

Canon Cooke came to Audenshaw in the middle of the Second World War, a time of great difficulty, but the parish continued to work very much in the style set by Mr Lane. Canon Cooke was a popular figure and helped his parishioners in more than spiritual ways. Two ladies have recalled how as young women the Vicar found them jobs, a kindness they have remembered ever since.

St Stephen's members have perhaps always had a leaning to the dramatic! It was noted above that in the early 1900's a production of Shakespeare's Richard III was given, and the Mother's Union from time to time produced small plays, but the desire to perform on the stage blossomed in the 1940's and early 1950's. The Dramatic and Musical Society was formed in 1943 and the first production was a review entitled 'Easter Parade' given in the school. This was a great success and repeated at the request of the Red Cross, the profits going to the Prisoners of War Fund. There followed a large number of plays and pantomimes: Red Riding Hood, Yellow Sands, Rookery Nook, Quiet Weekend, Aladdin, Jack and the Beanstalk, Tons of Money, The Camel's Back, Forced Landing, The Paragon, Mystery at Greenfingers, But Once a Year, Easy Money, plus a succession of reviews Easter Parade 1943--1950.

During a performance of 'Quiet Weekend' one of the cast was heard to say "Don't look at my hat, I know it's awful" followed by (whilst clasping her head) 'Oh I haven't got it on'. During 'But once a Year' an actor's dentures nearly slipped out but were quickly sucked back in again, and he carried on regardless, a genuine trooper! One young woman who got her start in the theatre at St Stephen's was the now famous, Kathy Staff, who directed and took a part in 'Easy Money'. Kathy and her husband were for a time members of our choir. One current choir member recalls in one musical production (not at St Stephen's) how she took the lead and Kathy was in the chorus! The Society closed in 1955, there was *a shortage of young men most of whom were doing National Service*. The Musical and Dramatic Society raised a lot of money for the church, gave a lot of pleasure to the audience and the members enjoyed a lot of fun.

The Men's Society continued to flourish with monthly meetings usually a visiting speaker on a fairly serious subject, and annual outings to which wives were invited. A trip to Southport was one such occasion, at which, towards the end of the trip, an inquisition took place when the wives demanded to know what several of the husbands, had been doing all the afternoon, they had not been seen once they had left Rountree's restaurant. However the jury returned a verdict of innocent, since the gentlemen had been buying a present for Mrs Cooke who was ill at home. In other years Trentham Gardens and Llandudno were the destinations for the great outing. There were also regular visits to local industry, these were for men only, and the places included; Mossley Blanket and Carpet Company, Hartshead Electricity Generating Station, Cake-a-Pie Flour Mills with a free packet of flour to come home with, and for their wives to use! and Ladysmith Barracks.

Having an annual Rose Queen started again in 1950, this was a great day! A young lady was selected as Queen several months prior to the crowning in June. She was attended by some ten maids of honour and two page boys. There was usually a procession around the parish, led by St Peter's Bugle Band, followed by the competitors for the Fancy Dress Competition and lastly the Queen and her entourage, and the retiring Queen. Collections were made on the way round.

On returning to the school there was the crowning performed by a local lady dignitary, the wife of the chairman of Audenshaw Urban District Council was always a popular choice. There was the judging of the Fancy Dress Competition and demonstrations and side shows run by the Scouts. Everyone brought gifts for the Queen and these were sold to raise money. During the following year the Queen ran other fund raising activities for the church funds. The Scouts were very much an integral part of the church and parish community; to be a member of the 4th Audenshaw Scout Group a boy had to be a member of the church or attend Sunday School. They took part in all the big church money raising events, and in one year they tidied up the church paths and were commended by the Vicar. On the night prior to the church bazaars the scouts acted as night watchmen in the school. On the last Sunday in the month they took the collections at Morning Service. The whole group prospered in the 1950's and early 1960's, its members attending church regularly, its leaders playing an active part in church life as sidesmen, PCC members, choir members, auditor and in the various church organisations. As well as helping the church they raised money to buy their own Headquarters in South Street, this was opened in 1954 by Mr Harvey Rhodes MP. It should have been opened by Sir Rob. Lockhart the Deputy Chief Scout but he was late! Our Scouts lived up to their motto *Be Prepared* by having the local MP ready and willing.

Raising money to keep the church in good repair is always necessary. One novel way employed in Canon Cooke's time was the collecting of "Bun Pennies" and "Ship's halfpennies". The bun penny was the first penny issued in Queen Victoria's reign and showed the young Queen with her hair in a bun, the ship halfpenny was issued in George VI reign with a sailing ship on one side. Parishioners were asked to collect these coins and give them to the church, the bun penny was fairly rare and was being withdrawn from circulation. The story is told that the church treasurer who was the manager of a local Co-op shop changed the bun pennies for the newer models and returned the buns to customers in their change, to ensure a prolonged income for the church. From one of the comments in the church magazine this was entirely with Canon Cooke's blessing; *Bring them into the Vicarage then we can put them into circulation again*.

Bazaar's occurred in most years supported with stalls by all the church organisations. Gift days were arranged when major sums of money were needed.

The organ was restored with some additional pipes added in the swell organ and the action made pneumatic in 1956 by Mr C. Wood at a cost of £1120.

The church was redecorated in 1952. The lighting was improved by having eight lights fixed to the beams above the pillars on the side of the nave, these were more easily accessible previously scaffolding was needed to change the bulbs. There were four additional lights in the chancel and two in the back of the gallery. The church clock became affected by pigeon droppings and was stopped for a period; however Ashton and Audenshaw Councils helped to pay for the repairs and the clock and its chimes again became functional in 1954. New drains were put under the paths in 1949 and again dry rot struck caused by the deterioration in the drain outlets from the roof.

The local Chairman of Audenshaw Urban District Council was usually "churched" at St Stephen's.

The choir started to have lady members once again in the late 1940's, they were initially unrobed but in January 1953 they became "robed" thanks mainly to a gift from the Dramatic Society and they joined in the choir processions. It should be noted that several young ladies were both choristers and actresses! The number of boys in the choir showed a steady reduction over this period.

The Mothers Union continued to be the backbone of the church, and in 1951 they celebrated their Golden Jubilee. In 1949 a Young Wives Group was formed for newly wedded wives and wives with very young children. The Young Wives held separate meetings but invariably worked closely with the MU in providing the refreshments at church events.

The Day School was given Aided Status in 1951. This meant that half of the costs of the repairs of the building were paid for by Lancashire County Council, but the character of the religious instruction was not affected and the School managers retained control.

Pew rents were abolished in 1951. *All seats are free and open to all. The system of pew rents served a very useful purpose in the past by its financial contribution to the church and by its example of family worship. It has now outgrown its usefulness and does not appeal to this day and generation.* The abolition of pew rents reduced the income by £55 and people were asked to give to a free will offering scheme.

In the early 1950's there was signs of a more ecumenical approach by the Audenshaw churches; the Men's Society had talks by the Minister of Red Hall, there was a combined service in January 1953 with St Stephen's, Bridge Street Congregationalists, Guide Lane Wesleyans, Red Hall and Shepley Road Methodists taking part. The Mothers Union joined with the Red Hall ladies *for worship followed by refreshments together and fun and games*. This occurred on two occasions, once at each church with both ministers taking part in each service.

The incumbent of St Stephen's had been appointed alternatively by the Crown and the Bishop. In 1955 with the agreement of the Church Council this was changed such that the patronage was to lie entirely with the Bishop. However this must only have had to come into effect after the appointment of the next Vicar, who was in fact appointed by the Crown.

For a large part of his ministry Canon Cooke's wife had been a semi-invalid and in 1958 Canon Cooke announced his retirement from the Ministry at the age of 72 to make way for a younger man. He left St Stephen's a much respected gentleman.