

## What is St Thomas Church?

St Thomas Church is the ancient parish church of central-west Oxford, its origins stretching back to the 11<sup>th</sup> Century. The history of the parish corresponds closely with the history of England, many of the big stories and significant figures of both overlapping.

The patron of the parish is St Thomas the Martyr, namely Thomas Becket, Archbishop of Canterbury in the late 12<sup>th</sup> Century. Becket was murdered in Canterbury Cathedral on 29<sup>th</sup> December 1170.

The church has served the people of the parish through many centuries of change, recent change perhaps being most obviously marked by the arrival of the Oxford Canal in 1790 and then the railways and breweries in the mid 19<sup>th</sup> Century. The Great Western Railway and the Great Central Railway both had stations in the parish, together with the Oxford Canal Basin, the Frank Cooper's Jam Factory (of Oxford Marmalade fame!), and the Hall's and Morrell's breweries.

By the mid 19<sup>th</sup> Century the parish was notorious as a place of disease and vice, the majority of the cholera outbreaks in the city being found here. This chapter of the story of St Thomas coincided with the long incumbency of Fr Thomas Chamberlain, Vicar from 1852-1892.

Chamberlain was an austere, devout and pioneering character who set the standard for 'Oxford Movement' churches around the country, combining a revival of prayer and liturgy together with a radical commitment to public service and education. His portrait hangs in the church to this day. One of the first convents of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century was founded at St Thomas: the Calvary gate remains standing to the south east of the church. Chamberlain also founded St Edward's School, originally in New Inn Hall Street.

The parish underwent huge demographic change in the 1920s and 1930s, with the slum clearances and the loss of much manufacturing, trade and industry in the following years. At the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century change was once again afoot, with the redevelopment of much of the parish, including Frideswide Square.

In the autumn of 2015 a new parish was formed from the amalgamation of St Thomas and St Barnabas, with St Thomas redesignated as a 'Chapel of Ease'. We rejoice to share the space with our friends from the Romanian Orthodox parish and look forward to exploring additional partnerships in the future. The question that we are exploring now is "What is God asking of us in this new chapter of life?" St Thomas is a holy and prayerful place, with a thousand years of devotion and service: how is God calling us to respond to the needs of his people now?

Fr Jonathan Beswick, Vicar