



# BLANDFORD FORUM TOWN COUNCIL

## ALL SAINTS CHAPEL

## BLANDFORD CEMETERY

During the first half of the nineteenth century considerable public concern was expressed about the growing health hazards posed by overcrowding in many urban churchyards. In a few cases parishes purchased land for churchyard extensions and in some large cities new cemeteries were built and operated by private companies. In the majority of towns no action was taken to relieve the pressure on existing churchyards and in 1842 a Royal Commission was appointed to consider the issue. It recommended the closure of overcrowded churchyards in the larger towns and giving powers to their borough councils to build cemeteries funded by the rates. These recommendations were implemented, and considerably extended, by the public health act of 1848, and the burial acts of 1852 and 1853, with the result that overcrowded cemeteries in any town, of whatever size, could be closed by order of the privy council and the borough council obliged to build a municipal cemetery.

It was as a result of this legislation that the parish churchyard at Blandford was closed and a municipal cemetery was opened by the borough council, on land then well outside the borough in the parish of Pimperne, in 1855. The cemetery buildings included an entrance arch, a lodge for the superintendent and two chapels, one licensed by the diocese of Salisbury for use by members of the Church of England, and the other for use by non-members of the Church of England. All these buildings still survive but the non-Anglican chapel has been converted into a workshop for use in the maintenance of the cemetery. The Church of England chapel is, however, the only such chapel in Dorset, and one of the relatively few in Britain as a whole, to retain its original furnishings with little or no modification. The only significant alteration to the interior of the chapel was the removal of the reading desk from its original position, directly opposite the entrance, to the north-east corner of the building to allow the introduction of an altar table. In order to restore this important building to its original condition, Blandford Forum Town Council, which succeeded the former borough council as owner and operator of the cemetery in 1974, agreed in January 2000 to remove the altar and to re-instate the reading desk in its original position. The interior of the chapel is therefore now as it was when it was first opened for public use in 1855.

The arrangement of the chapel is interesting as it reflects ideas about Anglican church design in the period before the full impact of the ecclesiological movement had been felt in the Church of England. It was this movement, in the last forty years of the nineteenth century, which produced the sort of arrangement which, with some modification, we tend to think of as normal today. Inspired by an idealised vision of medieval churches, the ecclesiologists produced churches arranged with the main focus on the altar. This would be placed at the far end of a long chancel, in which the choir was seated, and which was often separated from the main body of the church (nave) by a screen. Before the ecclesiological movement churches would have looked very different, with the emphasis on the pulpit and reading desk as the main focus of worship, and with the altar much less visible.

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The seating in Blandford cemetery chapel is arranged facing inwards, as in a college chapel, an arrangement to be found in a number of Anglican churches between the late seventeenth and early nineteenth centuries. Those who wish to visit similar churches will find comparable interiors at Killerton (Devon) and Sexey's Hospital Chapel at Bruton (Somerset). The Blandford chapel had the reading desk placed under the east window, with no provision for an altar, as it was never intended that Holy Communion should be celebrated in the chapel. An almost identical, though much earlier, arrangement, with stalls lining the north and south walls of the chapel and with the pulpit standing where an altar might otherwise be, can still be seen at Woodhey Chapel in Cheshire, which dates from about 1700.

Blandford cemetery chapel is a very conservative building for its date, representing an outlook towards worship in the Church of England which was beginning to become unfashionable by the 1840s. Its design is, however, consistent with the conservative religious outlook in Dorset in the 1850s, where there was much opposition, from both clergy and laity, to the reform programme sponsored by successive bishops of Salisbury, Edward Denison and Walter Kerr Hamilton, between 1837 and 1869. This opposition came to a head in 1867, when Bishop Hamilton wrote to his clergy advocating the innovations in Anglican worship and church design associated with the ecclesiologists. This provoked a petition by the clergy and churchwardens of the diocese of Salisbury to the archbishop of Canterbury, complaining about the letter. This petition received particular support in the large number of signatories from the area around Blandford. These were encouraged by the local landowners, Lords Portman and Shaftesbury, who were both strong opponents of Hamilton, and by the rector of Durweston, Lord Sidney Godolphin Osborne.

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In addition to the above information, readers should be aware that there was an arson attack at the chapel in September 2013. The chapel was broken into using paraphernalia taken from surrounding graves and a window was smashed. Three separate fires were started and then extinguished and another window was smashed as an escape route. As a result, extensive refurbishment works costing over £33,000 have taken place between December 2013 and March 2014, including re-plastering the walls, washing down the timber frames, re-glazing the windows, re-building the fire damaged pew and panelling on the right side of the chapel and replacing the burnt floor at the foot of that pew. The chapel was rededicated and opened for public use in April 2014.

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The cemetery wall and buildings were Grade II listed in 2016.

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