

Case Study: The Bethnal Green Churches Fund

When we talk to people about the Building on History: the Church in London project one of the first things that comes to their mind is the Church's response to 'the pastoral challenge of the east end',

For many contemporaries, as for future historians, the 19th century experience of the Anglican Church was defined by the pastoral challenge of the city. If we now take a more nuanced and contingent view of the success and failure of the Church of England's response to the city, it is none the less in the cities that the struggle between historiographical orthodoxy and revisionism has been fought out. And for Victorians themselves, the issue was clear not least in view of the instant analysis offered for the census by Horace Mann which spawned later sociological quantitative analyses. By the end of the 19th century a remarkable repertoire of pastoral styles specifically adapted to the urban environment had emerged, some derived from new trends in theology and professional recruitment themselves shaped by conscious decisions either to embrace or reject value systems associated with the urban and the commercial, most notably liberalism. Such approaches were very visible in the East End. First was the Anglo-Catholic slum priest offering a controversial ritualist ministry; second, from the opposite end of the theological scale, was the undenominational missionary enterprise of the evangelical, quite possibly a layman, shaped by the mechanisms of Biblicist missionary endeavour overseas, and their potential relocation from darkest Africa to darkest London; and at the third point of pastoral triangulation sat the world of boxing clubs, the settlement movement, clothing clubs, YMCAs and other forms of engagement with the life of the urban poor with its debt to liberal Anglican 'muscular Christianity'. Adherents of all three schools could draw on a developing professional literature and new training institutions seeking to produce new types of ordinand more suited to the city than the Oxbridge graduate.

In all three cases the contrast between the image of the leafy Edwardian vicarage of the shires and the sometimes squalid condition of church plant in the east end can also suggest a ministry struggling against difficulties created at least in part by a failure to divert the church's resources to the most deserving pastoral initiatives.

At various points Bethnal Green experienced all three strategies. But this was chiefly because, half a century before, the parish had been already identified as the quintessential example of the pastoral challenge of the city. Today I will focus on the first initiative to 'tackle' Bethnal Green, using the remarkable sources that survive related to this initiative: among them parliamentary papers, acts of parliament, charity reports, personal correspondence and large deposits of letters in the papers of the bishops of London at Lambeth Palace Library, as well archives in the remarkable Tower Hamlets Local History Library. The initiative deserves attention not just since it is so well documented: indeed this documentation reflects the fact that from the outset it was recognised as representing a landmark in the Anglican response to the city. As one historian has noted, 'For the first time, the reformed Church of England systematically tried to target an urban area in distress'.

Posterity has not been kind in its judgements on the initiative. At the end of the century, Charles Booth could write that Bethnal Green was the scene of “wasted effort to such an extent that even now ‘remember Bethnal Green’ is apt to be thrown in the teeth of those who try to inaugurate any great movement in the city on behalf of the church”; many modern historians see it as coming “close to disaster”. So what happened in Bethnal Green, and does it raise issues for us today?

I

The early 19th-century parish of St Matthew’s Bethnal Green presented a daunting pastoral challenge. The parish itself was barely sixty years old, having been carved out of St Dunstan’s Stepney in 1742 as Bethnal Green’s population grew to more than 15,000 as journeymen weavers and silk workers, many of them from immigrant stock, settled in its western reaches (hence the siting of the church). By 1821, as a result of very rapid growth in the first thirty years of the nineteenth century, the population stood at over 45,000, rising to 62,000 ten years later, making Bethnal Green the second most populous parish in London. Alongside growth, however, had come decay. The removal of import restrictions on silk in 1826 had contributed to falling wages and rising unemployment. Even without this, most residents inhabited small, badly-built homes, suffering from an almost total lack of drainage and sewerage; in 1848 the average life-expectancy of a parishioner was sixteen.

Anyone who saw Patsy Kensit’s *Who Do You Think You Are?* will be familiar with the pastoral challenge this posed the parish church by the end of the 1820s, left to one or two curates of an absentee hunting parson. One of these was Kensit’s ancestor James Mayne, who might conduct up to forty christenings, or as many as ten funerals in a single day (the details of Mayne’s career can be followed in an excellent article by Richard Palmer published on the website of the Clergy of the Church of England Database).

Now the early nineteenth century saw a recognition that industrialising cities required increased pastoral attention, and as a result authorities gradually zoomed in on the parish of Bethnal Green. In 1828, after protracted negotiations with the absentee incumbent, the parish acquired a chapel of ease: St John’s on the Green, partly paid for by a share of a national million pound church-building grant drawn from war reparations. The advent of a new and energetic bishop of London, Charles James Blomfield, brought further impetus, when in April 1836 he established the unprecedented Metropolis Church Extension Fund to raise contributions to match redistributed ecclesiastical monies to finance 50 new churches in the capital. This was wholly unprecedented: the great Scottish advocate of establishment, Thomas Chalmers, complained that if Blomfield insisted ‘on expatiating over the whole metropolis by building fifty churches at once, his whole scheme will be nothing more than a devout imagination, impossible to be realized.’ But Chalmers was wrong: it ultimately yielded 78 rather than the originally projected 50 churches, a significant share of more than 200 new ecclesiastical buildings Blomfield would consecrate during his 20-year London episcopate.

Yet an even more ambitious and specific scheme followed. The promoters of the Metropolis Churches Fund wondered whether donations might be more forthcoming for more localised initiatives: and thus in 1839 was born the Bethnal Green Churches and Schools fund, led by the banker William Cotton with Blomfield's full support. The scheme aimed to establish no fewer than 10 new districts within the parish, each equipped with church, school and parsonage house at a cost of some £75,000 (some £56 million in 2007 values). Within less than eighteen months the foundation stone of the first church to be erected, St Peter's Bethnal Green, was in place. The fund issued repeated appeals until 1853; and the following year a final report triumphantly reported that no less than £115,000 (£86 million), boosted by some £15,000 in responsive grants from the Ecclesiastical commissioners and Metropolis Churches Fund, and £3,500 from government or church education societies. Donors included the Bank of England, Brasenose College Oxford (the patron of St Matthews), the East India Company, alongside strikingly munificent individual contributions. Some were anonymous: 'commercial prosperity' gave £2,000, and a 'successful emigrant' £1,000; but among those named Sir Robert Peel had given £1,000 and Blomfield £745 (to the MCF overall, however, his personal donations amounted to £6,200); Cotton himself had paid for the erection of St Thomas Bethnal Green as a memorial to his son.

What had all this produced in terms of bricks and mortar? On 19 June 1850 the last of the ten projected churches was consecrated; all the churches were provided with parsonage houses, and seven schools had been constructed with three more in prospect. The 1850 ecclesiastical map of Bethnal Green thus offered a striking contrast with that of only twenty years before. In retrospect the ambition and execution of the scheme is breathtaking, not least in modern terms in keeping management costs at a minimum. From the mid-1840s its apparent success made Bethnal Green the model for a series of similar initiatives in Islington, St Pancras and Westminster. So why has the scheme to this day so often been regarded as a failure?

In part such perspectives reflect a general tendency too readily to read results through the eyes of late Victorians. They felt keenly the disappointment of pastoral ambitions shaped either by nostalgia for a mythical medieval age of faith and universal church attendance, or by expectations for the creation of a universally evangelised nation. To more informed (and jaundiced?) modern eyes rates of late Victorian church attendance are strikingly impressive, not least compared to the numbers involved in other voluntary associations in a great age for joining up to societies of every kind. This is true even in Bethnal Green, with one in ten of a population including numerous first generation migrants attending the Anglican churches in 1851, falling to 1 in 20 by the turn of the century. In Bethnal Green we are no doubt encouraged in a 'pessimistic' reading by the current condition of the 12 churches the parish boasted in 1850: while St Matthew, St John, St Peter and St

James the Less remain open for worship, St James the Great and St Bartholemew are now redeveloped as housing, while St Andrew, St Jude, St Matthias, St Philip, St Simon Zelotes and St Thomas have disappeared without trace. It is not immediately clear, however, that this should in fact be seen as evidence relevant to the success or failure of the scheme: it raises important questions about the time frame in which success and failure is to be judged, a point to which I will return later.

It is also important to recognise that the question at issue is not a straightforward one concerning the advisability of church extension versus other pastoral strategies less focused on bricks and mortar, as some commentators imply. For the Bethnal Green scheme recognised from the outset that church building of the kind instituted in the 1820s would not suffice: each church must have its school; the clergy must be resident in the parish and where possible be supported by curates and scripture readers; and indeed their presence would precede the arrival of the churches themselves. The 1851 report took a pride in personnel fully equal to that manifest in its account of buildings. It celebrated the fact that a parish served in 1839 by five clergymen and a single church school could now boast nineteen clergy, 9 scripture readers, 244 Sunday school teachers, 129 district visitors and a developed infrastructure of provident institutions and other ancillary church associations, as well as 6,000 children under Anglican instruction. In its integrated vision of institutions, mission and pastoral care (a key concern for Blomfield was the residence of clergy and the provision of an income which while not generous would give scope for charity), this was a scheme that aimed to do far more than simply add more spires to the London skyline.

The picture was certainly not all rosy, however. Nor were all contemporaries convinced. The scheme frequently attracted hostile press at the time, and one of the most memorable and frequently quoted indictments came from a cleric at its heart. In 1859 Timothy Gibson, appointed curate of St Matthews in 1842 offered the former secretary of the fund a detailed assessment of the pastoral merits of the clergy associated with each of the churches since his arrival. It does not make happy reading: as one commentator noted, the sins catalogued 'run the gamut of adultery, apostasy, simony, humbug and sheer idleness'. Only three churches get a pretty clean bill of health, Gibson noted empty churches and schools where politicking clerics preached millenarian sermons on the second French Empire, entrepreneurial clerics undercutting others in marriage fees, seduced and impregnated servants, self-indulgent ritual or doctrinaire high calvinism. Gibson concluded his letter: 'I heartily wish I could have given a more satisfactory [account] – but indeed I have "nothing extenuated nor set down in malice"'. However, one should note that his own St Matthew was one of the churches presented as a success, and a certain degree of schadenfreude colours a highly rhetorical performance. Gibson had two very significant biases. In the highly charged atmosphere of mid Victorian church party politics, his moderate evangelicalism had little time for churchmanship of different persuasions; and as curate of the mother church of the parish, he had particular reasons to resent the competition for funds that had arisen from the creation of the new districts.

This observation points to three key factors often overlooked in subsequent verdicts on the Bethnal Green experiment. First, the culture of church party shaped all contemporary judgments of success or failure, notably in both religious and non-religious newspapers at the time: either by introducing bias for or against High church-style ministries, or by generating strikingly different criteria by which success or failure was judged. This was all the more the case because, secondly, a model of what constituted a successful urban ministry was as yet hardly defined, in contrast to a wealth of guidance available to incumbents on how to run a rural Anglican parish. By the end of the century specialist urban ministers had emerged and actively sought the challenge of the slum: Gibson's indictment of his colleagues reflected the fact that Blomfield's limited endowments could not always prevent a Bethnal Green ministry appearing the incumbency of last resort: especially to a generation that had grown up with a decidedly different set of expectations of what it was to be a successful Anglican incumbent, even within the diocese of London, which at this date took in large tracts of rural Essex and Hertfordshire.

Did the Bethnal Green clergy represent a self-selecting group of clerics seeking the challenge of urban ministry, or with a strikingly different profile from those of the clergy more generally, whether by self selection or because they were chosen by others as particularly suited to the east end? Here we obtain what might seem a very eighteenth-century answer, in that a central part of the answer lies in questions of patronage rather than intended role. Derived as they were from the parish of Shoreditch, both the St Matthew's and St John's fell within the patronage of Brasenose College Oxford, and it is clear that this was by far the most important factor in determining the choice of incumbent: both the rector of St Matthew's from 1809 to 1861 and his predecessor, William Loxham, were Brasenose graduates, and so were all of the six curates of St John's up until the patronage of both livings was transferred to the bishop of London in 1843. Both college and incumbents were clear that the living was peculiarly unattractive; but demand for college livings exceeded supply. Yet patronage could work in complex ways, and the strength of BNC's connections with the north-west of England ensured that Bethnal Green received a string of Oxford graduates with disproportionate degree of exposure to city life: King, born on the Wirral had had his first living in Liverpool, where two of the six curates had been born; two others hailed from Chester, and the other was from Lancashire. Of the curates, two-thirds would go on to spend the majority of their subsequent careers in the city of London, suggesting that if not urban clergymen to begin with, they became so.

One might expect a very different picture for the district churches, and indeed such is the case. A number of factors were in operation here: from the outset the livings were in the gift of the bishop of London as a conscious element in the strategy to make pastoral progress in Bethnal Green, and Blomfield took his responsibilities seriously. He was nevertheless severely constrained in his ability to pick and choose both by the poverty of the livings (at first none worth more than £150 a year, and with a considerable portion of the fees for rites of passage mortgaged to the rector); by the difficult reputation of the parish both in health and social terms. In later years those who saw the Bethnal

Green scheme as a failure attributed this in part to the low calibre of the recruits Blomfield attracted to the parish, summed up in Gibson's verdict on one as a 'slug in the Lord's vineyard'. A consideration of the clerics CV's alone does not suggest that they were the dregs from the clerical barrel. Of the 15 clergy who held served the ten districts in their first decade, all but one were graduates, and of the graduates all but two were Oxbridge, in a period when many of the more demanding and poorly remunerated livings in the church were staffed by non-graduates. There are, moreover, some hints at least of the emergence of some sense of a type of clergyman suited to the urban context, or who sought out its peculiar challenge. Thus several of them were evangelicals ready to collaborate in controversial interdenominational and lay evangelistic initiatives such as the London City Mission despite their patron's lack of enthusiasm for such approaches. The fact that a third of the fifteen appointments of a conservative high-church bishop were clearly evangelicals, just as the fact that the seven clearly identifiable high churchmen included several of Tractarian inclination indicates that by the 1840s these groups were beginning to take up a disproportionate presence among the poorer urban parishes. Often exasperated by his appointments, Blomfield himself nevertheless often publicly defended both evangelicals and high churchmen against theological and ecclesiological driven criticism in Bethnal Green on the grounds of their outstanding pastoral labours, which suggests that he himself was not merely making the best of a bad job, but acknowledging the particular contribution men of such schools might make in this particular environment, not least through their willingness to mobilise in voluntary agencies. Hints of the later nineteenth century pastoral strategies outlined earlier are also apparent in specific CVs. Thus John Keane, curate of St Jude's, had spent his earlier career as a pioneer cleric in Australia, while James Coghlan of St James the Less had served in Canada. Like George Alston, who likened his experience tending to victims of the Cholera in 1849 to his memories of the quarterdeck of a man-of-war engaged in a full frontal assault during an earlier career as a midshipman, there is at least a suggestion that in this instance such 'non-traditional backgrounds' may have seemed positively desirable to the appointing bishop.

There is a long-standing trope that Anglicanism suffered in the urban context because clerical gentlemen were culturally cut off from the gentry class which sustained them in the countryside through collaboration in the exercise of class power and financial contributions. But while this may have been true elsewhere, it does not seem a very helpful explanatory model in Bethnal Green for a number of reasons. For one thing, for all the number of parishioners, there were few other parishes in the country with nineteen clergy in so small a geographical area. No clergyman could feel isolated here: the clergy were continually brushing up against each other. Occasionally this prefigured the team ministries which appeared in some industrial parishes later in the century, as the district clergy joined forces as a whole or in small groups to back in particular philanthropic appeals for relief for the local unemployed or diseased. But equally the interaction was often characterised by friction that generated some of the problems of which Gibson later complained.

Thirdly, causes of success and failure did not always lie in strategic issues such as choice of church site and ministerial style. They might instead be located in the intricate and to the subsequent researcher tedious nitty-gritty of the financial and constitutional relationship established between parish church and district church, rector and curate, vestry and churchwarden, or the unanticipated consequence of otherwise desirable reforms, such as the end to burial in churchyards on hygiene grounds which disrupted a key part of the parish economy. By 1869 St Jude's was already in disrepair; parsonages had no drains and the kitchen floor at St Simon's parsonage was of bare earth, covered in white mould when it was inspected at the end of the century. If we are to take lessons from such historical examples, it is important to pay attention to such issues rather than focusing only on the presence or absence of clerical zeal, or favourable pastoral sociology.

One might think that the lesson of the scheme is that money isn't everything, and that if the east end represents a peculiar pastoral challenge it is not one created by a historically uninterrupted tradition of continuous underfunding. But it is still oversimplistic to suggest that it is a straightforward example of money being spent unwisely. We must recognise that if some contemporaries at least took a more favourable view of the success of the Bethnal Green scheme than later commentators, this may not reflect wishful thinking or self-delusion so much as a different understanding of the pastoral challenge.

The scheme was formulated by men in their middle age in the 1830s, and would later be judged by a generation being only reaching maturity in the years after 1851. Early Victorians, who grew up in the shade of the French Revolution rather than the Great Exhibition had an utterly dissimilar framework of reference. It is striking how Cotton himself and his committee sought to assess the success or otherwise of their enterprise not primarily through church attendance or numbers of communicants, despite the emphasis on church building in the scheme, but concentrating on the impact on a wider community through the take up of rites of passage on the one hand, and the tone and atmosphere of the district on the other: the fact that people now felt safer walking the streets. They contrasted the first consecration of a church under the scheme when agitators had used 'fearful' language and driven an infuriated ox among the 900 children gathered from local schools, with the good order prevailing among a crowd including 7,000 pupils at the consecration of St Thomas. This in part reflected the outlook of a generation who thought vice and sin needed to be tackled, but not poverty per se, which only moral improvement could address, in contrast to a later generation whose incarnationalist theology encouraged much more direct concern with social issues and their place in pastoral strategy. But it also reflected the prior history of Bethnal Green itself, which in the first thirty years of the century acquired notoriety not only because of its burgeoning population, but on account of a reputation for immorality reinforced by parish institutions, charities and government effectively taken over by organised crime and protection rackets under the malevolent influence of Joseph Merceron, the godfather of Bethnal Green. Merceron had run houses of ill-repute while treasurer of the parish and diverted funds to his cronies; his resentment of the rector's attempts to drive him out led him to encourage rough sports in the churchyard to coincide with services. The rector was effectively driven from the parish in 1823 into a lifetime of non-residence after a

vestry meeting in which he was manhandled from the chair by heavies shouting 'I am going to piss, Mr Rector, I am going to shit', his supporters locked out of the election of officers, and then finally suffered the indignity of having the riot act read to control his behaviour. But King gloried in his martyrdom not least because he had already supped with devil, securing a doubling of his salary with Merceron's help a decade before. Nor was he alone; the curate he installed in his absence – James Mayne -- clearly had a working arrangement with Merceron; and Merceron himself had begun his criminal career as agent to a clerical landlord in the parish whom he assisted in defrauding a mentally handicapped parishioner of her inheritance. Alongside Merceron on a bench of magistrates working to license bawdy houses and drinking dens run by their friends in Shoreditch while refusing licences to more legitimate publicans were two more clergymen of the east end. It nevertheless needs to be remembered that it was the same group – including men like the brewer Robert Hanbury -- that in part financed the assault on vice and church extension of the next twenty years.

Now, as the present incumbent would no doubt ruefully testify, the more recent association of organised crime and the parish of St Matthew Bethnal Green in the era of the Krays, and occasional rough-handling of the clergy, might suggest a verdict of '*Plus ça change, plus c'est la meme chose*'. I can quite imagine Peter Ackroyd's vision of London haunted by mysterious local sensibilities accommodating this aspect of Bethnal Green's history. But there does in fact seem to have been a significant change in the 'feel' of the parish as experienced by mid-Victorians to which they genuinely believed the Bethnal Green scheme to have been a contributory factor. The institutionalised vice of the early nineteenth century, moreover, helps explain the importance attached to the institutional context of Bethnal Green religion -- as rival centres of influence with a concrete presence -- to give clergy on the ground institutional support which missionaries alone might have lacked. Do these perceptions of change reflect the creation of new solidarities and contexts for significant numbers of parishioners which should not be lightly dismissed? The church might have still struggled, but it was a more autonomous and active presence in the aftermath of the scheme than it had managed to be in the early nineteenth century. In a sense the changes of emphasis which led later generations of East End clergy to disparage their predecessors efforts, although on occasion hampered by the burden of the infrastructure bequeathed by them, may also have only have been possible on the back of immense amount of resource and energy mobilised by Blomfield and his allies.

And here I think is one potential source of resonance today: for how long should one assume a particular pastoral context or problematic will persist, and how far should pastoral strategies devised in response be expected to endure or answer, especially in a rapidly changing city context? Perhaps alongside the failure to identify a means of recruiting suitable clerical personnel, one 'mistake' in the Bethnal Green scheme was the expectation of permanence embodied in the building of churches, particularly in a local society whose continuity consisted not least in rapid social transformations affected by successive waves of immigration from Huguenots to Bangladeshis, and equally rapid transformations in the class composition of the community. The failure of pastoral effort may sometimes be due to a shelf life driven by a whole range of influences from social

change and intellectual trends to the detail of the parish economy. The extraordinarily rich documentary record of the Bethnal Green scheme which survives in London archives offers investigators the chance to explore such issues in a particularly well-equipped laboratory of the past.

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