

IDENTIFIER	ST JOHN'S ANGLICAN CHURCH	Citation No	PW08
Other name/s	St John's Church of England	Melway ref	77 H1
Address	624 Centre Road BENTLEIGH	Date/s	1960-62 (church)
Designer/s	Gawler, Churcher & Boardman (David Gawler)	Builder/s	Colin D Mason



Photographs by Built Heritage Pty Ltd, October 2019



Location map and extent of HO

Heritage Group	Religion	Condition	Excellent
Heritage Category	Church	Intactness	Excellent
Thematic context	8.1 Maintaining spiritual life		
Recommendation	Include on heritage overlay schedule as an individual heritage place		
Controls	<input type="checkbox"/> External Paint	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Interior Alteration	<input type="checkbox"/> Trees

Statement of Significance

What is significant?

St John's Anglican Church at 624 Centre Road, Bentleigh East, is a post-WW2 modernist cream brick church with a truncated A-framed nave, spiky metal steeple, and facade with false arched windows, pebbled wall finish and mosaic tiled spandrels. Erected in 1961-62 to replace an existing church on the site dating back to 1873, the building was designed by architects Gawler, Churcher & Boardman (who had previously designed a new church hall for the same site)

The significant fabric is defined as the entire exterior of the 1961-62 church building, and interior fittings as follows: the three stained glass windows from the old church, full immersion baptismal font, decorative iron grille between Pioneers' Chapel and choir stall, decorative iron altar rail, timber panelled wall behind the altar, and pendant light fittings in the nave. The other buildings on the site, namely the adjacent hall (by the same architects, but of little architectural interest), vicarage, kindergarten and toilet block, are not considered to be significant.

How is it significant?

The church satisfies the following criteria for inclusion on the heritage overlay schedule to the City of Glen Eira planning scheme:

- Criterion E: Importance in exhibiting particular aesthetic characteristics

Why is it significant?

St John's Anglican Church is aesthetically significant as an exceptional example of ecclesiastical architecture in a lively sub-style of post-WW2 modernism characterised by a playful expression of non-structural elements, applied ornamental and decorative finishes. Famously dismissed by Robin Boyd as "Featurism", this sub-style was mostly associated with commercially-oriented buildings (eg shops, showrooms, motels, etc) and houses, and was rarely adopted for ecclesiastical buildings. St John's Church, with its truncated A-framed nave, false-arched arcade (with pebbled finish and mosaic tiled spandrels) and spiky metal-framed steeple evocative of the American 'Googie' style, is a notable (and notably intact) example of the Featurist approach, as atypically applied to a church. With its deliberately eye-catching design and prominent siting at the corner of two major roads, the building remains a distinctive element in the streetscape. The nave interior is notable for retention of original finishes and fittings including panelled nave wall, decorative ironwork, pendant light fittings and a cruciform full-immersion baptismal font (an element seldom found in Anglican churches). (*Criterion E*)

History

The Anglican Church at 624 Centre Road, Bentleigh was built in 1960-62 for a congregation that, at the time, had occupied the site for ninety years. A local Church of England presence dates back to 1850, when the first outdoor service was held under a tree in Leary's Paddock (between present-day East Boundary Road and Tucker Road). The fledgling congregation subsequently met at St Stephens's Common School on Tucker Road, acquiring the premises in 1854-55. In 1870, it was decided to sell the property and re-establish the church elsewhere. The present site, on the south-east corner of Centre and Tucker Roads, was donated by parishioner named John, in whose honour the new church was named St John's. Erection of a modest brick and bluestone building began in October 1872, and the first service was held on Sunday, 11 May 1873. Such was the sparse settlement of Bentleigh's east at that time that the congregation saw limited growth over the next few decades. However, expansion in the early twentieth century prompted the provision of a vicarage (1912) and Sunday School hall (1923), and then the establishment of a Chapel-of-Ease, St George's in Mavho Street, Bentleigh (1926).

During the inter-war period, the old brick and bluestone church was enhanced with various items gifted by members of the congregation, including new carpet, curtains, communion rail and a set of three stained glass windows (1932) in memory of a parishioner's late husband. However, by the end of the decade, the building itself was in poor structural condition. As recorded in the parish history: "In 1940, the Reverend T H Watts, the then vicar, drew attention to the signs of decay and deterioration of the church and recommended that a Building Fund be opened for the Centenary [in 1954]". Doubtless due to the interruption of WW2, the establishment of the Building Fund was deferred until 1946. When the Centenary was celebrated eight years later, an ambitious rebuilding programme was outlined thus in the souvenir publication: "the design and specification for a new Sunday School Hall are already drawn up and the present plan for St John's Church is to build new sanctuary and vestries on the present edifice and, later, to enlarge the nave. The new hall will be erected where the tennis court is, and two new tennis courts behind where the present Sunday School stands... the only deterrent is the perennial lack of funds".

Such was the post-WW2 boom of residential settlement in the Bentleigh area, as market gardens were sold and subdivided for housing, that demand for community infrastructure, including church facilities, increased at an unprecedented rate. The number of Anglican families in the Parish of Bentleigh reportedly trebled over a single decade, rising from 850 in 1946 to 2,300 in 1957. This period saw the opening of a new church, St Christopher's, which commenced services in 1952 in a prefabricated building on Mackie Road. The mid-1950s brought rapid expansion of local Anglican infrastructure as new brick halls were erected for both St Anne's (Moylan Street) and St Christopher's (Mackie Road), and a new brick church for St George's (Mavho Street).

St John's on Centre Road followed suit, with drawings for a new hall prepared in mid-1957 and the foundation stone laid early the following year. By then, the original plan to retain and enlarge the existing church had been superseded by a bolder scheme to demolish it for a new and larger counterpart. As later reported, the original church was deemed "beyond repair and its seating for 125 is unable to accommodate the usual congregation of five hundred" (*Age* 28/07/1961:7). David Gawler, the architect engaged to design the hall, was retained to design the new church as well.

David Phillip Gawler (1924-2013) was destined to become an architect: his father was John Stevens Gawler, well known in the profession not only as a practitioner but also as an educator (including a pre-war stint as Dean of the Faculty of Architecture), reformer and activist who chaired both the Housing Commission of Victoria and the Town & Country Planning Board. His private practice, founded in 1914 as the partnership of Gawler & Drummond, became Gawler & Churcher in 1941 and then, after Gawler's retirement six years later, Gawler, Churcher & Blackett. Graduating from the University of Melbourne in 1949, David Gawler briefly worked for Stephenson & Turner and then spent several years in Canada before returning to Melbourne and joining his father's firm in 1957. The following year, after the death of W A M Blackett, staff member John Boardman was promoted to partnership in the firm known thence as Gawler, Churcher & Boardman. Eric Churcher died in 1962, but Gawler junior and Boardman remained in partnership until 1974.

Gawler had been engaged to design the new Bentleigh church by mid-1959, when a sub-committee was formed "to prepare plans for St John's new church" (*Church of England Messenger*, 19/06/1959:128). Design development continued in 1960: working drawings, while bearing the job number 5818, are dated January 1961. The site plan shows that the new church would occupy the prime corner site, necessitating removal of the original church. It was deconsecrated on Sunday, 30 July, and demolition began the following week. While one contemporary report noted the sad passing of a venerable local landmark, it was also pointed out that the new church would preserve memories of the old: three stained glass windows (installed in the former church in 1932) would be re-erected in the sanctuary, the pulpit and other original furnishings would be placed in a "Pioneers' Chapel", and a painting of the old church would grace a wall of the narthex (*Age* 28/07/1961:7). The new building would also incorporate the church's pipe organ, which had been installed there only a few years prior (having been relocated from another church, St Savior's Anglican Mission Church in Collingwood, which had ceased operating in the mid-1950s). On 10 August, the foundation stone for the new church was laid by the Lieutenant-Governor of Victoria, Sir Edmund Herring. As demolition and reconstruction continued, services took place in the old timber hall until the new church was completed in March 1962.

Description

St John's Anglican Church, at 624 Centre Road, Bentleigh, is an ecclesiastical building in the post-WW2 modernist style. Occupying a corner site, the church is laid out in a stepped rectilinear plan that comprises a large nave with a tall canted roofline (effectively, a truncated A-frame), enveloped on all four sides by a flat-roofed elements. The nave roof is clad in metal tray decking, and its gable ends are respectively infilled with a multi-paned window wall of coloured glass panels (Tucker Road or west end) and a solid wall with a pebbled finish and a series of radiating lines that follow the profile of the roof (east end). There is a small Latin cross mounted above each gable, and a flanking pair of flagstaffs at the west end

Along the Centre Road frontage, the enveloping flat-roofed wing has a pebbled finish and a row of false-arched openings. These have projecting rendered surrounds and contain tripartite window bays with tinted glazing and spandrels clad in pale green mosaic tiling, incorporating various ecclesiastical symbols (including Latin crosses, scales and a figure with a cross halo). The end bay, near the corner, incorporates a doorway that opens onto a metal-framed covered walkway with a low zigzag roofline.

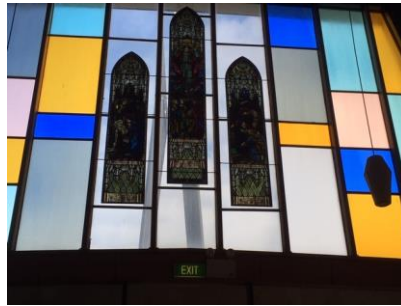
The adjacent elevation to Tucker Road is mostly a blank orange brick wall, enlivened by a narrow horizontal grille of brick tiles, a wall-mounted Celtic cross, and the name of the church. At the far right end, abutting the adjacent church hall, is a second entry point with a pair of glazed doors flanked by sidelights with mosaic tiled spandrels, a wide pebbled spandrel above, and a project flat-roofed canopy. The Tucker Road elevation is otherwise dominated by the spire, which rises from the flat roof in front of the nave, and comprises a long pole supported by a tripod-like structure of three tapering metal members with sharply pointed ends.

While an interior inspection was not undertaken by the consultant as part of this study, an inspection made in June 2020 by Council officers noted that the interior of the church remains substantially intact to its early 1960s appearance. Significant fittings are as follows::

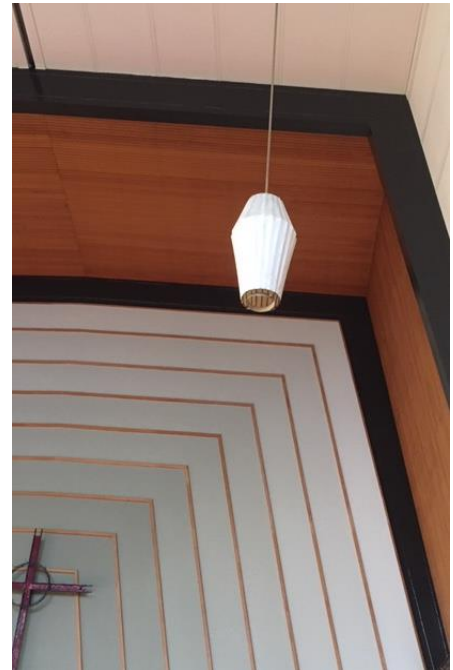
- The full immersion baptism font (an element rarely found in Anglican churches);
- Three stained glass windows (1932) from the former church on the site;
- The decorative ironwork grille between the Pioneers’ Chapel and the choir stall;
- The decorative ironwork altar rail (matching the above iron grille);
- The panelled wall at the end of the nave (with decorative timber strips);
- Pendant lighting fittings in the nave



Full immersion baptismal font



Stained glass windows (1932)



Panelled wall and light fitting



Altar, showing altar rail



Decorative grille screen

Comparisons

Architecturally, early post-WW2 churches in the study area (ie, the early 1950s to the mid-1960s) fall into two categories: progressive and conservative. The latter group represents a continuation of a tradition already well established by the late 1930s, where churches were expressed as plain gable-roofed brick structures with towers and simplified historicist details such as buttresses, arches and mouldings. This is evident in such pre-WW2 examples as Holy Cross Roman Catholic Church, 707 Glenhuntly Road, Caulfield South (O H Jorgenson, 1937) [part of HO66], Ormond Uniting Church at 264 Booran Road (Louis Williams, 1937) and St Paul’s Church of England, Dandenong Road, Caulfield (Louis Williams, 1938-39) [part of HO14]. It then continued into the early post-WW2 era with such examples as St Kevin’s Roman Catholic Church, Glen Orme Avenue, Ormond (Cyril Kelly, 1953) [part of HO75] and Bentleigh Presbyterian (now Uniting) Church, 495-497 Centre Road, Bentleigh (J F D Scarborough, 1958).

The emergence of a more progressive modernist approach, with stark articulation of volumetric forms, flat or low pitched roofs and minimal ornament, can be traced back to St Margaret's Presbyterian Church in Hotham Street, St Kilda East (K Murray Forster, 1952-53). The later 1950s saw very relatively few modern churches (or other places of worship) built in what is now the City of Glen Eira; the new synagogue for the Caulfield Hebrew Congregation at 572 Inkerman Road (Bridge, Hayden & Associates, 1958-61) was a notable exception. In the first half of the 1960s, local churches tended to embrace a starker modernist expression, with bold box-like forms, generous windows, and ornament reduced to stone feature walls or projecting brickwork patterns. This is evident in such examples as the former Brethren Gospel Hall (now Eastleigh Gospel Chapel) at 216 East Boundary Road, Bentleigh East (G James Rattray, 1961-62), the Church of the Temple Society at 152 Tucker Road, Bentleigh (William Blaich, 1963-64) and the recently-demolished East Bentleigh Uniting (former Methodist) Church, 31 East Boundary Road, Bentleigh East (1964).

St John's Anglican Church in Bentleigh stands out amongst local post-WW2 places of worship in that it is neither typical of this prevailing minimalist modernist style, nor does it attempt to make any historicist references. Rather, the building shows the influence of a distinct sub-style of the late 1950s and early 1960s, when mainstream modernism was tempered by the adoption of bold geometric forms, applied ornament and decorative finishes. This playful and deliberately eye-catching approach was famously dismissed by Robin Boyd, who, in his book *The Australian Ugliness* (1960), coined the term "Featurism" to describe it. Despite Boyd's protestations, the Featurist tendency was widely popular for a time, especially for commercially-oriented buildings such as motels, bowling alleys and car showrooms, as well as factories and houses. Perhaps not surprisingly, its application to the more dignified field of ecclesiastical architecture was rare.

As an example of a church in a mature and well-rounded Featurist mode, St John's Anglican Church in Bentleigh has few counterparts in what is now the City of Glen Eira. The former South Oakleigh Methodist Church (now Coatesville Uniting Church) at the corner of North and Mackie Road, Bentleigh East (J Gordon Williams, 1961-62) is dominated by a fairly conventional gabled nave, but exhibiting decidedly Featurist tendencies in its projecting butterfly-roofed narthex, with its random coursed feature wall and matching planter box (still extant) and Besser block screen (since removed). The aforementioned Caulfield Synagogue is also very much in a Featurist mode, with stone feature walls, stacked brickwork and tinted glazing. A proto-Featurist tendency is also evident in a much earlier example, the Bentleigh Church of Christ at 4 Gilbert Grove, Bentleigh (John Wallinga, 1949) [part of HO69]. Designed by a Dutch-born émigré designer, it has an idiosyncratic facade with recessed piers of stack-bond brickwork, half-round pediment, overscaled rendered cornice, and projecting windows hoods of an eye-catching zigzag form. A smaller but no less striking local example of the Featurist style is the 10th Caulfield Scout Hall at 2 Miller Street, Elsternwick (designer unknown, 1959), with a cream brick façade enlivened by a pair of stretched hexagonal windows flanking a central triangular entry porch with colourful chequerboard tiling.

References

Nancy Taylor, *The First Hundred Years: A Brief History of the Parish of St John's Church of England, Bentleigh, Victoria, 1854-1954* (1954).

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Gawler, Churcher & Blackett, "Proposed church hall for St John's C of E, East Bentleigh", working drawings, dated 5 July 1957. PB File 724, *loc cit*.

"Development in the Bentleigh Parish", *Church of England Messenger*, 21 March 1958, p 50.

Gawler, Churcher & Boardman, "St John's Church of England, East Bentleigh", working drawings, undated [c1960]. PB File 771, *loc cit*.

"Picturesque church link with market gardens", *Age*, 28 July 1961, p 7.

“Bentleigh says goodbye to corner church”, *Age*, 1 August 1961, p 18.

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www.builtheritage.com.au/dua_gawler.html

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