

St Mary's is the Friends' first Roman Catholic vesting: it came to us from the Diocese of Clifton in 2011. It was built in 1937 to serve a community of nuns, and has fulfilled that role for two such groups, now moved elsewhere.

Origins of the chapel

Bertha Kessler and Katherine Hudson served during World War I in the First Aid Nursing Yeomanry: both suffered mental illness as a result.

In 1920 in London they encountered a dynamic Congregationalist minister, W E Orchard, whose interests embraced psychiatry and Catholicism. He suggested they had a calling: caring for mental illness through spiritual healing.

Their first patient (1923) was a girl from Gloucester. In 1927 they bought Tanglewood (renamed Templewood), a house standing next to the present church. They ministered to female patients there until 1934. They were both received into the Catholic church that year. The Bishop of Clifton, inspired by their work, suggested they might build a chapel.



The building of the church

The architect, W D Caröe (1857-1938) had built more than 30 new churches - Anglican and non-conformist: he was Architect to the Ecclesiastical Commissioners from 1895. Brownshill was his only Roman Catholic commission.

His previous church was on Cyprus - St George, Troodos, built for the island's ex-pats. His influences were eclectic: a Byzantine apse; a Norman chancel arch; a Swedish original for the woodwork of the west gallery.

He provided for a presbytery - you can see the stonework at the northeast corner awaiting completion. It never materialised.



Stained glass by Douglas Strachan

The interior

At the east end, gold mosaic backs a plinth for a crucifix. The massive altar has a small recess where the 'mensa' would have been placed over the holy relics: without it, the altar is only a table.

In the apse, three glowing windows by Douglas Strachan (1875-1950), Scotland's foremost stained glass artist. There is a fourth window by him in the west gallery. It is not known how this commission came about.

The church was re-ordered in 1973, following Vatican II, but all of Caröe's furnishings remain, except the altar rail. Note the neat solution to a small and steep staircase to the gallery - triangular treads.



After it was built

In 1937 the community became Templewood Home of Rest: as the work grew, properties in Brownshill were bought. Male patients were also now accepted - many of them priests.

Recovered female patients often became helpers: from this grew a Tertiary Chapter of the Dominican Order in 1951, with Miss Hudson as Mother Catherine. An American order (Congregation of the Servants of the Paraclete), dedicated to the care of troubled priests, arrived in 1959. The two founding ladies died in 1963.

The community was reconstituted as The Little Company of Hope in 1976. In 1996, aged 88, the mother superior, Sr Philomena handed over to the Congregation of Mary, based at Derby. The nuns left Brownshill in 2006.

A dramatic footnote: Templewood House was destroyed in 1946 when a Lancaster bomber, lost on its way back to base, crashed into it. All the aircrew died, but the people in the house survived.

Other Friends' churches across the River Severn

Llanfihangel Rogiet Church Stands between two farmsteads. Mostly medieval, with 1904 north aisle. Medieval effigies. Parish's most famous resident was Henry Jones, inventor of self-raising flour!

St David, Llangeview Largely 15th century, including screen and rood loft. Medieval font. 18th century pulpit and pews, including squire's pew in the chancel. Altar rails from about 1700.

St Mary, Llanfair Kilgeddin Walls filled with glorious, complete, unique scheme of colourful Arts & Crafts sgraffiti panels by Heywood Sumner depicting verses from the Benedicite in a local setting.

Llancillo Church Our most difficult church to find! Mostly medieval, rescued and repaired a century ago. 13th century font and chest; pulpit (mostly 1632); an intense East Window by William Pearce of Birmingham.



(Llanfihangel Rogiet, Llangeview and Llancillo are open. For Llanfair Kilgeddin please ring the office)



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Church of St Mary of the Angels
Brownshill

a guide to its history