oxford, built in 1964-1965 by Colin Shewring with a timber hyperbolic paraboloid roof designed by Hugh Tottenham, is listed at Grade II for the following principal reasons:

Architectural interest:

- * as a largely intact example of an innovative 1960s church with an unusual heart-shaped plan;
- * for its carefully considered interior, with high quality, architect-designed fixtures and fittings;
- * for the technical interest of its timber hyperbolic paraboloid roof, an early surviving example by Hugh Tottenham, the principal exponent of the technology in England.

Historical interest:

* illustrative of the boom in post-war churches, often serving new towns and new suburban estates, designed to the principles of the Liturgical Movement.

History

The Church of the Holy Family was built to serve the Blackbird Leys housing estate which was developed by Oxford Council between the 1950s and 1980s to address severe housing shortages in the city and in particular to provide housing for the workforce at the nearby Cowley car factory. In 1958 the Anglican Diocese of Oxford designated Blackbird Leys as a Conventional District separate from the existing parishes of Littlemore and Cowley and a young curate from Hammersmith, Peter Walton, was appointed as the priest. A timber-hutted temporary church was established on the current site, at the heart of the estate, in 1960 and plans for a new church were undertaken. Peter Walton, who had seen examples of his work, recommended the architect, Colin Shewring. Shewring visited the site in October 1960 and canvassed opinion from the congregation on their requirements as he sought to build a modern church that was functional and included what people thought a church should contain. From these discussions it was decided, for example, that the altar and pulpit should be in the same area and should be visible from all parts of the church without raising the sanctuary too high above floor level. There should be no lighting behind the sanctuary which would distract the eye and it was thought that a separate lectern was not necessary.

By December 1961 Colin Shewring had produced a model of the interior layout of the church and drawn up plans which included a hall, classrooms, toilets and a rectory. In an article in the Oxford Mail of 16 July 1962 the name of the church, which had been chosen by the Bishop of Oxford from two suggestions supplied by the congregation, was announced. It went on to describe the proposed church as being heart-shaped in plan with serpentine concrete walls to a height of 11 feet inside. The upper half of the wall would be timber, reaching a total height of 22 feet. The roof was to have a copper surface and would be flat. The Church Times, however, criticised the proposed design commenting "this is a brave, generous yet modest venture, but unfortunately does not look like a church". Colin Shewring was quoted in a somewhat contradictory article in the Oxford Times of 17 July 1962 as saying of the inverted dome-shaped roof that it was lower over the altar and pulpit in order to act as a large sounding board. A prominent feature of the building would be the sanctuary, an egg-shaped area standing out from the wall, with a circular altar flanked by the pulpit, a reversion to ancient Christian practice. Natural lighting would be arranged so that it would flood the altar during the main service each Sunday morning and a ring of lights in the roof would illuminate the altar and pulpit at night. The baptistery wall would be tomb-shaped, symbolising death and resurrection, and would be situated between the two main blocks of seats. The font would be approached by three shallow steps to symbolize the descent into the river Jordan from the bank. The siting of the pews was intended to give a family feel to the building. The altar, font and lectern were to be of Clipsham stone. A total estimated cost of £50,000 was quoted.

Building work was eventually scheduled for the spring of 1964. By this time the cost had escalated, and as a result the project was reduced to only providing the church, the toilets and a rectory. The plans for the church appear to have been modified somewhat from the early press descriptions, including, perhaps most notably, the addition of the hyperbolic paraboloid roof. Work got underway on 2 August 1964 with a blessing of the altar which was symbolically put in place before the rest of the building was started. The roof was designed by Hugh Tottenham of Tottenham, Hume and Bennett. David Bennett acted as structural engineer. Construction was by Messrs Marshall-Andrew with the roof erected by Gardner and Company. The Clipsham stone altar, pulpit and font were made by Axtell and Perry of Oxford.

The church was dedicated by Bishop Carpenter on 10 April 1965. It was dedicated rather than consecrated as a legal move in order to allow its use for an experiment in Joint Evangelism with the Free Church which had been agreed in early 1965. A Free Church Minister was appointed in September 1965 and the ministry was shared between the Anglicans and Nonconformists. Following the Sharing of Church Buildings Act of 1969 this arrangement was formalised and Blackbird Leys was declared an Area of Ecumenical Experiment in 1973.

In 1983 an extension was added which belatedly provided a church hall, café and offices.

Colin Shewring (1924-1996) studied at the Regent Street Polytechnic and specialised in church design, working both on restorations and new builds. His primary works are the Church of the Holy Family, the interior of St Luke's Church, Leicester (1960-1966) by David Boddington and the Church of St Peter, Ravenshead, Nottingham (1972), listed at Grade II. His restorations include parts of the Grade I listed St Margaret's Church, King's Lynn. He was also known for his artwork, contributing a window to the Grade I listed Red Mount Chapel, in King's Lynn, and the altar furniture of the Grade I listed Church of St Andrew, Plymouth. He also designed a number of private houses such as that for himself at Compass Yard, Pollard's Hill, Norbury and later settled in Kings Lynn as the borough architect.

Hugh Tottenham (1926-2012) trained at Cambridge as an engineer and from 1954 worked for the Timber Development Association where he designed the first timber hyperbolic paraboloid roof in Britain; the weaving shed of the Royal Carpet Factory in Wilton (1957 by Robert Townsend, now demolished). He left the Association in 1959, to form his own practice and to conduct research at Southampton University, and went on to design a number of other hyperbolic paraboloid roofs. These included the Silhouette Corset Factory in Market Drayton (1959-1960), by Robert Townsend which was listed at Grade II in 2000 but was demolished shortly after, the Church of the Holy Family, the Church of St Peter, Ravenshead, Nottingham (1972) also with Colin Shewring (listed at Grade II). He was probably also involved in the design of the roof of the Grade II* listed Church of St Aldate, Gloucester (1959-1961, Robert Potter and Richard Hare), although EWH Gifford was the lead engineer.

Details

Church. 1964-1965 by Colin Shewring with a timber hyperbolic paraboloid roof designed by Hugh Tottenham. The interiors of the hall*, kitchen* and offices* added in 1983 are not included in the listing.

MATERIALS: reinforced concrete post and beam frame with cavity walls of pale grey brick with concrete block internally. The doubly curved surface of the hyperbolic paraboloid roof is formed of four layers of 22mm pine boards, cross laid and bonded together by nails and glue with a layer of cork above, originally with an aluminium covering later replaced with roofing felt. The original fenestration was of louvered windows in timber frames, replaced with aluminium-framed windows.

PLAN: the church is broadly heart-shaped with a projecting quadrilateral sacristy on the eastern side, a small square campanile and sacrament house which projects from the south wall and a rectangular narthex and toilets to the north-west. The curved plan reflects the oval street layout of the Blackbird Leys estate. The 1980s extension* containing a hall*, offices* and a kitchen* is rectangular in plan and extends north-eastwards from the narthex, encasing it on its eastern side. The original main entrance is approached via a walled forecourt into the narthex from Blackbird Leys Road with a secondary entrance directly into the church from the east off Cuddesdon Way. The current main entrance is via the hall block.

EXTERIOR: the curved exterior of pale grey brick, laid in stretcher bond, slopes up to a rounded peak at the east and west ends. Fenestration consists of long strips of square-paned windows set below the concrete ring beam. These are later aluminium framed replacements but follow the pattern of the louvered originals. Historic photographs appear to show that the walling below the windows and the campanile were originally rendered and painted white. The curve of the exterior walls is broken on the Blackbird Leys Road frontage by the low square narthex and the campanile. The narthex has a felted flat roof, timber folding doors and a wooden fascia. The west elevation retains the original louvered windows. The paved forecourt is surrounded by grey brick walls, laid in English bond, which descend in height away from the building, and has a low screen wall of blue engineering brick. The projecting campanile rises slightly above the dipping roofline of the church. At the corner of Blackbird Leys Road and Cuddesdon Way, the covered secondary entrance projects away from the curve of the walls and has a flat roof below the line of windows, with a timber fascia and three concrete steps with blue engineering brick risers. The single-storey, projecting, sacristy to the north also has a flat roof, with skylights, and a pair of tall narrow windows. Further along the north side of the building the valley of the main roof discharges rain runoff into a waterspout consisting of a concrete trough supported on a concrete projection. This is connected by a downpipe to a circular basin made of two soldier courses of engineering bricks.

INTERIOR: the main body of the church has concrete rendered walls and a concrete floor with hardwood strip divisions which slopes down gentry from west to east to a slightly raised oval Sanctuary containing the altar and pulpit. The raised area is of black tiling edged with engineering brick and is bordered at the rear by two low curved walls of grey brick with hardwood sills. The angular pulpit and circular altar are of Clipsham limestone, designed by the architect. The altar stands on a base of cobbles.

Beyond the Sanctuary, in a tight curve of the walling, is the choir, again bordered by low brick walls and fronted by three, architect-designed, hardwood bucket-seats set on a curved concrete plinth. The choir has bench seating with individual seat backs attached to the rear wall (three removed), set on a raised dais and with a fixed hardwood slab table in front.

Seating for the congregation consists of pews arranged in two blocks to the south and east of the sanctuary, set either side of the baptistery. These retain the original cork tile flooring with hardwood edging. The baptistery is inset into the sloping floor with two steps to the rear down to a grey brick paved area and defined by low grey brick walling. The font is of Clipsham limestone (with a later Greek inscription) on an offset brick plinth and is fed from a grey marble waterspout of similar design to that on the exterior. The font stands on a base of cobbles and there is an angled hardwood bench on brick piers. The two entrances to the interior of the church have similar plate-glass doors with large square wooden handles.

The timber roof slopes down to a lowest point over the Sanctuary. At the time of the site visit (April 2019) the roof was suffering from a high degree of rot caused by water ingress, mainly above the Sanctuary. The choir is lit by four round skylights.

The sacristy is utilitarian in nature with plain painted brick walls.

The narthex has light grey brick walling to the curved wall of the main church and darker grey brickwork to the other walls. The floor is of glazed clay tiles with a curved concrete apron inside the main doors. The ceiling is of the same timber as in the main part of the church.

* Pursuant to s1 (5A) of the Planning (Listed Buildings and Conservation Areas) Act 1990 ('the Act') it is declared that these aforementioned features are not of special architectural or historic interest, however any works which have the potential to affect the character of the listed building as a building of special architectural or historic interest may still require Listed Building Consent and this is a matter for the Local Planning Authority to determine.

Sources

Books and journals

Harwood, Elaine, 'Space, Hope and Brutalism', (2015), 443-451, 665, 669

Sherwood, J, Pevsner, N, 'The Buildings of England: Oxfordshire', (1990)

Maguire, R, 'Church Design since 1950' in *Journal of the Ecclesiological Society*, Vol. 27, (January 2002), 2-12

'7 New Churches - Anglican Church Blackbird Leys, Oxford' in *Architectural Review*, (October 1965), 253-254

Harwood, E, 'Twentieth Century Architecture 3: The Twentieth Century Church - Liturgy and Architecture: The Development of the Centralised Eucharist Space' in *Twentieth Century Society Journal*, (1998), 51-74

Websites

Blackbird Leys: A 30 Year History and a Celebration of 40 Years of The Church of the Holy Family, accessed 9 May 2019 from

<http://s482467435.websitehome.co.uk/linked/blackbird%20leys%20a%20thirty%20year%20history.pdf>

Other

Asset Heritage Consulting - Heritage Appraisal - Church of the Holy Family, Blackbird Leys, Oxford (October 2018)

Colin Shewring - Original plan drawings for Church at Blackbird Leys

Legal

This building is listed under the Planning (Listed Buildings and Conservation Areas) Act 1990 as amended for its special architectural or historic interest.

End of official listing