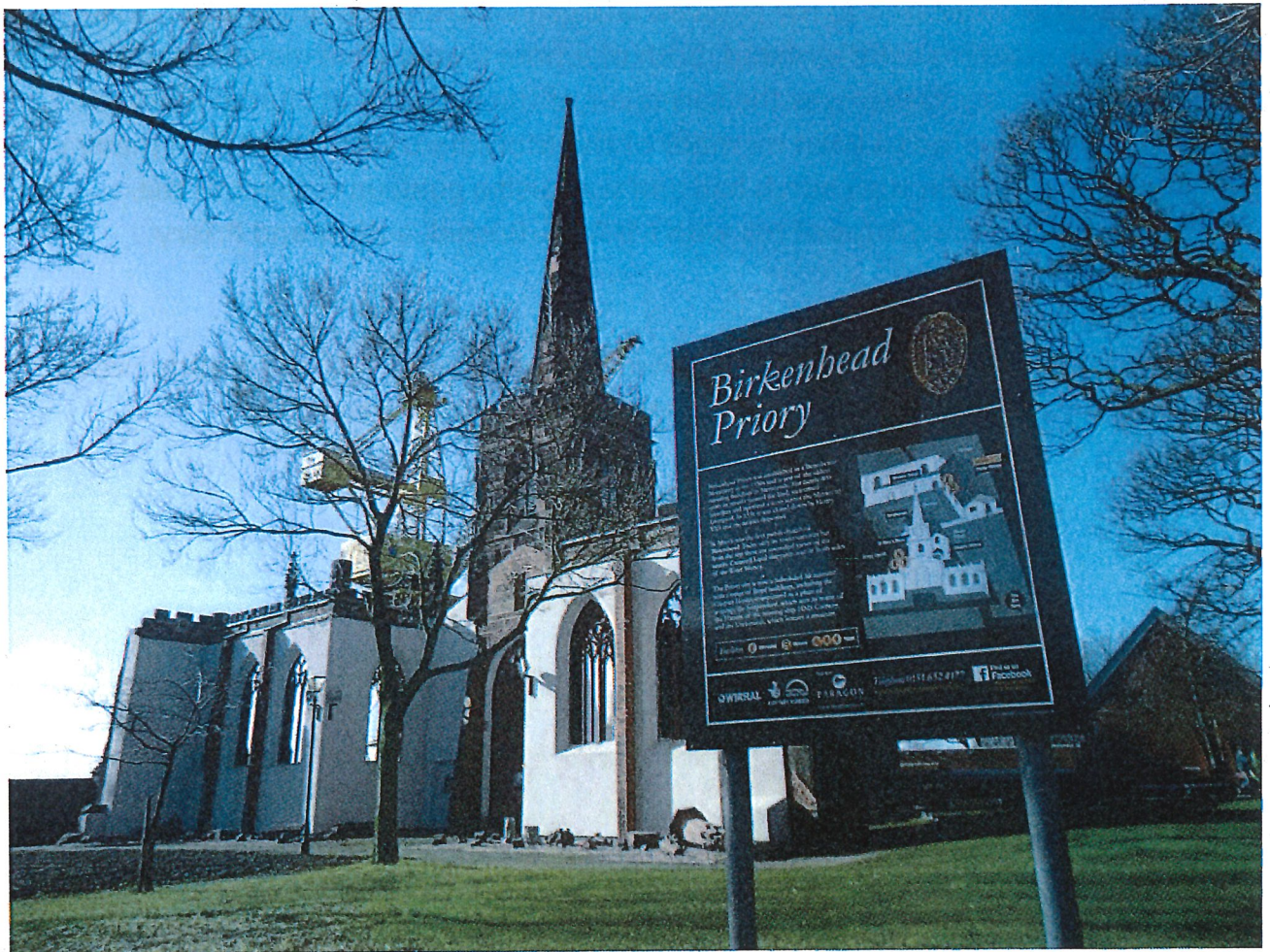


St Mary's Parish Church Birkenhead

1819-1977



Introduction

This leaflet has been compiled by Tony Hughes, a member of The Birkenhead Priory Volunteers.

Tony was baptised and confirmed in St Mary's Church and accompanied his grandparents to the Octo Centenary Celebrations in 1950.

Dedication

This leaflet is dedicated to my beloved late grandparents, Thomas and Louisa Jones of Tunnel road, Birkenhead, both of whom were active members of the church. My grandfather was the caretaker of the church and church hall and my grandmother was a keen member of the Mothers Union, partook in many pantomimes held in the church hall and was also a guide in respect of the Priory and had many cups of tea with Mr M.A. Bushel, author and Priory Historian.

This leaflet is also dedicated to many families associated with my grandparents mainly Davies, Dean, Conroy, Williams, Cheers, Courtney and Grey.

Acknowledgements

My gratitude is extended to the following without whom this leaflet could not have been compiled -

M.A Bushel- The Ancient Graveyard of Birkenhead Priory
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Cheshire Achives
Landican Cemetery Office Staff

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Historical Events

St Mary's Parish Church was consecrated on the 17th of December 1821, having been paid for by the Lord of the Manor Francis Richard Price and built by the architect Thomas Rickman. Mr Price no doubt saw the expansion that was coming to the town although in 1801 there were 110 people living in Birkenhead. In 1811 there was a reduction to 105 and ten years later a small increase to 200, but these may have been mainly churchgoers as Mr Price perhaps foresaw a rapid increase, because in 1821 the population had risen to 2569 and by 1841 to over 8000. This swift increase being due largely to the coming of the steam ferries and the introduction of industry in 1820.

The foundation stone of the Church was laid on the 26th of July 1819 by the right honourable Lord Kenyon. A bottle containing coins of the reign was deposited in the stone over which was placed a copper plate.

The first minister of the newly erected church was the Rev. Edward Newton who was also a school master from Wallasey. He was later joined by the Rev. Andrew Knox who came to assist as curate. Rev. Newton resigned his position and in 1834, Rev Knox was instituted as his successor.

Rev, Andrew Knox was a man of vision and actions. He spared no effort in providing for the spiritual needs of the town and took an active part in the building of new churches and the formation of new parishes (Holy Trinity in 1841, St Anne's in 1850 and St John in 1859, St Paul in 1864, St Peter in 1868 and St James in 1869). However, he did not neglect the claims of his own parish which was now growing. The church which when consecrated consisted only of the nave with "spire and six bells". A north transept had been added in 1832. Three years later the south transept was built. The galleries in both transepts were erected later on. For the education of the young, day schools were provided in Priory Street in 1851. In 1869 Bishop Jacobson appointed Rev Andrew Knox a Canon of Chester Cathedral. He died on the 12th of October 1881.

St Mary's Church and Churchyard



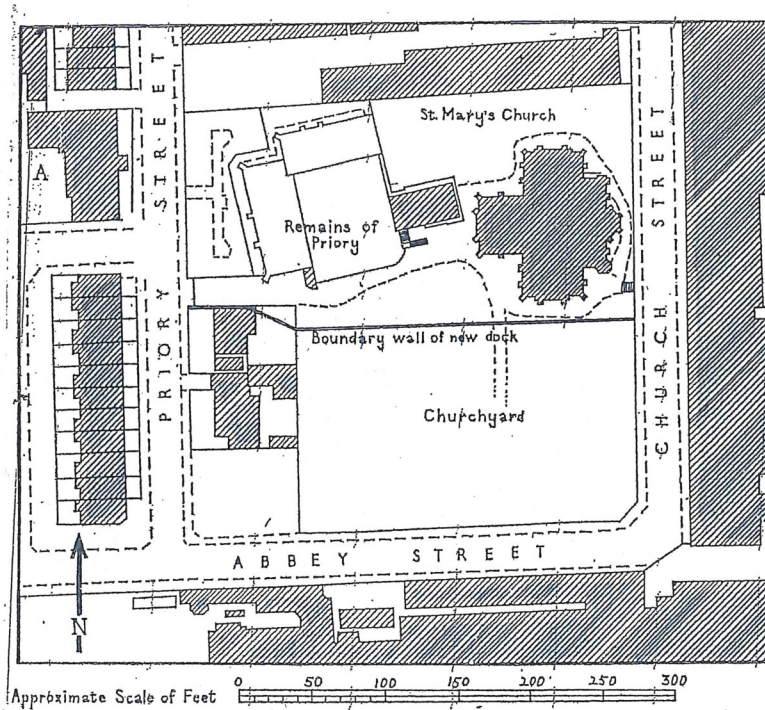
Interior of St Mary's Church



The Church Pantomime



Site of Birkenhead Priory and Graveyard, 1956



Historical Events Continued

During the ministry of the Rev, Henry Linton, son- in -law of Canon Knox, great alterations took place in the church and churchyard. The galleries of both transepts were removed and the doors approaching them from the outside of the church were closed. The organ was removed from the west gallery to the chancel. The high backed family pews and the three decked pulpit were abolished (rent for the pews had been £400 for the first year and £450 for the second year and £500 for each remaining year, 100 free in the body of the church and 100 free in aisles and galleries for the poor). The main approach from Abbey Street was also constructed during this period. The Rev. Henry Linton retired in 1896 and died in 1901.

An outstanding feature of the ministry of the Rev. J.H.W Hughes-Games was his strenuous effort on behalf of men, with popular gifts as preacher after he attracted large crowds and at the monthly service for his men. The church was invariably well filled sometimes to overflowing. However, due to ill health he resigned in 1902

During the ministry of the Rev. F.S. Guy Warman, when serving as a vicar of St Mary's Church, repair took place where dry rot had appeared and the interior of the church was re decorated. Electric lighting was also installed. Rev. F.S Guy Warman resigned to take up the position of principalship at St Aidan's College.

The Rev. G.D Oakley was called to succeed the Rev, F.S Guy Warman and is remembered for the scheme for restoration of the Priory Chapel and Scriptorium. A splendid new organ was placed in the church and the beautiful vicarage in Clifton Road was secured. The Rev G.D. Oakley resigned in 1916 to take up another appointment.

During the ministry of the Rev. T. Sherwood- Jones it was suggested that the forthcoming centenary celebrations should combine in one effort, the aim of obtaining the sum of £10,000 (i.e.) £6000 for the parochial hall, £2500 sustenation fund and £1500 for various purposes such as rehanging the peel of bells, railing off the church yard, furnishing the Priory and renovation and painting of the church.

Time passed until between 1939 - 1940 when there was no vicar in situ, probably due to the beginning of the Second World War. However in 1940, a

church warden (Harold Cheers) appointed William John Robinson of Prenton to act as church organist and choirmaster.

Later that year discussions took place between the church warden of St Mary's Church and the vicar of St Paul's Birkenhead, relating to the proposed union of the two benefices. Eventually in 1948 the two parishes of St Paul and St Mary were united resulting in the church at St Paul (situated on the corner of Argyle street and Market Street) being demolished. Memorials had been removed from St Pauls Church and re-erected in St Mary's Church. Both St Pauls Church hall (situated next to the old trustee savings bank near central station- now a car park) and St Paul's vicarage in Lowwood Road became part of the Parish of St Mary.

In 1970, St Mary's Church was declared unsafe and services were discontinued. By this time the congregation had reduced greatly following many changes that took place regarding the tunnel entrance and demolition of many residential streets. The church was officially closed in 1974 as part of the scheme for re organisation of the Birkenhead parishes, though services continued to be held in the Chapter House of the Priory. The church was demolished in 1977 except for the tower and west walls. In 2012, repair and restoration took place to St Mary's tower and the Priory site.

Ancient Graveyard of Priory and St Mary's Church

Little is known of the monastic graveyard which existed on the headland close to the Priory. A tombstone found during excavation of the church in 1819 was identified as that being, Thomas Raynford, prior who died in 1473.

After the dissolution in 1536, the old graveyard was presumably still used though the registers only date from 1719 and there is no actual record of burials before that time.

Following the consecration of St Mary's Church on the 17th of December 1821, registers from around 1850, show that burials were taking place at the rate of 500 per year. The best known tombstone was that of Martha Lary, the mother of nineteen children who died on the 14th of April 1777 aged 101.

Thus the graveyard had been used for eight centuries. However, the general appearance had been neglected and thus was resented by many as being deplorable.

In May 1901, an order was made for discontinuance of burials in the graveyard except under certain circumstances. The last burial recorded being one Walter Hide on the 6th of December 1957.

On the 5th of July 1950, a suggestion was made by the vicar, Rev, Kenneth Lee that the churchyard be closed and the site converted into a small public open space with no disturbance to any of the graves. This suggestion was adopted by the finance committee of Birkenhead Town Council but unfortunately nothing was done in spite of the efforts of a few.

However, Cammell Laird Shipbuilders required the building of a new dock. The Historic Society of Lancashire and Cheshire were helpless in their objections against the combined opposition of industrialists, town council and most unhappy, the ecclesiastic authorities who had little regard for their ancient inheritance.

Estimates were obtained for the removal of human remains and transfer thereafter to Landican Cemetery, to new shells to a depth of eight feet. One quotation received was from a Birmingham Company Messrs. C. Green and Sons in the sum of £11,448. A number of relatives in the meantime requested separate arrangements be made to re-inter their loved ones in places specified in Landican Cemetery close to deceased relatives. In accordance with records held at Landican Cemetery, the plan consists of approximately 1150 plots.

List of Clergy

1819 - 1834	Rev. E. Newton
1834 - 1881	Rev. A. Knox
1881 - 1896	Rev. H. Linton
1896 - 1902	Rev. J.H.W. Hughes- Games
1902 - 1908	Rev. F.S. Guy Warman
1908 - 1916	Rev. G.D. Oakley
1916 - 1922	Rev. T. Sherwood- Jones
1922 - 1927	Rev. R. Bell
1927 - 1938	Rev. A. G. Williamson
1938 -	Rev. Jack Ramsay A.I.C.D.
1939 -	Vacant
1940 -	Vacant
1941 - 1947	Rev. H.G. Pethybridge
1948 -	Vacant
1949 - 1953	Rev. K. Lee
1953 - 1961	Rev. W. Stanley Walker
1961 - 1968	Rev. E. A. Owen
1969 -	Rev. J.S. Wright