

The Early Years, Reverends T. T. Eager, J. H. Butcher, A. C. Bulkeley

St Stephen's was built and consecrated in the first half of the nineteenth century in the middle of the industrial revolution. There were at that time, two distinct groups of influential and moneyed people, the old land owning class who invariably were Tories and supporters of the established church and the new industrialists most of whom were non-conformists and Whigs. From a financial viewpoint in the industrial northern cities, the Roman Catholics came a poor third with no rich supporters.

It would be wrong to identify the policies of the early nineteenth century Tories with those of the present day Conservatives or the Whigs with those of present day Liberal Democrats. The Tory landowners were a class apart; they had had wealth for centuries, they were remote from the populace but often benevolent to them with some sense of responsibility. The new industrialists believed very much in competition, that people progressed by their own efforts alone.

Religion was very much an integral part of society. The local landowner appointed the Anglican parson, and if the parson wanted to keep his job he toed the line. There was considerable corruption in the church; the Rector of Ashton in 1849 received £1500 from Ashton parish church property but he lived in Buckinghamshire, paid a curate £220 per annum to run the parish, which he visited perhaps every three or four years. People like Fry and the Wesley's saw the need to get back to a more meaningful religion, but the movements they started appealed to some of the new rich industrialists who became the benefactors of the new chapels.

Audenshaw gave its name to a division of the Parish of Ashton under Lyne. The division comprised the places we now know as Audenshaw, Droydsden, Littlemoss, Medlock Vale, Daisy Nook, and Woodhouses. With the increase in population in the latter part of the eighteenth century, Parliament felt the need to provide Anglican churches in the growing towns and allocated a million pounds for this aim. St Peter's Ashton was built from money from this fund. St Peter's in 1812 was the first of the many new parishes created from the ancient parish of Ashton under Lyne. Unfortunately little provision was made for the new Vicars; the Rector of St Michael's retaining his income from rents. Whilst the Establishment was expanding the Anglican Church, there was expansion of the non-conformists' churches, first with relatively humble structures and then with the help of rich patrons more impressive buildings were built such as the Albion Chapel in Ashton.

The Roman Catholic population of the district grew with the coming of the very poor Irish immigrants. Their religion was very much a way of life. They supported their priest however poorly, managed to build churches and keep their faith in very difficult conditions.

In 1800 the Anglican Church had both a religious and a civic role in society. It collected taxes to maintain the parish poor and the church wardens had civic as well as church responsibilities. Apart from Quakers and Jews up to 1837 all couples had to be married in a licensed Anglican Church, and to qualify for poor relief, the social security of its day, a person had to show they had been born in the parish. Since the Parson was very likely to be the chairman of the Poor Board, it was prudent to have your children baptised in the parish church.

Many of the populace could not read or write; the Vicar would be well educated, come from a higher class in society and had to be held in respect. The situation outlined above is one of privileges enjoyed by the Anglican Church at the beginning of the nineteenth century, but one where the message of Christianity was coming to the industrial towns, through the non-conformist movement, the Irish Catholics and the new Anglican churches with their relatively poorly endowed ministers.

In 1844 the population of Audenshaw comprised some 4624 souls living along Guide Lane and its intersection with what is now Stamford Road in the village of Hooley Hill. There were cottages near Guide Bridge on what is now Audenshaw Road, and in the old village of Audenshaw at the intersection of Lumb Lane and Audenshaw Road, many of these cottages are now under the reservoirs. There were also farmsteads scattered throughout the parish.

There had been a non-conformist chapel in Audenshaw at Red Hall since 1787 and a second one at Hooley Hill started slightly later, so the Church of England had established opposition in trying to found a new place of worship. In the Booklet of 1896 written by Reverend A. C. Bulkeley but based on the first vicar's notebooks is found the following description of the start:

Church work was commenced some years previous to 1844 by Robert Dyson, so well known afterwards in the parish as a lay reader. Mr Dyson began on a very small scale with two scholars, his Sunday school being held in a small cottage at the top of Hooley Hill, pulled down some years since. He was presently joined by James H. Brownson, who was wont to boast that he had raised the first church hymn tune in Audenshaw.

There is a memorial to Mr Dyson on the wall of the chancel, and reference is made to Mr Dyson's work as a teacher at St Peter's church. Prior to 1846 Audenshaw was part of the parish of St Peter's. Later Mr Dyson became the official lay assistant at Stephen's with pay of £70 rising to £90 per annum.

In 1844 the Rev. T. T. Eager arrived to take charge of the district. The Sunday school had by then increased, teaching not only scripture but spelling and the alphabet. Mr Eager conducted Sunday services at first in the club room of a public house, the only room he could get. We are not told which public house. Colliers with their dogs used to look in to see how the new parson was getting on.

The first seven baptisms in the register were carried out in the licensed schoolroom of the Ecclesiastical District of Audenshaw. Along with spreading the gospel and carrying out his other duties Mr Eager was making big efforts to get the money to build a church.

On the 14th May 1845 the foundation stone of the church was laid. A procession started from St Peter's Church Ashton consisting of between 200 and 300 children, teachers and conductors of Audenshaw Sunday School (Mr Dyson's work had certainly born fruit), clergy of the district and the gentlemen of the building committee. The stone was laid by Mr Legh Richmond, the law agent of the Earl of Stamford. The Earl had given the land for the church, the churchyard, the school and the parsonage along with £200 towards the building. It is seen that the local land owner, the Earl of Stamford had a feeling of responsibility to people who were in the main his tenants. After the ceremony the procession reformed and moved back through Audenshaw and Hooley Hill to Ashton.

In just over one year the building was ready for use and was consecrated by John Bird Sumner the Bishop of Chester on 27th June 1846, Mr Thomas T. Eager was appointed the permanent curate of the new parish and he was to receive fees and the Easter offerings.

The church building was designed by Edwin Hugh Shellard a popular architect with the commissioners for church buildings, having been asked to design 13 in the now Manchester Diocese. He was not however as popular with Mr Eager, whose relationship with the architect were strained to say the least, judging from this extract from a letter written by Mr Eager to the Archdeacon of Manchester:

"If you hear anything prejudicial to my character from Mr Architect Shellard, please inform me thereof the creature is very wrathful at me for detecting ... in making crooked one of the beautiful lines of brick. I understand Mr Sidebottom accused him of all sorts of things and his plans were ejected from the Mottram Church meeting.

I have the honour to be your obedient servant

Thomas T. Eager

to the Venerable Archdeacon Rushton D. D.

The builders were Mellor and Greenhalgh of Manchester, and the building was initially estimated to cost £2400 but by 1845 this had risen to £3000. Things went up in price even in those days.

Money towards the building came from the following sources:

| | |
|--|------|
| The Earl of Stamford | £200 |
| The Chester Diocese | £400 |
| Her Majesty's Commissioners | £500 |
| Incorporate Society for building churches | £500 |
| Sir Robert Peel's ecclesiastical commissioners | £200 |

amounting in total to £1800. So considerable fund raising from within the parish was necessary not only to pay for the building but many other things as the church and its work in the parish grew.

The first man to be married in St Stephen's Church was the new vicar himself. It must be a rare event for a bridegroom to build his own church in which to be married. Of the first 60 couples to be married at St Stephen's 24 persons made their mark. St Stephen's schools soon to be built played a big part in bringing literacy to the district.

When it was consecrated the church did not have a spire this was added in 1854/55. The spire was in the original design but construction was delayed (money!). The original chancel was both narrower and shorter than our present one. Across the chancel arch was written "O come, let us worship and bow down; let us kneel before the Lord our maker".

The building was lit by 150 burners (*the fumes from which were suffocating and injurious to health*) these were replaced in 1901 with 30 new burners giving much more complete combustion. *A great saving of gas.*

The seating was planned for 700, and in 1854 the following details are given:

| | |
|----------------------|-----|
| seating at full rent | 300 |
| seating free | 204 |
| children | 196 |

Children have smaller bottoms and this was allowed for in the plans.

Our present pews are the original, the seating being reduced to make room for the memorial hall, the children's corner and the baptistery.

By 1850 the church had an organ; this must have been a very simple instrument at a cost of £32 and was placed in the west gallery behind the pews. This was replaced with basically our present instrument before 1871 at a cost of £301 again in the west gallery.

There was a pulpit in the present position, although the original was replaced in 1866 by the present pulpit albeit now in a reduced form. The pulpit was the work of a Saddleworth carver. A new reredos was also put in place in 1866 and part of this is now at the entrance to the tower in the west gallery. There was a wooden reading desk on the south side of the chancel arch where presumably the vicar sat. The original plans show the font between the third and fourth free standing pillars on the north side of the centre aisle with the entrance from the centre aisle. Present members remember the font further back, in a position which is now within the Memorial Hall with the entry from the North aisle. Whether the font was originally placed as shown in the plan and if so when it was moved is not recorded.

The national church census on Sunday 31 March 1851 gives the following attendances at St Stephen's:

| | Morning | Afternoon | Evening |
|----------------------|---------|-----------|---------|
| General congregation | 250 | 500 | 150 |
| Sunday school | 120 | 138 | |
| Total | 370 | 638 | 150 |

The permanent endowment of the Vicar is given as £150, but his income would also include pew rents, the Easter collection and some other fees. The total was however not comparable with the endowments of the older once country parishes such as St Michael's Ashton where the living was worth £2000.

At Red Hall Methodist New Connection chapel there was no morning service and 237 people at the afternoon service. At Hooley Hill Primitive Methodists there were 30 people attending in the evening service, and at Hooley Hill New Connection chapel there were 452 people attending in the afternoon and 134 in the evening.

There was great rivalry between the different Christian sects; the Vicar wrote a series of at least eight addresses that were distributed to all the people of Audenshaw. These addresses were quite complex documents, the third being of some 2700 words with 23 references. They give an insight into Eager's theology; in the third address he claims that the Church of England is not a breakaway from the Church of Rome, but has its roots in pre-Augustinian England.

"At the reformation the Church of England did not separate from the Church of Rome; but by shaking off the papal yoke, she reassumed that independence which had belonged to her from the first"

This address and several others were not aimed at the Roman Catholics, but at the non-conformists or dissenters as Mr Eager called them. The bullets were not however all going in the one direction, there must have been several missives if not missiles directed towards Mr Eager. From the Vicar's addresses there are references to "A Dissenter of Audenshaw", "strange remarks in a chapel in Hooley Hill" and to a gentleman with the initials F. C.. There are no records at Red Hall or Guide Lane to what exactly these phrases refer, but clearly strong cases were made against the C. of E. and the new Vicar, to get such rebuttals.

Although he does not defend the Rector of Ashton living many miles from the parish he argues it does not affect the people of Audenshaw and assures them that the next Rector will reside in Ashton.

Throughout the addresses, he argues the case for dissenters to return to the true flock and non-churchgoers to come to church.

Rev. Eager believed in the bible as literal truth, and the Church of England as the one true manifestation of Christianity in this country; he was very much a Vicar of his day.

A Protestant Irishman, he delivered lectures on the Irish church in 1866, and took part in the Great Protestant demonstration against Mr Gladstone's Irish Church Bill in 1869. It is also seen that he was a man who very much would stand up for what he considered the law. In October 1850 he brought a case against Reverend W. Wilson, a minor canon of Manchester Cathedral for marrying a couple from Audenshaw in the Cathedral without reading the banns in Audenshaw, but no evidence was brought and the case was dismissed.

What was the form of services in Rev. Eager's time? As is seen from the 1851 census there were three services every Sunday. Between March 1848 and November 1850, the vicar and his Curate Christopher Robinson preached 444 sermons, so there were mid-week services as well as the three on Sunday. These services were Matins or Evensong, the service of Holy Communion was rarely used.

Special services were said each November 5th. giving thanks for the failure of Guy Fawkes and others in their attempt to blow up the Houses of parliament. The service was removed from the Book of Common Prayer in 1859. The support of the establishment is clearly in evidence, but there were services for local, national and international problems; for relief from cholera in the town, the loss of a steamship off Anglesey, thanks for the suppression of mutiny in India, etceteras. It is seen that prayers were said for God's help and guidance as today.

Mr Eager in his diary or at least those parts recorded by Mr Bulkeley does not give details of social or leisure activities within the church. Probably the Whit Friday walks took place. On that day in 1866 we see that the scholars seem to have found their Vicar asleep for once, and got into mischief, for he records the following: *"Band left in good time, but dancing was done by accordian after I left in the evening, in the school room. No dancing in school for future"* clearly you did not cross Mr Eager!

In 1863 a Sunday School was opened in Hooley Hill again by Mr Eager. In 1870 this moved to a new building in Denton Lane (the branch school) which finally evolved to the present St Hilda's church. As well as establishing the church building, two day and Sunday schools, Mr Eager raised the money (£1693) for a fine Vicarage with spacious gardens. The remains now lie under the north east corner of the reservoir.

Mention should be made of one of Mr Eager's curates Rev C. Uttermark, curate from 1851 to 1853; from Mr Eager's diary it is noted that *he was an upright, conscientious man, not slothful in business, fervent in spirit, serving the Lord. His visits were chiefly among the sick and poor - rarely among the rich. Mr Uttermark died in October 1853 aged 27 years. The parishioners of Audenshaw showed their respect for his memory by erecting the three stained glass windows at the east end of the church. The two large chairs in the communion rails were a present from Mr Uttermarks's widow.* (One of these chairs was stolen in a burglary in 1998.) The east windows were removed when the new chancel was built, but the three medallions plus an additional fourth were reset and made into two new windows and placed under the gallery behind the seats once occupied by the children from the Audenshaw Home. The window is the memorial to Rev. C. Uttermark.

In 1871 the living of Ashton-under-Lyne was presented to Mr Eager by the Earl of Stamford and he left to become Rector of St Michael's. His love for his first parish remained very strong to the end of his life. When he died in 1893 he was buried in St Stephen's church yard in the shadow of the church he loved.

In 1871 Rev. Eager was succeeded by Rev. James Hornby Butcher who brought with him a good reputation as a preacher, and continued in the church the evangelical preaching to which the congregation had been accustomed. This was the time of the Anglo-Catholic movement but St Stephen's remained strongly Evangelical, that is staying clear of all the smells and bells. When Mr Butcher advertised for a Curate in 1878, he received the following humorous letter:

Rev Sir, - having seen your advertisement for an Evangelical curate for a long time in the Manchester Courier, I think it is only kindness on my part to inform you that it is simply throwing money into the ditch to advertise for anything of the kind, there being no such rara avis flying in the ecclesiastical atmosphere, except perhaps a "stray" here and there. They are birds quite out of fashion, and likely to become so more and more, as the breed is fast dying out. If by any chance you should be so fortunate as to trap one, I strongly advise you to put him in a glass case, for if you keep him long enough you may rub your hands and feel certain that you possess the eighth wonder of the world"

However the Parish was blessed with an outstanding curate in Rev. Alexander Charles Bulkeley who, when Mr Butcher became non-resident, on account of ill health in August 1878 became curate-in-charge, preaching his first sermon on "Wakes Sunday".

In 1878 the first harvest festival was held on the last Sunday in September, and in October the first Evening Communion service. Mr Bulkeley was an innovative minister.

Mr Bulkeley left the parish in January 1881 and Mr Butcher returned but had to have assistance from other clergy. Mr Butcher died in September 1881, and Mr Bulkeley returned as the third Vicar on January 1st 1882 having been appointed by the Prime Minister, Mr Gladstone. He began his second ministry of St Stephen's at the midnight service on 31st December 1881, and read himself in on Sunday 1st January 1882.

The church was redecorated in 1883, bells were placed in the tower in October 1889, and on November 14th in that year the clock, a gift of Mr James Kershaw was set going by the vicar at 12 noon.

Four new classrooms were added to the Central School (our present day school) and 120 trees were planted in the Churchyard.

A great number of people were confirmed (114 in 1893) and large numbers came to Holy Communion, (218 on the Sunday after the confirmation in 1893) a great increase from the early days of Mr Eager.

In 1896 the Easter Communion was taken by 208 people and the Whit-week procession numbered over 1000 people. There was a large Communicants Union, two Bands of Hope, a branch of the Girls Friendly Society, a Mutual Improvement Society, a Mother's meeting each week, two classes of instruction for Sunday School teachers, and a Men's class held on Sunday afternoons. The Diocesan Home for Girls (Church of England Waifs and Strays) was located in the parish, in what is now Trafalgar House on Audenshaw Road.

In the late 1890's there was a Men's Bible Class visit to Owens college. (*Train Guide Bridge to Ardwick, walk via Ardwick Green to the college. Guides showed them the chemical laboratory, the engineering school the museum. Tram to Manchester, tea in Innan's restaurant Oldham Street. Party broke up some to Queens Park some to Boggart Holme Clough and some to look round Manchester. A very enjoyable afternoon was spent.*

There was a Cricket match between St Stephen's and the Young Men's Class at St Stephen's Cricket Ground.

In 1900 the Church Lads Brigade Company was formed which by 1906 had 65 members plus 15 officers, all the officers being in the Bible class.

St Stephen's church had become a main centre of both social and religious activities in Audenshaw.

Mr Bulkeley was an accomplished musician, composing a service of song "Ruth" and several hymns, notably flower songs sung regularly at the flower sermons until the 1940's. Mr Bulkeley and his parishioners completed the structure of the church as it is today with the new Chancel and Vestry replaced in 1900. The foundation stone of the new chancel was laid on Saturday afternoon 24 June 1899, a fine breezy day by Mrs Garforth (Mrs Garforth was the daughter of Canon Eager) who performed the ceremony with *grace and evident feeling*. The chancel was dedicated in memory of Mr Eager by the Bishop of Manchester who preached on "the seed growing secretly". on 1st May 1900. The chancel