

## Case Study: Finchley

In earlier discussions about the Building on History project we have identified six themes that appear to be of particular interest in linking the past and the present. What I'd like to do in this presentation is to introduce them for you by using a case study of Finchley. What I do want to do is to illustrate by this example how a fairly limited amount of historical research can nevertheless generate some interesting and significant context for contemporary ministry and church life.

In 1883, the then Bishop of London, John Jackson, reportedly spoke as follows:

The population of the Diocese during the last twelve or fourteen years has been increasing at the rate of 38,000 a year ... A very large proportion of the annual increase is being planted upon fresh ground ... It is covering the fields and market gardens in North and North-west Middlesex very rapidly.

Finchley was one of the many ancient villages in outer London that in the late nineteenth or earlier twentieth century were transformed into populous suburbs. As late as the 1861 census its population was a modest two and half thousand, some clustered around the medieval parish church of St Mary-at-Finchley, but the majority living in the more recent settlement of East End, now East Finchley, on the Great North Road a mile or so to the east. However, the coming of the railway to Finchley in 1867 initiated its transformation over the next few decades into a populous suburb with much hitherto agricultural land built over by the turn of the twentieth century.

Four new Anglican churches were opened in Finchley between the 1840s and the 1890s, Holy Trinity East Finchley in 1846; Christ Church North Finchley as a temporary building in 1864, and as permanent church in 1872; St Paul's Long Lane in 1886; and All Saints Durham Road in 1892. Two more were to follow in the early twentieth century, St Luke's and St Barnabas Woodside Park. In contrast to Bethnal Green all four of the Victorian churches remain as functioning parishes in the early twenty-first century, although St Luke's has fairly recently closed.

In developing this case study of Finchley, I have looked at Visitation Returns made to successive bishops of London preserved in the Fulham papers in Lambeth Palace library, together with Bishop Blomfield's correspondence from the 1840s and Bishop Frederick Temple's from the 1880s and 1890s. I have also seen a fascinating run of early twentieth century parish magazines from St Paul's Long Lane, which are still kept at the church and a file of correspondence from the records of the Incorporated Church Building Society relating to the building of that church in the mid-1880s. I have had limited time for research, and I am sure I have not by any means exhausted all the possible sources: for example I have yet to look at the Church Commissioners' files relating to the creation of the new parishes, and at references to Finchley from the religious census of 1851 and subsequent surveys of London churchgoing and religious practice. I also suspect the churches themselves may well continue to hold significant historical material in vestry cupboards.

So, to come to my six themes...

First, telling stories. Our view is that it is worthwhile for both clergy and congregations to learn something of the lives and experience of their predecessors, in order to get a sense of perspective on the present, and also to reflect on some of the long-term legacies of history that may still subtly shape the present. These stories may be positive or negative ones. Finchley in fact provides something of a textbook example of the failings of the unreformed parts of the Church of England in the earlier nineteenth century. Ralph Worsley, Rector of Finchley from 1794 to 1848, was also incumbent of Little Punton, Lincolnshire, and St Olave's York, a fairly spectacular example of pluralism, given the distances involved. There is no evidence that, even in his prime, Worsley performed his clerical duties with any particular energy, but his 1842 visitation return to Bishop Blomfield suggests that in his old age he had become perfunctory at best. There were also allegations that he had been co-habiting for twenty years with a woman to whom he was not legally married, but when the Bishop demanded an explanation it turned out that Worsley was now in a state of 'entire imbecility of mind'. Whatever the truth of the more lurid allegations against him, the fact a senile octogenarian could be left in nominal charge of a significant parish was a telling illustration of the weaknesses of the early nineteenth century church.

On the other hand Finchley also provides several stories that illustrate the capacity of the mid-nineteenth century church to renew itself. Charles Worsley, presumably a relative, was Ralph Worsley's curate in his declining years and clearly did an effective job. In particular, working with a local magistrate, he took the initiative in launching a campaign to build a new church to serve the people of East End, who were described as previously 'lamentably indifferent to all religious duties'. After Holy Trinity was opened in 1846, its first incumbent F.S.Green engaged in a conscientious campaign of parish visiting, and rapidly built up a thriving congregation. By 1855, the church, which had initially had a seating capacity of 437 had already been extended to enable it to accommodate 600. A similar pattern of very effective founding incumbencies, creating successful parishes in a short period of time, was evident in the work later in the century of Henry Stephens at Christ Church and Samuel Mayall at St Paul's. Stephens was especially enterprising, taking advantage of his church's proximity to the busy junction of Tally Ho Corner on the Great North Road to engage in open-air preaching, and setting up several mission halls in his parish. But one has a sense that Green, Stephens and Mayall were all hard acts to follow, and that later incumbents were never quite so successful. One suspects that in the immediately succeeding generation congregations suffered from nostalgia for a perceived lost golden age, but now that we have a much longer perspective, is there something to be learned from reflection on their pioneering spirit and methods?

Our second theme is secularization and religious change. The dominant impression is that in this period the Church of England proved strikingly successful in planting new churches in Finchley. However, the fact that the churches were flourishing does not mean that everyone attended them, although the population did appear respectable and well-disposed to Christianity. J.T. Lang, vicar of Christ Church, reported

to Bishop Creighton in 1900 that 'While people are very friendly the spiritual standard seems to be low, but the want of making real way suggests rather searching of hearts personally.' Nevertheless, while the glass could thus be perceived as half empty, it was also half full, and the limitations to the Church's achievement seemed to arise not from any inherent popular antipathy but from the constraints of its own personpower and pastoral resources in the face of scale of population growth. Those who minister today to the unchurched descendants of such parishioners may find it helpful to remind themselves that they are often dealing with people whose parents and grandparents also had little or no active tie to the church, rather than with those whose families have turned their backs on committed churchgoing in earlier generations

The third theme is migration, which also closely links the past to the present. An application in the 1880s for support for the building of St Paul's described the population as 'chiefly labourers, artizans and city clerks'. The former two categories still reflected Finchley's agricultural past, but the latter primarily would have been recent, if short range, migrants to the area, drawn by the convenience of the railway and the better quality of life in a semi-rural location compared to the inner suburbs. As is well known, the early twentieth century also saw substantial migration of the Jewish population of the East End northwards to Finchley and Temple Fortune and Golders Green immediately to the south. At Holy Trinity in 1883 the 'migratory condition of the poor and lower middle classes' was reported as an impediment to ministry. At St Paul's Samuel Mayall observed on this 1900 visitation return that the chief difficulty in the way of his ministry was 'The floating nature of the population and the impossibility of getting to know the people.' Present-day churches understandably feel that the diverse and mobile nature of the population their parishes represents a pastoral challenge, but they may draw some comfort and inspiration from the knowledge that this difficulty at least is nothing new.

Fourthly, what can we learn from past strategies for what is now called church planting? Why were churches originally sited where they are, and can a better understanding of the intentions of the original builders help to inform their present ministry? Should the church or the congregation come first? At Christ Church North Finchley, Henry Stephens appears to have found the initial rapid erection of a temporary building in 1864 followed only in 1872 by a permanent large church to have been a successful mechanism for building up a congregation. At All Saints Durham Road on the other hand, H.M. Collier, the vicar of Holy Trinity East Finchley, who had initial pastoral responsibility, regarded it as something of a mixed blessing that wealthy donors had forced his hand in obliging him to proceed to have a permanent building constructed immediately. He pointed out that he had originally intended to work All Saints as a mission church and complained to Bishop Temple in 1892:

The congregation will have to be created from the beginning, the vicar's original proposal to put up an Iron Church with a view to collect the congregation having been overruled by the conditions of some large donations.

Schools were usually prominent in mission strategies. Thus half a century earlier at Holy Trinity itself, the opening of the church was immediately followed by starting a school in a cottage, and launching an appeal for a proper school building. 'The CHURCH', a subsequent report proclaimed 'must be united with the SCHOOL'. The building was started in 1847 just a year after the church itself opened and was in 'active operation' the following year. The school was intended to be a place of moral and spiritual as well as academic and practical instruction, and it was hoped that non-churchgoing parents would be reached through their offspring.

Fifthly, how was the Victorian church financed, and how might we learn from it? Contrary to popular belief, the church has almost always been short of money, especially for less glamorous and conspicuous needs. A list of donors to the building of St Paul's Long Lane gives a valuable insight into the way that this church was funded. There were three large individual donors, one giving £1000, one £750, and one £660, while the Bishop of London's fund contributed £500. However the greater part the total cost of nearly £8000 was cumulatively raised by medium-sized donations of between ten shillings and a hundred pounds, along with some church collections, and the proceeds of a fund-raising bazaar. These could still be have been quite sacrificial contributions for individuals of limited means, bearing in mind that one should probably apply a multiplier of at least a hundred to get a sense of their value in twenty-first century money. The indications therefore are that this church was primarily made possible not by external philanthropy but by the strongly broadly based financial commitment of its middle-class and artisan congregation and by other nearby residents. However, although the capacity of the Victorian church rapidly to raise large sums of money for buildings was thus striking, its resources were by no means unlimited. Thus in his 1883 visitation return Henry Stephens reported a frenetic round of worship and pastoral activity at Christ Church, but when asked to identify impediments to his ministry highlighted 'Want of help – especially money – if I had the means I could remedy many defects'. The implication therefore is that it was easier to get people to contribute generously to one-off capital projects than to sustaining year on year parish ministry. My impression is that not much has changed in this respect.

Our final theme is relations with other Christian denominations. To a significant extent Nonconformists had pioneered Christian ministry in East and North Finchley before Anglican churches were established. The slide lists the dates at which the main chapels were built, showing that the Church of England was very far from being in a monopoly position. Responses varied, to some extent at least in line with churchmanship. The Wesleyans and Independents had opened chapels in East End and supported a school there before Holy Trinity was built. It therefore seemed rather ungracious of the High Church incumbent F.S.Green to complain in 1862 that 'The efforts of Dissent are always undermining the efforts of the clergy.' By contrast at Christ Church in 1883, the Evangelical Henry Stephens did not appear to be troubled by the presence of four dissenting chapels in his parish, and by the awareness that some church people, especially the poor, also attended the Wesleyan, Baptist or Congregationalist chapel. It was apparent that he was prepared to apply lessons learned from observing their ministry in order to make his own more effective. He was though more concerned by the efforts of the

Baptists to dissuade parents from bringing their children for church baptism. In 1900 Stephens's successor, J.T.Lang described relations with Nonconformists as 'very happy ... , without (I think) any compromise of principle'. This view was now shared by his counterpart at Holy Trinity, who claimed to be 'on cordial terms' with other Christian bodies, joining with them in practical activities, but not in any 'spiritual work'. Such evidence of grassroots cooperation in Finchley is interestingly at variance with perceptions of widespread confrontation between church and chapel at national level, especially when political and educational issues were at stake.

We hope that the project team, through such case studies and our wider historical expertise, will help to give a sense of the diverse historical experience characteristic of the church in London. We also aim to provide pointers and resources to help and inspire clergy and laypeople to look into the specificities of the history of their own parishes and church communities, and to build upon such knowledge in thinking about the present and the future.

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