

History of St Andrew's – Alexandra Park Library, 3pm Saturday 25th May

It's lovely to be asked to come and speak to you today about the history of St Andrew's, your parish church.

St Andrew's is only 125 years old but we know don't we just how drastically society and the world about us has changed since its foundation stone was laid.

I want, if I may this afternoon, to speak to you today about three things **1)** its founding, plotting out its early history and establishment, **2)** to comment upon perhaps the most significant event in the building's history, that is the damage it suffered by enemy bombing in 1944, and then **3)** to talk a little about our present, and the enduring significance of your parish church in spite of the different times we live in. You will have your own memories and associations with St Andrew's in more recent history and so I intend to focus less in detail upon its history since the consecration of the restored church building in 1957.

So to its foundation. In 1899, out of what was referred to as 'Clerkenwell Detached', a small portion of the Parish of St James, situated in Muswell Hill, an application was made to the then Bishop of Islington for more ecclesiastical provision for the one thousand inhabitants. A mission district was formed and the then curate of St Mark's, Noel Park in Wood Green - The Rev Martin Blakelock was made Mission Priest (not Vicar). Blakelock made it a rule to visit and welcome each new resident and these visits came daily.

Worship began in a little Swiss chalet, called the Norwegian House, situated at what is now the junction of Alexandra Park Road and The Avenue. We have a drawing and one photo of this building in St Andrew's. It had been brought over in sections from Norway and fitted up in the Norwegian style as a drinking bar. It had then served as a chapel, having been taken over by the Wesleyans, before being made available for the new St Andrew's. The opening service was held on 20th October 1899, led by the Bishop of Islington and supported by the choir of St Mark's, Noel Park. On the following Sunday, fifteen communicants were present for Holy Communion. There are a couple of little details that make me smile here...

Just to jump ahead slightly, some of you may be aware that for a little while, in more recent history, St Andrew's hasn't been in the best state of health. The last few have seen a concerted effort to revitalise the life of St Andrew's, to sort out its finances, grow the congregation and most importantly serve this community. Before coming here, I too served as a curate in Wood Green not at St Mark's like Revd Blakelock but its neighbouring St Michael's, and on my first Sunday were just 16 communicants! One more than this service detailed from October 1899! We've almost come full circle! We'll return to these more recent times...

Worship at the little Norwegian chalet was not free from difficulties. The Church was approached by a road which in wet weather, became a quagmire and the path to the Church was badly lit. One evening at choir practice, it was discovered the church had been burgled, and the choir went out to hunt for the intruders without success. A paten and chalice were stolen, and on the following Sunday a butter dish from the Vicarage was used as a paten and a cup won by the Vicar as a boy in a cycle race for the chalice. But the congregation was growing and there was talk of a larger church to accommodate the growth.

On the 5th July 1900, it was decided that a temporary building should be erected on the site which had been purchased for a permanent church by the Bishop of London's fund. An iron structure was erected at a cost of £800 and seating 250.

On the 15th November 1900, the last service was held in Norwegian House. After evensong, the altar was carried up to the new church by members of the congregation, with the new temporary church dedicated the following St Andrew's Day (30th Nov).

In March 1901 the mission district, as it had been, was formed into a separate ecclesiastical parish by Order in Council – the Parish of Alexandra Park, and Revd Blakelock became the first Vicar. The appointment was a Crown appointment and among the first of those made by King Edward after his accession.

On the 21st November 1901, J.S Alder was selected as the architect for the permanent church and a plan prepared by him for a church with capacity of 800 at a cost of £8000 was approved. By April 1902, there were 238 communicants on Easter Day and 300 a year later (remember only 250 seats!).

In September that year, the Building Committee accepted the tender of Messrs Thompson and Co of Peterborough for the building of the permanent church, and on the 11th October at 3:30pm, the ceremony of the 'turning of the first sod' took place. The spade was handed to C.C Smith, one of the first members of the congregation. The marked foundation stone laid here can still be seen today in the alleyway between the hall and the church.

On the 13th January 1903, the Bishop of Islington laid the foundation stone and on the 31st October 1903, after just ten months, the consecration of the building by Bishop of London took place. The motto he suggested for the church in his sermon was - *'in your patience possess ye your souls'* (Luke 21:19). He spoke of the labour and self-sacrifice that had gone into the church's building. He commented on the worries of city men and how difficult it was for them to possess their souls in patience. He said he desired that St Andrew's should be a house of patience, where people might come and feel at peace. The roof was constructed of red Brosley tiles with a red brick exterior with stone bands and dressings and stone windows. Internally the nave, arcade and columns were in Corse Hill redstone and the nave arches constructed in specially made molder bricks from Sible Hedingham in Essex. The floor was wood blocks, the walks mosaics, and the roofs open pitch pine. The original font was made of Chilmark stone. The chancel was fitted with oak seats for the clergy and choir and was raised five steps above the nave. A very pretty side chapel to the right of chancel catered for daily services.

The consecration service had begun with two trumpeters leading a circuit of the Church by the choir singing *'Hail thee, Festival Day'*. Following three knocks at the main west door by the Bishop, there was sung *'Lift up your Hearts O ye Gates, and be ye lift up ye Everlasting Doors and the King of Glory shall come in'* from psalm 24. The doors were opened, the keys handed over, and a collection was taken during the singing of *'Now thank we all our God'* yielding £59. Several services were held the following day on the Feast of All Saints when the Vicar said he *'hoped that the Church would not be attended by the 'respectable classes' only'* and begged all to give a warm welcome to their poorer neighbours.

By 1904 the population of the parish had reached 4,400. By 1926 it stood at 6000. Today it stands at approximately 12,000.

The next twenty years, culminating in the opening of the New Hall at a cost of £6,517, were a story of consistent development and progress, with the number of communicants growing until they numbered 710 on Easter Day in 1923. The church was beautified and embellished with stained glass windows dedicated, new fonts blessed.

It's very striking if you look around the church now, just how many items you can find dedicated in loving memory of former parishioners, church officers, the war dead, former clergy, children etc. It all adds to the sense of a living, breathing building, a worshipping family, the communion of saints, living and departed. A tragedy of the later bombing was that many such artefacts were destroyed, among them of course the original dedicated stained glass windows.

March 1st 1938 saw the death of St Andrew's first and longest serving Vicar, Revd Blakelock. Clearly he was much loved for his service and dedication to the parish and his flock. The memorial made for him at the high altar was destroyed in the bombing, although the bronze tablet was saved. We retain a couple of his published works with short commentaries on verses of scripture for each week of the year. The then Bishop Perrin of Willesden said of Blakelock *'such clergy are the salt of the Church of England'*.

During the Second World War, the then Vicar Harry Edwards also served as Air Raid Warden, and was frequently on duty throughout the night. On one occasion when an unexploded bomb fell in Grove Avenue at least one family, turned out of their home, spent the night in the Vicarage. Another parishioner recalls that after a terrifying night when three bombs dropped very near to their home, within a few minutes Revd Edwards was rushing in, in his slippers caked in mud and grass, to ask if everyone was ok before moving on to comfort and visit more of his people.

After the bombing of St James' Church, anxiety increased re vulnerability of St Andrew's given its pitch pine roof, and in June 1941 a hose was purchased for use in emergency.

On 19th February 1944 the church was struck with fire bombs from an enemy aeroplane. After the bombs fell, the Vicar, Verger and many helpers hastily rescued from the Church as many valuables as they could. The fire made terrific headway in spite of the fact that the said hose was in action within minutes. The church Safe, communion vessels, church registers, altar cross, processional cross, cassocks and frontals were all saved. Only the walls and the belfry survived of the old church. Arrangements had been made with the members of the congregation to fight the fires but in this case they were not able to get to the flames. Many members of the community had come to save the church despite all the other bombs dropped that night. One Marian Hember was the fire officer for Coniston Road and went knocking on doors for buckets the night of the bombing.

One parishioner wrote, *'We who loved St Andrew's Church suffered and we can imagine the agony through which the Vicar lived. But not for one instant did he falter. He and Mr Lambert, the Verger, whose work at this time should never be forgotten, made during the*

day some order in the chaos of the Parish Hall, and at 8am on Sunday morning the 20th February, Holy Communion was celebrated, the front of the stage being used as an altar. Those present at that service will never forget it'.

Services did not cease even for one Sunday. The vicar told the congregation that the church building had been destroyed but the spirit of the church was indestructible for that was in the people, not the building. The bombs had dropped on the roof and fell into a tunnel between the roof and their wood rafters.

An appeal was launched with the aim of raising £2,500 in five years, and by July of 1944, £1281 had been raised, and a further £600 promised. All sorts of practical items, hymn books, altar rails, silverware loaned or given to the church by other surrounding churches. A wedding had been due to take place at St Andrew's that Saturday. This was solemnised at another church in the same road and the fees were generously given to the church's restoration fund.

In 1946, Revd Edwards left the parish to become Vicar of St Michael's Highgate not far away. On leaving the parish he wrote the following in the parish magazine – *'None stands in great need of charity than the Vicar of a parish. He cannot hide his defects nor mask his shortcomings. His personality enters so much into his work, and there is no escape in mere professionalism. I, at least, am haunted by a sense of failure. A grisly company of good intentions, of might-have-beens, of what I did and what I left undone, attends me. But repining is useless; repentance is the only cure, that we may profit from our mistakes. The parson's ability is as God has provided'.*

By 1957 the Church had been rebuilt with many of the original features retained and visible today.

The consecration of the new church took place on 13th November at 8pm that year. The parish magazine reported that *'the service was most impressive and all present must have sensed the excitement as the grand procession of Choir, visiting Clergy, our Vicar and Servers finishing with the Lord Bishop of London in all his splendour, and his Chaplain and preceded by our Verger, walked slowly and with dignity down the central aisle. It was the moment for which we have been waiting (and sometimes rather impatiently) for thirteen years, so can there be any wonder that the congregation were excited'.*

Further clergy who have served since those aforementioned, were the Revd Hugh Cartwright from 1946-1973, Revd Frank Carter from 1974 to 1988 and Revd Anthony Pybus from 1993 to 2021.

Other aspects of note in St Andrew's History are its Dramatic Society, the St Andrew's Orchestra, the Mother's Union, its Youth Club, the Parish Magazine, the Young Wives Club. So much of local community activity was rooted in the role of the Parish Church, and the Parish Magazines remain a precious archive for anyone who wishes to learn more about local history here.

In 1946, the magazine was being sent to around 550 households in the parish. Of note also within them are the sheer number of advertisements for local businesses and services. Also of note in much more recent history is the amalgamation of St Saviour's Church within the Parish of Alexandra Park in 1993 (after St Saviour's had to be taken down – the war memorial remains at St Saviour's Court) and, more recently still, the redevelopment of the St Andrew's Centre with the assistance of national lottery funding. The Centre was newly opened in 2007 following award of planning permission in 2001 on appeal in the time of Revd Anthony Pybus.

Today the Centre continues to cater for a wide range of activities; pilates, thai chi, addiction support groups, children's ballet, the church's new baby and toddler group every Wednesday, children's parties and much more. It continues to be used for parish social events also.

Whilst today people are arguably conscious of multiple, indeed multi-placed, identities in a way in which they perhaps weren't in the past, the parish church can remain a means of signposting local community life and an expression of locality evoking the sacred at the heart of a place. The very essence of the parish church is that it is for that place and speaks of a relation between Church and society.

Of course this is not to say that every parish is articulating this well, but that is not the point – it has made a start by virtue of being there. With increasing privatisation or commercialisation of public space, this is something to be embraced about a parish church which is, I think, pre-eminently an inclusive place, an open sanctuary and a resource for all within the parish. It has a commitment to people in a place.

We live in a world that has deified reach – number of followers, number of likes, going global and viral etc perhaps at the expense of place. The displacement effect of technology can seem to render one's locality irrelevant. The parish church building stands for the dependability of God, and for God's presence as something that is located, permanent and enduring and at the heart of our daily lives.

And so in the last few years since I became parish priest here, we have seen a concerted effort to revitalise the life of St Andrew's Church initially with the support of our neighbouring parish of St Michael's, Wood Green. Mid-week worship was re-established in late 2021 on Thursday mornings and we have seen the average Sunday congregation grow year on year from 24 in 2021 to 59 today. Attendance at Christmas has grown from 270 to 700+ in this time and attendance during Holy Week and Easter has doubled in this time. The parish's electoral roll has more than doubled. A new church website and very active social media channels have brought us into the 21st century! Regular cake sales and a new monthly lunchtime concert programme have brought new people into the life of the church. The Church's baby and toddler group serves around 25-30 families each week and last year the church collected 214 bags of food to support the work of both the Muswell Hill Soup Kitchen and the Foodbank at Bounds Green.

Society has changed enormously in the time since St Andrew's foundation. But we have seen in the last few years that there remains a great deal of support for the idea of a parish

church that is regularly open, inclusive, outward looking, servant hearted and rooted in its regular rhythm of worship. Our resources remain small but the growth over the last few years has been a great encouragement!

You can see and read much more about the history of St Andrew's on our display in church. Please get in touch if you would like to view more of our historical archive.