



Mr Newbold's Disturbing Failings

Introduction

In 1948, after a few turbulent years in which the church had even considered the 'appointment of a lady' to play the organ Max Newbold was appointed as the new church organist of All Saints' in East Finchley. Tall, thin and topped with a shock of blond hair that he had to frequently sweep back, he would cycle twelve miles from his home in Chiswick to All Saints'.

He had a busy schedule. On All Saints' Day there would be a sung mass at half past six in the morning. Worshippers were also expected to have fasted before Communion. Not even a mouthful of water was allowed. The main Sunday service took place at eleven and he would be there again at Evensong.

The church was one of forty-six that had been built by the Cutts Brothers in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. It is solid, red brick, Victorian Gothic revivalism. From the outside it looks like many others, inside it is rather more beautiful than you would expect.

To the right-hand side of the church was a pathway. The condition of this unruly thoroughfare has weighed heavily on generations of PCC members and at the other end of the path there was a new road. The houses were still relatively new having been built on what had been until the 1920s, woodland.

Around the church there was a vicarage, a large garden, a parish hall and two air raid shelters. All have now gone. The roof bore a few scars from the war years.

Inside the church, the space that is now the church hall was the baptistry and the back of the nave. Today's glass doors were a solid wall behind which you would find a well-used font. That font had just been moved and one of the first to experience the new location was one of a flurry of post-war babies, Alan Toms. 70 years later he was still there, a churchwarden, worrying about the state of the church roof.

The baptistry also housed a figure that the PCC wanted to remove but there were worries. It was, they realised, a memorial but they had no idea to whom nor who had donated it. The church was only just over fifty years old and it was already losing track of its past.

And it is not as if it was overburdened with worshippers, the electoral roll had just 170 names on it, more than today but not dramatically so and the number was around half of what it had been in the early 30s. Nevertheless, the church records show a relatively busy calendar of baptisms, confirmations and marriages.





Indeed the congregation had at this point only recently said goodbye to young Lillian Portell, the daughter of a local electrician, who had married an American GI, Barney Bridges. After her wedding at All Saints' she left for Louisiana where she had three children. One of those daughters, Lynne Spears had a daughter called Britney. You may have heard of her.

Family life was beginning to return to normal and one of the congregation, Joyce Coombs, herself a historian of Anglo-Catholicism, had just been made Vice President Central of the Mothers' Union. The MU was enjoying a new lease of life in the postwar baby boom and All Saints' was very much a part of it.

Amongst the congregation Max Newbold would have been addressed as Mr Newbold or if someone were affecting a more intimate acquaintanceship, Newbold. In church (and much of the rest of life) male Christian names disappeared from public use sometime shortly after confirmation .

Mr Newbold's organ was often troublesome. Tucked in the space that is now occupied by the vestry it had a habit of letting people down at key moments. Maintenance had not been a priority during the war years and everyone realized that something had to be done when it wheezed to a halt on Palm Sunday.

These days the choir and the new organ are a bit closer to heaven now that they have been moved to the back of the church to a loft nestling under the rather beautiful wooden roof. If you stand on the steps to the chancel and look back you can see the wall at the back is dark and sooty, a little reminder of a more bronchial age of gas lighting and coal fires. The quiet sections of Mr Newbold's performances in 1948 would have been punctuated by the coughs and wheezes of a congregation that had yet to experience the benefits of penicillin and the Clean Air Acts.







'1948 and all that'

Outside, there was a parish hall. One of the churchwardens, Mr Roper, who helped run a local building firm, was in the midst of discussions about compensation for the wartime requisitioning of the building. They were holding out hopes that they might get £16 for each of the war years, a not inconsiderable sum for a church that boasted just £39 in the bank. Church treasurers can always cheer themselves up by looking back and seeing that today's worries eerily mirror those of fifty years ago.

Short, ginger and rather deaf, Frank Buckland, the verger, was involved in a daily battle with the boiler heating the church, every now and again it would flood. Not only was there no money to repair it, there were no materials available; rationing and shortages were as bad if not worse than during the war. It was resolved that the best solution would be to buy Mr Buckland a pair of 'India rubber boots.'

There were other problems in the parish hall. The floor was worn out (it was resolved that scouts would have to wear plimsolls) the stage lighting was said to be in a 'deplorable state' and the badminton club had to be, it was recorded, 'brought into line.' It had become apparent that some players were not 'active members' of the church. There were expulsions.

But there were also arrivals. Maurice Smalley had just taken his seat on the PCC after five years as a prisoner of war, the minutes show a small and rare crossing out, the title Mr is replaced with Warrant Officer. If you hunt along the north wall of the nave you will find his name on a small brass plaque and a reference to the fact that in later life he was ordained. Meanwhile, the names of those lost in the war were added to the war memorial, a fraction of the number lost in what was now beginning to be called the First World War.





‘...disturbing failings.’

Meanwhile, in the surrounding streets the bombed-out families from the East End who had been billeted in East Finchley were being rehoused. The local children who had been sent from East Finchley to the countryside to escape the bombs and doodlebugs were back.

The two air raid shelters were also relics of a war that had just come to an end. So too was Max Newbold’s malaria, a legacy of a wartime posting to the far east. Max, who lived with his mother, expected high standards from his choir. During one troubled carol he held up the score, tore it in half and the choristers watched as it fluttered to the ground.

Max, however, did not always make it to the church on time. There is also a record in the PCC minutes of certain other undisclosed ‘disturbing failings.’

A few months later All Saints’ had a new organist.





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