

Knebworth, in the south of the district, is a community with a complicated history. The medieval community worshipped in the twelfth-century Church of St Mary and St Thomas of Canterbury, now in Knebworth Park. It remains the official parish church. The present park dates from about 1641, when Sir William Lytton created ornamental gardens around Knebworth House. The main medieval park lay between what we now call Old Knebworth (formerly Knebworth Green) and Gipsy Lane, around Park Lane. Another, the Little Park, lay between Old Knebworth and Knebworth House.

The name Knebworth Green, recorded since the time of King Edward VI (1547-1553), for what we now know as Old Knebworth is a sign that this was not the main settlement. The community recorded since the time of Domesday Book perhaps lay around St Mary and St Thomas's church, as archaeologists saw slight earthworks here in 1989.



The railway arrived in 1850 and in 1884, the Lyttons of Knebworth House persuaded the railway company to build a new station 1.8 km (about 1¼ miles) east of Knebworth Green, just past Deard's End. A new community was beginning to grow around it by the 1890s, in what had been the extreme southeastern corner of the parish. Known at first as Knebworth Station, it had simply become Knebworth by the 1930s. The boundary changed to incorporate Swangleys Farm and Roundwood Cottages, previously in Datchworth, into the parish.

The Church of England opened a Mission Room on Gun Lane in 1880, where the Royal British Legion Club now stands. As the community grew at Knebworth Station, it was not enough to meet the needs of the new village, so a new church was commissioned, to be designed by the famous architect, Sir Edwin Lutyens (1869-1944).

Lutyens had already worked in Knebworth, designing the Arts and Crafts style Homewood for his brother-in-law Victor, Lord Lytton in 1901, a new garden at Knebworth House and cottages in Knebworth Garden Village, an intended planned settlement around Knebworth Station, in 1904. Work began on the Garden Village in 1912 but it was interrupted by the First World War and foundered for good in the 1920s. In the meantime, Knebworth Station continued to grow, with an increasing need for a Church of England church there.

Lutyens designed what he originally called Christchurch in 1911, with a site in the intended Garden Village donated by Lord Lytton. A local builder, William Darby, won the contract for building it, and work started in April 1914. The outbreak of war slowed its construction, as it became harder to get hold of building materials and many labourers left to become soldiers. As a result, the plans had to be scaled back, with the nave reduced in length and the west end abruptly finished off with a plain brick wall. Edgar Jacob, Bishop of St Albans, consecrated the church on 12 November 1915. He chose the dedication to St Martin of Tours, as the saint's day falls on 11 November.

William Darby followed Lutyens's very specific instructions about the quality of materials he

wanted for the church. The bricks and pantiles for the roof came from his own brickworks on Spinney Lane at Rabelyheath and he used Portland Stone for the columns, as Lutyens specified. The shortage of materials meant that the portico with steps intended for the west end – the entrance – was left until 1963. Sir Albert Richardson designed an extension to the nave (but without portico and steps), which includes the present cupola containing the 3½ tonne bell. Work on his alteration was finished in 1964, creating the church that can be seen today.

Sir Nikolaus Pevsner described St Martin's Church as 'one of Lutyens's most remarkable churches'. Its location on a slight rise gives it an imposing presence, which is enhanced by the wide overhanging eaves. Inside, Lutyens's attention to detail includes the organ with its pipes arranged in double spirals and a shallow apse at the east end, containing the altar. Archaeologists are interested not just in the most ancient of remains, glittering 'treasures' or the pyramids of long-dead pharaohs. The remains of the recent past, even when they stand as complete buildings, are just as valid a subject for study. Often they can tell us so much more as they come with a richer background of documentary evidence, social context and living memory. St Martin's Church is one of these special places.

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