

A LITTLE HISTORY OF SOUTHCHURCH

By Mike Penry

Episode 26: COMPER'S VISION FOR HOLY TRINITY

Sir Ninian Comper was the architect of the New Church in two senses: as well as designing the New Church nave, he appears to have been the driving force behind the decision to extend the old church rather than to build a completely new one (a controversial decision, as we will see in the next episode). Below you will find a fascinating letter from Comper to our then rector, Canon Philpott, in which he sets out his intentions. Two quick comments from me, and then over to Comper:

1. It is apparent how much the two architects of the New Church, Comper and F.C. Eden, had a shared vision. Comper cites Eden's most famous church, Blisland Church in Cornwall (described in Episode 23), as an example of the effect he was seeking to achieve; and Eden's chancel design did indeed finish the "sequence of arches" envisaged by Comper;
2. Comper appears to have wanted to balance the old and new parts of the church by adding not only an (unbuilt) Lady Chapel (to counterbalance the Old Church) but also a turret at the east end of the church to counterbalance the old steeple at the west end.

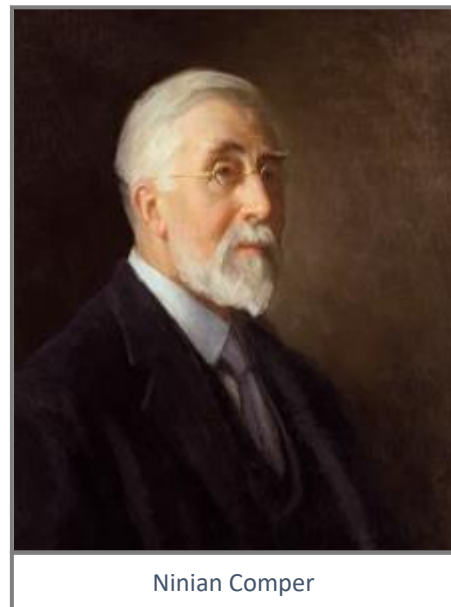
Here's the letter from Comper to Canon Philpott:

Dear Mr Philpott,

It may be of use in view of your application to the Incorporated Church Building Society if I add the following notes, upon the intentions of the plans, to the statement, which we sent you accompanying them last September.

The additions to the old church are designed with the desire to keep the needs of a new district which is likely still to increase, and to meet them in such a manner as will preserve all the features of the old church, and will not unnecessarily or unduly dwarf it. The alternative course of building an altogether new church on a different site has the very serious practical objections that the funds are not forthcoming to do it; but even were it otherwise, it would be the means of severing from what would be the new parish church the historical associations of the continuous worship of centuries which are bound up with the old church, and of abandoning it, except for such occasional use as that of a cemetery chapel, whilst still incurring the expenses of maintaining it. It is true that the initial expense of joining the first part of the new building to the old would be greater than that of building the same part by itself; but it would be obviously more costly to build a portion of an entirely new church which should be as large as this part and the old church put together. Moreover, once this first addition is made, the remainder will be free from the expenses of such connexion as it would be on a new site. There is also the difficulty of disturbing graves; but this is a difficulty of frequent occurrence, which can always be dealt with, and in this case it would not be acute. There are few graves on the north side of the old church where we first propose to build.

There is the necessity, also to be regretted, of disturbing the old door and windows in the north wall. Yet to rebuild them, as we propose, in new walls is no wanton obliteration of history, but only its continuity. It is to do today what was done again and again in past times, wherever there was need of enlargement, and economy suggested the rebuilding of an old door or window instead of making a new one. Some features there are, such as the stairs to the rood loft and the sepulchre in the chancel, which to rebuild would deprive of their special interest, and these we do not propose to touch. The retention of those parts of the chancel wall which contain them will have little or no



Ninian Comper

disadvantage, as to hearing and seeing, during the first stage of the proposed enlargement of the church, and it is a question which need not be settled now, whether this disadvantage, which would become apparent when the new high chancel is built, would be sufficiently great to outweigh the historical objections to removing them. Probably, since the old chancel and its altar would always be retained, it would not be thought necessary, even in the future, to open it out more than we now propose.



“a sequence of arches”

It may be as well besides to note some points of the new building. The thrust of the old chancel arch is carried in the design across the new nave by another arch, which is similar to the new chancel arch eastward of it, and (since it is possible that in the future such a proposal would not seem extravagant), a third arch, immediately above the new altar, would not only complete the effect which such a sequence of arches would give, but it would afford, in conjunction with the east wall, a base for some such turret as the plans suggest. Moreover, being at the end of the building, the turret would not compete with, or dwarf, the old steeple at the west end; and the East Anglian examples of Wymondham (for position) and Lynn (for its form) may possibly be allowed as some precedent for such a proposal.

In these and in some other features of the plan, such as its irregularity somewhat in the manner of Blisland Church in Cornwall by which a very delightful perspective is obtained, it is hoped that the necessities of meeting the existing conditions improved by the old church may produce an architectural effect which is reasonable, as well as pleasing to the eye, and one to which an entirely new building would not lend itself.

Believe me

Yours faithfully

J N Comper

27 February 1903

Come back in a couple of weeks' time for Episode 27:

“THE DESTRUCTION OF A VALUABLE LITTLE CHURCH”.

- What did The Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings have to say about our plans for the new church?
 - Find out what it cost to build the new church
- What was the occupation of most workers in the parish in 1906?

See all Episodes of ‘A Little History of Southchurch’ [here](#)