

The Church during the War: World War 1 and the Parish Churches of Evesham

by Richard Ball



The Great War had a profound effect on all aspects of life in Evesham as elsewhere. However the Church, as an institution, seemed in some ways to be determined to appear to be carrying on unaffected. The Worcestershire Diocese magazine is quite explicit about this:

A magazine is not a newspaper. ... Our readers look elsewhere for news of the outer world. A Parish magazine is meant for those who want to be reminded of their heavenly citizenship..."Christians sojourn among perishable things, while they look for the imperishability which is in the heavens" In normal times the normal contents of our ... pages.. help .. to lead our thought in these channels. In these times of sore trouble, our function and aim remain the same. ... What has to be done now is every usual duty which is not plainly set aside by other duties.

So – through the annals of the parish magazine of All Saints and St Lawrence – we see a Church quietly determined to carry on as usual, but buffeted in unexpected ways by the effects of the War.

Before the War

At the start, we see a typical church at the end of the Edwardian era. The vicar, the Rev James Walker, had been in post since he arrived in 1900, and had been Rural Dean since 1903. He lived with his wife Anne at the Vicarage on Merstow Green. A graduate from Oxford, he had, just in March 1914 been awarded the degree of Doctor of Divinity at Oxford University.

The Curate, the Rev Marie-Charles Guyot, had arrived in December 1913. He was originally from Alsace and was past middle-age; in the early part of 1912, he had

married his wife Matilda, who was then about 69 (it is assumed that Marie-Charles was a comparable age). Matilda was blind, and the couple had tutored blind people in Evesham. However Matilda died in July 1914, her funeral being held at St Lawrence.

The two church organisations were also in the process of combining into a joint Church Council, amid some speculation as to whether this was the right thing to do – or even valid. There was also a continuous call on the parishioners for money – for an array of funds and projects: for the clergy, for missions (in particular a mission to Lebombo, in the colony of Mozambique), for the different church organisations – and for a long-term ambition to build a new Infant School. Meanwhile there were ongoing projects to restore the porch and the pinnacles of the spire at All Saints, to fit lightning conductors to both churches, and do work to the churchyard.

The idea of War was far from anyone's mind. The greatest "threat" was considered to be possible vandalism by Suffragettes.

The Outbreak of War

War was declared on 4th August 1914, and the church responded with a special service on Sunday the 9th. The first wartime meeting of the Church Council was on 17th September, and the main topic was how to raise money from the parishioners. It was agreed to adopt a "Finance Scheme" in which people were asked to make a single payment to cover all the eleven ongoing schemes, rather than have an individual collection for each one. The feeling of the meeting was that "the parochial expenses would have to be met", even if "the war would affect the collection of money". The scheme was described in the October Parish Magazine with the exhortation "The war does not relieve us from ordinary obligations and to a loyal Churchman his church must be the chief claim". The war was not expected to last long.

The parishioners were answering the call. 33 members of the Church Lad's Brigade offered their services to the Worcestershire Territorial Association. 39 former members had signed up by October. Five altar servers were on service by January.

The Archbishop of Canterbury echoed the appeal by Lord Kitchener, for all of "those who can rightly do so" to abstain from alcohol. "Their example would make the rough roadway a little easier for those wives and mothers to whom unusual circumstances and hourly anxiety are, with sad effectiveness, bringing unusual temptation."

The Church Lads Brigade had had their annual camp in July, and the St Lawrence choir had their annual outing in October (nearly all the funds had been raised before the start of the War). However the All Saints Festival at the end of October was curtailed: the usual Dance was omitted and the Parish Tea was followed by a "Patriotic Concert";

funds were raised for the Red Cross and the “Belgium Relief Fund”, and for the Church Army to provide facilities at the various army camps.

The All Saints festivities at the end of October included a Patriotic Concert, followed by another in early November whose highlights included the National Anthems of Britain, France, Russia and Belgium, and a recital by the Vicar of “The Charge of the Light Brigade”.

The Long Haul

Work on the church porch and the lightning conductors were completed late in 1914. Planning for a new Infant School continued slowly. The site, at the end of Avon Street, was purchased (from the Rudge estate) in April 1915, but “progress with the new Schools was hindered by the advanced cost of building owing to the War”. The Church Lads Brigade provided a guard for the Birmingham Aqueduct and were grateful for their new boots.

By May and June 1915, the Magazine began to publish obituaries for those from the Parish who had been killed in action or died in service, alongside those of other parishioners who had died naturally.

The Churchworkers Society, the Girls Friendly Society, the Choir and the Sunday School all cancelled their Annual Outings.

New monies were being raised for (among other funds) the Red Cross, the Serbian Relief Fund, the Belgian Distress Fund and (later) the Fund for Serbian and Montenegrin Victims. Meanwhile fundraising continued for the Clergy Fund, Foreign Missions, the Lebombo Mission (the new Bishop of Lebombo visited Evesham in October 1915), the New School, and other causes. Funds were raised for the Bellringers, whose income was reduced because they were not ringing as regularly as usual.

The Curate in Evesham was joined by the Rev Tom Coxon, who was appointed in September but left in November 1917 for a curacy at Manchester. The Church Council agonized about a replacement: it would be necessary to offer a significantly higher wage, “the expenses would be heavier this year than last and the income less”, but it was considered wrong to rely on the Rev Guyot as he was “too old”. Mr Guyot “left very suddenly” in February 1918 (he died in France around 1923). The Rev Hoste was appointed in October 1918, but was not formally licensed and left in July 1919. The Rev George Soden arrived in July 1919, being formally licensed the following November; it was proposed that he should live at the Vicarage, which Dr Walker was finding too large for himself.

Increasing Stresses

News of casualties was soon coming back to Evesham: the All Souls Day service in November 1914 made special mention of those who had fallen in the war. The Vicarage party on New Year's Eve 1914 was noteworthy by the presence of Sidney Gardiner, back from Mons, "with glorious scars" and stories of the retreat.

There were soon a very significant number of working men away from Evesham serving in the forces – at the Front in France or elsewhere. This made for a shortage of labour at home, in particular at harvest-time, and the world needed to adapt.

The shortage of men affected the church directly. By August 1916, there were 16 former servers in the Forces. There was a call in June 1915 for "able-bodied men" to "come and learn bell ringing"; a second call in July 1918 for "ringers, if any can be found with sufficient strength and interest" suggests a somewhat relaxed requirement of fitness, training and gender. There were calls for more tenors for the All Saints choir in July 1918, and a second call – for anybody for either choir – by October. There were vacancies for people to decorate the churches for services. By July 1918, women were allowed to pull the sacristy bell in All Saints, although it was felt necessary to give a proper theological justification for this.

The organist of All Saints, Arthur Slatter, was serving at the front, although he returned occasionally on short visits. The middle-aged organist at St Lawrence, Miss Myra Taylor, continued steadily as she had been doing since 1884. The improvements to the churchyard were postponed until the end of the war.

The War affected the cost of living. The Council agonised for some months about raising the price of the Magazine from 1d to 2d – and exhorted everyone to buy a copy so as to leave none unsold. The price was eventually increased in January 1918 but reduced back to 1d in January 1919. The level of lighting in the churches, and the number of candles, had to be reduced "on account of cost and scarcity". The Palm Sunday crosses in 1918 were made from the leftovers from the previous year.

By the latter part of the War, wounded soldiers – including those coming into town from the Abbey Manor Hospital – were a conspicuous part of the scene in Evesham. The Y.M.C.A. War Workers' Department appealed for discharged soldiers to help in their work, and "ex-officers or men of good education" to act as secretaries and lecturers – both home and abroad.

Doing the Right Thing

The church was determined to keep its life as normal as possible. The annual Diocesan Conference was held in Evesham for the first time in June 1916, over two days. There

were about 230 at the event, and “those who came for the day found the catering in the town very satisfactory” with lunch and dinner parties – and the Vicar’s wife gave teas in the Parish Hall. “A great many who had not seen Evesham before went away with a very favourable impressions of the place. ‘Why! it has really good shops!’ “. The event was deemed to be a great success, marred only by the news of the death of Lord Kitchener death on the second day.

A memorial service for Lord Kitchener was held on 14th June 1916. There was a large congregation, including nurses and wounded soldiers from Abbey Manor.

The Evesham Maternity and Infant Care Society held its first meeting in March 1917. “All mothers in the borough of Evesham will be able to obtain advice and help in the care of their infants ..., and it is hoped that many valuable lives may be preserved for the country in the future. The present state of infant mortality is a disgrace to the community”. It is not clear whether the deprivations of the War were making matters worse.

Despite all the additional calls for giving to the wartime relief funds, the Church Council was continuing with the project to complete the refurbishment of the churches themselves, with new hymn boards and hangings etc. The vicar was brazenly explicit about what was wanted:

For St Lawrence: a choir vestry, new stained glass windows

For All Saints: six new hymn boards, hangings for the Altar in Derby Chapel, two new Frontal Chests, a Cupboard Hymn Books, etc, new curtains for the High Altar

... and other items were also donated, including “cloths for the Credence Table in the Lichfield Chapel”

Much of this was donated by parishioners, some dedicated to sons killed in the War. The Church Lads Brigade was fitted out with new uniforms. After much anticipation, these arrived in June 1918. The Celtic Cross Memorial to Simon de Montfort was constructed, on a base of Abbey stones collected by the Vicar and arranged by an old soldier secured for the purpose (it was unveiled in January 1919).

Supporting the War effort

The church organised funds for the various relief efforts for the Army (including the Church Army Fund for providing huts and tents for the soldiers at the front, and St Dunstan’s Home for blinded soldiers) – and for relief work in Belgium and Serbia.

It also did what it could to maintain the morale of the Home Front. Special services were held to maintain the patriotic spirit, in particular in August each year – on the anniversary of the start of the War – and in the festival period of All Saints and All Souls. At the request of the Mayor, special services were held on the first Sunday of each year. The Rev Guyot visited France in June 1915 where he read the lesson at the centenary Memorial Service for the battle of Waterloo (his namesake had commanded the French Imperial Guard Cavalry!).

On the 28 June 1916 a special service was held to commemorate the Battle of Kosovo in 1389, which had come to symbolize the fortitude and bravery of the Serbians.

On May 24 1917, The Mayor revived the observance of Empire Day. It was hoped that “the children at least would be taught the meaning of the British Empire, with its duties and responsibilities, of which our brethren overseas have given us such a splendid example in the Great War”.

The Church flew the flags of all the allied nations. There was some debate in 1918 as to whether the Russian Flag should be taken down and the American Flag put up in its place. In the event the Russian Flag was retained “as a portion of the Russian People were still loyal”, and both were included.

Thoughts turned – remarkably quickly – to the commemoration of those killed in the war. The first wall plaque to be set up (on 25 November 1916 in St Lawrence) was that for Lieut Ernest Crisp, a 2nd Lieutenant in the Royal Warwickshire Regiment, who was killed in France on 16 December 1915. The first memorial to an old member of the Church Lads’ Brigade was a brass tablet in All Saints, in memory of the late Lieut Russell Jones, killed in action on September 3 1916.

The Vicar tried to keep track of all those serving in the War, with promotions, medals, wounds and deaths, but was limited by the information he was given. A proposal – suggested in May 1915 – to erect a Churchyard Cross using some of the old stones from the Abbey, was quietly transformed over the years into a Parish War Memorial.

Armistice and Aftermath

With perfect timing, the Eagle and British Dominions Insurance Company announced in October 1918 that sailors and soldiers could insure for the War: for a yearly payment of £1 a soldier or sailor can insure for £100 at death.

The War ended with a Thanksgiving service on November 11, when All Saints was “crowded out as perhaps never before”. Plans were advanced quickly to set up a new St George’s Chapel in the South Transept of All Saints, and group together the various

memorial brasses and flags. A Committee was also set up immediately to work on the plans for the Memorial in the churchyard.

As no treats were held during the war the Sunday School infants were given an entertainment on December 26 1918, and the older children on December 28. Both Choirs had a supper in the Church House on January 8 – songs were given by several members in the interval between supper and the whist drive.

The Rev. James Walker left Evesham in February 1919 to become Vicar of St Mary Magdalene church, Newark and Canon of Southwell. One of his last tasks in Evesham was to write to the War Office asking for the release of Mr Slatter, the All Saints Organist. He died in January 1929. In his will he left a legacy from which was set up a charity for poor communicants. In his memory, the altar frontal was installed at All Saints, and a memorial window was installed at St Mary Magdalene. The Rev E E Burbidge arrived later in 1919.

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