



**My Memories of St John's Angell Town Church**

**1935 to 1956**

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My father, the Reverend Frederick Walter Palmer, from a poor Poplar family was brought up from the age of 15 until he was 30 at Kelham, a monastery which trained poor boys for the ministry. They supplied priests for the Diocese of North Queensland, Australia, where he went, newly married, in August 1929 for 5 years

On return, with three children born there, in October 1934, where he had been Rector of Bowen, for 5 years, he first became curate at Holy Trinity Tooting, until, in March 1935, he became vicar of St John's. I was the eldest, nearly five.

It was a period of huge change. The gracious houses were becoming tenemented, and the well-heeled population replaced by workers in centre London, now easily accessible by bus or tram. Only in Loughborough Park were all the houses still occupied by families with servants and large gardens.

My father inherited a huge debt from building maintenance and improvements, which he instantly began to mitigate, having a horror of debt from his humble beginnings. Fundraising efforts came in, with Christmas Fair and summer Fetes, an early one, in Loughborough Park, being opened by celebrities Elsie and Doris Waters. Another I remember was in our garden, and had an Indian theme with elaborate booths and exotic artefacts, and huge crowds came. It was tried again, when Sabu, celebrity star of the film "The Jungle Book" agreed to come, but he did not turn up, and we had to offer some people their money back

My mother ran a working party on Wednesday afternoons, when the Dining Room was filled with ladies, and lots of material to make things to sell. She also ran the Mothers' Union, and was doorkeeper and general welcomer to any who came; some regularly, like Mrs Madden who cleaned the church, and Skip who ran the Scouts. It was a truly "Open House" in the kitchen (former stables, now demolished). We also had my parents' family and friends to tea on Sundays. Leisure was a rare luxury!

Dad was very successful in bringing in worshippers from the new population (not traditionally churchgoers). I remember a wonderful visit by Church Army evangelists, who parked their caravan in the garden. Each night there were evangelistic meetings in the church, with sermons (I vividly remember the one about the trumpets which destroyed the city of Jericho) and rousing hymns. I also remember going to school and telling another child how exciting it all was, only to be faced with a blank stare. I was probably six by then.

In the early days, Sunday School on Sunday afternoons in the crowded Hall next door was supervised by portly behatted Miss Spilling. I have much happier memories of the later Sunday School in the church, where each age group had its own attractive young teacher. I became very attached to Gwen Robertson. The weekly "Kings' Messengers" for children to learn useful skills in the form of games, followed by Bible stories with magic lantern was a big thrill for midweek.

In the summer, there were wonderful outings to Southend on the paddle steamer, when most of the congregation seemed to go. The trip on the boat, with its exciting view of the engine working, and then the long train ride from the jetty to the town were the highlights. For my parents, there were two seasons of tennis parties on the lawn with the clergy from the neighbouring church, St John the Divine Kennington, delightful for us children getting some attention as well.

The church building then had a long, raised Chancel with choir stalls and altar beyond the nave, with vestries plus organ to the north, and a small vestry to the south which was a sacristy and church office, with Lady chapel between it and the nave. The altar had a bronze frontal, which my father painted, for which he was mildly rebuked by the archdeacon for having done it without a faculty. There were some large mosaic murals by Gertrude Martin, one of the virgin and child, another of the three kings, Caspar, Melchior and Balthazar, whose names I have remembered ever since.

Gertrude had done mosaics in the House of Lords, and in Westminster Cathedral. and was a member of the eccentric family of unmarried women: Ethel, Madge, Gertrude and Dora, all artistic, who still lived in their parents' house in St James's Crescent, and although not very regular churchgoers, were nevertheless important friends. Some other people I remember were the young organist, Geoffrey Riches, and the chief choir man, Percy Sinclair, who read the lessons, sometimes with amusing results.

Church services were lovely, with large choir, good music, servers with incense, but done simply. The choir and servers all entered from the vestry, led by the heavy brass cross carried by cross bearer, and proceedings happened up in the chancel with celebrant's back to the congregation. It was a Eucharist service, but only one old lady (Mrs Chandler) had communion brought to where she was sitting; no others were invited (communion was at 8 o'clock). Once a month, the sermon was directed to the children, and was easily understood by a 6-9-year-old. I did not go to Evensong then. Dad painted some Passiontide posters, which he brought out each Lent and put on the side walls for "Stations of the Cross" stories, which I loved. He also built the stable for the large crib which came out each Christmas. Less enjoyable for him was stoking the boiler to heat the church for Sundays.

This pattern continued until war loomed, and by September 1939 everything changed. Children were evacuated, including us with our mother, while my father stayed behind. He did not like being without her, so, in June 1940 we children were sent off to Somerset, and she returned to London, where she taught science in various London secondary schools. By the time bombing started, and the church suffered fire bombs, the congregation was decimated, and worship took place in an entrance hall off the north aisle. I remember, on visits back home, the awful sight of tarpaulins and buckets in the main church and the dark, freezing porch, devoid of atmosphere. Remaining in the Vicarage from pre-war as a lodger, was Mary Gardiner, who worked in a bank in the city. She was a good support to my parents.

During the bombing, on brief holidays at home, we sometimes shared the cellar with the Martin sisters, who set up night time residence there. On other occasions, we slept under the dining room table, when dad would throw himself on top of us when the scream of a bomb seemed too close. We only lost windows in the vicarage, but it was shocking to see a

huge crater where once was the dentist, a sweet shop, and the shoe shop where we bought my dancing shoes, as well as yet more gaps where houses once stood. Dora Martin kept a goat on the bomb site next door to their house, and they kept chickens too; we were invited to see the hatchlings under the bed!

Towards the end of the war, repairs were done, and a crowd of teenagers from schools which remained, or had returned, became the new vibrant congregation, welcoming our holiday returns from evacuation or boarding school. Young mothers also swelled the congregation, and by the end of the war a very different congregation from the pre-war one, arrived.

We had a nun, Sister Mary Katherine allotted to us as a pastoral assistant, to help with visiting and run a Sunday School, and we all became fond of her. We were once invited to tea at her convent in Vauxhall, where I noted with utter delight, the shiny surfaces and peaceful atmosphere, and was quite attracted to the lifestyle.

By 1946 when I was home for good, and later, when my brothers returned, there was an active young congregation. We had no organist for the evening service, as Geoffrey Riches lived too far away, and an organ enthusiast, Derek Kirkland, came and played, and kept us youth all lustily singing hymns after the evening service had finished. He wanted to rebuild the organ, and brought in organ builders.

The disaster which followed changed everything. The organ builders left a blowtorch on, and one night in 1947, the church roof and contents burned as we looked on, horrified. Mr Kirkland and the organ builders were not seen again, and while the church was being rebuilt (the lovely choir and chancel being cut off to make a Hall), we worshipped in the asbestos clad Hall next door. I had to be organist, sharing with Palma Huff, one of the older "youth", using a harmonium.

The PCC paid for me to have organ lessons at St John the Divine, with Donald Cashmore, and I reached a low level of proficiency. By the time the church was ready to be reoccupied and a new organ installed in the West gallery, I was nervous about the opening ceremony with Bishop to reconsecrate. I tried to enlist Francis Sutton, whom we had met through Derek Kirkland, but he said I could do it. With great trepidation, I did, and went on from there to play regularly, sharing occasionally with Palma. We built up a good choir, with older girls singing alto and a few men to make a four-part choir. We attempted occasional anthems and special music, in which I got very interested. Young children joined the choir (not always well behaved, which caused problems), and I had a waiting list at one stage. Tony Banks, who became a forthright MP and animal rights activist, was in the choir, as his father was a very keen server, and his mother ran a social club with badminton in the new Hall.

The Christmas treat for choir and servers was the pantomime at Brixton Theatre. One year during the Billy Graham Crusade we also went to an evangelistic meeting there in which we were invited to stand up to give our lives to Jesus. I alone in our group did, and felt a bit silly when called out afterwards, as they only wanted non-church people. We used to go on hikes on Bank holidays to places such as Runnymede or Box Hill, and we sometimes had Saturday madrigal parties in the garden, sight singing the simpler Tudor madrigals.

Using this enthusiastic young congregation, dad revived the pantomimes he wrote for his first curacy, and we had two or three seasons of pantomimes in a hail in Brixton Road with a week of performances each time. This was a huge effort, but united the band of young (and not so young) worshippers effectively, and brought in others from neighbouring churches, even as far away as Balham, as well as a young curate from St John the Divine, Ted Moberly, who used to preach at Evensong.

My brother Tony lived at home while doing an apprenticeship in accountancy. I was there, too, studying locally, and Michael was there in holidays from University. The band of youth expanded. Amongst those who came to live with us was Dick Parkes from Brixton School of Building where I was studying architecture, who became church server, youth leader and MC for our Sunday night youth club dances, and monthly Saturday "Socials" for the whole congregation. The club was so successful, we were besieged by non-church youth, and had to close and re-form from time to time. Also amongst us were students from the local teacher training college (St Gabriel's), one of whom, Nina Fozzard, stayed on living with us and was part of the group.

In August 1949, my mother surprised us all by having another baby, Laurence, and some of the families returning after the war were also having children, so the family group was very vibrant. One of them, "Mac" McGowan married Gwen Robertson, but they moved away after a few years, as did John Clarke, a pre-war lodger in the Vicarage, with his 3 lovely daughters, born in Angell Road.

About this time an influx of Jamaicans filled the repaired houses, and wanted to have church weddings, even though they already had families. My dad and I were kept busy every Saturday with weddings, even reaching eight on one day. As the Jamaicans always arrived late, this caused problems, and dad eventually said that if they were more than half an hour late, they would have to come back another day (not enforced!). There were also huge numbers of baptisms. Many of the first wave of immigrants worshipped with us, but the later ones preferred a Pentecostalist style of service, which they held in the separate Hall. My father wanted to let them use the church, and to that end, invited the archdeacon and others to one of their services. To his great disappointment, the powers that be said "No".

In about 1951, the headmaster of the Primary School, Harold Cole, who lived in Knatchbull Road, retired and took holy orders, and became dad's curate. He initiated daily mass, a hardship for dad, but also a two week long "Mission" with lots of evangelistic events, a free newspaper and a schedule of volunteers to deliver them, ring doorbells and give personal invitations. To start us off, a team of Christians from Kings College came to help us, and I found their habit of praying together before they went out rather strange! But I did a huge amount of this, as there were lots of gaps, and discovered one recluse in a basement in Overton Road, living at the end of a corridor of newspapers, milk and whisky bottles and general rubbish, sitting in an armchair with the gas oven on for warmth. I continued to visit her regularly and listen to her story of fortune lost after the Bolshevik revolution.

In 1954 I moved out of the Vicarage to a flat in Clapham, and from then on, shared being organist and choirmaster with Palma Huff. My father was getting older, and less fit after being knocked off his bicycle by a police car on the way to funeral duty at the cemetery. We went to look at a church near Oxford driven by Dick in his new second-hand car, but

dad decided it was too far from the sea, and was daunted by the overgrown garden. He was then invited to be Rector of Heyshott near Midhurst, West Sussex, where he moved in September 1956.

The young people were by then getting married: Dick Parkes to Pam, in the choir, Palma to visiting preacher, Richard Coggins, and Norman from Ascension Balham to Grace Molyneux, occasional organist. We have kept in touch ever since, (with family-making gaps), but around 2000, Fr Martin Clark's initiative in inviting us back, prompted reunions at St John's, and thereafter, annual tea parties here in Petworth, which continued until 2006. With spouses, we numbered fifty! The present incumbent, Dr Rosemarie Mallett, has kept up the connection with us, as we all become grandparents, and, indeed, great grandparents, but becoming ever fewer!