

Barnet & District Local History Society

THE CHURCH OF ST MARY THE VIRGIN, MONKEN HADLEY

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Hadley Church. Middlesex.

1. We are fast approaching the 500th anniversary of an important event in the history of St Mary's Church, Monken Hadley. Exactly what happened in 1494 is not clear, but the distinctive inscription over the West Door of the church shows that something significant took place in that year. The inscription shows the date in archaic arabic numerals, with "half eights" instead of fours. On either side of the date are heraldic emblems, a quatrefoil and a bird's wing, believed to be those of Sir Thomas Lovell, a senior figure in the government of Henry VII. It is assumed that Sir Thomas Lovell was a benefactor in the rebuilding of the church, as he is known to have been elsewhere. Evidence from contemporary wills, mentioned below, suggests that the period of rebuilding extended over a number of years to around 1500. Perhaps, therefore, the inscription can be regarded as a sort of foundation stone, marking the beginning of the rebuilding of the church, in the form that has come down to us half a millennium later.

2. The late 15th century building that has come down to us today was not the first ecclesiastical building on the site. It is generally accepted that a chapel of some kind existed at Hadley from the middle of the 12th century. When Geoffrey de Mandeville, first Earl of Essex, endowed his new Monastery of Walden in Essex in 1136, he included "the hermitage of Hadley with communal pasture in my park in which the hermitage is situated". A few years later, Gilbert Foliot, Bishop of London, in a charter dating from around 1175, confirmed to the Abbot and Monks of Walden their ownership of 12 churches, including that of Hadley. The manor and church of Hadley remained in the ownership of the Abbey of Walden until the dissolution of the monasteries in 1539. In its early years, the church at Hadley is thought to have been more a chapel for the use of the Monks of the Hermitage, than a parish church in a recognisable modern sense. The name "Monken Hadley" is a reminder of the Hermitage. "Hadley" is thought to derive from Saxon words meaning "high clearing": the present church stands at a point some 400 ft. above sea level.

3. Nothing remains of the building or buildings which served as the "monks church" before the late 15th century rebuilding. Or almost nothing. There is a brass in the present church, to the left of the altar in the Chapel of St Catherine, which is dated 1444 and presumably came from the earlier building. A will dated 1418 provides for its author, Roger Grene, a resident of "Hadley near Barnet" to be buried in the chancel of St Mary's church.

4. Wills from later in the 15th century and early in the 16th century support the evidence from the date inscription that rebuilding was in progress during the years immediately before and after 1500. Walter Turnor, in his will dated 1494 or 1495, leaves money "for the building of the church of St Mary of Monkyhadley". In 1503, John Goodere leaves money towards "the making of the first floor of the steeple in the said church" which he refers to as the church of St Mary and St James. (The Abbey of Walden was dedicated to God, St Mary and St James.) As late as 1506 or 1507 John Wright left money for the "building of the church".

5. The building which arose in the years around 1500 seems to have come down to us, through a series of restorations, unchanged in its essentials. In his substantial book "Monken Hadley",

published in 1880, the then Rector, Frederick Charles Cass, describes the church as "constructed of flint, with stone quoins [stones at the angles of the walls] and mullions [columns dividing the windows], ... in the form of a latin cross, [consisting] of a square embattled tower, over which the ivy luxuriantly clusters, with a turret at the south west angle, of a nave with two side aisles, north and south transepts, and a chancel". A vestry had been added in the angle between the chancel and the north transept in 1848. An engraving which was published in the "Topographer" for August 1789 appears to be the earliest surviving view of the church. At that time there was no trace of the ivy referred to by Cass. The ivy which he knew survived till 1931 when the threat it posed to the condition of the stonework must have been regarded as too great a price of pay for the picturesque effect that Cass admired.

6. A number of sketches date from the few years following the "Topographer" engraving, including two by the youthful J M W Turner, done in 1793, when he was staying at the Beacon House next to the church. Turner's sketches depict a building instantly recognisable as the church we need today, albeit in a setting made a little unfamiliar by foreground details such as crazily lolling headstones in the churchyard.

7. By the time the rebuilding of St Mary's church was complete, early in the 16th century, the rule of the Abbey of Walden over the affairs of the parish had not long to run. On the Dissolution of the Monasteries in 1539, the Abbey of Walden and its possessions passed into the ownership of Thomas Audley, a prominent supporter of Henry VIII. The former estates of the Abbey appear to have been soon broken up. The church and manor of Hadley became a separate parcel of property that passed from Sir Thomas through various hands, including those of the Goodyere family whose forbear (spelt without a 'y') was one of the benefactors at the time of the rebuilding. The emblem of the Goodyere family, a partridge with an ear of corn in its beak, appears on a pillar capital near the pulpit.

8. In 1573, Robert Staunford, a member of a family then prominent in the locality, conveyed various property associated with the manor of Hadley, including "the free chapel called Monken Hadley" to William Kympton and his son, Robert

Kympton, London merchants. From about this time forward, the historical emphasis tends to move from the noblemen and lesser potentates who were responsible for the founding of the first churches at Hadley, and who traded the church and manor as a piece of property, to the rectors who presided over the operation of St. Mary's as a parish church. Cass notes that little is known of the various medieval and tudor chaplains, vicars, curates and rectors of Monken Hadley, until we reach Barnard Carrier, appointed to the living by William Kympton in 1580. Names crop up at uneven intervals in wills and other documents, starting with Henry, chaplain in 1244. Robert Hill was chaplain in 1494; by 1500 he is referred to as Sir Robert Hill, Vicar. The dates show that he was in post while the rebuilding of the church was in full swing, but we appear to know nothing else about him.

9. Barnard Carrier is the first incumbent of St Mary's about whom we have any detailed information. The terms on which he was appointed by William Kympton stated that he was to "bear fealty to the said William; ... demean himself well in his life and conversation; ... perform Divine Offices and administer the Sacraments as he ought; ... keep the Chancel in repair and pay 26s. 8d. to William and his heirs, out of which William was to pay back 6s. 8d. for his tithes". Cass observes that despite these apparently strict conditions, Carrier must have found to preferment to his liking, as he remained in office until his death some 40 years later in 1618 or 1619.

10. From about this time forward, the record of the church and the parish is much more complete. A register of births, marriages and deaths was begun by Barnard Carrier's successor, Ely Tournor. From 1666 there are Vestry Books recording the decisions of the vestry, a form of parochial council. We learn of various benefactors, one of the most important at the time of Carrier and Tournor being Thomas Emerson. He was briefly patron of the living in the 1620s, but was a benefactor before becoming patron. One of his gifts was the Register Book itself in which, in 1624, Ely Tournor had to record his burial. A note was made in the Register Book of the other benefactions of Thomas Emerson. As well as a gift of money to be invested for the poor of the parish, Emerson "beautified the chancel and both the aisles and the whole body of the church with wainscot pews and ceiled the church with wainscot". He also provided a screen between the chancel and the

church; a pulpit; a font cover; a clock and clockhouse; a communion table; various soft furnishings; and three items of communion plate (further mentioned later on).

11. It is worth a mention that Ely Tournor later fell foul of the political and religious turmoil of the Civil War years. He seems to have been removed from office in 1643 at the instigation of Parliamentary sympathizers. He continued to live locally and he apparently carried out some religious duties at South Mimms before being buried at Hadley in 1654.

12. Cass remarks of Emerson's "improvements" that "what the eyes of simple Ely Tournor regarded with complacency would have met with unreserved condemnation in our own day [1880]". He remarks that the wainscot pews symptomized an age when parishioners were permitted to "fence off....unsightly enclosures for the benefit of themselves and their families, and to erect galleries here, there and everywhere, in defiance of the most elementary principles of architectural design". By the time a major restoration was undertaken in 1848-50, there were three galleries, on the north and south sides of the church and at the west end, under the tower. These are visible in a drawing of the interior which was done in 1848, presumably as a record of how things were before the new work began. The gallery on the south side was built in 1680 by Henry Coventry, who had been a senior minister under Charles II. In 1725, Percival Chandler was given permission to raise the north wall of the church, presumably involving total reconstruction of the lower slope of the roof, to allow installation of a second gallery. In 1776, the third gallery was built by the proprietor of a local school "the better to accommodate the poorer sort of people in their attendance at divine worship".

13. The restoration of 1848-50 was carried out by a prominent architect of the day, G E Street. A stained-glass window records the benefactors who made it possible. The major changes were removal of the galleries, wainscot pews and ceilings in the main body of the church; the raising of the floor level in the chancel; and the widening of the north and south aisles by demolishing and rebuilding the side walls 18 inches further out. A comparison of the appearance of the church in the "Topographer" engraving with that of the church today shows how this widening has reduced the

slope of the roof and made room for a window in the west end of the north aisle.

14. The raising of the floor level in the chancel is regarded by some commentators as regrettable, on the grounds that it interferes with the original 15th century proportions and means that, for example, the piscina in the chancel is unsuitably close to the ground. One imagines that concern for historical authenticity was given little weight by those who took the decision to raise the profile of the chancel, both literally and metaphorically. There are probably not many people today, 150 years later, who would wish to undo this aspect of the 1848 restoration.

15. Alterations and modifications after 1850 have been less fundamental than those of earlier centuries. The remainder of the 19th century saw enlargement of the 1848 vestry and the rebuilding in 1855 of the south west porch. The latter was in memory of Rector George Proctor's son, an army chaplain who died of illness at Scutari during the Crimean War.

16. At various times in the 19th and 20th centuries heating was installed and improved, a modification that, from the users' point of view, must rank as one of the most significant since the building of the church. As recently as 1930, the church still had no electric light, being lit by candles. The then Rector's attempt to instal modern lighting gave rise to vigorous opposition from some parishioners, resolved only by an action in the consistory court. The court found in favour of the Rector. It acknowledged that candles were more effective aesthetically but it gave more weight to the view of the Rector that electric lighting would be cheaper, safer and more efficient in the fulfilment of the church's primary function.

17. Throughout the present century there have been a series of improvements and restorations, such as the installation of the present choir stalls as a memorial to Rector Stubbs who died in 1920; the installation of the present east window in 1952, the same year as the presentation of the highly ornate wooden font cover; the refacing of the West Doorway in 1958 and the re-establishment in the same year of the Chapel of St Catherine, in the south transept. The most recent restoration of the church was carried out in the years 1977-80 and is commemorated by a stone

inscription set near the West Door. Extensive work was done to repair exterior stonework, modernise the heating and lighting and redecorate the interior. An ornate brass chandelier was donated by Lord Carr, former Home Secretary, and his wife, who were parishioners for many years, in memory of their son, killed in a road accident. It hangs at the west end of the church under the tower, a few feet from the 15th century font which represents the opposite end of the 500 year history of the present St Mary's church.

The Beacon

18. One of the most distinctive features of the exterior of St Mary's church is the cresset mounted on top of the stair turret of the tower. Its origins and purpose are shrouded in mystery. The earliest reference to it, or its predecessor, seems to be that quoted by W H Gelder in "Monken Hadley Church and Village", published 1986. Gelder notes a historian called Fuller, working at the time of Queen Elizabeth I as writing: "On the steeple is a fine pan for a beacon, the situation being very high". Other evidence shows that the locality of the church was known in Elizabethan times as "Beacon Hill". This lends considerable credence to the usual belief that the cresset was part of the nationwide signal fire "early warning system" most famously used at the time of the Spanish Armada in 1588. Gelder remarks that the cresset itself has probably been replaced from time to time. There is some evidence that one such restoration took place in the reign of George III when parishioners wanted to light the beacon to celebrate the King's recovery from an illness. It has become customary for the beacon to be lit to celebrate royal occasions and historical anniversaries. Recent lightings include one to mark the wedding of the Prince of Wales in 1981 and another to mark the 400th anniversary of the Armada in 1988.

The Bells

19. There were bells at St Mary's at least from the reign of Edward VI when a detailed inventory of church property was drawn up. The construction of the tower, of course, implies the intention to instal bells, and those listed in the inventory may have been there from the early years of the century. There were then four large bells, and a smaller sanctus bell. The four large bells were

successively replaced by another four, cast in 1681, 1702, 1711 and 1714. In 1876 two new bells were added and one of the old four was recast, to make a proper sequence of six. Cass records that the refurbished ring of bells was inaugurated at a special service on Saturday, 17 June 1876, at the conclusion of which "the silvery voices of the new bells were evoked for the first time by a set of ringers from London". A photograph of the same year shows that St Mary's was soon able to muster its own band of seven stalwart ringers, who are pictured in a semi-formal group outside the West Door. In 1921 two additional bells were donated by a prominent local resident, and ringer, Mr F A Milne, one in memory of his parents, who had died on the same day in 1890, and the other in memory of his son, killed in action in 1917. In the same year a sanctus bell dating from about 1600 was recast. This bell is probably the one still in place and ringable from the floor of the church. In 1956 the whole octave was recast in memory of a local resident, Francis Vernon Thompson, Baronet. In accordance with the usual custom, the bells were recast with their previous inscriptions. The frame and fittings are mainly those of 1876 and 1921.

Church Plate

20. The church has an unusual collection of communion plate, some items of which are kept in the British Museum and in the Treasury of St Paul's. Three items were donated by Thomas Emerson. A 1610 flagon, with a dragon's head forming the spout and a 1615 "steeple cup" are in the St Paul's Treasury. The third Emerson donation is a paten of about 1619. A cup presented in around 1612 by Cecil Walker, and a cup dating from 1586, but donated by James Quilter in the 1730s, are in the British Museum. A cup and matching paten of 1562 and 1567 complete the collection of antique communion plate. Two modern items are a ciborium and a double pyx presented in 1990 in memory of Robert and May Scott and of John Baker.

The Churchyard was officially closed in 1881 but burials continued in Family Graves. The last burial was in 1952.

John Thompson - Bellringer, Monken Hadley Church.