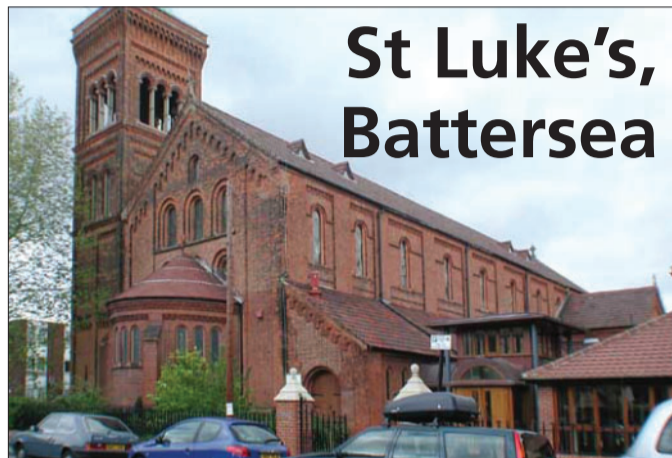


Bryan Harris's

PARISH PROFILE



**St Luke's,
Battersea**

There are some parishes that seem just too good to be true – so you scratch the surface, and sometimes, they are almost that good! Such a parish is St Luke's Battersea – and after 'scratching the surface' I understood why the Vicar, Canon John Shepherd says it will be 'tough' to retire at the end of May.

St Luke's is an 'extraordinary' parish, John told me.

Let's start with the church itself. From the outside, it's big but unremarkable, red-brick Victoriana. But step inside.... The Bishop of the time asked for 'a Basilica' and that's what he got – an Italianesque mixture of red brick walls and ornate alabaster, marble and gilt furnishings. The church was the initiative of John Erskine-Clark, Vicar of Battersea (1872-1909). A bachelor millionaire, he 'planted' a number of churches and built a huge vicarage (now a school) for himself next to St Luke's. He also published children's and church newspapers and founded Bolingbroke Hospital. Not surprisingly when he died there wasn't much money left!

Everything is in grand style from the marble columns to the canopied pulpit; from the magnificent altar - white marble cross above and gilded mosaics behind - to the stained glass windows all round - and then there's the lighting. St Luke's is said to be the first church to be electrically lit – a

Canon John Shepherd



1901 Christmas present from Mr. J. H. Bartlett a parishioner who later went on to 'light' Buckingham Palace. His hanging 'electroliers' which still light the nave were designed after a Cellini pendant - other lighting imitated other Italian works of art. It is truly the 'Basilican Church' Bishop Thorold called for.

With all that I expected high church, but 'no'. From the beginning St Luke's was 'upper-middle' and is so today. The worship pattern is two Sunday morning Common Worship Communion 8am and 10am sung (by a very competent adult and children's choir). Once a month there's a Sunday evening service, usually choral evensong, the occasional healing service or a 'signpost service' when someone talks about the people and events that have helped shape their faith. There's also morning and evening prayer most days in the week and Holy Communion on Wednesdays. Until recently there was a Family Service one Sunday a month, but an Action Group of mums has got together and come up with a Saturday afternoon service instead geared to young children and parents.

I visited on Palm Sunday at 10 - a warm welcome and liturgy straight from Common Worship. But first virtually the entire congregation of 200 or so processed out and round the church led by the cross and the choir and the service included a dramatised reading of a Passion narrative which gave me a chance to study the congregation – mainly 25 to 40 year olds with children – and that I discovered was a reflection of the area in which St Luke's stands

To begin with it's not strictly in Battersea – it's an up-market area between Clapham and Wandsworth Commons, favoured by people who are 'something in the city'. Terraced Edwardian and Victorian houses, once in multiple occupation, now

single family homes costing about four times the national average – mostly occupied by young and fairly affluent families. At half term the congregation halves – many of the families have a second home, go home to families or grab a quick holiday

The cost of housing shapes much of life in the parish. With two incomes needed to pay the mortgage, many couples put off starting a family, hence the highest average age for mothers having a first child in Europe; often IVF is involved, one reason for the most multiple births per household in Europe leading to the highest number of under 5s per household!

So at St Luke's, on an average Sunday there will be up to fifty children. As a result crèche is bursting at the seams and the children's church is 'lively'. At Christmas the Nativity Play is 'all-ticket' (650 seats!), after a fight broke out in the queue one year, and the Christmas Day service with the children draws the biggest congregation of the year.

The age profile also means lots of baptisms – 117 last year with parental preparation 'a good discussion over a glass of wine'. But there are few marriages – they are all married when they move in, John said. And very few funerals - the local undertaker closed through 'lack of business!' People tend to move out when the children grow, for the gardens are tiny. Some people stay, especially the minority ethnic community (around 8%) among which there are several elders. But in general it's a 'young couples and families' area where the only shops seem to be wine bars and restaurants catering for people too busy to cook for themselves.

The choir lead the Palm Sunday procession



They are a 'very thoughtful lot', John Shepherd told me. And you can read that two ways. People actually listen to sermons, he said, and ask questions afterwards. A weekday series of lectures this Lent with guest theologians attracted about 60 people. Discussion groups do well, including a theology group which takes a book of theology to read and discuss, and an open group called Agnostics Anonymous – started by the curate, Ravi Holy - which meets in a local pub to discuss their faith. There's also a group for retired people and a novel reading group. Even the Junior choir learns music theory and 'what the service means' as well as singing.

Being thoughtful also means thinking of others. St Luke's people are generous. Every year the church gives away something around £18.5k to charities but not just to 'the usual causes'. They think about their giving. Almost all the charities have a direct link, like the Tsunami appeal suggested by a parishioner who was caught up in the disaster. In addition, street collectors from the church raised £11K in Christian Aid week last year. The 'quota' is supposed to be equally difficult for each church in the diocese – for St Luke's it is £185K this year – not easy – and on top of that currently there's an appeal to rebuild the 100 year old Lewis organ. Three retired people who are excellent DIY enthusiasts, recently renovated the church floor – saved the church a fortune. And last year the church set up St Luke's Community Projects with around 60 volunteers from the congregation giving one or two Saturdays a year to garden or decorate for older people living nearby.



The interior looking east to the altar

There's a strong sense of 'community' in the area and much of that focuses around St Luke's. "I'm very keen on bringing the sacred into the secular" said John. So move back the pews and the nave becomes a Christmas market or the venue for a barn dance – or the occasional dinner dance. Last autumn they staged a Question Time – BBC style – chaired by journalist Andrew Rawnsley (a member of the congregation) with panelists Lord (Roy) Hattersley, MPs Theresa May and Simon Hughes and Dean Colin Slee. The church – and its excellent acoustics - also lends itself to concerts and performances, many staged by the very professional St Luke's Music Society – last year Humphrey Lyttleton came, and the London Mozart Players.

The Community Hall built around five years ago next to the church is a community focus too. It is almost fully booked by a large number of groups meeting there – from the playgroups and Alzheimer's Society to yoga and pilates classes, scouts and cubs, even French lessons for children.

"It is a tremendous asset" said John. "Not only does it bring in a valuable income, but it also brings non-churchgoers into contact with the church, creating goodwill and placing St Luke's at the heart of local community life." Thoughtfully... part of the hall income is set aside for future maintenance and some to reduce the rent for less affluent groups.

So are there no problems under the smooth surface of St Luke's, I asked?

"Of course there are," John told me. "There are the usual people and family problems as in any parish. This is a lovely area to live but expensive.

Hefty mortgages and private school fees intensify fears of job loss – so long hours are the norm. Lack of time is always an issue for families and to a degree for the church. Weekday evenings are no good for meetings for example – early to rise means early to bed!"

"With large numbers, and a lot of activity there's always the danger of complacency and of failing to notice people properly. We know that new people move into the area and are drawn or brought to St Luke's - yet our numbers are static. That means some people must be leaving. Where do they go? Is there something we need to address? And, too, we need to do something for teenagers, and are looking at the possibility of a youth worker to join the staff team."

John retires at the end of May after 41 years in the Diocese he loves. Leaving will be 'tough', John admits. "I'm told that you grieve for about a year." But it's the parish he is anxious about. Statistics suggest that congregations shrink if a parish is without a Vicar for more than six months and it can take five years to recover.

"We have a gifted staff. Having Ravi, a full-time curate, will make an enormous difference; Katherine Smith, a Reader will be ordained this year as NSM and will stay here. We have a trainee SPA, Juliette MacPherson, John Ryan who looks after children's work and Deborah and Sally our two job-share parish secretaries.

"We've prepared carefully for the interregnum and everything is in place, which should help make it a short one – let's hope the right person will be attracted to come to St Luke's quite soon," he said.