

St Martin's Parish History

Establishing the Parish

The expansion of Bedford in the latter part of the 19th Century was quite rapid, a speed matched by the development of St Martin's as a distinct parish. The Rector of St Peter's, the Revd W Hart-Smith, who took the lead in the development of the Church's work in this area. His church was being extended at the time but he saw the need for another church to serve the new development which fell in the parishes of St Peter's and Holy Trinity. The Bishop of Ely and the congregation of St Peter's supported the idea, the latter deciding just before Christmas 1885 to raise funds for the expansion of their own church and for the building of a new church at the same time. In May 1886 a bazaar raised £350 towards the new church fund and in March 1887 the Revd A Hawkins-Jones began work on the proposed new district. An iron building, capable of holding 200 people, was quickly erected to form a temporary church. This opened on 27th May 1887. By the following month it was obvious that a more permanent building was required and the site on Clapham Road was identified. Agreement to buy it for £450 was reached in August of that year and it was duly conveyed to the Ecclesiastical Commissioners as the site of the church in April 1888.

By December 1887 the funds had reached over £1,000, these being augmented the following year by more fund-raising efforts and the donations of *inter alia* the Duke of Bedford, Lord Cowper and Mr Whitbread. With the money in hand J Alfred Chatwin designed the new building. Most of his work is in the West Midlands, particularly in Birmingham where he was based. St Martin's is a rare example of him working in another part of the country. St Martin in the Bullring is among the many buildings there with which he is associated. He was responsible for the demolition and rebuilding of that church 15 years before designing our church. In the 19th Century Birmingham was growing rapidly, thanks to the burgeoning metal-work industry and the prosperity it brought. The civic pride that resulted brought Chatwin a number of commissions in the city and the surrounding area. He had been articled to Barry and, under him, worked with Pugin on the Victoria Tower of the Houses of Parliament. Chatwin emulated Pugin in being concerned with designing every detail of the church, giving it an essential integrity it retains today.

The work was carried out by Samuel Foster of Kempston and the cost, including seating for 700 people, heating and lighting was £4,549. Little over a year after the foundation stone was laid on 10th October 1888 the new church was ready to be dedicated by Bishop Alwyn Compton of Ely on St Luke's Day, 18th October, 1889. Later that day there was another hint of the Birmingham connection since the preacher at Evensong was Canon Wilkinson, the Rector of Birmingham. A few years passed before the parish of Bedford, St Martin was officially established by Order in Council on 4th December 1896. The Reverend Alfred Hawkins-Jones, who had overseen the work from the beginning and been Curate-in-Charge since 1888, now became the Vicar. Unusually the

church and the land on which it stands did not become part of the parson's freehold of St Martin's but was vested in the Vicar of Holy Trinity until 1962.

Sources differ on the dating of the Sunday School, later the Church Hall. Marriott's history of Bedford churches indicates it opened in January 1897 while Kelly's Directory suggests it was built slightly earlier, in 1894. What they agree on is that it soon needed to be enlarged, being reopened at twice its original size in January 1898. A little over twelve years had passed since the original decision to hold a bazaar to raise the funds for a church in this part of Bedford. The church had been completed, the parish officially established and a Sunday School built and enlarged. Next door the Elementary School had a capacity of 750 and an average attendance of about 640. There can be no doubt that this was a very active part of Bedford.

Consolidation and Growth

Although Mr Hawkins-Jones had an assistant priest the demands of the parish, the speed of its growth and the difficulties he faced took their toll. Worn out by what he achieved, but leaving the buildings as his lasting memorial, he died on 26th February 1900 - less than 13 years after the work was started. It is fitting that the east window depicting Christ reigning in glory was erected in his memory, being dedicated on 22nd May 1902. The Reverend Arthur Haig was instituted as the second Vicar on 14th July 1900. At that time musical accompaniment was being provided by a harmonium, hardly fitting (or probably loud enough) for a church like St Martin's. Mr Haig attended to this deficiency and an organ was erected in what is now the Lady Chapel in time to accompany the Christmas Day service of that same year.

More building was also put in hand with the addition of new vestries beyond the North-east corner of the church. This meant that the organ could be moved across the church to its present position, where the vestry had been, and a Lady Chapel created in the space it vacated. Equipping the new chapel was undertaken by the congregation who subscribed for the cost of the east window while individuals supplied the furnishings and the side window. While the church continued to be beautified and extended not all of the building work, or the fund-raising, could be to that end. By the time Mr Haig announced that, after seven years in Bedford, he was exchanging parishes with the Vicar of Wroxton, Banbury the £50 debt due for the building of the schoolroom ten years before had been paid. A less welcome expense had been the need to underpin that building twice, the cost of this essential work being over £100

The exchange of livings that brought the Reverend Jocelyn H Speck to St Martin's on 4th October 1907 saw a continuation of the development of the parish and of the church. One enduring reminder of that time is the erection of the oak altar and reredos, a thank-offering from two members of the congregation, the next year. 1908 also brought another development welcomed by some within the choir and congregation - an electric motor for blowing the organ. 1909 saw the introduction of the Free-Will Offering

Scheme, an effort to produce a more regular and assured income for the church. This was followed the next year by a fortnight-long Church Army Mission in the parish. The Vicar found it so helpful and fruitful that he appealed for the money to finance a permanent mission in the parish. A thank-offering of £50 started the fund and within a week enough had been raised to guarantee the first year's work. Captain Martin arrived that September to begin his work in the parish.

1910 saw a continuation of the beautifying of the church with the windows either side of the east window being erected, thanks to the generosity of two members of the congregation. Now with a full set of stained glass windows illuminating it the sanctuary was the setting for the first Sung Eucharist to be celebrated in St Martin's on 10th September 1910. That same altar, illuminated by the same windows, has been the setting for similar celebrations each week since then. Mr Speck's plain and persuasive teaching helped many to a deeper understanding of the Christian faith, a number also receiving personal counsel in sacramental Confession. As a result of his teaching and spiritual guidance St Martin's had what can be seen as something of a golden era. At one time there were three assistant priests and the number of Easter Communicants rose to nearly 800.

More difficult times

This period of continued growth and development was brought to a premature end when Mr Speck, under pressure from the Bishop, moved to the parish of St Paul's, Bedford. Inevitably when a popular and effective priest moves such a short distance a number of the congregation followed him to his new parish. The Reverend Frederick H A Williams certainly found he had a hard act to follow when he arrived on 7th May 1913. He faced further difficulties with the outbreak of the First World War the next year as troops poured into Bedford. Many families provided billets for the soldiers while the church was used for parade services and the hall was given over to the men for recreational purposes. As in other parts of the country many of the men of the parish answered the call to arms, a number of them dying in the conflict.

The years after the War were difficult throughout the country. It was not the promised "land fit for heroes", and Bedford was no exception. Rather it was a time of transition as a new order was gradually established. The Church was part of that move to a new order with the election of the first Parochial Church Councils in 1921. This gave the laity a greater say in the running of the parish, mirroring the 1918 *Representation of the People Act* that gave the vote to all men over 21 and women over 30. Having steered the parish through turbulent times the Vicar decided he should make his own transition to other responsibilities. In early 1922 he announced that he was exchanging livings with the Reverend Maurice B Stuart-Fox, the latter being instituted as the fifth Vicar of St Martin's on 29th June 1922.

The change of incumbent was, perhaps, fortuitous because the new Vicar had a gift for finance which would be in great demand. Extensive and expensive

underpinning was required, this time of the East end of the church as well as of the hall. The urgency of the work was highlighted by the way that, during one of the readings at Evensong, Mr Stuart-Fox saw a crack appear in the wall and then extend before his eyes. In addition to the £214 needed to underpin the church, and £251 for the hall, a further £279 was expended on a new heating system for the church in 1924 while another building, the Institute in Hartington Street, was acquired for £144. Given all these expenses it was a sign of great faith that pew rents were abolished in 1925, bringing to an end the assurance that income provided. Henceforth all would be able to come to the church free and equal in the sight of God.

His efforts to overcome such challenges took their toll of the Vicar's health and obliged him to seek a new living. Accordingly the Bishop presented Mr Stuart-Fox to the living of St Peter, Bushey Heath in 1934, the Reverend Arthur F H Edington taking his place at St Martin's on 19th November of that year. Financial pressures meant that Mr Edington did not have another priest to assist him in his duties, the first time in the history of the parish there had been no Curate. Despite the debt to the bank some improvements to the church were made by painting the walls of the chancel and Lady Chapel, adding colour to the reredos and installing hangings either side of it. This had a great effect on the appearance of the church, as did the fixing of front panelling to the choir pews.

The spiritual life of the parish was not neglected either. The Vicar undertook the task of instructing the children in the catechism, thus giving clearer structure to their learning about the Christian faith. At the same time they were introduced into the regular worshipping life of the church by being brought to the Sung Eucharist each week, thus becoming clearly part of the Church gathered for worship. After over ten years the parish's debt to the bank was eventually cleared in 1937, largely through a generous response to the Gift Day as part of the observance of the annual Dedication Festival. The next year, to assist the Vicar in administering private communions to the sick and housebound, the practice of having the Reserved Sacrament always available was started.

Soldiering on

As the parish prepared to celebrate the Golden Jubilee of the church in 1939, now with the benefit of an assistant priest again, dark clouds were gathering in Europe. The generosity of many people meant that the church could be further beautified. A new crucifix and six candlesticks, as well as a white frontal, were obtained for the High Altar. A carpet was added to the sanctuary while the Lady Chapel received a crucifix and two candlesticks. Various celebrations to mark the event were put in hand but the declaration of war on 3rd September meant the cancellation of all the social events that had been planned. Despite this the special services could take place, as happened throughout the War despite the contribution made by members of St Martin's in the forces and on the home front. Once again this included helping to provide for the soldiers and members of the United States Army Air Force who were moved into the area.

This time there was the additional need to accommodate children evacuated to Bedford from areas seen as more liable to enemy attack.

The Vicar was again left single-handed when the assistant priest became an Army Chaplain. Despite the extra pressure of work the pattern of services was extended, Midnight Mass being celebrated for the first time at Christmas 1943. The pressure of work affected Mr Etherington's health and in June 1944 Mr Etherington announced that, having consulted his doctor and the Bishop, he would be leaving Bedford to become part-time Chaplain of St Charles's Hospital, Paddington. The Vicar's brother, the Reverend John H Etherington, despite suffering from poor health himself agreed to serve as Priest-in-Charge for a few months while a new Vicar was sought. Unfortunately the work proved too much for him and he died on 3rd January 1945. Various factors, including the Patron's resignation as Bishop of the Diocese, extended the search for a new Vicar. It was not until two days after John Etherington's death, on 5th January 1945, that the appointment of the Reverend Francis Bale as seventh Vicar of St Martin's was announced.

A brighter future?

On the Saturday of Easter week, 7th April 1945, with the war in Europe drawing towards its close, Mr Bale was instituted to his new cure. Hardly had he settled into the Vicarage than the church began to settle again as the foundations sank further. Although the East End of the church had been underpinned twenty years earlier this had not been sufficient to put the church on a solid footing. In June cracks started appearing throughout the building from the baptistry at the West end to the Eastern wall of the transepts where arches lead to the vestries and the Lady Chapel. The number and extent of the cracks indicated the need for a thorough investigation and proper remedial works to secure the building.

On 6th November 1945 the architect, J H Leech, inspected the building and recommended the installation of temporary safety measures with a view to monitoring movement over the next twelve months. However it became clear that the movement was ongoing and on 31st May 1946 Freeman, Fox and Partners, Consulting Engineers, inspected the building. Their inspection revealed the reason for the repeated difficulties with subsidence. While the clay subsoil goes down 16 to 20 feet before reaching bedrock the foundations went down only two, and were in the bare soil rather than having any concrete to form a platform. The engineers concluded that the shallow depth of the foundations in clay subject to seasonal changes meant almost inevitable irregular, and indefinitely continued, settlement of the building. Their recommendation was a complete underpinning of the church to a depth of 6½ feet at an estimated cost of £10,000, plus £5,000 builders' work.

Despite the size of the projected bill there was no guarantee that it would prevent any further movement of the church. The Vicar was not in sympathy with what was proposed and suggested an alternative solution. This was to deal with the most seriously affected portion, namely the West end and the

nave pillars, by underpinning them with reinforced concrete piles down to the rock. Steel girders at strategic positions resting on the piles would then transfer the weight of the building from the outside walls (which were not designed for this load) to the rock base. Having secured the agreement of the engineers and the architect that this was a sound idea new estimates were obtained. These showed a total cost of £3,760 - a significant saving.

It was finally agreed that the work should commence in Spring 1948 and the Ministry of Works eventually issued a licence allowing that. 6th April 1948 saw Samuel Foster Ltd, who had built the church originally, arrived to start the preliminary works and the Cementation Company Lts arrived the next day to start sinking the piles. The work revealed an unsuspected problem - the wiring under the floor was in a dangerous state and needed to be replaced, which was duly done for an additional £289. By 28th June the piling contractors had finished their work but the builders worked from then until 8th April 1949 to complete repairs to the defects in the structure. 9th April saw a mammoth spring-clean by members of the congregation so that Palm Sunday services could take place the following day in a church free of builders' apparatus, scaffolding and dust. It is a tribute to the work undertaken then that the area underpinned has remained stable for nearly sixty years. The cost also came in £290 under estimate, something that is scarcely experienced today. This sum equated almost exactly with the unexpected cost of the new lighting, including flood-lighting. One permanent reminder of the work that was done in that immediate post-War period is the location of the pulpit. This (and the organ) had to be moved to allow access to the pillar at the East end of the North arcade. It was reerected a few yards West of its original position.

Consolidation

Having placed St Martin's (literally) on a sound footing Father Bale left Bedford to become Vicar of St Luke's, Enfield on 1st May 1952. Four months later, on 2nd September, the Reverend Victor Challen started his long incumbency at St Martin's. The idea of a memorial to those who died during the Second World War had already been mooted but not yet implemented. It was decided to broaden the scope of the memorial by remembering all parishioners who had died, rather than just those who had died in conflict. Professor Sir Albert Richardson was commissioned to produce a suitable design, which he duly presented in December 1954. This was revised 15 months later and on 7th May 1959 the Memorial Chapel and Altar of All Souls in the North Transept were dedicated.

What many consider one of the finest features of St Martin's, the hanging Rood, was donated by Mrs C Stronach in memory of her parents, Ernest and Edith Bolus, her brother Herbert Holmstead and her sister Mary Bolus. Faith Craftworks of St Albans executed the work to a design by J N Lawson and it was dedicated on the Feast of Candlemas, 2nd February, 1962. The statue of Our Lady had been in place since before the Second World War and the line of statuary as it is today was completed in 1966 with the statue of our Patron Saint, St Martin. Michael Ward donated this in memory of his mother. At the

time the Challens lived in what was considered to be an unsatisfactory Vicarage at 5 Warwick Avenue. It had been intended that the church site should eventually house a Vicarage as well as the church and hall but this had never been pursued. Providing a more suitable parsonage house became possible in November 1971 when a generous parishioner bequeathed her house for that purpose. At the time it was divided into two flats but appropriate alterations were made to provide the substantial family home that is the current Vicarage. Before he retired on 29th July 1983 Mr Challen oversaw one final change at St Martin's. This was the Memorial Garden for the burial of cremated remains which was consecrated in 1980, thus providing a place within the parish where those who had worshipped here over the years could be remembered by those they had left behind.

Mr Challen's successor, the Reverend David Rees, had started his ministry in Bedford as Curate of Goldington from 1973 to 1975. From there he went to teach in Malaysia for five years. Returning to England in 1981 he served a few miles up the road as priest of Milton Ernest and Thurleigh before becoming the 9th Vicar of St Martin's on 24th January 1984. While Mr Challen had left a number of lasting memorials to his ministry at St Martin's there were several areas where maintenance work was sorely needed. By 1988 Mr Rees had raised £35,000 to fund retiling and reguttering of the roof, rewiring of the church and restoration of the organ. That same year he was awarded a PhD for his study of the multi-cultural nature of the parish, a feature that is still evident both in the congregation and in the wider community. Bedford lies in the heart of England, about as far from the sea as it is possible to be in this country. Nevertheless the population is drawn from all corners of the world and St Martin's welcomes all who come, seeking to live and grow together. Both church and hall have suffered from subsidence damage over the years. In 2008 the PCC agreed that the hall was beyond economic repair and should be sold. In March 2009 the sale was completed with the local council acquiring the property for expansion of what is now Livingstone Lower School. With more housing being developed in the parish it is hoped that the school, the Children's Centre now in part of the original school and the church together will form a hub that strengthens the development of a real community