

St John the Baptist Church  
and  
Southend Village  
Early History

**Southend Village**

Southend Village existed for centuries – the neighbourhood reportedly mentioned in Domesday Book (11<sup>th</sup> century). The main Kent to London road passed through the village, bringing fruit and vegetables from the countryside and stagecoaches could use the blacksmiths forge. The village's name derives from its location at the southern end of the Parish of St Mary's Lewisham. The River Ravensbourne flowed through the village helping to create the mill pond and watercress beds.

The surrounding countryside was predominantly farmland, with farms such as Sangley, Whitehouse, Bellingham, Shroffold, Perry's and Holloway.

**The Forster Family & St John the Baptist Church**



The Forster family lived at Southend Hall (located at the junction of Whitefoot Lane and Bromley Road) from the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, having moved from Elton in Huntingdonshire. John Forster (1747 –1834) had a Chapel of Ease built in 1824, reputedly, so that his family and villagers did not have to travel all the way to St Mary's in Lewisham to go to church. *(The chapel is used as St John's Church Hall today).*



A village cottage school was opened in 1855. This school remained in use until 1963, when the present school in Beachborough Road was opened. *(The old school building was finally demolished in 1983).*

The arrival of the tramline in 1913 led to Southend Village becoming a popular leisure destination for Londoners seeking a day out in the country! It was around this time that Lord Henry William Forster (grandson of John) moved his family to their home in Exbury, Hampshire. This may possibly have been because the village was becoming noisier and a lot busier. Lord & Lady Forster's home (Southend Hall) became a film studio for a few years.

The area remained predominantly farmland until the 1920s, when large new housing estates (Bellingham & Downham) were built nearby. The small village Chapel of Ease would not meet the future requirements of some 35,000+ new residents. A new larger church was needed.



St John's vicarage was built in 1921 and dedicated by the Bishop of Woolwich. This was later enlarged and is still used as the residence for the incumbent.



The original plans drawn up by the architect, Sir Charles Nicholson was for a cathedral-sized building. However, changing circumstances and finances meant that the design had to be altered.

The ground on which St John's church now stands was owned by the Forster family. Lord Forster generously gifted the land for the building of the Parish Church and contributed towards its cost.



The site was dedicated by Lord & Lady Forster: Commemorated in the foundation stone laid by the Rt Hon Henry William Forster on 17<sup>th</sup> July 1926. This can be seen in the East Wall of the Church.



Construction of the church continued through 1927.

The consecration of the New Parish Church of St. John the Baptist, Southend Village, took place at 3pm on Saturday, 28<sup>th</sup> January 1928. Writing in the Parish magazine at that time, the then Vicar, the Revd E.F. Edge-Partington wrote:

“..... the consecration marks the fulfilment of a plan which has been in existence for many years. On May 6<sup>th</sup> 1919, a large meeting was held in the Parish Hall at Ladywell, to promote the plan to build a church at Southend. At that meeting the chair was taken by the Earl of Dartmouth, and the Bishops of Coventry and Woolwich together with Canon Bickersteth and Canon Roseveare (the past and present Vicars of Lewisham) spoke in favour of the scheme”.



One of the chief features of the church is the Forster Memorial Chapel, which was Lord Forster's personal contribution. It contains a bronze memorial tomb honouring sons, John and Alfred, both of whom died in the First World War. There are also monuments to John Forster 1834; Elizabeth Forster 1837 and Harriet Forster 1839, all transferred from the old chapel.

The church has seen several re-orderings through the years; one in 1977 saw the installation of a corona by John Hayward. Recent years have seen the introduction of comfortable, bright seating to replace old wooden pews; new heating; sound system; disabled toilet and a new chapel (The Holy Cross) was created under the organ loft.

*We would like to hear from anyone who has additional historic information about our church, Southend Village or the Forster family.*