

A Glimpse of its History

by

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The Beginning

In 1840 a Liverpool businessman, William Potter, obtained permission through an Act of Parliament to build a church "in the township of Claughton-cum-Grange in the County of Chester."

Mr Potter bought a piece of land on the "south side of the road leading from Birkenhead to Oxton" from a Mr Ball and his son who had originally purchased a large area of Claughton in November 1836 from a Welshman named Price.

The church was finished in 1849 and opened for worship. It flourished from the beginning, although it was not consecrated for five years. The building had cost £9,000 to erect and when Mr Potter got into financial difficulties the building and land reverted to Mr Ball. A public appeal was then made to raise money to purchase the building for £4,000. In the appeal it was made clear that the church was to be "dedicated to the preaching of Evangelical and Protestant Truth in perpetuity." The money was raised, the congregation contributed £1,200 of this and a board of trustees made up of three clergy and four laymen were appointed to oversee the church.

As Mr Ball senior died at the time Mr Potter went bankrupt, there were legal problems and the building was not consecrated until Friday 3rd March 1854 when Bishop John Graham D.D. performed the ceremony.

The land on which Christ Church was built was in the parish of St Oswald in Bidston and remained within the boundary until 1876. Then the new parish of Christ Church was formed from parts of St Oswald's, St John's, St Saviour's and St Catherine's parishes.

Why Claughton-cum-Grange?

The Wirral peninsula was divided into districts many centuries ago. The letters 'ton' at the end of a name probably mean a village or small town. Thus we have Storeton, Oxton and Claughton. Grange means a farm or centre where grain was stored. There was a Grange Farm near the top of Grange Road which supplied the priory at Woodside with grain. From the elongated shape of the district of Claughton cum-Grange it would seem that the area of the Grange Farm was added to the district of Claughton making Claughton-cum(with) Grange. The boundary line between the districts of Oxton and Claughton-cum-Grange runs along Slatey Road, Bessborough Road, Bennetts Hill, Claughton Firs, Palm Hill, Palm Grove and along Shrewsbury

Road to Claughton Village. Thus, Christ Church stands in a corner of the district of Claughton very close to the boundary with Oxton.

The Building of Christ Church

The land on which Christ Church stands was originally part of monastic property and belonged to the monks in the Priory near Woodside. When Henry VIII closed the Priory he sold the land to Ralph Worsley who had been a page at his court. Ralph Worsley's daughter married Thomas Powell, a merchant in Liverpool and in 1713 the land was sold by the Powell's to John Cleveland. His daughter married Francis Price and a large part of the land on which Birkenhead was built remained in the Price family for over 100 years. In November 1836, a Mr Ball purchased thirteen acres and three perches of land for £7195-15-0 from Mr Price, including several cottages. He then sold William Potter a portion of the land on the west side of Slatey lane. This lane ran from near the Grange Farm to the stone quarries just beyond our church. It was a very narrow track and was widened about the time the church was built.

The outside of the original church building was shaped differently at the east end. The present cloakrooms, kitchen, staircases, organ chamber and choir vestry were added later.

The church was built of red sandstone from the quarries nearby and finished in 1849. It was the largest church to be built in Wirral and was designed by Robert William Jearnard, an architect from London.

It had 1209 sittings - 414 were free and were "to remain unappropriated forever." The pews and free sittings have no distinctive difference in appearance except the former have very low doors. The architectural style is of the date of the latter part of the reign of Edward I. The reading desk and the clerk's desk were on the south side of the chancel and the pulpit which had carved canopies, pendants, and quatrefoil panels, on the north side.

The pulpit was much higher than the present one and Canon Robson commented on how far away from the people he felt when preaching.

The organ and choir were in the gallery at the west end of the church. The crypt room was used as a school and had desks arranged for 100 infants, 200 girls and 370 boys - a total of 760 children. The day school in Borough Road did not even open until 1880.

There were three entrances to the church; through the west door to the Nave and the Nave Gallery, through two entrances at the North and South sides of the church to the North and South Galleries and transepts and to the school room - these latter entrances are rarely used today.

The church was lit by gas until 1899 when a faculty to install electric light was given and the church changed to electric light on 31st January 1900.

The Opening of Christ Church

From The Claughton Messenger 1903:

"The unconsecrated building was opened by licence on Sunday 25th February 1849.

"The first sermon was preached by Rev Canon Knox and was based on Psalm 122, verse 1. In the evening, Rev W.F.Taylor preached on 1 Kings 8, verse 27.

"There was a distinctly evangelical ring to both sermons and 'no uncertain sound' has been heard within the church from that day." The first trustees were:-

- *Rev Hugh Stowell*
- *Rev Richard Paul Blakeney*
- *Mr Palmer Palmer*
- *Mr Benjamin Darbyshire*
- *Mr John Shepard*
- *Mr Philip Finch Curry*

The Diocese of Chester in the 19th Century

The Diocese had been created in 1541 partly from Lichfield and partly from York Dioceses. The southern boundaries were more or less as they are today but in the north they extended as far as the lake District. The Diocese was in the Province of Canterbury but was transferred to York in 1542. In 1847, two years before Christ Church opened, the northern part of the Diocese was given to the Diocese of Carlisle and East Lancashire went to the newly created Diocese of Manchester.

Until 1880, when Liverpool Diocese was formed, churchwardens used to attend Saint Nicholas' Church in Liverpool for the annual Archdeacon's Visitation.

Bishop Sumner

In 1828 John Bird Sumner became Bishop of Chester and stayed for twenty years, when he was translated to Canterbury. He had a profound effect on the Diocese. When he came, the church was not very alive. Some vicars and rectors did not live near their churches and only visited the parishes occasionally, leaving their curates to conduct the weekly services. Rural deans had no special function and parishioners on the whole were ignorant of the faith. Few could read, even if they could afford a Bible.

Bishop Sumner and his brother, later Bishop of St Asaph, were at Cambridge at a time when Samuel Wilberforce and Charles Simeon, two great evangelical theologians, had a great influence.

When John Sumner came to Chester, he set to work to bring the Gospel to the ordinary man in the street and make the church relevant to the needs of the times.

He insisted that all vicars stayed in their parishes and gave rural deans a place in the structural oversight of the local churches. Rural deans had to meet the clergy of the deanery several times a year and report back to the Bishop.

Bishop Sumner saw the population of his large Diocese increasing rapidly, especially in the new manufacturing areas, including Liver-pool and Birkenhead. He appealed to the businessmen whose wealth was increasing under the Industrial Revolution, to build churches in the new towns springing up. Thus it was that many churches like our own were financed and built up by private businessmen and then given to the Church.

When Sumner left for Canterbury, Chester Diocese, though smaller, was well organised and the Gospel was being preached far more effectively.