**[SUMMARY]** The first records of formal Catholic worship in the parish dates back to the 9th century, during the reign of Alfred the Great (848-899). St Saviour’s though was not established until 1909 and was completed in its current form during the years of the Great War (1914-1918). As such, it was heralded as a beacon of new hope in a fast growing and dynamic parish.

**[TITLE] The History of St Saviour’s Parish**

**[SLUG] The founding of Lewisham parish**

The story of the founding of Lewisham is much earlier than the establishment of the parish, and is based on oral tradition. It is said to have been founded by a migrating Jute called Leof, who settled in the area near what is now St Mary’s Church in Ladywell at some time in the 6th century. As to the etymology of the name, Daniel Lysons (1762–1834), the English antiquarian and topographer, in his four-volume book, *Environs of London*, written between 179 and 1796, writes: “In the most ancient Saxon records this place is called Levesham, that is, the house among the meadows; *leswe, læs, læse, or læsew*, in the Saxon, which signifies a meadow, and ham, a dwelling. A Latin legal record, dated 1440, mentions a place in Kent as Levesham which may refer to Lewisham. It is now written, as well in parochial and other records as in common usage, Lewisham.”

According to written historical records, the hamlet called Leofshema by Saxons, was an important settlement at the confluence of the rivers Quaggy and Ravensbourne. King AElfred, better known to us as Alfred the Great (849-899), King of the Anglo Saxons, was also Lord of the Manor of Leofshema – once celebrated by a plaque in the now closed Lewisham Library.

As the King accrued more land, by the early part of the 10th century the parish of Leofshema dwarfed the village which carried its name. Its reach stretched to the Norwood Hills, and across to what are now the boroughs of Beckenham, Bromley, and Woolwich. The parish was dominated by a large Catholic Church, which was dedicated to the Blessed Virgin Mary. Unfortunately, all that remains of the original church is a rather large belltower, which now forms part of the late Stuart, protestant church of St Mary’s near Lewisham Hospital.

That seems to have been the high point of Lewisham parish, after which, in subsequent years and centuries, the acreage was dispersed, granted, or sold off, for political reasons. Some 20 years after Alfred’s death, the Manor of Leofsham, with its then appendages of Greenwich, Woolwich, Mottingham and Combe, was given by Elthruda, or Elstrudis (names vary), who was either Alfred’s youngest daughter, (or niece, depending on the source) to Saint Peter’s Abbey, in Ghent (in Belgium), in a Charter dated September 918, following her marriage to Count Baldwin III of Flanders. The grant was formally recorded many decades later in a special charter issued by King Edgar in 964. Even so, at the time it remained a hefty demesne. It included 314 acres of arable land, 33.5 acres of meadowland, 27 acres of pasture and 642 acres of woodland – a reminder of the great forests that once covered southeast England.

The original priory stood, according to tradition, on the site of the old Hippodrome Theatre, which stood at the bottom of what is now Brownhill Road. A document in the municipal archives, dated 1392, describes the Priory as a lodestone in the centre of the parish. By 1414 the extensive lands of the priory were taken over by the Crown and King Henry V granted the now much smaller manors of Lewisham and Greenwich to the Carthusians of the Charterhouse of Jesus of Bethlehem at Shene, in Surrey.

**[SLUG] From Tudor times to the Enlightenment**

The Carthusians owned the land for a little over a century. Then along came King Henry VIII, who was looking for available land to add to his palace of Placentia at Greenwich. Eventually the Crown came to an agreement with the Prior of Shene, who no doubt handed over priory land with some reluctance. Following the depredations to the Catholic Church during Henry VIII’s English Reformation, the Priory was briefly restored in the reign of Mary I (1553-1558). During Mary’s reign, it came under the management of Cardinal Reginald Pole, who was appointed Archbishop of Canterbury for the duration, and had administrative responsibility for the Parish of Lewisham, which at the time was deemed to be part of Kent. Once Mary died and Elizabeth I ascended to the throne, the systematic suppression of Catholics began again in earnest and Lewisham became a parish under the newly designated Church of England.

Even so, Catholicism hung on, if only intermittently in parts of England, often in secret. The North, especially Lancashire, Cumbria and Yorkshire, retained significant communities of Catholics during these penal times, evidenced by the large number of secret passages and priest hiding holes in the manor houses of the region. So did Norfolk. The South was less fortunate. In parts of the rural south memories of Catholicism faded quickly, in part because much of the Church of England rites and ceremony was quickly adopted and adapted from Catholic liturgy to suit Protestant tastes. Lewisham was likely such a place. We have no records that tell us otherwise.

Modern day St Saviour’s commemorates these difficult Tudor and Stuart days with stained glass window depictions of English Catholic martyrs, such as Sir Thomas Moore and St Margaret Clitherow (sometimes spelled Clitheroe).

During the 16th century, Lewisham became an important Church of England parish. Its vicar enjoyed a salary of £120 a year – a considerable sum at the time. Ownership of a vicarage and 54 acres of land came with the job. In the 17th century the Manor of Lewisham was purchased by George Legge, Lord Dartmouth. The Legge family descended from Edward Legge, Vice-President of Munster – the most important office in the English government of the Irish province of Munster from its introduction in the Elizabethan era to 1672, a period which included the Desmond Rebellions in Munster, the Nine Years’ War, and the Irish Rebellion of 1641.

George Legge’s eldest son William was a Royalist army officer and close associate of Prince Rupert of the Rhine. On the Restoration, Charles II offered to create him an earl, but Legge declined. Years later, William was raised by Queen Anne (1665-1714) to several positions of honour and trust and became a member of her privy council; and in September 1711, was ennobled as Viscount Lewisham, and Earl of Dartmouth.

In turn, William’s grandson George, Lord Dartmouth, obtained the privilege of holding a fair twice a year, and a market twice a week on Blackheath in the parish. The fair used to be held in May and October, but in 1772 it was discontinued (except for the sale of cattle) by the then Earl.

Lewisham itself remained a small, semi-rural village. In the 18th century, the site of what is now St Saviour’s was a formal garden of a large house, the ‘The Limes’ built by Lord Elish and leased to a Mrs Valentine Sparrow, a friend of John Wesley and his brother Charles, a Church of England cleric. Both were leaders of the Methodist movement. John Wesley is believed to have been a frequent guest during the 1730s, between preaching tours. On Mrs Sparrow’s death the lease passed to Mr E Blackwell, a banker working for Marlin’s Bank in Lombard Street in the City. In 1782 Mr Henry Mills bought the house and the freehold from Lord Elish. He in turn sold it to Mr Edward Leigh, who built a series of houses on part of the property that became known as Limes Grove.

**[SLUG] Catholicism returns to Lewisham in Victorian times.**

In 1867, a number of properties were erected on the grounds, which in later years became 175-185 High Street. In 1894, the whole of the property was sold off after a series of shops (No 161-167 High Street) were built on the site of some old stables and the old mansion was demolished. The present entrance to St Saviour’s is the original entrance to The Limes. Two large stone pillars once supported iron gates, with two rams’ heads on the pillar copings. The pillars and iron railings were removed prior to the construction of the church and were presented to Mr PJ Foley, as a thanks for all the support he had provided to the Church. He in turn had them erected at the entrance to his garden at The Grange in Lewisham Park. According to the archive of Southwark Diocese, in the autumn of 1893 a meeting was held in Lewisham, with the aim of finding a local place of worship.

A local French Catholic lady offered her house in Morley Road and Mass was first said there on May 27th, 1894, by Fr (later Canon) Sheehan, of Blackheath. Very soon, the venue became too small, as did two successive buildings, namely a hall in the School of Art, which was rented for use on Sundays only, and a disused building in Rushey Green. The parish was founded in 1894 and a resident priest, Fr McClymont, was appointed.

The Rushey Green building was dedicated to St Columba, which was changed by Fr McClymont’s successor, Fr George B. Tatum, to St Saviour, St John the Baptist, and St John the Evangelist. Land was bought on the High Street – essentially, the site of the long demolished The Limes. A school chapel was built on the site which opened on November 9th, 1898 (now the hall of the school to the rear of the church).

**[SLUG] St Saviour’s is founded.**

The newly appointed parish priest, Reverend James Connell, anticipated the need for a school and a new church, which was realised with substantial financial support from Patrick James Foley, founder and president of the Pearl Assurance Company and a Lewisham resident. The architect Claude Kelly provided the original design, as well as the designs for the subsequent extensions. Claude was the son of John Kelly (1840–1904), also a church architect, and took over his father’s practice after his death.

The foundation stone of St Saviour’s was laid on April 24th, 1909, and the church was officially declared open by Peter Amigo, the then Bishop of Southwark on December 9th, 1909. The Lord and Lady Mayor of London attended the opening as did the Sheriffs of London. The first iteration of the church consisted of the nave, with narrow aisles, the apsidal sanctuary, and the Lady Chapel on the north side. The construction is of Danish red brick with tiled courses.

The first iteration of the church was soon insufficient, and a number of incremental extensions followed. In 1914 the high altar, pulpit, ambulatory, north aisle confessionals, and St Patrick’s chapel were added. In c.1916 the fresco in the apse vault was finished, executed by the Belgian artist Hugh Chevins, who was living locally in exile, in gratitude to the people of Lewisham. By 1917, the debt of £3,000 to build the church and its extensions had been paid off and the church was consecrated on October 23rd, that same year. In 1917-18 the current Lady Chapel was constructed at the east end of the north aisle. The Chapel of St Joseph was added in 1921 – a gift of Thomas E Clifton, the father of Canon Clifton, the curate of St Saviour’s at the time.

Three years later the Sacred Heart chapel was added to the south side. In 1928-9 the last and largest extension was added to the church grounds. The neighbouring houses to the south (including the old presbytery) were pulled down and on their site a new presbytery was built, as well as another long block behind the presbytery, containing an outer south aisle with a social hall above and adjacent cloakrooms.

Construction included an enlarged aisle, an enlarged choir area in the main body of the church and the famous Campanile, topped by a statue of Christ the King, 12 foot high and weighing 3.5 tons. The statue looks out on the town, a monument to Catholic piety, a lodestone for parishioners called to church services, illuminated at night to proclaim the glory of the Christ and, at the time it was erected, a commemoration of the Centenary of Catholic Emancipation.

The parish priest, Fr Ward wrote at the time: “The early pioneers of 1893 builded [sic] better than they knew. Almighty God guided their work.” Once the original church building was completed, work soon began on building an associated school.

**[SLUG] St Saviour’s Catholic School – the first in the Diocese**

St Saviour’s was the first new Catholic school in the diocese and started life as an Elementary School under the 1902 Education Act, sometimes referred to as the Balfour Act. The Act was highly controversial, but it set the pattern of elementary education in England and Wales for four decades. It was brought to Parliament by Lord Arthur James Balfour, who became Prime Minister (1902-1905) the same year. His act was enthusiastically supported by the Church of England and especially by Catholics. However, it was vehemently opposed by many Nonconformists and the Liberal Party. The Act provided funds for denominational religious instruction in voluntary elementary schools, most of which were owned by the Church of England and Roman Catholics. It reduced the divide between voluntary schools, which were largely administered by the Church of England. It was extended in 1903 to cover London. The Act standardised and upgraded the educational systems of England and Wales and led to a rapid growth of secondary schools, with over 1,000 opening by 1914, including 349 for girls only.

For the first time, Church schools had financing from local ratepayers and had to meet uniform standards The building was erected quickly, and the opening ceremony took place on May 17th, 1910. Even so, the difficulties of opening a Catholic school, even in the early 20th century shouldn’t be underestimated. It required extensive permissions and paperwork from both local and central authorities.

Much of this detailed work was led by Mr RW Farrell, who later became the first Catholic elected to Lewisham Borough Council. Mr Foley also played an important role. He defrayed the entire cost of the reconstruction of the old chapel building and additions to the church school to comply with local authority requirements.

**[SLUG] The parish during the Second World War**

Significant disruption came with the Second World War. Fortunately, St Saviour’s remained relatively unscathed even as the High Street and nearby houses suffered extensive bomb damage. The church however did sustain some bomb damage. In 1978-1979 a comprehensive programme of restoration and maintenance was conducted by Tomei & Mackley architects. Apart from rewiring and the provision of new light fittings, the interior of the church was repaired and redecorated. Rising damp had been causing problems and disfigured some of the marble panels. Damp repellent was injected at ground floor level and the defective marble sections replaced. Corroded parts of stained-glass windows were repaired, and the apse mural cleaned and carefully restored. With the return of peace normal life resumed, but with great social changes.

While many of the Belgian refugees who lived in Lewisham returned to the European mainland after the War, many of the refugee Poles who were in exile through 1939 and 1945 decided to stay. Their numbers were augmented by more immigrants from mainland Europe, particularly Italians, many of which settled in nearby Catford, and more Irish families, anxious to build new lives in the post war reconstruction. Lewisham was becoming multi-cultural.

Caribbean immigration began in the 1950s, however much of it has been protestant. The 1960s brought in refugees and migrants from East Africa and the Indian sub-continent St Saviour’s was changed by it too. It’s familiar 1940’s tag of the church being ‘Fr Ward’s Irish House’ became redundant. Today, visiting and term priests have come from Nigeria, Goa, Uganda, Tanzania, Sri Lanka and most latterly Ethiopia, a reflection of the cosmopolitan make-up of St Saviour’s parish.

Lewisham enjoyed mixed fortunes in the late 20th century. Designated by the Greater London Council’s Greater London Development Plan as one of the top tier Major Strategic Centres, the town has regularly enjoyed its share of makeovers and investment. The area at the north end of the High Street was pedestrianised in 1994. It is now home to a vibrant daily street market and a local landmark, the clock tower, completed in 1900 to commemorate Queen Victoria’s 1897 Diamond Jubilee.

**[SLUG] A new century and a cosmopolitan parish**

Lewisham police station, which opened in 2004 to replace the station in Ladywell, is one of the largest in Europe. The Docklands Light Railway was extended to Lewisham in 1999 and plans are regularly discussed to extend London Underground services to Lewisham and Catford.

Meanwhile Molesworth Street has been widened to create a bypass around the shopping area as part of the “Lewisham 2000” project, including sculptures by John Maine. This saw the demolition of the 1932 art deco Lewisham Odeon which had also provided a live music venue hosting artists from Johnny Cash to the Rolling Stones.

Lewisham’s growing metropolitan complexion variously brought controversy. In 1977, the Battle of Lewisham saw 500 members of the National Front, who were attempting to march through the area, and their police escort, attacked by more than 4000 counter-demonstrators. In 2011, it was again marked by riots. The protests began in Tottenham Hale, in north London, following the killing of Mark Duggan, who was shot dead by police on August 4th. Subsidiary rioting continued in various London suburbs for a further two days. On August 6th riots began in Lewisham, damaging cars and property on Albion Way and Clarendon Rise, after which unrest spread rapidly into Deptford and Catford.

The 2010s and early 2020s saw the construction of many high-rise residential buildings around Loampit Vale and Molesworth Street, though the completion of four of the central buildings remain suspended as recent ground flooding has forced contractors to look at the foundations once more. The former roundabout by Lewisham station has been replaced with an “H” junction to release land for further private development, which continues to the present day.

Modern day Lewisham is a paragon of a multi-racial society that works. St Saviour’s parishioners come from some 80 countries and we are delighted that the Church has become a haven and hub of multi-culturalism, united by a shared belief in Christ and the Catholic Church.

In 2025 St Saviour’s was designated a special sanctuary during the Jubilee Year of Hope. The parish welcomes new visitors and pilgrims daily and has introduced new services and Masses to serve them.

**[SLUG] The Interior Design of St Saviour’s Church**

The style of St Saviour’s church is variously described as Italianate or Roman, executed in red Dutch brick with tiled courses. The roof coverings are predominately slate. The basic plan form is axial, with a five-bay nave with an apsidal east end. The nave is flanked by a north aisle with confessionals and chapels, an inner south aisle, and a larger outer south aisle with an apsidal chapel. The entrance front has a large open Tuscan pediment above a circular window and statues of St Peter and St Patrick, with the Sacred Heart above. Three crosses are executed in raised brickwork. The lean-to narthex has another open pediment supported by Ionic columns. Above the narthex gable is a Calvary of 1919, with a mosaic of the Madonna and Child in the tympanum. An inscription above the pediment, together with two wall tablets, form a memorial to the fallen of the First World War.

The Church’s campanile is 126 feet high and features a 12-foot-high statue of Christ the King at its apex and dominates the High Street. The lower campanile storeys are decorated with tall, blind brick arches, an open double-arched belfry stage and a stepped pedestal to the sculpture. The nave is barrel vaulted with clerestory windows and an arcade of Doric columns of Nailsworth stone. The arcade narrows at the east end, where it is continued by Corinthian pilasters below a frieze with inscription.

In the interior of the church, the high altar is of Carrara marble, with panels of carved swags and gold mosaic. The pulpit is of marble with a small bust of the Saviour. To the south of the sanctuary is a wooden Calvary scene. The narthex contains a former baptistery (now repository) with stained-glass panels of the Presentation and the Baptism of Christ, and a Lourdes shrine at the west end of the north aisle. The north aisle contains several confessionals, as well as small chapels dedicated to St Patrick and St Joseph (both with saints’ statues set in aedicules) and the Lady Chapel at the east end. The latter contains a Madonna and Child statue by La Statue Religieuse of Paris and a stained-glass window of Our Lady of Lourdes by Arthur Orr of 1935, and a window showing Our Lady and St Anne of 1957.

The side of the Lady Chapel has been glazed with sliding panels, in order to provide a separate prayer space. The outer north aisle is a broad space, with a low coffered ceiling and square Doric pilasters, against which further sculptures of saints are placed. It has four stained glass panels of English martyrs, executed between 1935 and 1937, again by Arthur Orr.

At the west end is a carved pietà. To its east is the Sacred Heart chapel, an apsidal space framed by two Ionic columns of onyx marble presented by Cardinal Bourne and reputedly from Westminster Cathedral. The chapel’s altar is lit by a concealed skylight in the apse. Throughout the interior, wall surfaces are sumptuously decorated with coloured marble facings, redolent of Westminster Cathedral. The opus sectile Stations of the Cross are set into the outer walls of the interior. They are reminiscent of the work of Eric Gill (who designed the Stations for Westminster Cathedral between 1914 and 1918) and his pupil Joseph Cribb.