

A Brief History of Smethwick Old Church

by Brian Jones

Until the 19th Century Smethwick lay in the parish of St. Peter's, Harborne and before 1732 Smethwick church-goers had to make the long trek to St. Peter's to hear the word of God, to receive the sacrament, and for baptisms, marriages and burials. It is said that ruffians and thieves from Birmingham lay in wait for them in the Lord's Wood, where the good Smethwick folk were robbed and assaulted. Whatever the truth of that story, it must have been a muddy and miserable journey in the winter months taking anything up to two hours each way if you lived at the Oldbury side of Smethwick and many Smethwickians must have forgone the venture. Despite Smethwick's description in the 17th century as a scattered settlement there must have been sufficient people living here for Dorothy Parkes to consider it worthwhile to pay for a chapel to be built, and their welfare, both spiritual and physical, to be provided for.

Dorothy Parkes 1644-1727

Dorothy Parkes was the daughter and heir of Thomas Parkes, a dealer in the iron trade who made a fortune in Birmingham during the Civil War. In 1719, now an elderly lady with no near relatives to provide for, she settled lands, including Old Chapel Farm in Smethwick, and in Halesowen, on 13 trustees who were to build and furnish a "neat and convenient" chapel on part of the Smethwick property within three years of her death. They were to provide bread and wine for communion and appoint the minister, his stipend being the residue of the income from the rent from the farmland property after payment of £10 in charitable doles. Her will of 1723 confirmed the settlement.

The Trust which Dorothy Parkes set up, and still exists today, not only provided for a chapel, but also a minister's house (vicarage), a church school and a number of charitable acts to be dispensed at stipulated times each year. Twelve penny loaves, clothes and bibles were to be provided to the poor and needy of Smethwick and Harborne set down in the terms of the Trusts' indenture.

When Dorothy died in 1728 she was buried at St. Peter's church, Harborne. "Parkes's Chapel", a chapel of ease to St Peter's, was consecrated in September 1732. Two years later her remains were re-interred in Smethwick. A beautiful memorial, which was paid for by her will, describes Dorothy Parkes' virtues and charities and records her burial "close to this place"; on the south side of the chancel.

The Church Building

The Old Church is a Grade II* listed building. It has a square tower at the west end, a small coved apse at the east, with a vestry on the north west corner of the building completing the main architectural features. The church is typical of an early Georgian design, reflecting the influence of Sir Christopher Wren and the constraints of the views and opinions held by

the Church of England at that time. Nine large rounded windows give the church a "lightsome" interior - another feature of Wren's thinking - and the simple uncluttered internal space fulfilled the purpose of the building as an effective auditorium as "a preaching box".

Designed to accommodate the population of the area, seating was provided for about 200 people. Later c1759, the gallery offered an additional 50 or so seats, perhaps indicating an increase in population in the first thirty years. Rents were charged on the pews in the gallery to those who preferred to sit above the humbler members of the congregation and the money received was applied to the upkeep of the church. In the 1830s the Chapel was described as "a neat modern building - lofty, some 60 feet by 24 and well pewed".

Frederick Hackwood, a local historian in the 1890s, described the building as "a very fair specimen of a small ecclesiastical edifice in the style of the early Georgian period. It is of red brick, with stone quoins; the west end is flanked by a lofty square tower in three stages, the top stage pierced with large round-headed louvres, for a belfry containing one bell."

A sunken annex on the north side, with steps leading down, houses the boiler and heating system. The three storey tower originally only housed a single bell but in 1897 the tower was strengthened to hold a peal of eight bells. The tower was again strengthened in 1977 to receive the present peal of bells. The clock installed in 1927 was the gift of John Edwin Mitchell (of the brewing company of Mitchells & Butlers), a chairman of the trustees.

The Church Interior

Over the years the appearance of the church interior has undergone many changes. Under the influence of the Oxford Movement of the mid 18th century, the raised chancel was created moving the focus from the pulpit to the altar. The austerity and whitewash of the early years gave way in late Victorian times to curtains and choir stalls plus an organ, all situated at the chancel. Revd Addenbrooke (1850-1884) replaced the high-backed pews with the ones we see today, and gas lamps replaced oil lamps in 1850. These in their turn were replaced with electric lighting in 1923.

At the east end a shallow apse contains a stained glass window depicting the Ascension of Christ witnessed by the apostles. A dedication is inscribed at the bottom of the window to the Revd Edward Addenbrooke, dated 1897. Other stained windows grace the north and south walls of the Church: they portray various scenes from the New Testament with the exception of the window nearest the vestry door. This window is a delicate composition on the theme of baptism and the Christian life. In 1992 the most recent stained glass window was installed, a gift from Edna Adams in memory of her parents and sister. The scene is a vibrant and powerful dedication to "Christ the Servant", depicting Jesus washing Peter's feet. Two roundels in the east wall depict a crown and a bishop's mitre, representing the twin pillars of the Church and the State.

During the 1960s the choir stalls were taken out and the curtain removed from around the chancel, and the pipework of the organ moved into the gallery. The 1990s saw the two back pews removed to allow for better facilities at the entrance of the church and nave.

In 1873 the Church received a pulpit made of riga oak to a hexagonal plan, with panels ornamented with figures of the evangelist, though which evangelist is not recorded. The present pulpit is semi-circular, simpler in design and is fitted with a lectern from which the lessons are read. An alabaster font was situated in the aisle, but in recent years this has been removed and a moveable one is used on the occasions of baptism services.

The vestry is on the north -west corner of the Church and in 1962 suffered a fire which was fortunately brought quickly under control and the church saved from destruction.

The Clergy

Society in early Georgian England was anti-clerical, and critical of the laxity, absence and poor standard of education of the Church of England's rural incumbents. Dorothy Parkes stipulated that only a divine of holy orders with at least a bachelor of arts degree could be installed as vicar of her chapel. This was apparently a higher standard of education and residence than existed at St. Peter's in Harborne, for it is recorded that as late as 1824 the vicar of Harborne was non-resident and services were conducted, intermittently, by a curate from Halesowen! Except for the brief periods of interregnum before the induction of a new vicar, the Old Church has never been without an incumbent through the whole of its history.

	<u>List of Vicars</u>
Robert Boyse	1732-1759
Edward Patteson	1760-1796
Richard Pickering	1796-1811
Robert Spencer	1811-1814
Edward Dales	1815-1850
Edward Addenbrooke	1850-1883
George Astbury	1884-1925
H. Stanley Astbury	1925-1926
Frederick Girdlestone	1927-1940
Charles Lowe	1940-1963
David Hewitt	1964-1978
Brian Hall	1979-1993
Martin Gorrick	1994-2001
R. Mark Pryce	2002 -2006
Nigel J. Mason	2007-2013
currently in interregnum	

The Records

The first baptism that took place here was that of Henrietta Anna Maria Turner on 15 October 1732. The first burial was that of Joseph and Mary Kettle on 18th November. These might have been twin babies, as their baptisms, as the children of Sam and Anne Kettle, took place just four days previously. For reasons that are unclear after 1758 (with only two exceptions) marriages were not recorded here until 1840. It has been suggested that marriage ceremonies did take place but are recorded in St Peter's parish registers. Other records were lost in the fire of 1962 and the registers received some minor damage, but were saved by the fire brigade hosing down the metal box containing them to keep it cool. The records and completed registers are now kept in the diocesan record office at Birmingham City Archives but there is also a collection of archival material deposited at the Sandwell Community History and Archives.

The Memorials

The memorial tablets recall several of the notable Smethwick families of the 18th and 19th centuries as well as incumbents of the church. Henry Hinckley, and his son John, of the Beakes on Bearwood Road, were among the original trustees of the church. Local landowners include Thomas Hanson, of Smethwick Hall, John Reynolds of the Coppice, and Jonathan Grundy of Lightwoods House.

Just inside the entrance to the Church is a record of those who fell in the First World War, including Capt. T.L. Astbury, son of the then Vicar. This memorial was bought by public subscription, the appeal being launched in December 1921 and the memorial was unveiled on 11th November 1923 by Major Samuel Nock Thompson. He was for many years a churchwarden and his family lived at the Uplands, having been involved in the local maltings industry.

Ecclesiastical History

Until 1842 the Old Church came under the jurisdiction of Harborne and its minister. In that year, following the building in 1838 of Holy Trinity Church in the High Street, Smethwick was divided into two ecclesiastical districts and the Old Church was designated a district chapel. In 1892 the Old Church became a parish church and upon the creation of the Birmingham Diocese in 1905 it was transferred to the new diocese from the Diocese of Lichfield and Coventry.

The Churchyard

The Old Church churchyard forms a prominent feature in the locality. From the four perimeter roads, Meadow, Rosefield, The Uplands and Church, there are contrasting views and beautiful scenes. Originally about an acre in size, the churchyard has been extended

several times and now contains about four and a half acres. The original schoolhouse was situated approximately half-way down the present Church Road wall. When it was demolished in 1855 the land was consecrated for burial usage. At the beginning of the 20th century Edward Cheshire, a Smethwick brewer and a churchwarden, donated the strip of land running along Rosefield Road, and the parishioners raised a subscription to buy the strip of land on Meadow Road. Behind the east window is the grave of the first vicar, the Revd Robert Boyce, died 1759. The inscription is now illegible but the stone is quite prominent. Another vicar, the Revd Edward Dales, lies on the south east side of the church. By careful inspection of the dates on the gravestones it is possible to discern the chronological progression of the burials in the churchyard in the 20th century. Starting at the top and back of the Old Chapel public house the dates run down until about 1916, and then progress along the bottom parallel to Rosefield Road. Finally, dates of the graves of the twenties and early thirties progress back up the churchyard parallel to Church Road to rejoin the gravestones of the nineteenth century which are also the oldest graves.

By 1981 the churchyard was in a poor condition, overcrowded with 1,470 gravestones, with many of them broken and badly neglected. Many of these were removed by the Manpower Services Commission in the work to tidy and landscape the area. During this exercise all the gravestones were surveyed and their inscriptions transcribed by the Birmingham & Midland Society for Genealogy & Heraldry and a copy of this survey is held at Sandwell Community History and Archives. The headstones marking the burial of 23 servicemen of the First and Second World Wars are inspected at intervals by the Commonwealth War Graves Commission to check that the stones are intact and not in need of replacement.

More than 14,500 burials have taken place at Old Church. Today the majority of services are for the interment of cremation ashes, with only one or two burials in the average year. The tracing of old graves is extremely difficult, due to the age of the churchyard and the number of burials. Additional complications are the removal of headstones in 1981 and the destruction of the grave registers in the vestry fire of 1962.

The School Vicarage and Old Chapel Farm

Dorothy Parkes' trust gave Smethwick its first school for poor children, which was opened in 1734. After 1855 it was replaced by a new schoolhouse built on the corner of Church Road and the Uplands. This larger building also incorporated a mistress's house. Around 1930 the needs of the children's community required facilities which the church school could never hope to fulfill and with the opening of the nearby Uplands School the church school was closed. The building became the church hall and this was extended in 1952. In 2000 the premises were transformed into the Dorothy Parkes centre to serve the needs of the wider community.

In 1927 it was decided to sell Old Chapel Farm to Smethwick Corporation for much-needed council housing. The original vicarage, its location now marked by the presence of the copper beech trees that stand in the island in Church Road and which were once in its garden, was demolished. It was replaced by the present vicarage on the corner of Church Road and Old Chapel Road.

Smethwick Old Church Date List

- 1719 Dorothy Parkes sets up a trust with £800 to provide a chapel in Smethwick
- 1727 Death of Miss Dorothy Parkes
- 1732 Consecration of Chapel - Reverend Robert Boyce first Minister
Completion of Church School situated on land which has now become part of the churchyard
- 1750s Final completion of Old Vicarage and church pathways
- 1759 Erection of gallery at the rear of the church
- 1786 Record of repairs carried out to ceiling and some internal woodwork
- Major repairs to walls and roof: the walls were moving and reported to be four inches out of true
- 1842 Smethwick chapel created a District Chapelry
- 1855 Closure of Church School. A new school was attached
Mistress's house was erected on the corner of the Uplands and Church Road
- 1890 Lychgate built
- 1892 Smethwick District Chapelry created Ecclesiastical Parish
- 1898 First stained glass window 'The Ascension' dedicated to Revd. Edward Addenbrooke
- 1905 The Old Church is transferred into the Diocese of Birmingham
- 1909 Churchyard extended to its present size with gift of land from Edward Cheshire and land bought by the Parishioners
- 1927 Old Chapel Farm sold to Smethwick Corporation. The new vicarage built and present housing estate
- 1928 Clock installed in tower donated by Sir John Mitchell O.B.E.
- 1930 The church school closed when the Uplands School is opened
- 1952 New Church Hall built on the site of the church school; School Mistress's house retained
- 1962 A fire damages church, a new vestry is built and the organ moved to the gallery
- 1977 New peal of eight bells installed on the occasion of Queen Elizabeth II's Silver Jubilee
- 1981 Major improvement to churchyard, many grave stones removed; pathways to front of church altered and improved

- 1992 Most recent stained glass window installed, 'Washing the Disciple's feet' dedicated to the Adam's family
- 1995 Church organ renovated and improved
- 2001 Redevelopment of Church Hall to create Dorothy Parkes Centre as a Healthy Living Community Centre.