

St Barnabas Church and the Oxford Canal



Jericho Oxford

Unwrecked England – CANDIDA LYCETT GREEN

You can pick up the canal tow path at Hythe Bridge and walk to the heart of Jericho. Away from the nose-to-tail traffic which curls around Worcester college, the path runs beside fast-gliding swans whose wake brings gentle ripples towards the bank and the moored barges, and within seconds you are a world away from the hustle and bustle of Cornmarket. This is Gerard Manley Hopkins's Oxford, 'Cuckoo echoing, bell swarmèd, lark-charmed, rook-racked, river rounded.'

Jericho, an inner suburb of Oxford, began to play an important part in the city's history with the arrival of the canal in 1790. Wharves, ironworks and, predominantly, print works, including the Oxford University Press, were set up within spitting distance of the passing waterway traffic. Myriad streets of modest

two-up and two-down cottages were then built between the canal and Walton Street to house the workforce – and unassuming, small-scale Jericho was born.

Apartment blocks will wreck the scale and the canal-side view of this historic landscape

From the towpath, across the low roofs of the boarded-up Castle Mill boatyard, the glorious Byzantine bulk of St Barnabas church springs up, sailing above the small streets of Jericho. Originally intended for the spiritual welfare of the residents working in the University Press and the factories nearby, St Barnabas became unexpectedly

fashionable and, according to Manley Hopkins, 'on Sundays the narrow streets of Jericho were choked with carriages, and undergraduates poured in to fill all twelve hundred seats for the 11 am High Celebration.' St Barnabas still celebrates High Mass at 11 am and the fog of incense lingers long after worship.

The architect was Arthur Blomfield, and his employee Thomas Hardy often visited St Barnabas during its construction in the 1850s. It subsequently became his model for St Silas in *Jude the Obscure*: 'High overhead above the chancel steps, Jude could discern a huge, solidly constructed Latin cross.... It seemed to be suspended in the air by invisible wires; it was set with large jewels which faintly glimmered in some weak ray caught from outside...' Inside, the scale knocks you for six; it must be one of the most powerful Victorian interiors in the land. Eastern in flavour, the apse is gold and remote, the high

ceiling, dark and decorated, and above the north arcade is an elaborately tiled frieze.

Thomas Combe, the University printer, put up the money to build St Barnabas. He lived in Printer's House in Jericho, and with his wife, Martha, played a seminal role in the founding of the Pre-Raphaelite movement. One July day, Combe spotted John Everett Millais and his companion Charles Collins (Wilkie's brother) painting in Botley Wood. By September they had moved in to Printer's House, followed soon afterwards by Holman Hunt, who painted his celebrated *Light of the World* there. The picture so impressed Dante Gabriel Rossetti that he visited the Combes, as did William Morris. Some of the earliest Pre-Raphaelite exhibitions were staged in Jericho.

What care the planning powers that be? What cared British Waterways when they sold what was ours to developers who are appealing, for the second time, to build the dreariest and bulkiest of apartment blocks between the canal and St Barnabas? This will wreck the scale and the canal-side view of this truly historic landscape – the inspiration for the setting of Philip Pullman's *His Dark Materials* trilogy; it will obliterate the 150-year-old boatyard, and it will wipe out a slice of history of which we should all be proud.

Jericho Fighting Fund: vivien_crew@hotmail.com