

SIN AND THE ANGLO CATHOLICS

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It is traditional for people like me to begin with a disclaimer, along the lines of 'I'm not a historian and I'm not an architect.' But I am an Anglo-Catholic (and I'm actually a sinner as well) so presumably I have some authority to speak to the title I've been given. I'm an enthusiast with a little knowledge of some of the hidden and forgotten byways, by which the life of the people of London has been shaped.

In my teens I discovered the Anglo-Catholic Movement and Gothic Revival architecture simultaneously. And one of the delights of preparing for today was to revisit places I first came across in the 1960s.

I'm going to take you first to Wapping in East London. It's still not an easy place to get to, and in the 1850s you didn't want to get to it, unless you had the misfortune to work or live there. The towering warehouses are now converted into flats. The narrow streets, tiny houses and tenements have gone. Anyone coming here in the early part of Victoria's reign had first to negotiate the notorious Rattcliff Highway, a place of public houses, brothels and seedy lodgings – and then cross the bridge over the docks into Wapping Lane.

Into this area in 1856, aged 36, came a priest of the Church of England, Charles Fuge Lowder. He had been ordained in 1844, the son of a wealthy banker from Bath. But to understand why a man of his background chose to spend his life in East London we need to look at the momentous changes which had taken place in the National Church as Charles Lowder was growing up.

By the beginning of the 19th century the Church of England was in terminal decline. One member of Parliament warned any young man considering ordination to think again: for he was proposing that the C of E should be abolished and its older clergy pensioned off. In the 1820s St Paul's Cathedral reported fewer than 50 communicants on Easter Day. And in 1832 Thomas Arnold remarked, 'The Church, as it now stands no human power can save'.

At the beginning of the 1830s Parliament began to debate a Bill to amalgamate the dioceses of the Church of Ireland. Since Ireland was overwhelmingly Roman Catholic, the C of I simply did not need its many Anglican Cathedrals and Bishops. How sensible, how uncontroversial. But not to John Keble, a country priest who in 1833 preached a sermon in the University Church in Oxford entitled 'National Apostasy'. In modern terms he demanded that the Government back off. The Church of England, he declared, was not a department of the State, but the ancient Catholic Church of this land; its Bishops were not state functionaries, but the successors of the Apostles. The Oxford Movement had been born.

The sermon hit the headlines, and provoked controversy up and down the land. It marked a great awakening in the English Church which we call variously, the 'Oxford Movement and 'the Catholic Revival'.

It may well seem incredible to us that this one sermon should transform the face of Victorian Christianity. The Barchester Chronicles are witty and provocative. Trollope is often unfair to the Evangelicals, represented by Mr Slope. Nonetheless, the overwhelming impression is of a National Church which had remained unchanged for a century and a half. The best of Trollope's clergy are personally devout and kind. At their worst they are concerned with position, privilege and maintaining their considerable incomes, in the face of government interference.

It is difficult for us to understand just what a radical challenge the Anglo-Catholics represented to this world. They brought a new professionalism to the clerical life, broke the identification of the clergy with patterns of upper class life and behaviour, and sought to challenge laissez-faire attitudes to economics and class, by direct intervention in their parishes.

They were as concerned with sin as had been the evangelicals in their revival. But they saw sin as more than wrong behaviour of the individual. They believed that society and government could

be sinful in their collective attitudes and actions; and above all they declared that the poor were sinners more often than not, because they were sinned against: you could not expect people to be good when you condemned them to long hours, appalling working conditions and slum housing.

The Catholic Revival of 1833 had begun in Oxford, as an appeal to history. It became a determined movement among the younger clergy to restore to the Church of England Catholic belief and worship. The establishment was horrified; surely all this superstition and mummerly had been swept away at the Reformation. 'Not a bit of it' cried the young enthusiasts. And if the middle classes didn't like it, they would go to the poor.

So, back to St Peter's, Wapping. In 1866 the permanent church was consecrated. The church is part of a larger complex, approached between the Clergy House and the Institute – and across the road, the schools. Those who would dismiss the Anglo-Catholics as 'ritualists' – interested merely in vestments and incense should consider what was being provided here. It represents an alternative culture: a place where human beings might, from cradle to grave, find something other than what their station in life condemned them to. Here was a place to lift not just the soul, though that was central, but the mind and the body as well.

Hardly had the church been consecrated than cholera broke out in the area. While other professionals fled from Wapping, Lowder and his colleagues stayed. It is generally held that Charles Lowder was the first Anglican priest to be called 'Father' and that the use of the title dates from the time of the epidemic.

We move, still within London's East End, to Shoreditch, not far from Liverpool Street Station. Here in 1866, Fr Henry Nihill, the vicar of St Michael's Shoreditch, gave his support to Monica Skinner, who took vows as a Benedictine nun and built the Convent and Hospital for sick and incurable children (Fig 1).

Mother Monica was typical of those women who re-founded the Religious Life in the 19th century Church of England. Most of them came from upper class families. They adopted a form of mediaeval monasticism completely at odds with what most people thought the C of E stood for; they lived with an abandoned austerity which shocked and terrified their contemporaries. Fr Nihill's letters are full of accounts of the sisters

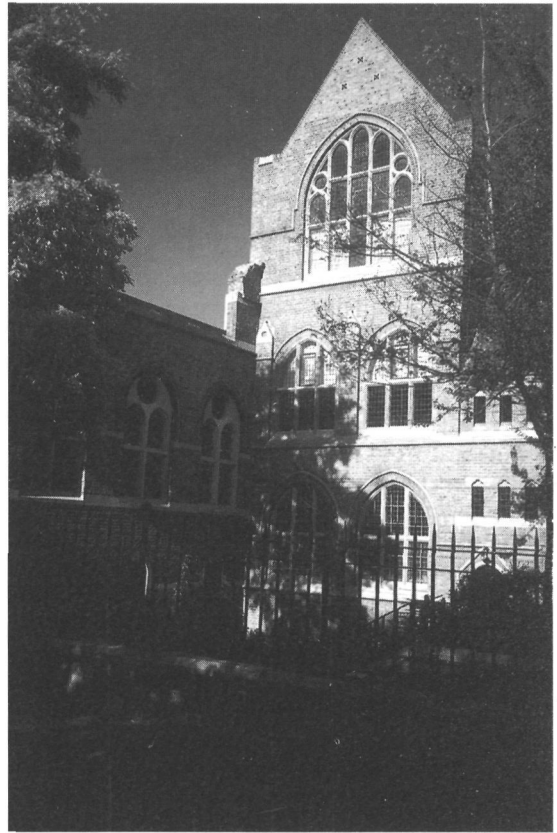


Fig 1. The old Convent at Shoreditch

being taken before the magistrates for unashamed begging in the streets. In 1874 the land at Edgware was bought as the site for a Smallpox hospital and in 1932 the Shoreditch convent was closed and the community moved to Edgware. The Church is now an architectural warehouse; the Convent, offices.

It is a reminder to us that the great men and women of the Anglo-Catholic revival built for a purpose: working buildings to serve the needs of their area. Such determined and radical people might have had hard things to say about our obsession with preserving church buildings. But it is hard to see them go. The Anglo-Catholics produced stunning buildings: full of 'vistas and vaulting' to quote John Betjeman, but designed to be worshipped in, not looked at. Large, and yet homely with corners for favourite saints and altars to remember loved ones who had died. Vulgar and cluttered sometimes, for our taste, but in their time daring and even fun. Bishops fulminated against them, but the poor recognised

priests who cared for them. And the rich turned their carriages in the direction of Euston and Paddington, Holborn and Pimlico, and brought their money and influence with them.

The life of the community at Edgware is now as fragile as it was in the early days. Many of the sisters are elderly and infirm themselves. This, however, did not stop them selling a chunk of their grounds for housing, and building a state-of-the-art House for the handicapped, frail and elderly, which was opened in 1992.

By the 1920s Anglo-Catholicism had fought and won many of its battles. It was enjoying intellectual respectability, and growing influence among the hierarchy of the Church. Public displays of Anglo-catholic worship were seen at the White City and the Albert Hall in 1933, the anniversary of Keble's Sermon. Some would say that the rot set in at this time, as Anglo Catholics rested on their laurels and became increasingly concerned with the details of worship and church furnishing. There is some truth in this, yet the concern for social justice was as strong as ever, as we see in our next project: the St Pancras Housing Association.

Fr Basil Jellicoe was born in 1899, and ordained deacon in 1922. Educated at Magdalen College, Oxford, it was natural enough for him to go to the Magdalen College Mission at St Mary's, Somers Town, close to Euston Station. Fr Jellicoe began his crusade for better housing immediately, and poured his talents for organisation, and money-raising into the newly formed Housing Association.

Fr Jellicoe was a great publicist. A contemporary film shows the dynamiting of old houses in Bridgewater Street, and the ceremonial burning of huge models of a bug, flea, rat and cockroach. The blocks of flats (Fig 2) were dedicated to the saints, and indeed the poles supporting the washing lines have carved statues of St Michael, St Francis and St George as well as Nursery Rhyme characters.

The flats were spacious and modern, the first totally electrically-equipped dwellings of their kind. But they were also a delight to look at with their glazed pottery bas reliefs, the central clock and the stunning detailing of the gateways. Fr Jellicoe cared passionately for the lives of the poor – his people – for their souls, their bodies and their minds. Nothing was too good for them. He challenged the moneyed upper classes from whom he came, and they responded. He died only 36.



Fig 2. St Pancras Housing Association, Euston

In 1962 Fr Bill Shergold was Vicar of St Mary of Eton in Hackney Wick. The exquisite church by Bodley and the attendant Mission Buildings were home to a very successful youth club called the 59 Club. Fr Shergold had begun using a motorcycle as a curate. And the motorcycle was the transport and symbol of the youth culture of the period: the 'Rockers'.

The Church of England in the 1950s was enjoying a period of revival and growth. Its youth work was innovative and popular. Following a precedent in the north of England, Fr Shergold advertised a service for motorcyclists at St Mary of Eton. In fact he took his flyers up to the Ace Cafe on the North Circular Road, and spent several evenings talking to the young people there. About 200 of them came to the first service, joined the youth club and quickly took it over.

The Club moved to Paddington, and then with the building of the Westway transferred back to the East End to St Augustine's Haggerston. Like St Peter's London Docks, this

great complex of buildings had served a closely knit community which had been destroyed in World War II. The Club was to occupy the Hall and Clergy House until 1990.

Fr Bill, a gentle and self-effacing man, affected a whole generation of young people. He rode his bike with them, married them, baptised their children, ministered to them in hospital, took their funerals; by the force of his Christian personality, he gave them a sense that the Church cared about them and belonged among them. His work was not achieved from offices or by committees, but by the man himself. He was not a youth leader, but a priest doing what came naturally to him. The person most surprised by the success of the 59 Club was Father Bill himself.

Anglo Catholicism was never popular among the middle classes. It had its strongholds among the upper classes, from whence it got its money, patronage and priests. It was hot on sin, and revived the practice of going to confession. But sin was a much bigger thing than just individual transgressions. Long before the rise of socialism

it was tackling the problems of the inner city. It was serious and committed, but never straight-laced. Fr Jellicoe himself held the licence for a public house in Somers Town. It rejoiced in the raw, rowdy life of working class London. It believed that just as Jesus had been at home with 'publicans and sinners' so too, its priests should make their home there also.

The war, subsequent slum clearance, and the uprooting of East London communities out into the new suburbs, destroyed many of the communities. The faith and the life which went with them did not survive the move. New movements within society and the Church in the 1960s were quick to parody Anglo Catholicism as inward looking, paternalistic, and over concerned with ceremonial. Yet I trust that our visit today to some of the places where Anglo-Catholics made their contribution has shown something of the vitality of the Movement over more than a century. It pioneered work among some of the most destitute and downtrodden people of London. I think that should not be forgotten.