

## Dipping into 60 Years, continued...



about 1980

As the 1980s started, and having worked for a few good years in Oldham, I was looking for fresh ideas both for myself and for my family. I looked at a few possibilities in the Manchester Diocese, but nothing seemed to click for me. Then, in the spring of 1982, I saw an advert in the Church Times for a parish called Greenford Magna. I liked what I saw and applied. After an incognito visit to see the house and church, during which we met a bloke who later we discovered was Johnny Johnson, I went to Cambridge to be interviewed by the Dean and Fellows.

The interview was a strange affair. Although I was not aware of this, John Drury the Dean was new and Greenford Magna was the first parish to come up for appointment since he started work. There were six candidates but we were kept apart and I only know about one of the others because he mentioned it to me some ten years later!

The interview was in a well-worn and comfy study with the Fellows looking very erudite and proper. My interest in poetry came up and they were very interested to hear that whilst a student teacher in 1967 I had for a short time been paid a small fee for reading poetry to John Heath Stubbs, who is blind and arguably one of England's greatest living voices. At the time, I was unsophisticated enough not to realise what a privilege I had been given. John Heath Stubbs was an amazing person. His knowledge of literature was comprehensive and he wanted me to read reams of work by poets like John Skelton so that he refreshed his memory and heard the sounds of poetry every day. I admired the way in which blindness had not impeded his writing and his joy in living.

After the interview, I caught the train back to London and just before boarding the Manchester express, I rang Marion and she told me immediately that my interview had been a success. I travelled home feeling somewhat happy.

We made the usual preparations and said our fond farewells to Oldham friends and parish. I wasn't particularly sad to leave Oldham. London has always interested me, and we were going back for a second stint of living there, following our time from 1967-1971 when we lived in West Hampstead. We drove down the motorway and moved in to the splendid Victorian Greenford rectory where it has been our privilege to live and also from where it has been my privilege to be the parish priest for 23 years.

Probably the person I missed most from Oldham days was Doris Eastwood, one of my Churchwardens at St. Hugh's Church. Doris was a quiet and undemonstrative person but she had star qualities such as dedication, open mindedness, willingness and



Tuesday 14th September, 1982- Holy Cross Day  
Dean John Drury presents me to the Bishop

a broad vision of Christian life. She came to my Induction and then visited us again but life being what it is, we lost touch a little. I went to her funeral- a sad affair - and she is buried in Oldham's Greenacres cemetery, one of the bleakest places on the face of the planet!

I used the word privilege (above) advisedly. Greenford Rectory is a wonderful place to live and work, although there are some problems. It is very difficult to heat in winter without spending a fortune. I have had to develop an aptitude for working in the cold. We can't afford to heat the house during the day but only for a couple of hours in the morning and then again in the evening. So, when things get really brass-monkeys, I run down the Lane to Betham school and warm myself up on the radiators there, whilst exchanging banter with the Administrative staff. I often wonder if they appreciate why I turn up so much on cold days!



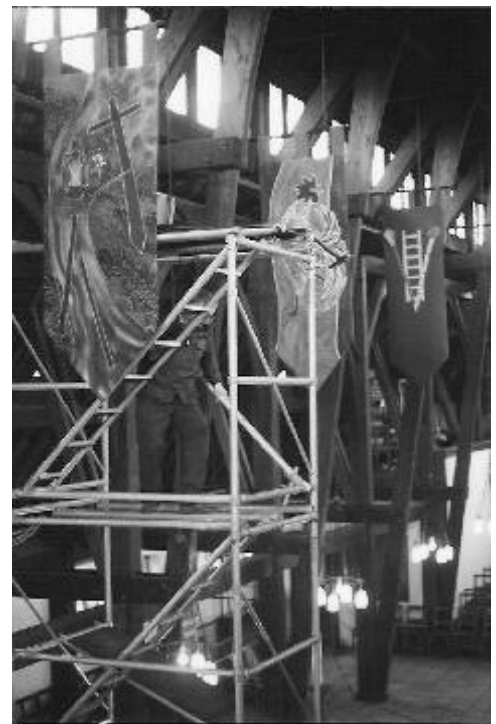
The individual rooms in the Rectory are spacious and gracious, but from a contemporary perspective, they represent wasted space, or at least, space which could be used more effectively. However, I have always loved the fact that my parish work happens via a house, a home, rather than via a church office, but not every member of the family has seen it that way! I think that on balance, even those who didn't like the lack of privacy will appreciate the sense of space filled with people and laughter and fun. The garden is a huge advantage, and here in this rare snowy scene, you see Hannah enjoying the winter garden. The noises in the house can be scary though! On many occasions Marion

has been convinced that I have opened the front door and walked in the house, only then to seek alternative explanations for the sounds which made her think that I had arrived home in the first place when I hadn't!

I have always tried to stimulate members of the congregation to practise and achieve in the area of expressive arts. New poetry, art, drama and music have all been consistently an aim



for me. One of the things one notices most on entering Holy Cross Church is the set of ten Banners of the Passion hanging down. The set you see now was installed in 1989. We needed new Banners as the old ones were frayed and sagging badly. In this photograph (right) you see two of the new banners being put up whilst one of the old ones is still in position. I was really pleased that Ginette Gillard, then a regular member of



the congregation, agreed to design the banners and make them in her own living room using the batik method. The results are still stunning, twenty years later!

So, the arts projects have run out with pleasing regularity- a huge combined tapestry made by a collective of people over a period eventually of 12 years, two huge and glorious Flower Festivals, regular dramatic productions, using the special features of both the Old and New churches, poems, articles and stories for the parish magazine, plays, new music for the Mass, new anthems composed, new hymns written, art exhibitions, photographic exhibitions, concerts, recitals, Choir concerts, visiting choirs, brass bands, Scarlet & Lace with Dickie Bellairs in Crisis at Christmas concerts, a self-styled aging rock band, special entertainments for Holy Crosstide, links with people from other countries, such as our Essen friends, and other events.... Creativity is at the heart of the best human experience. As we express ourselves, we are in touch with all that is good and all that is godly in our nature. Creativity is next to godliness! A Church of England parish church should always be a place where individuals can come and express their creativity and find appreciation and companionship. And all perspectives are welcome too because as a Church of England parish we have a duty and a mission to be there for all, no matter what their place on the journey of faith. There are no lines to toe or regulation limits. The human mind was made by God and must find expression for the deepest and most striking images it is capable of and especially in a church.



If all that is true of a Church of England parish church it is also true of a Church of England School and any good school. I have during the past 23 years made a serious and long-term commitment to education in a variety of guises, but always anchored here in the institution founded by my illustrious predecessor, Edward Betham School. Encouraging children to discover their own creativity is high on the agenda of any good school, and although risky, it is always worth the risk. I am pleased to report that I have had the pleasure of working with

Head Teachers who have in their different ways, all shared commitment to creativity for every child.

One of the features of a longer incumbency is that you notice how people leave, either for pastures new which has been a huge feature of parish life, especially in the past five years, and also the funerals. For the past ten years, the list is formidably long- Fr. Donald Harris, the founder of the New Church died in 1996 and it was a great pleasure and interest for me to meet him three times before he died. He visited Greenford twice, once to preach his VE sermon again, 50 years later, and I went to see him in his flat in Marsham Street with a reporter from our local newspaper, the Greenford Gazette. He was a charming person and extremely polite and restrained in his obvious displeasure at how the New Church had been re-ordered. I liked him for that! Then came Joan Draycott, whose legacy has been such a benefit to Holy Cross Church over the past decade. Norman Tams also died in 1996 and many will remember his individual approach to the local history of Greenford. The premature death of Karen Moses was a great shock, and many still feel the pain very heavily today. I still look for Alan King sitting in his place opposite the altar, sat next to May Silk, who followed him four years later. Then Reg Emberton comes to mind with his total devotion to serving for the mid-week masses and at 8am on Sundays. Rita Morgan, a former choir stalwart died in 2000, along with Bob Mansell and Joan Herring. In 2001, there was a real crop. Eddie Bryant was followed by Joe Ede, Cecil Lowe, Angela Marchant and Shirley Petit, all of them being at some point parts of the very fabric of Holy Cross church. The next year saw the funeral of Sheila Harrison, then in 2003, there was the shock of Connie Johnson, suddenly taken away from us. Last year saw the funerals of Mary Blackburn Moyra Ledder, Dickie Bellairs, Emilie Burton and young Sebastian Nayager-Stafford. The funerals of children are always a cause for deep sorrow and I have conducted many during my 30 odd years in the job, and never with any satisfaction that we understood why and what for. Hope springs eternal, but pain is frequently to be found clouding the vision.

As we came towards the end of the 2nd Millennium, a movement was felt within the church community that we should take up a big challenge to make our buildings accessible to all people.



Since our church buildings are Listed, we are not obliged by law to conform to the Disability Discrimination Act, however we thought it was the right thing to do and so an Access Committee was formed and a huge amount of work was planned and undertaken. This work consisted of trying to understand how our buildings could become even more the centre of community activity with barriers for accessibility removed. It took time to agree what changes were needed. It was important to include advice from people with disabilities at this early stage. This thinking stage was vital to the success of the project. Then the time came to appoint an architect and commission drawings and plans. David Brown Associates who are our Inspecting architects, undertook the wide range of tasks

involved, from measuring the building to applying for relevant regulatory permissions to planning the specifications on which tendering would take place. In August 2004, the first phase was successfully completed with a total renewal of the toilets up to an acceptable modern specification, a major and much needed piece of work. During the works, the toilets were closed, of course. It was amusing to have signposts to the Scout Hut toilets for wedding guests and other visitors pegged out in the churchyard! Phase Two started in January, 2006 with a ramp being built for access to both the main door of the church and the door to the Parish Room. This will also involve re-laying the patio area and making sure that the paths around the New Church are smooth and even. The Third Phase will provide a parking area for people with disabilities, giving access to the ramp and therefore to the building. Other features of the project include improved signage, educational and other information, thereby making it possible for everyone to participate in activities in the building independently and with confidence, including those with sensory impairments and learning difficulties. ***This project will require on-going Access Funding.*** Having started this big undertaking, we need to look again at our activities and how we advertise them so that the groups of people targeted by these building works really do feel welcome and free to participate in Holy Cross Church and all the many activities which happen in the buildings.

On a personal note, the years since the new Millennium have led to very enhanced family life for Marion and I. Toby married Mell on New Year's Eve, 1999, and Ben married Lisa on 6th June, 2002. The first fruits of these activities were our two grandchildren! Tom Richardson was born on 15th November, 2003 and Kitty Vandevelde on 8th January, 2005. Our daughter Hannah, having travelled the world three times round, is now negotiating the path towards her qualifications as a photographer, and is happy in her relationship with Joe Elgie.

Tom Richardson aged 2

Kitty Vandevelde aged 1

In 2002, Johnny Johnson announced his retirement as Churchwarden. It was a bit of a water-shed for me personally since he was the first Holy Crosser I ever spoke to back on that incognito visit in 1982, and for everyone at Holy Cross church since he has been such a rock and a beacon of good Churchwardenly activity since the 1970s. However, with Ray Allen and Peter Abernethy as churchwardens, we are still very well-served, and of course, Johnny is always on hand when needed for support and, well that Warden-whiz, which makes him so much a loved and respected man.

Neil Richardson