

St. Paul's Church, Kandy: A Living Monument in the Heart of Kandy

Posted on

There is history written into every corner of St. Paul's Church in Kandy, where Neo-Gothic grandeur meets Victorian refinement to create the impression of a timeless castle, its watchtower-like clock faithfully keeping time above weathered amber walls softened by age and memory.

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Rising above the historic city of Kandy, St. Paul's Church stands as a magnificent

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example of Gothic Revival architecture. Its stately bell tower bears witness to generations of history, faith, and community.

One evening in the 1990s, stepping into St. Paul's Church in Kandy, our eyes were drawn to a magnificent stained-glass window that unfolded the story of Christ's life in a radiant tapestry of color— depicting the Nativity, the Crucifixion, the angel at the tomb, and the Ascension, with a sense of majesty and transcendence. This exquisite masterpiece, gifted in memory of tea planter Lawrence St. George Carey of Le Vallon Estate, Pupuressa, by his widow, has illuminated the church since 1874.

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Once shattered, this magnificent stained glass window has been restored to its former glory.

When we returned in 2026, the stained-glass masterpiece carried a story far more poignant than the one we remembered. For over a century, it had been the crowning glory of St. Paul's Church, an enduring symbol of its identity, until January 25, 1998, when a nearby explosion—on the eve of Sri Lanka's fiftieth year of independence—shattered it into 33,000 fragments. Yet today, above the high altar, its radiant beauty betrays no trace of that devastation. In a remarkable act of resurrection, a passerby gathered the shattered pieces into a gunny bag and, from those countless fragments, began the painstaking task of restoring the window, allowing this treasured work of sacred art to rise again from the ashes.

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Depicting Christ as the Good Shepherd, this stained glass window was gifted to St. Paul's Church in 1908 by the Ceylon Mounted Infantry in memory of George Owen. It is situated in the Chapel of the Good Shepherd.

Though six fragments were lost and later replaced with painted clear glass, unlike the original naturally colored pieces, traditionally joined with lead, the window's splendor and craftsmanship remain undiminished. Time has faded the color of these replacements, yet they stand as quiet witnesses to the determination of those who painstakingly restored the shattered masterpiece—made possible by the foresight of a stranger who gathered its fragments in 1998. Had those pieces been swept

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away as rubble, this story may have ended differently. Instead, they remind us that beauty can emerge from brokenness, and that history is shaped not only by grand events, but also by small acts of care that preserve it for generations to come.



This memorial tablet commemorates two soldiers of the Ceylon Rifle Regiment who lost their lives during the nineteenth-century conflict between the British and Russian Empires.

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The crucified Christ, set against a solemn black cross at St. Paul's Church, Kandy.

For all its beauty and resilience, St. Paul's Church is also a story shaped by history.

For all its beauty and resilience, St. Paul's Church is also a story shaped by history. Standing in the shadow of the Temple of the Tooth by deliberate choice, its origins can be traced to the visit of Bishop Reginald Heber of Calcutta in 1825. Disturbed by a confirmation service held in the Royal Audience Hall rather than a dedicated

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church, Heber voiced his dissatisfaction to Governor Edward Barnes. His concerns echoed those of the Buddhist clergy and Kandyan aristocracy, who were equally uneasy about the use of one of their sacred spaces. Seizing the moment, the Legislative Council passed the Church Ordinance, allocating 1,500 Sterling Pounds for the construction of a church in Kandy. From this decision, St. Paul's Church was born, consecrated by Bishop James Chapman of Colombo on January 25, 1853. However, the church often cites 1843 as the year of its establishment. According to Rev. Rasika, this is because a congregation was already worshipping at the site by that time, suggesting that a suitable place of worship had been established to accommodate the growing community.

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The memorial plaques form a silent gallery of remembrance.

Built in the form of a cross, St. Paul's Church stretches 120 feet in length and 80 feet in width, its vast interior remarkably free of pillars beneath an elegant arch-braced roof. Constructed in a herringbone style, it showcases the warmth of teak in its beams, ceiling, pews, and carvings, while satinwood graces parts of the High Altar. The sanctuary is distinguished by an exquisitely carved Burma teak chancel screen, installed in 1919, adorned with graceful arches and a grapevine motif. Beneath it lie striking floor tiles in shades of ochre, terracotta, green, and black,

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while throughout the church, indigenous motifs such as liyaval, which is a flowing floral and vine decoration and lotus designs are woven into the carvings and stained glass, creating a subtle exchange between local artistry and sacred tradition.



Among the church's most fascinating features are its memorials and donated furnishings, each with a story to tell.

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A finely crafted brass eagle lectern, symbolizing the spread of the Gospel, is among the church's treasured furnishings.

Since its establishment in the nineteenth century, St. Paul's has remained under the stewardship of the Anglican Church and today serves a congregation of around 500 worshippers under the guidance of Rev. Rasika Abeysinghe. As one of Kandy's oldest Anglican churches, it was built on land provided through a Crown grant. It holds great archaeological and historical significance, contributing to its status within the World Heritage precinct and placing it under the care of the Central

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Cultural Fund. Yet much of its rich and layered history remains little known. Among those captivated by its story is parishioner Stephen Edwin, whose deep fascination with the church has inspired years of exploring its treasures and advocating for its preservation.



To the left of the entrance is an archive of restored photographs and two original roof tiles, preserving the church's rich heritage.

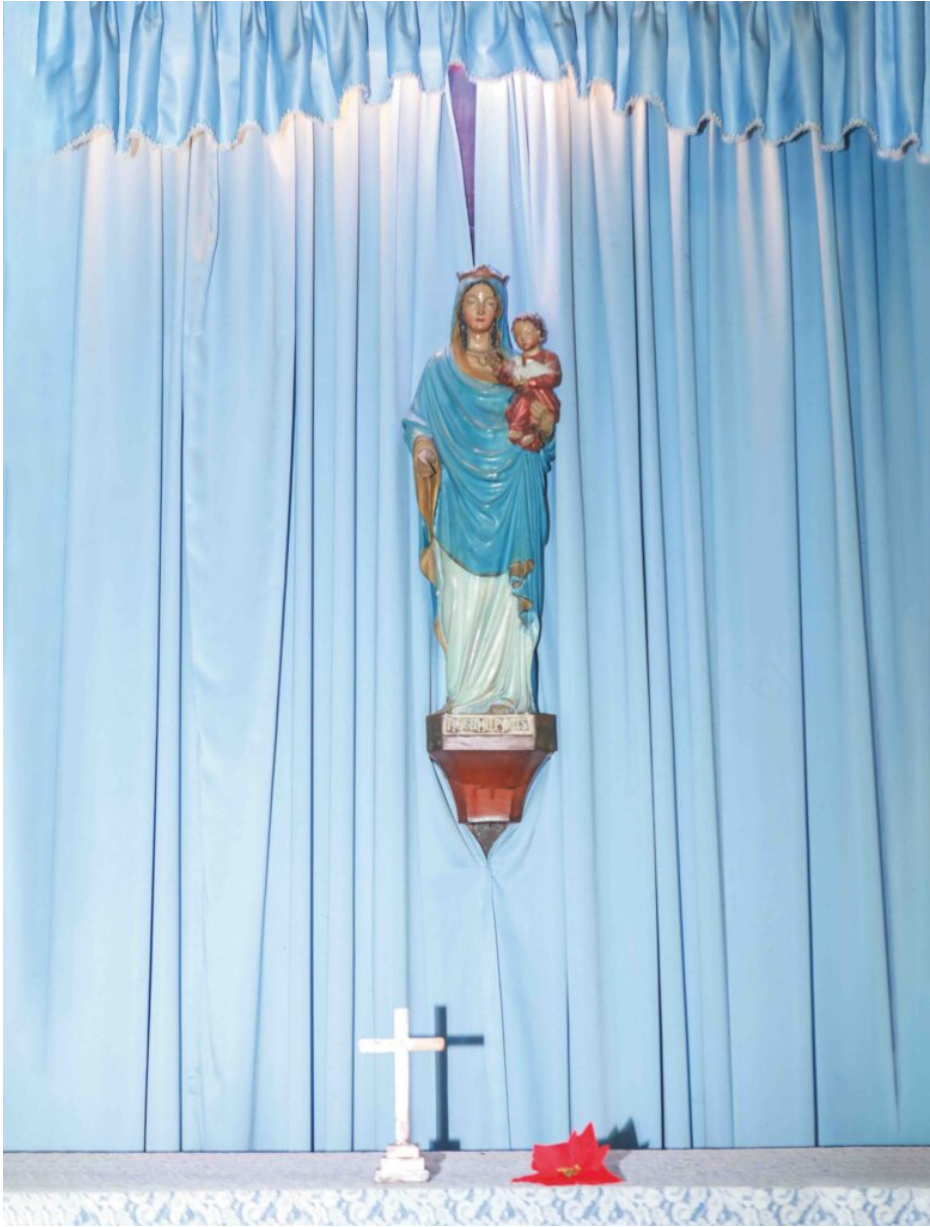


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A remarkable example of ecclesiastical craftsmanship, the baptismal font is believed to have been carved from a single slab of granite.

As you continue along the aisle towards the altar, another remarkable chapter of St. Paul's history lies beneath your feet. The middle and side aisles are still covered with nearly 175-year-old cowhide flooring—an unusual feature that may be unique in Sri Lanka. Soft and silent underfoot, it absorbs footsteps' sound, preserving an atmosphere of reverence and stillness. According to Stephen, its exceptional durability is a testament to the quality of its original tanning, requiring little more than occasional waxing to endure through generations.

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A statue of Mary carrying the Christ child in the Children's Chapel.

That same sense of craftsmanship and purpose extends throughout the church. Three side chapels—the Lady Chapel, the Children's Chapel, and the Chapel of the Good Shepherd—offer intimate spaces for prayer, separated by exquisitely carved wooden screens adorned with indigenous liyawela motifs. The Children's Chapel is enriched by a series of paintings by Rev. David Ince, depicting key moments in the life of Christ, while a baptismal font carved from a single block of granite stands at

the rear of the church. Marble and brass memorial tablets line the walls, preserving the memory of those who served in Ceylon, and above the west entrance, a pipe organ continues to fill the sanctuary with music each Sunday, sustaining a tradition that has long faded from many churches across the island. Above the choir loft, the church attic conceals a largely untapped archive of history. Old trunks hold more than a century of records and artifacts, including a Sunday School book once used by a Sri Lankan bishop in his childhood. Filled with documents, timber pieces, and ceramic objects, the attic remains a treasure trove awaiting the time and attention needed to uncover the stories it preserves. Beyond its visible beauty, St. Paul's conceals marvels that few worshippers ever see. Above the dark timber ceiling rises a vast hidden space beneath the hammerbeam roof, where immense Indonesian teak trunks—joined with timber pegs rather than metal nails—have supported the structure for over a century without succumbing to insect attack. Stephen, who ventured into this cavernous roof space as a boy, recalls a forest of colossal beams disappearing into the gabled roof's heights, a feat of craftsmanship hidden from view. At the opposite end of the church, the imposing clock tower continues to mark the hours through its original manually wound mechanism.

Standing beside the sacred Temple of the Tooth for more than a century and a half, the church has flourished through mutual respect and peaceful coexistence.

Housed within a room-sized assembly of gears and alloys, the century-old machine remains one of the church's most remarkable treasures. Though its chimes fell silent decades ago after the loss of a single gear wheel, Stephen hopes one day to restore its voice and return its melody to the city.

Preserving such a monument demands extraordinary dedication. The church's distinctive amber herringbone bricks, made from a carefully balanced blend of local and imported clays, require painstaking conservation to maintain their original character. Even minor repairs involve extensive research, specialist expertise, and materials that are often no longer available locally. As a protected heritage monument under the care of the Central Cultural Fund, every intervention must honor the methods and materials of its builders, ensuring that its history endures for future generations.

Yet, perhaps the most enduring story of St. Paul's is not found in its timber, glass, or

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stone, but in its setting. Standing beside the sacred Temple of the Tooth for more than a century and a half, the church has flourished through mutual respect and peaceful coexistence. Stephen reflects with gratitude that Christians have long been able to worship freely in one of Buddhism's most revered precincts, a privilege made possible by the goodwill and tolerance of the surrounding community. In that shared spirit of faith, respect, and understanding lies the true legacy of St. Paul's Church in Kandy.

St Paul's Church

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