



The Social History of St Nicholas' Church:

One Parish, Two Stories

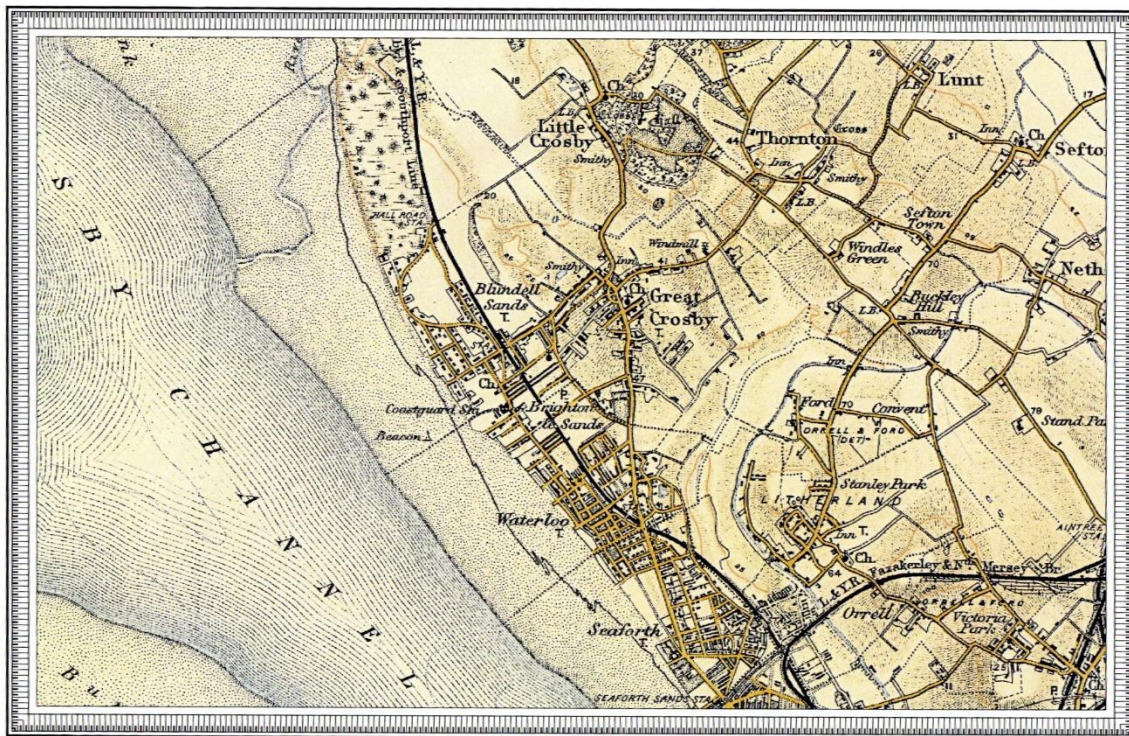
The history of the earliest years of the Parish of St Nicholas, covering the period from the 1850s to the first decade of the twentieth century, clearly shows its development from two very different roots: the settled, largely working class population of Little Brighton, later Brighton le Sands, to the south, for whom St Barnabas' School in what is now Warrenhouse Road was also their place of worship, and the more recent influx of the wealthy merchant and professional classes for whom the new suburb of Blundellsands began to be developed during the 1860s and for whom the Iron Church and then the current church were erected in the early 1870s. Early accounts, particularly the memoirs of Mr WE Tyson, a long-serving member of St Nicholas' Church throughout the first six decades of the twentieth century, convey in graphic terms the marked class differences between the denizens of Little Brighton and Blundellsands. Mr Tyson's comparison of the social divisions of the parish to the three classes of

railway carriage of the time is particularly telling (see: The Social History of St Nicholas' Church, the Early Years, St Nicholas' website). Two stories from the archive present us with revealing glimpses of life at the furthest ends of the parish.

The Story of Brighton Road (Jubilee Road) Mission

The early years of St Nicholas' Church were a time of rapid population growth throughout the parish. After the building was consecrated in 1874 work began almost immediately to extend and enhance it. As early as October 1880, the Vicar also spoke of the need to open a Mission House in Brighton Road. A committee was appointed to manage this, with the cost to be met by a special collection in church and working expenses to be paid out of the Parochial Fund. Little further reference to a Brighton Road Mission House appears in parish records until 1903, when the magazine reports:

“The Brighton Road Mothers’ Meeting held their treat at Southport on 2nd July. After a sail on the lake, donkey rides etc, came tea at Messrs Rowntree’s Botanical Gardens. After a look at the shops, the party left by the 9.30pm train for Blundellsands, in the best of spirits for their holiday, the weather being a good friend. 26 members went”.



Ordnance Survey Revised New Series 1902-1903

The same year, the Vicar pointed out that there would soon be a population of 400 in Brighton Road alone and that the present accommodation “in a cottage” was quite inadequate. The Church Council duly agreed to the formation of a sub-committee to arrange for the erection of a suitable building for a Sunday School and Mission Room. The following year, however, we also read in the Church Council minutes for October that “the Vicar stated he was starting a children’s service on Sunday afternoons for children of better class”.

For the next four decades the Brighton Road Mission seems to have played a thriving, if separate, part in the life of the parish of St Nicholas’. During the First World War, when the Third Battalion of the South Lancs Regiment was stationed in Brooke Road, the Brighton Road Soldiers’ Institute was a considerable success and, in 1921, A Men’s Club was launched.

The Mission continued to flourish; 180 children attended the Sunday school, 85 of whom came from Brighton Road alone, and, at a Council meeting in 1922, the Vicar clearly stated the need for more room. He pointed out that, twenty years ago, the building had been bought for £300, but now it needed to be extended for more Sunday school classes. The clubs for men and youths were flourishing but “lacked spiritual power” and he very much wished to have a Sanctuary there, where Holy Communion could be celebrated at the evening service. A large part of the cost had already been found, the men of the Mission would help raise money “by entertainments” and the children by collections. The vote in favour of the scheme was 16-1. On 19th October 1923 the extended building was opened by no less a person than the Bishop. By 1926, however, further extension was considered necessary; the hall held 110 people and often 130 attended Sunday evening services.

In spite of this obvious success, however, there might also have been a sense that something needed to be done to bridge the social gulf between Church and Mission. Although it is unwise to carry speculation too far, this, perhaps, was behind the suggestion made at a Council meeting in 1932 that, at a date to be arranged, members should officially attend an evening service at Brighton Road Mission.

A short section from a brief history of St Nicholas Day School, written in 1953 by the retiring Headmaster, Henry N Davey, throws an interesting light on this subject. Commenting on the development of Church–School relations from the period when he took over as Head in 1925 to the 1950s, he remarks rather tartly that, in 1925, the school was far from being an integral part of the Church in Blundellsands. “It was an activity very much

on its circumference and many of the well-to-do members of its congregation who sent their children to boarding schools never even knew there was a St Nicholas' Day School in Warrenhouse Road. The village children's Church life was very ill-organised and neglected, the Church's emphasis did not touch them"

Between 1925 and 1935, however, Mr Davey noted a demographic change in the area: "...smaller houses sprang up in large numbers and a three thousand parish increased gradually to ten thousand. Some of the residential families across Warren Road and in the Hall Road area began to migrate and the personality of the congregation changed to an admixture of many well-to-do families with upper working class folk". He goes on to describe in much more optimistic terms a steady coming together of church and school during this period and continuing throughout the war, largely through the medium of music and the growth of a children's choir, trained by himself, which sang regularly in church, augmenting the church choir and, presumably, bringing at least some of their parents with them.

Routine references to the Mission, (from 1936 the Jubilee Road Mission) in the magazine and Council minutes from the rest of the decade suggest that it continued to be seen as an active part of wider parish life as a whole and was supported as such. We read of the work of its Social Committee to arrange social evenings to draw people together and add to Mission funds, and of a gift of caps and gowns for the Mission choir, made by the Parochial Working Party. One particularly generous gift, from a Mrs Buckley, was of a silver urn and two chalices. In July 1939, as war approached, the Church Hall was cleaned and at the same time, the Mission was also renovated and cleaned.

The place of Charming Manners: an interlude

At the opposite end of the parish, as the Church Council took the decision to attend a service at Brighton Road Mission, which continued, meanwhile, on its busy but essentially humble way, scandal briefly rocked Blundellsands. The following is an extract from an interview with St Nicholas' Vicar during the later years of the twentieth century, the Revd Roy Baker. The interview, which includes fascinating details about the 1932 scandal, appeared in the May 1996 edition of Livewire, an Anglican publication:

"'Charming Manners' was the title of a novel published in 1932 that brought down the wrath of Blundellsands on one of its curates, a certain Joseph McCulloch.

If any parish had a golden age, it was, for St Nicholas', the early part of this century. The great houses still stood, the captains of the shipping and cotton industries worshipped in its pews and the Churchwardens wore tails on a Sunday! The Vicars, Wardens and their ladies dined together each month and, after the Ladies had withdrawn, the gentlemen settled the parish business over port....

'Charming Manners' hit the parish like a bombshell. Within weeks it had been devoured by the denizens of Blundellsands, who quickly realised that it was a complete lampoon of the parish and of themselves. The characters and place names were so thinly disguised that they caused uproar as did, for its day, its mildly risqué nature. No-one escaped. The Vicar of the day, the Revd B Selwyn Smith, became the Revd Edgar Gordon Thomas, a man 'with a genius for interfering. A proud and tactless man, if he had once been a power for the cause of good, for the cause of God, he had long since ceased to be so!'

The 'loathed Vicar' as he was described by the Curate, hit the roof as he found himself described as 'changing his smile as he passed over the railway bridge' from Crosby to Blundellsands. So St Agatha's, Merribank became the downfall of Joseph McCulloch, who was sent down by the Vicar and PCC. Later in life he became Rector of St Mary-le-Bow in Cheapside, and will be remembered for his famous arguments with Malcolm Muggeridge on black and white television broadcasts from that church".



The characters in this book are completely fictitious,
and if any of the names are actual, it is without
intention.
Though, however, they are fictitious, they are none
the less typical.
J. M.

As the author of the Livewire article comments, many may doubt the complete accuracy of the claim that “the Vicar ministered to a church of tea parties, dances and bridge drives”. Revd Baker himself, however, somewhat wryly admits in the same interview that, “not being an Oxford man”, the parish would certainly “not have come his way”. Meanwhile, the prompt response of the Vicar and Churchwardens, as reported in the Church Council minutes from 18th October 1932, gives some idea of the depth of the offence the novel had caused. As a result of their actions, the “late Curate, Mr McCulloch, tendered his resignation on 22nd September last, giving three months notice.” His resignation had been “promptly accepted and his services dispensed with there and then”. He had been given a cheque for £62-10-0d, “being three months stipend to 31st December next”. The Council “strongly endorsed” the actions taken by the Vicar and Wardens.

Brighton Road Mission: Conclusion

Neither Church Council minutes nor the magazines of the first years of the war seem to provide any hint of what was to come for the Mission. References sometimes reflect details of daily life as they were affected by the war; for example in 1941 it is reported that, although evening services in the church had had to be brought forward to 3.30pm, they could continue at the normal time at the Mission, which it had been possible to black out. On other occasions they are reassuringly normal: in 1942, whist drives, organised by the Knitting Party, had been able to raise “a considerable sum” for the work in Jubilee Road.

Ominously, however, at the Annual General Meeting held in February 1944 the Vicar expressed concern about the costs of upkeep of the Jubilee Road Mission. Mr Tyson went on to express concern to the Church Council that necessary repairs would cost £40, while a further £100 would need to be spent on it in two or three years time. By the end of the year, we learn that a deputation had been formed to meet the Church Council and discuss the proposal to close the Mission. Members included Mrs Brew, Miss Mary and Miss Martha Brew, Mrs Walsh, Mrs Eilbeck and Mrs Wright. These ladies were all described as living in or near Jubilee Road and had stated that the Mission was important to them.

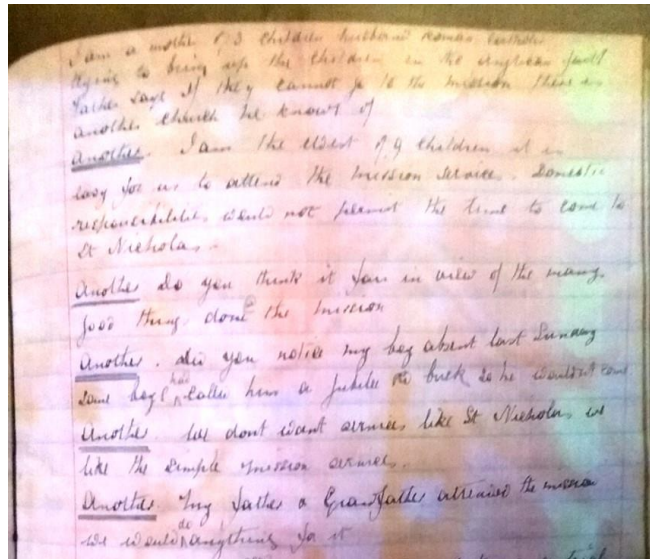
In January 1945 the deputation attended the Council meeting. The minutes of this discussion are unusually full and, in places, poignant. The points raised by the deputation were addressed to the Chair in the form of questions and answers. They are worth quoting as recorded:

"I am a mother of 13 children, husband Roman Catholic. I am trying to bring up the children in the Anglican faith. Father says if they cannot go to the Mission, there is another church he knows of"

Another: "I am the eldest of 9 children. It is easy for us to attend the Mission services. Domestic responsibilities would not permit the time to come to St Nicholas' "

Another: "Do you think it is fair in view of the many good things about the Mission?"

Another: "Did you notice my boy absent last Sunday? Some boys had called him a Jubilee Road buck, so he wouldn't come"



Another: "We don't want services like St Nicholas'. We like the simple mission services"

Another: "My Father and Grandfather attended the Mission. We would do anything for it"

Finally, the members of the deputation requested an extension of time, "as a trial".

In response, the Vicar referred to the estimated costs of keeping the Mission going, also pointing out that attendance at services there was in decline. The Mission, he suggested, had served its purpose in a changing parish, but now only served one street, of which half the population anyway were Roman Catholic. Its continued existence "divides the parish unnecessarily" and it would be better if all, including Jubilee Road, should worship at St Nicholas'. Mention was made of the Nativity Plays which had been held at Christmas time, the Vicar hoping to have more such events in which all could take part.

Further exchanges show the polarised nature of opinion, one person, presumably from the church, declaring a Sunday school at the Mission "redundant", while another spoke positively of the recent establishment of a rota system of sides men, which was "helping to break down the social barrier". Someone else expressed their surprise that it could be thought that the time had come for "fusion", at which point the meeting was sharply reminded of its starting point, the cost of repairs to the buildings.

Finally, the deputation left the room while the decision was made. The request to defer closure was rejected by eighteen votes to five. A second vote agreed unanimously that the Mission should be closed from the end of Lent. The deputation then returned, to be told that the decision would be communicated to them. The archive does not record their response.

It is difficult to decide from a twenty-first century perspective how exactly to interpret the fate of the Jubilee Road Mission. Was it simply an outmoded relic of a bygone era, costly to maintain in an age of post-war austerity and out of place in a changing, more egalitarian age? Or does its closure betray an unfeeling indifference to the needs of a small community modern pundits might characterise as “left behind”? What became of those people for whom it was still an important part of everyday life? Some, we know, did eventually worship at St Nicholas’, although what proportion is not clear. The names of two who did, however, are familiar to some longstanding members of the present congregation. Miss Mary and Miss Martha Brew are remembered with affection, sitting every week in their regular pews near the front of church until well into the 1980s.



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