

Guy Rowston's PARISH PROFILE

Scandinavia in Rotherhithe

It all started with the Great Fire of London when large amounts of timber were needed to rebuild the capital. The Baltic timber trade flourished for both building houses and ships whilst vessels from the Scandinavian countries filled the docks of London. From then on sailors from Norway, Finland and Sweden have regularly visited the docks on the south side of the Thames until the move down to Tilbury in the mid 1960s.

The first Danish/Norwegian church was built in Wapping in 1696 while the Swedish church (now in Marylebone) celebrates the 300th anniversary of its parish next year. When Norway was ceded to Sweden in 1814 the Norwegian church closed and its members scattered.

It wasn't until Pentecost 1868 that a Norwegian priest started work in Rotherhithe and a church was completed in 1871. The Finnish mission followed in 1881 and the Swedish in 1905. Initially they were concerned with the religious and moral welfare of their seamen abroad, but eventually they provided reading rooms, entertainment and - perhaps the most important of all - 'a piece of homeland abroad'. As most of the



The Finnish, Norwegian and Swedish churches in Rotherhithe

Scandinavian sailors arrived at Surrey Docks it made sense that the missions should centre on Rotherhithe.

Finland had sent its first chaplain to England, not to London but to the fishing ports of Grimsby and Hull in 1880. Two years later a Finnish church opened in a little tin hut in Albion Street, Rotherhithe. Now into its third church, a fine modern building opened in 1958 and recently refurbished, the Mission continues its work with the London Finnish community and still with mariners now berthed in Tilbury and on the



Seafarers remain central to their ministry

Medway. Changing conditions required the chaplains to respond differently. Container ships have faster turn-rounds, reduced crewing, 24 hour working shifts and a need for security.

So seafarers seldom find time to leave their vessels and visit the church. Armed with traders' timetables, Teemu Halli, the port chaplain, meets Finnish seamen on the vessels. He brings the latest Finnish newspapers, exchanges news, discusses personal problems with the crew from the bridge to the engine room. If there is time ashore, Teemu will try to arrange transport for the crew for shopping and other activities. The Mission also offers confidential pastoral counselling by e-mail.

Back in Albion Street, the church building still offers accommodation though ironically it is very rarely used by seamen nowadays. There's a shop selling Finnish food and it must be the only church in Britain with a sauna!

The Norwegians opened the Ebenezer Church near Commercial Dock Pier. In 1927 the mission moved to a striking new church which dominates the entrance to the Rotherhithe Tunnel.

During the Second World War it was the place of worship for the Norwegian royal family in exile and acquired pro-cathedral status where priests were ordained for the free world and where King Haakon VII broadcast many of his speeches to the Norwegian people. A Norwegian Christmas tree was despatched secretly every year to the King during the exile. After the war the Norwegian people decided to send an annual gift of the tree that stands in Trafalgar Square as a thank you to the British people for their wartime support.

Nowadays the emphasis of St Olav's is less on the seafaring community and it's now primarily for Norwegians living in London. There are an estimated 7000 Norwegians in



London and over a hundred of them meet every Sunday for a mass and stay for traditional waffles, home-made cakes and coffee afterwards.

During the rest of the week there's a mother and toddler group, a ladies' club, Saturday School and meetings three times a term, with food and 'open mike' music for students, au pairs and young professionals. There's an estimated 900 -1,000 students from Norway in London. Confirmation classes are run by the curate, Just Salvesen, and the confirmands join others from Norwegian churches across Europe on a traditional confirmation camp. There is close co-operation with the Norwegian school in Wimbledon.

The highlight of the St Olav year is without doubt the Annual Christmas Fair which has a reputation across London! This year it was extended from two to three days! It's a really good place to get traditional knitwear and jewellery, Norwegian food and the occasional glass of gløgg!

"Christmas is a strong tradition for Norwegians and has a big impact on our lives," says the Rector and Senior Chaplain, Torbjørn Holt. The Christmas services are well attended with a service on Christmas Eve at 3pm in the church followed by a traditional Christmas dinner. High Mass follows on Christmas Day at 11am.

Today, Torbjørn spends much of his time on the move both in London and around the rest of the UK visiting offices, homes, Norwegian networking events and students. "My vision is for the church to be seen as a home where the community meet, we have an open house six days a week," he stresses.

Once 1,800 Norwegian vessels visited London in a year, but even now 450-600 ships land cargo at Tilbury and on the Medway annually. The crews are rarely one hundred per cent Norwegian these days but the chaplain will point

them in the direction of an appropriate point of contact for faith or nationality. The Norwegian chaplaincy provides a similar outreach to the Finnish church.

Just down the road from the Norwegian Church is the Swedish Seamen's church. Another modern building (rebuilt in 1966), with a 30 bed guesthouse attached, the church is remarkable for its attractive seating. The Swedish parish church, Ulrike Eleanore Church built in 1910, is in Marylebone and serves the Swedish community in London as it is more centrally placed. The Dean is also chaplain to the Swedish Embassy. Though the main worship services take place in Marylebone, there is morning prayer daily at Rotherhithe with a weekday mass and a

already sold out this year! As with the other two churches, the Swedish mission does not forget its origins and chaplains visit Swedish vessels downriver.

Clergy have a fixed term and there's quite a movement of staff so a lot of importance is attached to the trustees of the church, the church council and the wardens to maintain continuity which all seems quite familiar to Anglicans!

All three churches take a lively part in local ecumenical activity. This has been helped in part by the signing of the Porvoo Agreement. In 1992 twelve European Christian churches which were not in communion with the Roman Catholic Church or the Orthodox churches signed an agreement in the town of Järvenpää in Finland,

establishing full communion between them. This was followed by a joint celebration of Holy Communion in the cathedral of the neighbouring town of Porvoo, home of the composer, Sibelius. The location of the communion service was deliberate. The agreement could then be called 'Porvoo' which was easier to pronounce than Järvenpää! Southwark Cathedral hosted the tenth anniversary service of the signing of the agreement.

In the spirit of Porvoo, the clergy at all three Scandinavian churches in Southwark have been licensed by the Bishop of Southwark. They are also

members of the Bermondsey Deanery Chapter whilst the Rev. Torbjørn Holt is an honorary chaplain at Southwark Cathedral which is twinned with the congregation of Bergen Cathedral.

I'm sure that all the three Scandinavian communities will wish their fellow Christians in Southwark:

**Hyvaa joulua!
God Jul! God Jul!**



The annual St Lucia Festival

monthly Taizé service. Midsummer Day Festival is observed in nearby Southwark Park whilst Swedish National Day is celebrated at the Swedish School in Barnes.

Both churches will get together this year as they always do for the St Lucia festival which this year takes place in St Paul's Cathedral. In other years it has been held in Westminster and Southwark Cathedrals. A congregation of 2,500 is usually expected and before you ask, tickets are

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