

## 1900 - 1930 Revs. G. Billington, A. C. Sinclair, A. E. Swallow

Rev. George Billington was inducted as vicar on 24th November 1900. He was a married man with three children. He employed 2 female servants and a sick nurse. Vicars were men of some standing.

Further improvements in the church building takes place, the replacement of the smoky gas lights mentioned earlier, *sanitary linoleum replaces the cocoa-nut matting in the pews, with a sale of the remnants of linoleum and good pieces of matting* and the church was redecorated in 1903. In June 1902 the organ was moved from the west gallery to the chancel as it is today. A playing field was obtained for the church. Of these improvements Mr Billington wrote “*All recognise the improvements in the Choir since the organ was put in the chancel in June. Much of the improvement is also due to the energy of the organist. The result of the field on the health of the users is beyond arithmetic calculation*”

There was a very large Sunday School and a picture has survived of the teachers

On the social side there was a performance of Shakespeare's Richard III by the Dramatic society, and the choir with professional assistance gave a performance of the “Messiah”. A Scout troop was formed and won a prize in the Black Knight Pageant in Ashton and held a camp in Ashton Wake Week at Rhewl Tawer, Wales with 23 scouts and W H Partington, Warranted Scout-Master. It is not clear how long this Scout troop continued, a new Scout troop being formed in 1931. There were canal boat trips to Romiley for the Band of Hope and the CLB continued to flourish.

In 1906 there was a Mother's Union with 65 members who met quarterly and in the same year the Girls Friendly Society had 81 members and ten associates.

However the following letter appeared in the church magazine:

*Dear Sir,*

*I should like, through the medium of your Magazine, to call attention to the conduct of certain members of the congregation, seated in the gallery, of both sexes wilfully leaving their seats immediately before the sermon at Evening Service. It is an interruption of the worship of others around them, an insult to the service, and no language could be too strong, and no discipline too strict, that would deter these people, whose ages may range from 18 to 24 years, in their interruption of the service of the Grand Old Church. I would, if I may, appeal to their honour as future Churchmen and Churchwomen, to their duty as children of God, and to their respect of their fellowmen, to cease from conduct so baneful in the House of God.*

*I am, dear Sir,*

*Yours very truly,*

*A Worshipper*

In 1906 there was a questionnaire from the Bishop of Manchester to the Vicar about the details of the parish. There were 309 questions, the bishop certainly wanted to know what was going on in the various parishes. Some of the answers throw some light on the parish at that time.

In 1901 the population was 7830,

Stamford Road had been made up following the route of the old Cock Lane.

The principal occupations were hat making, coal mining, engineering, railway work. *Interestingly no mention is made of cotton manufacture although many of the brides married in St Stephen's were in this trade.*

There are 14 public houses, six close together.

There were no houses of ill fame.

The two schools are used for many entertainments and social organs. There is no gambling and the Vicar is always present.

The vicar's income is made up as follows:

Ecclesiastical commissioners	£250
Marriages	£7
Funerals	£20
Churchings	£1
Pew rents	£60
Rent from Railway	£26*
Manchester Corporation	£13†
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	£377‡

less £45 for curate

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£332

\* *a part of the church yard was sold to the railway, that part now occupied by the houses on St Stephen's Avenue and the area in front.*

† *the first vicarage was lost when the reservoirs were built in 1876*

‡ *perhaps £20,000 in today's terms*

The vicar was a man with an income far higher than that of his congregation and he had a large vicarage (now a nursing home on Audenshaw Road) which cost £2050, with servants to help run his home.

In the church yard there was now no room for any new graves, but burials continued in the existing graves

Great details are given as to where the priest is standing during the communion service, but ordinary bread from home was used.

The minutes of the annual vestry meeting (equivalent to the church's annual general meeting) have been preserved and show that the people attending were all men. The right to vote in the election of officers depended on being a house holder in Audenshaw as distinct from a church member, so Audenshaw women who outnumbered worshippers then, as they do today, had no say in the church appointments!

The church was run principally by the vicar, but with two wardens and two sidesmen to help. The accounts were the responsibility of the wardens.

The collection was taken in a plate at the door.

The vicar appointed one of the churchwardens, the Vicar's warden, and the other, the Parishioners' warden was elected by the ratepayers. There were two sidesmen, one appointed by the vicar and one elected. The number of sidesmen gradually increased over the years, half being appointed by the vicar and half elected until 1959 when all were elected. The first woman to be elected a sidesman was in 1971. The appointment of a Vicar's warden seems to have continued at St Stephen's until 1976.

Rev. Billington left the parish at the end of 1911, and was replaced in 1912 by the Rev. A. C. Sinclair.

The new Vicar immediately made his mark on the parish, he was concerned at the low attendances at the mid week services, and on Ascension Day in 1912 held a service of Holy Communion at 5.00 a. m., to cater for people starting work at 6.00 a.m.. He was successful to the extent that 24 people attended.

The church continued to actively supported the Waifs and Strays Home and the Pound Day was a popular social event. On these occasions every one was asked to bring a parcel weighing one pound, grocers were real grocers in those days, they weighed out your sugar whilst you watched them, none of your pre-packed kilograms. The custom of the “Pound Stall” persisted in the church until quite recently. Entertainment at the Pound Day was provided by the St Stephen's string band, and further money was raised at the annual cricket match, which occurred on the Saturday before the Waifs and Strays Sermons. The children from the home were regular church attendees and came in crocodile formation wearing long coats and shoes, but the children wore clogs during the week.

There was a football team pictured here.

The Whit Friday Walk continued as the big show piece of the church in the parish. In 1913, 1200 people walked the parish led by the band of the 9th Battalion of the Manchester Regiment who then played for entertainment in the afternoon, and the full day finished with a social evening.

In July 1913 Mr Austin Hopkinson allowed the use of his grounds at Rycroft Hall for a Garden Party. Mr Hopkinson was the Independent Member of Parliament for the District, he owned a large engineering company in Audenshaw, and was a generous benefactor both to the district and to the church. The beautiful east windows were given in 1914 by an anonymous donor but who is now known to have been Mr Hopkinson.

The theme of the window is Te Deum Laudamus, We Praise Thee O God. In the centre is Christ enthroned in Glory, with the three archangels Raphael, Michael and Gabriel directly below. The top left window depicts St John with the cup and St Peter with the book and the key. Bottom left is St George with what looks from the back of church a Viking's helmet on his head, but it is in fact a soldier's helmet with a dragon on top. Why did the artist not give St George a halo? Next to St George is St Stephen carrying the stones. Top right are King David with the harp and Moses with the tablets. Bottom right are St Augustine of Canterbury, our first archbishop carrying a cross rather than a crosier.

With Augustine is St Martin of Tours giving half of his cloak to the thirteenth figure, the poor man. There are also two angels at the top of the window and the small rose window near the roof contains the Manchester Diocesan shield.

From 15 November to 26 November 1913 there was a mission in the parish led by Rev. C. P. Keeling with all ages catered for: Men Friday at 7.45, Women Wednesday and Thursday at 3.00, Children every day at 6.00.

You must not believe that this period of our church was all one of peace and light. It is recorded that the people's warden resigned half way through his term in 1913, because the Vicar would not act in accordance with the vote of the majority of the church officers. Diplomacy was such that it is not recorded what the disagreement was about.

In August 1914 the Great War broke out, and this had a terrible effect on the parish and the country as a whole. Eighty four men who had connections with our church were killed in the war. The parish magazine over the five years gave many names of young men, particularly members of the CLB who gave their lives for their country.

In 1916 in the middle of the Great War, church life continued as best it might At the start of the year the parish account, which provided for the upkeep of the school was £135 in debt to the Bank, equivalent to £5000 today. There was no income to the fund except from the results of special efforts. The parish resolved to have a Sale of Work in an effort to clear the debt, and the dates were fixed for 25th and 26th February. Canon Eager's daughter, now Lady Garforth was contacted and agreed to open the event. Her husband, Sir William Garforth also had associations with the church having drawn up the first drawings of the churchyard in 1868. The war changed the parish's plans for the event, when a form of blackout was imposed preventing the use of the church buildings after dark, and new dates were then fixed for 26th and 27th May. The event was an outstanding success; by May the debt had risen to £160 8s 7d but the total receipts of the Sale of Work amounted to £182 12s 7d (£6500 in today's money). The debt was cleared! The ladies embroidered a tablecloth giving the names of many of the then church and school officers, and this cloth was displayed at the anniversary exhibition in 1996.

Sir William and Lady Garforth were so impressed by their visit that they gave an additional endowment to the Church by investing in L & Y stock yielding an income of £12 per annum. The Vicar was overjoyed and set two pews, numbers 23 and 50, free of pew rent. Pew rent was collected four times a year by the churchwardens and was a main source of income to pay the incumbent.

Quoting Mr Sinclair in November 1916 “*There is no question that the fact that almost the whole of the body of the church is pew-rented has the effect of keeping some people away from the services. They do not like to sit in other people's seats with the possibility of being turned out by the occupiers - a contingency which, I hope, seldom happens amongst people who call themselves Christians, but which strangers do not like to risk. I shall be very thankful if it were possible to make every seat in the Church free, as the strangers should be in every Church, but until this becomes possible, I trust all seat-holders will do their best to make strangers welcome.*” For many years the statement “**All seats are free when the bell stops**” appeared on the front of the parish magazine.

It is very impressive that people continued to work hard for St Stephen's church in the middle of a dreadful war and showed a determination to make the church available and welcoming to everyone.

In the church magazine of 1917 there is a letter from the Bishop of London in which he points out that:

*The Prayer book is 250 years old and in need of revising*

*The sale of livings ought to end*

*Incumbents who are too old or negligent should be removed*

*Revenues should be redistributed some clergy are overpaid and others under paid*

*Deans should be abolished*

These aims seem now to have been achieved apart from the last!

In 1917 the Great War was perhaps at its most bloody stage, Rycroft Hall became a Red Cross Hospital and the Parish sent Christmas parcels to the men serving in the Forces.

In March 1918 women received the right to vote (the Enfranchise Act) and Mr Sinclair welcomed the legislation. However he drew attention to St Paul's ruling in Corinthians 11, 5 and 6 and wrote “*some little girls are coming wearing only a bow of ribbon. Parents must see that their girls come to Church and Sunday School with their heads covered. Young people are eating sweets during service - this is not a theatre or picture house, they have more pocket money than is good for them if they can afford to buy sweets at all, at present prices. If I see any case of persons eating sweets during the services, I shall not hesitate to draw attention to them from the pulpit*”

One of our parishioners remembers as a very small child sitting in the gallery and unfortunately dropping a book down into the nave, Mr Sinclair immediately said “*don't bring that child into this church again*”. It is a good thing this was not taken too literally.

You may form the impression of a Vicar who made it very clear on what he considered was right and wrong, or perhaps more accurately correct and incorrect was unpopular. It would not be true however to think that Mr Sinclair and the other early Vicars were not held in tremendous respect by the parish as is seen by the inscription in a bible given to Mr Eager in 1859:

*Presented to the Rev. T. T. Eager MA Incumbent of St Stephen's Church Audenshaw by The Teachers of the Sunday School as a small token of their heart felt respect and esteem also to mark their high appreciation of the untiring interest which he continually evinces in their welfare. And they sincerely pray that he may long be spared to continue his ministry among them. April 30, 1859.*

In 1919 Parliament passed the Enabling act which required the creation of an electoral roll for each church whose members elected the Parochial Church Councils. In 1920 the parish elected 16 councillors 8 women and 8 men. For the first time women had a say (officially!) in the running of the church.

The stone Lych gate was built in 1922 as a memorial to the men of the parish who gave their lives in the Great War. This was a very significant occasion bearing in mind the many men who had died in the war. We have a picture of the scene, the original was in poor condition but I have included it to set the scene.

In 1923 the gas lighting was replaced by electric lighting

In August 1913 the name St Hilda was chosen for the mission church at Hooley Hill a new site was secured large enough for a new church and vicarage, and in November 1923 the mission became a separate district with the Rev. E. B. Clarke as curate in charge. The new St Hilda Church was consecrated in 1938. The St Stephen's parish boundaries then became as they are today, give or take a street or two.

The Branch School ceased to be a day school in 1914.

In 1924 Rev. Sinclair left Audenshaw and was replaced by the Rev. A. E. Swallow, and on Whit Sunday afternoon the new church banner was paraded for the first time. It was made by Messres Brown and Son of Brazenose Street and help towards the cost again came from Mr Austin Hopkinson.

Mr Swallow had a reputation for always taking his bicycle with him, his wife claimed it was with them when he proposed. He also was a humorist. He tells the story of a boy in the gallery (not in St Stephen's) who was using a peashooter on the congregation below. The boy shouted out to the vicar “*You keep on preaching and I'll keep 'em wakken*”

The biggest youth organisation was the Girls Friendly Society led for many years by the Misses Wright, entering and winning competitions.

The school building was blacklisted and the school was threatened with closure, but internal improvements were made including the screens and the school was saved, however a large financial debt was created.

At the watch night service, the congregation heard for the first time Big Ben striking the last 160 8s 7d thanks to the installation of a wireless set.