

The Church of St. John the Baptist Little Maplestead

The Church of St. John the Baptist in Little Maplestead is one of only four round churches still in use in England. It was built on a site given to the Order of the Knights of St John of Jerusalem, known as the Knights Hospitaller, and is still associated with the Order today.

This Order was originally established in 1092 in Jerusalem with the building of a hospice to accommodate pilgrims visiting holy places and was first introduced in England in around 1144. Both the Knights Hospitaller and the Knights Templar built round churches, the design being based on the fourth century rotunda of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre at Jerusalem, which was built by the Emperor Constantine. Constantine's church was built on what is regarded as the site of Jesus's tomb and the round shape of the church is thought to celebrate the resurrection. The other round churches still in use are the Temple Church in London, belonging to the Knights Templar, and the Churches of the Holy Sepulchre in Cambridge and in Northampton, but neither of these are connected to the Knights Templar or Hospitaller.

It is generally believed that there was a church near to the site of the current church in late Saxon times as a priest is mentioned in the Domesday Book but there is no documentary or archaeological evidence to support this. The manor and church of Little Maplestead were given to the Knights Hospitaller in 1185 and it must have been around this time that the Hospital was founded. Soon thereafter the Knights must have built a church for their own use which may or may not have been of circular plan. At the same time domestic buildings would have been erected for the use of the Knights Hospitaller community, including a chapter-house, refectory and dormitories. The preceptory was close by on the site of what is now Maplestead Hall, which can be seen on the other side of the road from the present church.

Although no trace of the Knight's Hospitaller's church or domestic buildings remains today, it is however supposed with reasonable certainty that the present church stands on the site of the church built by the Knights Hospitaller in around 1186. The present church was probably built around 1335 and is the latest of the four round churches still in use in England. It is therefore of great importance historically. There is debate about why the circular plan of the church would have been adopted as late as the 14th Century as this style had gone "out of fashion" by the end of the 12th century. One theory is that the circular aisle and walls of the chancel probably date from the late 12th century and the hexagonal arcade within the round dates from a later period. However there is no sign of work earlier than the 14th century so it may be that the circular form was simply influenced by an earlier round church on the site.

The church was dramatically restored between 1851 - 1857 when most of the old details were renewed or replaced. It is possible to read what was done in the old minute book of the Restoration Committee which is still in existence. The external walls were completely refaced and the windows and buttresses were renewed. A new roof was added to the chancel and circular aisle, the hexagonal wooden belfry was rebuilt and the old western porch was replaced with a smaller one. The interior stonework was scraped and much new stone added. The present font was also discovered during the restoration work. It is the most ancient feature in the church and probably dates from 1080. The bowl was originally square but the corners were later cut off, probably during the 16th century. The font was probably intended for total immersion baptism as was the custom in early Norman times. The western face of the font bears a carving of St Andrew's cross. As St Andrew was possibly the first bishop of Byzantium this may account for the presence of his symbol.

The Round Church still retains close links with the Order of the Knights of St John of Jerusalem today. Every year members of the Order can be seen in procession, clad in traditional full robes, on the first Sunday in June. The Order was originally founded to give medical care to sick and injured crusading knights and became today's St John Ambulance service which is the UK's leading first aid provider and training organisation. The Maltese cross of the Knights Hospitaller still forms part of the service's livery and also features on the traditional robes of the Order.

Courtesy of The Friends of the Round church at www.roundchurch.co.uk.