A Powerful Composition

A short History of Christ Church, West Wimbledon

Peter Fleming
Engraving of original appearance of Christ Church by I. S. Heaviside. The picture is based on the architect's drawing and appeared in The Builder in February 1858.
Foreword

It will be apparent to many readers that the first part of this book is based on the history of Christ Church by Robert Willis, published in 1972. Other sources of material include the church’s committee minutes and other records, including a comprehensive collection of documents concerning the applications for, and granting of, parochial status. Much background information was found in Richard Milward’s histories of Wimbledon and of its parish church, St Mary’s. Mr Milward has also kindly read this history in manuscript and, with others, has made useful suggestions and corrected several errors of fact. Such errors as remain are, of course, entirely my own responsibility. I am also greatly indebted to a member of the Christ Church congregation, who wishes to remain anonymous, for the plans of the church at various times in its history (Figs 1 and 2).

Two points about the text should be mentioned. The title ‘vicar’ appears frequently without qualification. Up to the granting of parochial status, in 1961, this refers to the vicar of Wimbledon; after that date to the incumbent at Christ Church. Also, the source of the somewhat cryptic title of the book is to be found on page 3. PRF
Introduction

The sky was cloudy but the sun appeared from time to time and it was pleasantly warm\(^1\) on Monday 5th August 1859 when the Rt Revd and Rt Hon Archibald Tait, Bishop of London, was driven from Fulham Palace over Putney Bridge, up the hill on to the plateau formed by Putney Heath and Wimbledon Common. He passed along the east side of the latter to Wimbledon Village and then took the road to Kingston along the ancient Ridgway to where, at the south-west corner of the plateau, stood his destination, a new chapel-of-ease for the parish of Wimbledon, which he had come to dedicate\(^2\).

The building of Christ Church had, naturally, been an important event to the parishioners but it is likely that they would have been taking an unusual interest in religious affairs in general at this time for much was happening. The literal truth of the Bible was being questioned; science had been rearing its heretical head - that very year would see the publication of Charles Darwin's *Origin of Species* - and Protestants were still debating, and often resenting, the announcement by the Pope in 1850 that he proposed to revive the English Roman Catholic hierarchy with the appointment of diocesan bishops. The Church of England itself had been riven by earnest, often acrimonious, debate since the beginnings of the Tractarian movement in Oxford in the 1830s. This pressure for reform and a return to the spiritual values of the early church initially enjoyed support from all shades of opinion in the Church but, by 1841, the Oxford movement had undergone a decided shift towards Anglo-Catholicism. Hitherto supportive Evangelicals abandoned the Tractarians and, in 1846, founded the Evangelical Alliance in direct opposition. The consequent debate among clergy and laymen throughout the country had its echoes in Wimbledon where, by the middle years of the nineteenth century, other, secular, changes were occurring. Of these the most striking were a consequence of the arrival of the railway in the town in 1838. The line at first only went to Woking but by the 1850s branch lines began to appear and Wimbledon became a junction. With the increased ease of travel the population began to increase. This was particularly evident in the area south of the railway and many houses were built for the new predominantly working-class population. To meet their spiritual needs Holy Trinity Church was built in the Broadway and consecrated in 1862. By this time a need for another church had arisen, for rather different reasons, elsewhere in the parish.

In 1851 Charles Pepys, Earl of Cottenham, died and his property, stretching from Copse Hill towards the railway was sold to developers. New houses began to appear in this area and the local population began to increase beyond the occupants of the small numbers of houses along the west side of the common and near the Crooked Billet. It was among these, mostly well-to-do, inhabitants of the houses on the Cottenham Estate, and nearby, that a demand for a place of worship, nearer their homes than St Mary's, the parish church, had arisen. Among these were such men as Thomas Devas who lived in Mount Ararat, a large house approximately on the present site of The Drive, John Reeves Russell FRS who lived in Woodhayes House on the corner of Woodhayes Road and Southside and Thomas Hughes, author of *Tom Brown's Schooldays*, and John Ludlow whose families shared The Firs near the site of the present Atkinson Morley's Hospital. Hughes and Ludlow were associated with F. D. Maurice and Charles Kingsley in the foundation of the movement known as Christian Socialists, supporters of social reform including widespread adult education and co-operation rather than capitalism. Christian Socialists, on the whole, were Broad Churchmen, favouring neither Tractarians nor Evangelicals and, holding these views, had become uncomfortable with the ministry of the vicar of Wimbledon, Revd Richard Adams, an Evangelical. Hughes and Ludlow are recorded as accusing him of 'being too fond of hell-fire sermons' and had gone so far as to organise their own services in the library of The Firs. Thus, the upheaval in the Church had combined with demographic factors to indicate not only the need for a new church but also the likely attitudes of the more influential members of the congregation. In 1857 a public appeal was launched for funds not only for a new church but also for a village club - a typical Christian Socialist project

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\(^1\) Philip Eden, meteorologist and journalist personal communication, 2001.

\(^2\) The route taken by the bishop is the most likely one although no actual description of it exists.
‘to afford to the inhabitants... the opportunities of intellectual and moral improvement’. The club
was to be built at the eastern end of the Ridgway, the site for the church was ‘Ground of half
an acre or thereabouts’ at the other end of that road, at the north-eastern corner of the
Cottenham Estate. From here, the ground sloped away on three sides so that a new church
would be visible from places well into Surrey, perhaps as far as Epsom. It is doubtful whether
this potential physical prominence of the church influenced the planners but it is an attractive
thought. £6000 was raised for the church and in 1858 the building contract, worth £3425 was
signed between Henry Mills senior and Henry Mills junior, builders of Egham in Surrey on the
one hand and the new Trustees on the other. The original Trustees were the vicar and four
laymen, William Vizard and Devas, Russell and Ludlow who have already been introduced.

The first half-century

Samuel Sanders Teulon (1812-73), a man of Huguenot descent, was chosen as the architect of
both the church and the village club. This was a bold choice as, although he was much in demand
as a church architect, he had a reputation for eccentricity and, in the year in which the building
contract for Christ Church was signed, he had just completed the Church of the Holy Trinity
at Oare in Wiltshire; this was later described as the ugliest in the county. Fortunately, Christ
Church is one of his more successful designs. The original church, built in hammer-dressed
Kentish ragstone, was considerably smaller than the present building although it had room for
571 sittings (Fig 1). Teulon’s design of a simple rectangular building from which the only
projections were the north porch (the main entrance) and the sanctuary developed over the
next twenty years or so into the shape known today. This has been described by various authors
as ‘muscular Gothic’ and ‘a powerful composition’; the stylised outline of the view from the
south-east of the low broad tower with its steep Rhenish roof buttressed by the transepts
which was used as the church logo for several years gives a convincing impression of solidity
and strength. An early engraving (Frontispiece) suggests that the tower originally had a weather
vane on a shaft about ten feet in height and decorated with wrought ironwork. Internally, the
best features are the hammerbeam roof and the arcading arches in the Decorated style. The
floriated capitals to the unusual columns, each different from its neighbours, are not to
everyone’s taste; Pevsner described them as ‘quirky’ but Willis found them ‘pleasing’ and few
complaints are heard today. Originally, as in many churches at that time, the Creed, the Ten
Commandments and the Lord’s Prayer were painted on the walls. These have long since disappeared.

A church tower has, for centuries, usually been placed over the crossing, to the west of the
chancel. The absence of transepts in the original Christ Church meant that there was no
crossing and Teulon had been free to place his tower over the chancel. This unconventional
arrangement meant that when, barely a year after the dedication, it was decided to add a south
transept, its position was determined by an embryonic ‘crossing’ under the tower in the chancel.
The pews in the transept were thus not only directly behind the choir stalls but also behind the
pulpit and lectern. Despite these disadvantages, Teulon produced a design and the contract with
the original builders was signed by the four original lay trustees and the new vicar of
Wimbledon, Canon William Henry Haygarth. At the same time, the small vestry together with
the organ were moved to the north side of the chancel. For several years the pews in the
transept were reserved for the pupils of Wimbledon School which had been built south of the
Ridgway by Revd John Brackenbury the very gifted teacher who was the headmaster. These
pews were screened from the remainder of the congregation by a heavy curtain to save them
(whether boys or congregation is not stated) from distraction. Building meanwhile was
continuing on the Cottenham Estate and in 1862 Frederick Cranmer Penrose built his house,
Colebyfield, just to the west of Christ Church. Penrose, who claimed descent from Thomas
Cranmer, the sixteenth-century martyred archbishop, was a distinguished architect and
Surveyor of the Fabric of St Paul’s Cathedral. He joined the Christ Church congregation and left

3 Citation for listing of Christ Church as Grade II, 1988.
his mark by designing a choir vestry in 1874 and re-arranging the other vestries so that a north ‘transept’ appeared on the outside of the church. Just before this the choir, hitherto unrobed, were provided with cassocks and surplices. Also at this time, or perhaps a little earlier, a turret with fifty steps was built abutting the north-east corner of the tower.

The last major change in the external configuration of Christ Church took place in 1879-81. The church had proved too small to cater for the rapid growth in population in the West Wimbledon area and a lengthening of the nave was proposed. The cost was £1220 of which £1000 was raised as a loan with the remainder by contributions. The architect appointed was Charles Maylard, then planning St Mark’s Church, and his designs were approved by the same Building Committee who had accepted Teulon’s original plans. The work, which was completed in 1881, involved taking down the west wall with its four-light window and the small trefoil above it. So that services could be held while the work was in progress, a temporary screen of canvas and wallpaper was erected. The nave was then extended by one bay and the west wall rebuilt incorporating a new porch with a double entrance and a larger five-light window; the small trefoil was replaced unaltered. The new window was apparently a great improvement on the old for tracery was not Teulon’s strong point and it is more in keeping with the rest of the nave. The result of the work was space for a further 104 sittings, making a total of 675 in all (Fig. 2). At the same time a heating chamber was built below the south-west corner of the church and ventilating stones with trefoil openings were built into the wall of the nave beneath the cornices. About this time, or a little later, the north door ceased to be used and was sealed. This was probably because of draughts for the door was facing open fields; the porch was converted into a baptistery. The font, hitherto in the centre aisle, was moved to this position. With these structural changes, the church had assumed the external appearance known today. Internally, changes went on throughout the second half of the nineteenth century - and have, of course, continued. One of the first was the gift of a pulpit round the base of which is inscribed ‘To the glory of God and to the memory of John Miland, ob. Aug. 13, 1877. Faith cometh by hearing’. In 1885 Richard Hunter died, he had been a trustee and was one of Thomas Devas’ sons-in-law. He is commemorated by the brass lectern given to the church by his children. The stone steps to the lectern were a later gift in memory of Annie, the wife of Arthur Watts, who died in 1921 at the age of 58. The original specification in the building of the church
had included 'to provide and fix a best cast Bell of clear tone'. This was replaced in 1899 by a peal of six bells given by the Strickland family of 'The Lodge', Wimbledon Common. The ropes of these bells would have hung down in the chancel because of the unusual position of the tower and the bells have to be rung by clapper lines operated by a single ringer from a small 'cuddy' in the north-east corner of the belfry which is reached via the steps in the turret. The new bells were rung for the first time on All Saints Day, 1899.

It is not certain whether Canon Haygarth appointed priests-in-charge at Christ Church in its early years or whether he employed his staff in a roving ministry. Contemporary service books suggest the latter but there is some anecdotal evidence that, at least at times, there was a resident priest in the Cottenham Park area. For example, the Revd Leveson-Gower, curate-in-charge about 1870, is said to have been responsible for the introduction of a surpliced choir. He also persuaded the vicar to allow him to have an early morning service of Holy Communion once a month. This celebration, on the second Sunday of the month, at 8 a.m., was the first, and only one, in the parish of Wimbledon, for a time. Also the Three-Hour Devotion on Good Friday at Christ Church was the only one for many years. Another priest-in-charge mentioned in the records was Revd C.C. Chamberlain, in office about 1880. A third was Revd Walter Weston who was in charge of Christ Church until 1889 when he left for Japan to become British Chaplain in Kobe and, later, in Yokohama. He was a keen explorer and cartographer and climbed Mount Sobo on one of his many map-making expeditions in the Japanese Alps. He died in 1940 after 51 years in Japan. His reputation as an explorer among the Japanese seems to have survived the war years for, in 1964, the then vicar of Christ Church, Revd Henry Andrewes Uthwatt, was surprised to receive a request for a stone from the garden of Weston's old home, now 33 Cottenham Park Road, to be incorporated in a memorial on Mount Sobo. When permission was sought from the then owner of the house, he was happy to comply.

A most distinguished priest who preached regularly at Christ Church in retirement in the 1920s was Charles Gore, successively Bishop of Worcester, Birmingham and Oxford. His introduction thus early in this history is because he was born at West Side House in 1853 and was brought up as a member of the congregation of Christ Church where he preached his first sermon as a deacon. Bishop Gore was prominent in the Oxford Movement although he later modified his strict Tractarian views. He knew John Ludlow by whom, it is said, he was introduced to Christian Socialism. There is a memorial to his parents in the south aisle.

The first major event in the history of Christ Church in the 20th century was the opening, in 1900, of the Parish Room and Club at the Crooked Billet. Victor Read, in his centenary booklet on the history of the church, comments on how unlikely it was that the Parish Room was 'in the licensed premises themselves' - one can only agree. This was not the first Christ Church Parish Room - there is a handwritten note in the archives about such a room in Richmond Road before 1890. The new venture seems to have been a success as a membership of the club of 60 men and boys is quoted. There is no mention of any comparable provision for women in those chauvinistic days.

In 1907 further alterations to the interior of the church were planned. The Bishop of Southwark issued a citation in that year for quite extensive alterations in the sanctuary. There is no record of why this work was undertaken but it seems possible that it was related to the fiftieth anniversary, in 1909, of the dedication of the church. The scheme seems to have been delayed and it was probably not completed until 1912 or early in 1913 as at Easter in that year a leaflet describing the work was produced. The east wall was cut away below the window and the altar set back in the recess formed; a new reredos of stone and marble and a white and gold canopy were erected. The communion rail and step were brought forward two feet into

5 An event, which is well-documented with the notable exception of its date, may have taken place in the latter part of the nineteenth century, or early in the twentieth. One Sunday evening, Mr Sumner, the organist, collapsed and died while playing, with tragic relevance, the Nunc Dimittis. It is recorded that a member of the congregation, a Mr Dean, played for the rest of the service.

6 'Faculty' in today's terminology.
the sanctuary the floor of which was inlaid with carrara marble and panels of onyx originally quarried in Mexico. The arcading removed from the east wall was re-erected as a sedilia in the south wall of the sanctuary. Then the sanctuary and chancel were redecorated and the rest of the church cleaned and distempered. Finally a new heating system was installed. The whole was designed by Mr F.C. Shearman.

A new east window and murals in the sanctuary and choir were the gift of Mr and Mrs Bishop in memory of their son Eric who died in 1907 at the age of fourteen. The murals are paintings of some merit and it is a pity that few members of the congregation have an opportunity to see them; they depict richly dressed angels singing verses from the Book of Revelation and, rather surprisingly, swinging censers. The window illustrates the Resurrection; in the centre is the Angel of the Sepulchre surrounded by the women bearing spices, early at the tomb, and SS Peter, John and Joseph of Arimathea. The latter is accompanied by a kneeling boy, in the lower left corner, representing Eric Bishop. Patrick Fawcett has described how, at the age of seven or eight in 1914, he attended Christ Church with his parents and found the East window the most attractive feature. He was particularly impressed by seeing the figure of Eric Bishop, a ‘real person’ such as he had never seen before in a church window. Otherwise Christ Church did not impress young Patrick. He thought it ‘a very dark building, too wide for its height, as if a heavy weight had been dropped on the roof spreading it out sideways’. He did, however, have happy memories of hearing familiar hymn tunes played on the bells.

The First World War and the inter-war years.

Henry Haygarth’s long incumbency in the parish of Wimbledon had come to an end in 1903 and it may be that he would not have wholly approved of the elaborate enrichment of the sanctuary at Christ Church; he has been described as ‘Low Church traditional’ and had banned ‘Hymns Ancient and Modern’ as ‘too Tractarian’. The new vicar was Canon James Bell who remained in office throughout the first World War. This was a period of disturbance of church life with anxiety for many and great sadness for some - 21 members of the congregation lost their lives in conflict. Yet, as Willis put it, ‘it seems that the war years were a time of inspiring faith, of hope and of continuing worship’. It seems that the vicar favoured a somewhat ‘higher’ form of worship than had been the case and, at Christ Church, the Great Festivals in 1915 were celebrated with choral communion. In 1917 the vicar urged the need for ‘brighter and simpler’ services and a new pattern of Sunday worship was introduced; this consisted of a choral celebration at 10.30 followed by a ‘revised’ Mattins at 11.30; the nature of this revision is not known.

At the very end of the war, important changes were made in the administration of Christ Church. The Revd N. Kynaston Gaskell was installed as priest-in-charge in October 1918 and, a month later, the first ‘wardens’ were appointed. These were Messrs W.R. Doherty and H.J. Carden who took over the care of the church expenses and the organ and choir funds. The Trustees - the new vicar, the Revd Horace Monroe, Joseph Arthur Burrell, Alfred Bishop, James Liddell Walker and Charles Tyrrell Giles - retained responsibility for the fabric, property and pew rents. In January 1919 the vicar set up a Parochial Church Council with representatives from all five churches in the parish. Simultaneously the first Christ Church Committee was elected - an incomplete list of the members includes the priest-in-charge, Messrs C. Aldrich, W. Allibone, A. Bishop, ? Burrell, H.J. Carden, ? Cater (Hon. Sec.), W.R. Doherty, J.L. Walker, A. Watts, Tyrrell Giles K.C., Colonel Dettmar Todd and Miss M. Twentyman. In December of the same year the vicar held an election for committee membership in the church following a short service held ‘as an object lesson to the congregation that a solemn responsibility attached to them to elect the best and most suitable persons from their number for this privileged office’ One hopes that this admonition was unnecessary.

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7 The burning of incense has never, as far as is known, been a practice at Christ Church. However, in 1996, a censer was found in the attic above the choir vestry and inadvertently left on the floor of the vestry to the consternation of the new vicar.

The records for the 1920s are incomplete but it is known that Revd Rowland Scriven was appointed assistant curate in 1923 and remained until 1928 when he joined the staff of St Mark’s. It is also recorded that the ‘Roof Fund’ had closed; the reasonable inference is that repairs had been necessary. Also in 1923, on the Second Sunday in Lent, the Bishop’s throne, which had been given by a member of the congregation in memory of his mother and was installed in a new niche in the north wall of the sanctuary, was dedicated by the vicar.

Three events of particular importance occurred in 1925. The organ, which had been installed at the end of the 19th century, was repaired at a cost of £194; the Revd Alfred Dunstan took office as priest-in-charge and, in August of that year, a Christ Church Society came into being; the inaugural meeting being held in the hall of St Matthew’s Church. The need to borrow the hall of a church 50 years ‘younger’ than Christ Church was not lost on the congregation of the latter, some of the younger members of which had suggested, as early as 1923, that Christ Church should build a hall of its own. During 1926-27 plans were made for raising £3000, the estimated cost of the hall and a search began for a suitable site, preferably within the church precinct. By 1928 no site had been found and the feasibility of building an extension to the church in the shape of a larger vestry on the south side of the chancel as a substitute for a hall began to be considered. Also, in 1928, more repairs were needed to the fabric of the church after one of the stone crosses fell to the ground, fortunately without damage to life or limb.

The year 1930 was marked by the death of Arthur Jarvis, the verger of Christ Church for 21 years until his retirement in 1929. He had been greatly respected at the church and in the community to whom his tall commanding figure at the church door had become familiar. In 1928 a portrait of Arthur Jarvis by Miss Barker had been hung at the Royal Academy and, later, could be seen on the wall of the hall for many years.

In May 1930 a new Hall Building Committee began to grapple with the plans for an extension of the church but, the following year; they were able to abandon this makeshift scheme because, by great good fortune, the land next to the church came unexpectedly on the market. The price was high but this was an opportunity not to be missed and the church bought it. In the same year, 1931, the priest-in-charge, Alfred Dunstan, left and to his successor, the Revd John Cawley, fell the task of supervising the new construction. By 1933 the plans for the hall were complete; building began early in 1936 and proceeded with such commendable speed that the opening ceremony was performed on September 30th of that year. The programme records that the ceremony was performed by a Miss Mortimer. This ceremony was followed by an ‘entertainment’ which consisted of songs by a Mr Sharpington and readings by Revd Kynaston Gaskell, a former priest-in-charge. The new hall quickly proved useful as, by 1937, the newly established Children’s Fellowship was meeting there. However, catering for meetings must have been limited at best until a kitchen was added in 1939. The hall was connected to the south door of the church by a pathway and it was while this was being constructed that a ‘subterranean chamber’ was apparently uncovered. This is built of brick with a vaulted roof and is in the form of a tunnel which runs towards but does not reach the transept. Willis suggested that this chamber might have been the ice-house of a previous dwelling. However, no such building is shown on maps until 1838 when one shows the model farm built by the Earl of Cottenham just to the west of the site of Christ Church. The chamber might conceivably have been associated with this. An iron manhole cover now hides the entrance to the chamber. Another event about this time was the dedication of a memorial flagstaff presented by the Wimbledon Branch of the Old Contemptibles Association. The ceremony was performed on 28th June 1936 by Revd John Cawley who was honorary chaplain of the branch. The Old Contemptibles continued to parade at Christ Church until 1965.

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9 No details of this lady seem to be available but a window in the north aisle is dedicated to the memory of ‘Anne, wife of Percy Mortimer, died 5th February 1929’ and it may be surmised that Miss Mortimer was related to this couple, perhaps their daughter.
10 Milward, R and Maidment, C. Wimbledon. A Surrey Village in maps.
The Second World War and the late 1940s

Claude Godefroy, the long-serving organist at Christ Church, recalled that, on 3rd September 1939, the first air-raid sirens of World War Two sounded during Morning Service. He remembered vividly the scene as, in the apprehensive silence of the congregation, the choir sang the anthem ‘Thou wilt keep him in perfect peace whose mind is stayed on thee’.

As in the First World War there was a good deal of disruption of church affairs in 1939-45. Many of the younger members of the congregation served in the Forces and the memorial records the names of the 26 who lost their lives. In addition, others joined the various civilian services, some facing dangers no less than their armed colleagues. The biggest change at Christ Church was the loan of the hall in November 1940 to the Church Army for use as a canteen and club for service personnel. This was formally opened by the Bishop of Kingston in January 1941. The canteen was staffed by a team of seventy Christ Church ladies under the admirable leadership of Miss Mary Abel and continued to cater for service men and women until August 1945. Miss Abel, an honorary captain in the Church Army, was the daughter of a then warden and, later, the wife of Paul Beney whose role in important events in the history of Christ Church is described in the next section. Services at Christ Church continued throughout the war but there was some difficulty in maintaining the social activities. Efforts were made to keep the Christ Church Society in being but with little success and the need to ‘revive’ the society is expressed in committee minutes of 1945. Youth work also suffered at this time. In August 1942 Christ Church was licensed for weddings and, at the end of that year, Revd Edward Ashford took over from Revd William Hopkins who had been priest-in-charge since 1937.

During the bombing of 1940-41 Christ Church suffered relatively little damage. There were several near-misses, the closest being one which fell on 6th November 1940 in the front garden of 4 Cottenham Park Road, next door to the church. This caused damage to the hall and broke several windows in the church. One, of stained glass, was a memorial to Caroline Hunter who died in 1874. It was situated near the south door and all three lights were destroyed, leaving only the little angel in the quatrefoil. It may have been at this time that the roof of the tower was damaged. There is a record of a claim for compensation for war damage to the tower being successful in 1942. A far worse fate befell a neighbouring church, St Matthew’s in Durham Road, which was destroyed by a flying bomb on 28th June 1944. A period of close co-operation between the two churches followed with two members of St Matthew’s joining the Christ Church Committee and boys from St Matthew’s ringing the Christ Church bells to earn money for their own church.

An interesting and unusual gift was presented to the church in 1944. This, by Mrs Parkin, was a piece of Honiton lace, for use as part of an altar cloth, in memory of her daughter Ann who died at the age of 15 in 1943. Willis published Mrs Parkin’s own account of the history of the lace in full. In summary, it was woven for an Anglo-French exhibition in 1851 and the greater part of it became the property of Queen Victoria; apparently it is still owned by the Royal Family. Mrs Parkin’s great-grandfather bought a small part of it and it had been worn by members of the family on important occasions; it had been intended for Ann’s wedding. The lace was apparently used at Christ Church at Christmas and Easter for some years and it is recorded that it was ‘cleaned and backed’, presumably for display, in 1961. To bring its history up to date, it was inspected by a representative of the Victoria and Albert Museum in 1973 who reported that, while it was genuine mid-Victorian Honiton lace, it had been considerably re-worked and was not of exhibition quality. The Parochial Church Council of that day decided to take no special steps towards its preservation and ‘just to use it until it wore out’. Wiser counsels must have prevailed as it still hangs, mounted and framed, in the choir vestry. Mrs Parkin made a further gift to the church in 1947. In memory of Ann, a bird bath containing her ashes in a bronze urn had been placed in Mrs Parkin’s garden. When she left the district, the bird bath and urn were moved to Christ Church and were consecrated in October 1949.
During the war the condition of the fabric, furnishings and grounds of the church had been neglected for lack of proper maintenance and had deteriorated badly. Once peace returned refurbishment was a high priority; this began in the sanctuary where the canopy over the altar was removed, uncovering the lower part of the east window which had been obscured by the canopy. In the sedilia, the decorated moulding at the top of the reredos wall was enriched. Attention was also paid to other areas as resources became available. The paths surrounding the church were in particularly poor condition and needed resurfacing.

The financial position of Christ Church was regularly reported as very satisfactory during and after the war and the records betray a wish for greater local control over the collection and disposal of the church’s resources. Thus, as early as 1942, a proposal to change from using a plate at the door to a pew-to-pew collection was made but was rejected by the Parochial Church Council at the parish church. Likewise, a proposal to abolish pew rents by a Christ Church committee met with opposition, albeit temporary and reasonable, from the churchwardens until the legal position had been clarified. There was, in fact, no legal obstacle to this action and the ancient practice of paying for a seat in church, still being used at that time by about one in ten of the congregation, came to an end in January 1947. It may have been this episode or a subsequent query by the Christ Church Committee about the amount of money they were required to pay to the general funds of the parish that provoked a reminder, recorded in that Committee’s minutes, that Christ Church had no legal right to administer their own finances.

In January 1949, to the dismay of the congregation, Revd Ashford left, to be replaced, after a short period when Canon T. Guy Rogers, an eminent retired priest, acted as priest-in-charge, by Revd Donald Holt. A little earlier there had also been a change at a more senior level when, in 1946, a new vicar of Wimbledon, Revd Norman Hook, was appointed to succeed Revd Arthur Phelps who had been the incumbent since 1932. The new vicar was a man of decided views which were destined to clash with those of some of the Christ Church laymen in the important debate about the future status of their church which is described in the next section.

A memorable decade

Mr Holt proved to be as popular and successful as Mr Ashford and, during their ministries, the congregation at Christ Church grew considerably in size. More help was needed and, in September 1955, Revd David Webb, newly ordained as Deacon, was appointed to assist Mr Holt. The partnership lasted only five months, however, as, in January 1956, Mr Holt was appointed vicar of St Peter’s, Croydon. For the next six months, the duties of priest-in-charge were carried out by Revd H. Rowland Grant, chaplain of Atkinson Morley’s Hospital and formerly Rector of Sandringham and Queen’s Chaplain. The interregnum lasted just over six months and, in July 1956, Revd Victor Downs was installed as priest-in-charge. Further changes followed rapidly and Mr Webb left, in September 1957, to become Chaplain of Emanuel College, Cambridge. He was replaced by Revd Victor Read who was appointed assistant curate in September 1958 after Mr Downs had continued single-handed for a year. It is characteristic of successful priests-in-charge that they gain preferment sooner rather than later and Mr Downs left to become rector of Denton in Sussex in 1959. Once again Christ Church was without a priest-in-charge and, this time, the vicar, Canon Leslie Wright - in post since 1953 - stepped in and acted in this capacity himself.

Under the direction of Claude Godefroy, the choir at Christ Church had, by 1951, reached a standard ‘of which many famous London churches might well be proud’\(^\text{11}\). The same could not be said of the organ. This was originally installed in 1898 and, after over fifty years, was being described as ‘decrepit’ and ‘not worthy of the church or the choir’\(^\text{12}\). The original builders, Messrs J.W. Walker and Sons, were commissioned to provide a new instrument and an appeal to raise £5500 was launched in September 1951. The money was raised and the new organ

\(^{11}\) Appeal for new organ, September 1951.

\(^{12}\) Remark made by Canon Hook at Christ Church Committee, May 1950.
incorporated all the pipes of the old one (after revoicing); the 1600 pipes were adjusted to ‘fill the building with music, in clarity without excess’\textsuperscript{13}. Unlike the former instrument, the new organ was three-manual with an electro-pneumatic action. It was placed in a chamber over the south transept, with the manuals on the north side of the chancel in a special alcove; this enabled the organist to have a clear view of the choir and sanctuary. The removal of the old organ allowed the choir vestry to be greatly enlarged. The new organ was dedicated by the Bishop of Southwark at Evensong on 16th May 1954. Following the service a recital was given by Sir William McKie, the Organist and Choirmaster at Westminster Abbey. As might have been expected, the church was full on this occasion and the service and recital were transmitted to 100 more in the hall. A plaque commemorating the installation of the new organ was fixed to the west side of the organ loft.

The process of improving and refurbishing the interior of the church which had begun after the war continued during the 1950s. One major item was the construction of a side altar in the north-east corner of the nave. This was first discussed in October 1954 but the subcommittee asked to consider this clearly felt no sense of urgency as, a year later, no progress had been made and, in July 1956, the idea was dropped. There the matter rested until September 1958 when Mrs Abel offered to pay the cost of ‘improvement’ of the north-east corner in memory of her late husband who had been a warden from 1934 to 1944. Plans for the altar were agreed and, by the end of 1959, construction had been completed. Further refurbishment took place around this time including cleaning the pews in the nave of their coating of badly worn red stain to match the appearance of the pews in the south transept. In addition a new cork floor was laid in the nave and, at the beginning of 1959, Mr Cornock-Taylor presented the church with a new permanent communion rail. None of this refurbishment was planned as part of the centenary celebrations, which are described below, but, in retrospect, they may be seen as such. One last small addition to the furnishings of Christ Church should be mentioned here. This was the provision of wands of office for the wardens. Like the side altar, this had been discussed several times in the past. In September 1953 the idea was rejected because ‘it might lead to pomp’. By July 1955, this fear no longer caused anxiety and an offer by the sidesmen to defray the cost was accepted. Readers interested in symbolism might care to ponder over the significance of these decisions as evidence of (1) the churchmanship of the Christ Church Committee and (2) a wish to adopt, prematurely, the practices of a parish church.

In 1959 Christ Church celebrated its centenary. As has been said, the vicar was acting as priest-in-charge for most of that year and, naturally, with his many other commitments, could not devote more than a modest proportion of his time to that role. The planning of the events during that year was, therefore, in the hands of a subcommittee of the Christ Church Committee together with Vic Read who, at the beginning of 1959, had been assistant curate for only three months. It was universally judged that this team had produced an excellent programme to mark the occasion. The year began, in December 1958, with the presentation of a Christmas card giving preliminary notice of the centenary to all who attended the Christmas services.

A brochure to introduce the work of the Church in general and of Christ Church in particular was distributed to every house in the district served by Christ Church. This was the work of Charles Lane, a member of the Centenary Subcommittee, who used the skills acquired from working in an advertising agency. This brochure was described in glowing terms in a column of the Church Times and, as a result, requests for copies were received from several parishes throughout the British Isles to help them celebrate similar occasions. The centenary was also discussed in an article in the Wimbledon Borough News entitled \textit{Celebrating a Centenary} by Nicholas Russell. Another publication that year was a short history of Christ Church entitled \textit{A 100 Years to the Glory of God} by Vic Read. In July 1959 a Centenary Appeal was launched with three specific aims. These were (1) to provide a permanent shelter for babies and

\textsuperscript{13} Specification for new organ, quoted in Read, \textit{V.A 100 years to the Glory of God}, 1959.
their prams at the Haygarth-Witts Home for unmarried mothers, (2) to found two prizes at the Old Central School in Camp Road, which had celebrated its own bicentenary in 1958 and (3) to clean thoroughly and redecorate the church to complete its refurbishment. The initial appeal was for £1500 which was quickly raised.

The period 4th - 11th October was chosen as the Centenary Octave. During this time, the programme included parties for the younger and the older children, a social gathering in the hall and a Grand Dance - 'Old Tyme to Rock and Roll'. The services began with normal Sunday services on 4th October (Fig 3) including a Family Communion. On Wednesday 7th October, a Thanksgiving Service was held to which members of the other churches in the parish were invited and on the last day of the octave, the Bishop of Southwark, the Rt Revd Mervyn Stockwood, was the preacher at Mattins.

On other occasions during the year several previous priests-in-charge returned as guest preachers. After the service on 4th October, Dr G. Thalben Ball, Organist at the City Temple and a member of Christ Church, gave an organ recital. During the year there were a number of other recitals - for example, by organists from Westminster Abbey and York Minster. On 12th July, the recital was by Donald Cashmore, Organist and Director of Music at Kingsway Hall with, as vocalist, Peter Salmon, a chorister at St Paul's Cathedral. These two gentlemen had been choirboys at Christ Church in 1940 and had been trained by Claude Godefroy.

**FIG 3:** A service at Christ Church about the time of the centenary. The preacher is probably Vic Read. The drawing is based on a photograph in the magazine of the parish of Wimbledon.
Nicholas Russell, in his article about the centenary, mentioned that the ‘Church Council (sic) are clamouring to set up their own parish’. ‘Clamour’ is not too strong a word to describe the efforts made by the officers of Christ Church to achieve parochial status. This had, probably, first been raised as long ago as 1872 and it may be significant that this was the year in which Holy Trinity, consecrated three years after Christ Church as a daughter church of St Mary’s, Wimbledon, became a parish church. Subsequently, according to the incomplete records, this matter was raised before the first World War and in the 1930s; in the 1940s it was the then vicar, Canon Arthur Philips, who raised the subject. He canvassed informed opinion, both clerical and lay, and found a majority against the separation of Christ Church from the parish of Wimbledon. In 1950, a further attempt was made. It began informally with the Christ Church wardens seeking guidance from the vicar, Canon Norman Hook. He opposed the idea and was unwilling even to discuss it but he did arrange for the wardens to put their case to the Bishop. He agreed to consider the matter and asked that there should be no public discussion of the issue. This undertaking was given and observed for more than two years. During this time various meetings were held between the Christ Church wardens and clerical and lay representatives of the parish as well as with the bishop and other diocesan officials. This period culminated in a meeting of the Christ Church congregation on 5th December 1952 at which the vicar outlined the reasons for his opposition to the separation of Christ Church from the parish. According to an account of this meeting, it seems to have become very heated and the vicar is alleged to have said that Christ Church would attain parochial status ‘only over his dead body’. The congregation was unconvincing and a vote showed that a large majority favoured separation. The vicar left Wimbledon to become Dean of Norwich early in 1953; his successor was Canon Leslie Wright who was equally opposed to the separation of Christ Church but much less forthright in the expression of his views than his predecessor. At an acrimonious meeting of the Parochial Church Council in October the proposal that Christ Church should become a separate parish was heavily defeated. It is clear from the arguments advanced by representatives of all the other churches that, although the ‘strength’ of Christ Church and ‘its remarkable expansion during the last 20 years and more’ were admitted, its separation would inflict hardship on the other three daughter churches all of which were relatively weak and were being ‘carried’ financially by both the parish church and Christ Church. Despite this rebuff, the Christ Church officers persisted and, during the next year, appealed to the Dean and Chapter of Worcester, the patrons of the parish church, the new Bishop of Southwark, the Right Revd Mervyn Stockwood and, finally, to the Church Commissioners who agreed to receive a deputation only after threats of legal action by the Christ Church Committee. Nothing came of all this activity and, in December 1954, this unhappy period of over four years came to an end.

At Easter 1959 the attempt to achieve parochial status was renewed. A ‘Separation Committee’, chaired by Paul Beney, was appointed and prepared a closely reasoned case for Christ Church becoming a parish church. This was presented to the Parochial Church Council in September and accepted by a large majority. The agreement of the Bishop followed swiftly. The reason for this, apparently sudden, volte face is now clear. It will be recalled that, for most of 1959, the vicar had been acting as priest-in-charge of Christ Church and had become convinced that the desire for separation was felt by the vast majority of the congregation and not by an influential minority only. He had also formed the view that, with many of the congregation, this issue had become ‘a sort of obsession’ which was damaging the spiritual life of the church. Furthermore, it should be noted that Vic Read had been appointed assistant curate in September 1958 and the extra stipend resulted in Christ Church receiving more from the parish funds than it was contributing. The financial argument against separation was thus removed.

The complicated process for the creation of a new parish was begun and will not be described in detail. The financial arrangements caused a little difficulty but there was no other
cause of disagreement between Christ Church and the diocesan authorities. Perhaps surprisingly, no objection seems to have been made to the definition of the boundaries of the new parish. It had been assumed that these would be the same as those of the Christ Church District before separation (Fig. 4). These had included the whole of Wimbledon Common but, because it was felt that the ‘ancient parish of Wimbledon’ should include part, at least, of the common, the eastern boundary of the new parish was shifted from Parkside to an irregular line dividing the common from north to south and leaving the windmill in the ‘ancient parish’ (Fig. 5). A suggestion that the new parish should be ‘compensated’ for the loss of part of the common by receiving the uninhabited strip of land between Beverley Brook and the Kingston Bypass was quickly abandoned when it was realised that this would involve negotiations with two neighbouring parishes. Eventually all was settled and, after referral to the Privy Council, as required by law, a notice appeared in the London Gazette on 4th August 1961 and the Parish of Christ Church, West Wimbledon came into existence.

A teenage parish...

The first vicar of the new parish was Revd Henry Andrewes Uthwatt. He had become priest-in-charge on September 13th 1959 and, between that date and his institution and induction as incumbent on September 18th 1961, there were several developments in the spiritual life of the church. It had been felt for some time that the spiritual needs of families with young children were not being met by the usual services and, in the spring of 1960, a monthly Family
Communion service was introduced as an experiment. It was well-attended with the parents taking their children to the altar rail for a blessing and the experiment was thought to have been so successful that it soon became a weekly service. Another addition to the children's work of the church resulted from a suggestion by the baptismal visitors - ladies who undertake to visit a baby baptised at Christ Church about a month after the service and for five years thereafter on or about the child's birthday. They proposed a Pram Service to which all mothers of children baptised at the church during the previous year were invited with their babies. This service became an annual event.

In February the Christ Church Committee invited Revd Wallace Harris and Revd S. R. Longes from the diocese for help with planning a Stewardship Campaign; it was emphasised that the campaign was to be concerned about all aspects of stewardship and not only about money. Although financially the campaign was not a success, over 100 people took active parts in it. About 300 Time and Talents offers were made and a small intercessory group was formed, the members undertaking to pray about the same specific subject on the same day. The final verdict was that increased fellowship and spiritual growth, though intangible, may have been the most important result of the campaign. In April 1961 Christ Church was one of the 30 churches in the Wimbledon and Merton Council of Churches which took part in a week of evangelism. The object of this mission was to 'Present Christ Jesus in the power of the Holy Spirit, that men shall come to put their trust in God through Him, to accept Him as their Saviour, and serve Him as their King in the fellowship of this Church'. The Christ Church Mission was led by Ven Gordon Strutt, Archdeacon of Maidstone and, later, Bishop of Stockport. The second half of 1961 saw the resignation of two priests who had presided over a momentous period in the history of Christ Church. Lionel Wright had earned the gratitude of the Christ Church congregation for his statesmanlike handling of the debates about parochial status. In the case of Vic Read, the 'Goodbye' turned out to be 'Au Revoir'. He was replaced as assistant curate by Revd Jeremy Whales. One final event in these years, memorable only in the light of subsequent events, was the appearance in the south porch of a Persian carpet, the gift of an anonymous donor; it was presumed. It was found to fit the chancel exactly. In December 1995, the same carpet, by now at the rear of the south aisle, disappeared as suddenly as it had appeared. Once again, the person or persons responsible appeared to be anonymous.

One of the early tasks of the new Christ Church Parochial Church Council, which met for the first time on 9th October 1961, was to decide on a site for a vicarage. A house in Conway Road, occupied by Mr Andrewes Uthwatt as priest-in-charge, automatically became the vicarage initially but the Church Commissioners had expressed the opinion that it was too far from the church. Various other sites were considered, including the possibility of building on the land around the hall. Happily in June 1963 it became possible to purchase some land from the Westside Lawn Tennis Club opposite the church across Copse Hill. The architect chosen to design the new vicarage was David Rock who had at one time worked under Sir Basil Spence. The building, completed in 1966, with its shining copper roof and first-floor patio, attracted a lot of attention and controversial comment. The vicar was reported to have said that he had heard a comment that it looked like a squash court but another that it resembled a slaughterhouse had not reached him. Despite these unkind remarks the building was included in an exhibition of outstanding designs of new vicarages organised by the Church Commissioners in 1969. In addition to the vicarage, improved accommodation was provided for a curate. A small house in Copse Hill was purchased in 1969 and redecorated in preparation for the arrival of Revd Tony Lucas and his family.

Claude Godefroy had been planning to retire at the end of 1963 but died just before playing for a last time at the service of carols and readings; he was replaced by Chris Hall who served for the next thirty years. Also in 1964 Jeremy Whales left Christ Church and in 1965 Revd Ian Sutcliffe too, who had also been assisting the vicar. They were replaced as curate that year by
Revd David Smith who served until 1969. Other changes in the staff of the parish in the 1960s included the appointment of a parish secretary in 1965. This was one of the recommendations of a group of three businessmen, members of the congregation, who had been asked to advise on the administration of the parish. The first secretary was Mrs Joan Nagele, an active member of the church and previously organiser of the Young Wives Group. In addition, Reginald Troman was appointed verger in 1970 in succession to Bill Cooke.

During the later 1960s the Church of England was debating the possibility of uniting with the Methodist Church. Christ Church played its part in this debate, collaborating with Raynes Park Methodist Church in various ways including shared services even after the proposal for union had failed to win a sufficient majority in the General Synod. Synodical government itself was a new departure for the Church of England. The role of Christ Church in this was by virtue of its representation on the new Deanery Synod which met for the first time on 1st June 1970. In 1968, as part of a world-wide scheme, the dioceses of Southwark and Chicago were paired for the mutual exchange of clergy. Hence it was that, in May of that year, Henry Andrewes Uthwatt, with his family, moved to Downer’s Grove, a suburb of Chicago, to become visiting rector of St Andrew’s. Meanwhile Revd George Williams and his family journeyed from Illinois and settled into Christ Church vicarage. The congregations of both St Andrews and Christ Church took their visitors to their hearts and, when the exchange ended in October, both priests returned home with happy memories.

Mr Andrewes Uthwatt left Christ Church in 1973 to become rector of Yeovil and was succeeded by Vic Read, well known to many of his new congregation. The first few years of his incumbency were ones of financial stringency and drastic retrenchment throughout the Church of England and Christ Church suffered so badly that Mr Read said at the Annual Parochial Meeting in 1980 that ‘Christ Church could die as a parish’; he added ‘or go on to a splendid, if different, future’. It is for the present and future members of the congregation to judge the extent to which the second alternative prophecy has been fulfilled. The fundamental problem was the decline in church attendance nationally with consequent reduction in income. At Christ Church the fall in numbers was particularly noticeable in the choir. This was partly made good by recruiting ‘young ladies’ as choristers in 1976; this followed the successful appointment of lady ‘sidesmen’ the previous year. The diocese attempted to deal with its financial problems by merger of parishes but suggestions that Christ Church should unite with St Matthew’s or St Mary’s met with strenuous opposition from those with memories of the recent struggle for parochial status. An attempt to reduce the staff establishment from one curate to zero was, in the event, also unsuccessful. Christ Church too was in financial trouble by 1975 and was unable to pay its ‘quota’ (the contribution of a parish to diocesan expenses) in full. The situation became so bad that, in 1979, the diocese issued an ultimatum which can be summarised as ‘no quota in full, no curate’. Some relief, at least for Christ Church, came the following year when the falling parish income was acknowledged by a reduction in the quota. In years to come it proved possible to resolve similar financial crises by careful recording of the size of the congregation with timely appeals to the diocese.

An important event in the life of Christ Church was the visitation by the Bishop of Southwark in October 1974. Part of an associated Parochial Church Council meeting consisted of a rigorous cross-examination by the Bishop of the members on their answers to a pre-circulated questionnaire. On this occasion the Bishop also suggested the introduction of the practice of reservation of the sacrament. Accordingly, following the visitation, representatives of Christ Church went to inspect examples of a hanging pyx in neighbouring churches. In the event, the decision was taken to install an aumbry which, with the sanctuary light, is sited in the north-east corner of the nave, next to the Abel altar. Other changes in the worship at Christ Church at this time included participation in the experimental services of Holy Communion in preparation for the introduction of the Alternative Services Book in 1980. In connection with this, the
‘Passing of the Peace’ began at Christ Church in February 1979.

There were several changes in the staff in the 1970s apart from the change of vicar. In March 1974 Tony Lucas left and was replaced in July by Revd Peter Kefford. He is remembered for his pioneer production of the musical *Joseph and his Amazing Technicolour Dream Coat*. This was performed in the church and was followed by coffee, also in church. It had been expected that there would be some opposition to these innovations but all comments were favourable. It had been thought that Peter Kefford would be the last curate at Christ Church as mentioned above but, in fact, he was succeeded, in October 1978, by Revd Nigel Hamilton. His term of office was, unhappily, for less than a year. His wife had been ordained priest in America and had intended to work as such in Britain. This was not possible because the General Synod voted, in November 1978, against the acceptance of women ordained elsewhere in the Anglican Communion. So, by 1980, no curate was in post. However, lay reinforcements were at hand. In 1977 Robert Willis, author of the first edition of this book, was licensed as reader but, sadly, died in April 1978. David Lankey began training as a ‘worker-priest’ in 1979 and, by 1980, Ros McLachlan and Monica Brown were training as readers and subsequently had long and distinguished careers at Christ Church. Finally, in 1977, Reginald Troman left Wimbledon and was replaced as part-time verger by Alfred Taylor.

...reaches maturity

One of the most important developments in the last quarter of the twentieth century was the construction of the Truman Room. The idea that a ‘quiet room’ could be formed in the south transept by the use of a removable partition first arose in October 1967. Discussion on this was repeatedly deferred and nothing further happened until October 1973 when the creation of a new ‘parish room’ in the transept was discussed together with the idea of an altar at the east end of the nave. Initially there seems to have been little enthusiasm for these ideas in the Parochial Church Council particularly on the grounds of the likely high cost. The financial situation was transformed when, after the death of Violet Truman, a long-standing member of the congregation, in January 1977, it was found that she had bequeathed a large sum of money to Christ Church. By January 1978 plans were approved for a room in the south transept to be called the Truman Room, a nave altar on a platform extending the chancel and the removal of five rows of pews to accommodate this together with conversion of the baptistery into a store room and redecoration of the whole church. The work proceeded rapidly and the nave altar was consecrated and the Truman Room dedicated by the Bishop of Kingston on 26th November 1978.

Another event in 1978 which demonstrated that, despite trials and tribulations, Christ Church remained in good heart, was the parish festival weekend in June. This consisted of a parish exhibition, a flower festival, and a children’s competition together with various events such as a festival banquet, a dramatic presentation and a festival service on the Sunday morning.

The anxieties of the 1970s persisted into the 1980s. The congregation and the choir continued to decline in numbers and, by 1983, the latter was reduced to one man only. After nearly two years without a curate, Revd Peter Sills joined Christ Church in November 1981 but left in February 1985. No replacement was made but David Lankey was ordained as deacon in 1982 and assisted the vicar for the next ten years. The idea of union of parishes arose once more, in 1981, when the diocese proposed that Christ Church be linked with all the churches of the parish of Wimbledon in a ‘co-operative ministry’. It was feared by some that this would lead inevitably to merger of the parishes, but it was probably nothing more than a suggestion that co-operation between the parishes should become more formalised. Nevertheless, some at Christ Church thought that their parochial status was at risk and the church acquired an unfortunate reputation of being unwilling to co-operate with its neighbours. By 1983 the falsity

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14 Interestingly, one of the plans considered at this time involved the removal of pews at the back of the church and partitioning off the west end to form a ‘hall’, one of the developments which followed the receipt of another large legacy twenty years later.
of this was demonstrated when the Christ Church readers helped at St Mary's during a period of staff shortage at the latter.

An account of the other activities in this period is best given chronologically. In 1980 Vic Read led a group to Oberammergau for the Passion Play followed by a week in Golling, near Salzburg. 1981 was the year of Quest, a year-long programme of events. Every month a book-mark with a bible reading and a prayer appropriate to the season of the church year was issued. Some of the high-lights of the year were a Lent course on the Seven Words of Christ from the Cross, a Festival of the Word with competitions in bible-reading and composition in prose and verse and a Biblia week-end in December with celebration of the Holy Bible and its ministry. Two days in 1982 were particularly noteworthy. One was a Discipleship day or ‘A Day with Jesus’ led by Canon Roy Chamberlain. This consisted of an open-air service and picnic, bible study and eucharist. The other was a visit by Archbishop Lord Coggan on Bible Sunday, 26th September; the archbishop had intended to come to conduct the Biblia week-end in 1981, but had been prevented by illness. The main event of 1984 was the festival to celebrate the 125th anniversary of the dedication of Christ Church and also, coincidentally, Vic Read’s completion of 25 years in the priesthood. 1986 was marked by an appeal on behalf of the Atkinson Morley’s Hospital Neurosciences Research Foundation. This raised the very considerable sum of £1500 towards the purchase of a scanner. In May 1987 more fund-raising took place; this time for the improvement of the heating system of the church and, on this occasion, took the unusual form of an Antiques Auction. People were asked to donate articles ‘too good for a jumble sale’ for sale on behalf of the church. Another unusual occasion was the inclusion, in 1988, of Christ Church in the list of buildings of special architectural or historical interest; the church was, and remains, listed as Grade II.

Towards the Millennium

In September 1994 Vic Read’s long incumbency came to an end. He had ministered faithfully to the spiritual needs of the people of Christ Church with an engaging gusto and bonhomie and was much missed. Around the same time the Dorcas Group ceased to exist, after 60 years of fund-raising handwork. Mr Read’s departure was, unfortunately, nearly synchronous with the resignation of Ros McLachlan, one of the two readers, both long-serving churchwardens and Janet Till, parish secretary for 25 years. To some in the congregation the situation seemed so cataclysmic that a widespread rumour that Christ Church was about to close had to be firmly denied at a congregational meeting. Vic Read announced his retirement a few weeks only after the new churchwardens, Cynthia Aird and Geraldine Wootton, took office. Nevertheless, they rose to the occasion as they assumed the responsibility of leading the congregation into the interregnum which was to last for one year precisely. During this time the worship at Christ Church continued almost without interruption thanks to the efforts of Monica Brown, the remaining reader; Revd Eric Clark, a retired priest and Stella Tanner, Deanery Administrator, who contrived to find priests whenever an ordained visitor was needed; a regular visitor on these occasions was Ven Richard Bird, Archdeacon of Lambeth. During the search for a new vicar, the Archdeacon had occasion to remark how important it was for Christ Church to remain ‘middle-of-the-road’; thus the Broad Church tradition of its founding fathers was maintained. The new vicar was Revd Celia Thomson, one of the first women to be ordained priest in the Church of England, in 1994. Within a month of her arrival, assistance for her came when Simon Rocksborough-Smith was licensed as reader. Celia’s ministry has been marked by several changes. One of the most notable has been the greater emphasis on music, both in the services and on secular occasions. No mean musician herself, she encouraged a new organist, Julia Ainscough, appointed in August 1996 on the retirement of Chris Hall, to recruit and train the choir which plays an increasing part in the services.

15 See page 3
Another change, an extensive re-ordering at the back of the church, was made possible by the receipt of a large legacy in the will of Ronald Christy, a long-standing member of Christ Church. The major part of his estate consisted of a house and there was some delay before this could be sold and the proceeds, about £105,000, were in the hands of the church. The main purpose of the re-ordering was the creation of much-needed extra space at the west end of the nave. This was achieved by the removal of three rows of pews at the back of the nave on either side together with the removal of all the pews in the north aisle behind the font, one pew in front of the font and turning of the next pew. The flooring of the whole church was renewed and the baptistery converted into a catering area; this involved moving the original ‘Teulon’ porch, which had been retained after the north door was sealed, to the south-west corner of the nave. The remainder of the legacy was used for essential repairs and other general expenses. Around the same time two small cupboards were fitted in the west porch in memory of Paul and Mary Beney. While the work on the nave was in progress various papers and artefacts were found under the floorboards and were replaced by a collection of documents related to 1999 as a ‘time capsule’ for a future generation.

There were two changes in the staff of Christ Church in the closing years of the century. Farhad Hedayati, a former Muslim, who had recently been churchwarden, completed his training as a reader in 1999 and immediately took a full part in the spiritual life of the church. Two years later Monica Brown resigned as reader after 17 years of much appreciated ministry. Another event at this time was the establishment of Christ Church’s web site on the internet providing, literally, an opportunity for ‘world wide witness’. On 22-23 June 1997 the Archdeacon conducted a formal visitation on behalf of the Bishop of Kingston and joined in the discussion at the Parochial Church Council about forward planning. Among the plans agreed were some of those for the celebration of the millennium.

It is pleasant to record that, on 31st December 1999, as the people of God in West Wimbledon rose from their knees after the last service of the twentieth century, the bells of Christ Church rang out to proclaim the true significance of the millennium, the two thousandth year since the birth of a Saviour. The year 2000 was marked by a number of occasions; one of the more memorable, with a permanent memento, was the appearance of 50 embroidered kneelers provided as a result of the industry and generosity of members of the congregation and their friends and relations. These were dedicated at the patronal festival on 30th January by the Rt Revd Tom Butler, Bishop of Southwark; this was the first visit of the Bishop to Christ Church since his installation. The dedication of the kneelers was followed on 29 February by a continuous reading of the whole of the Gospel according to Mark. In June Celia led a party to Oberamergau to see the Passion Play and the next major event at Christ Church was a Flower Festival on 15th-16th July, at which 20 displays on Christian themes were provided by various individuals, churches, schools and organisations. The Festival was opened by Roger Casale, MP for Wimbledon, and closed with Evensong, sung by the Academy of St Mary’s. Part of the proceeds of the Festival went to Christ Church’s major charitable effort for the millennium; this was the provision of a windmill to pump water for irrigation in Filabusi, a poor area in Matabeleland, Zimbabwe. The Kingston Episcopal Area had been linked with the diocese of Matabeleland for some years.
Conclusion

Men and women have worshipped at Christ Church for nearly 150 years and during that time there have been many changes. The church has grown from being a little overcrowded chapel-of-ease to become a well-appointed, forward-looking parish church. The congregation is, of course, sadly shrunk so that ‘spacious’ is a more appropriate descriptive term than ‘overcrowded’; top hats and crinolines, too, are rarely seen today. The account of change in this book has, inevitably, given little emphasis to continuity. Yet the congregation is as energetic as ever and is led, as it always has been, by an equally energetic and devoted priest. Above all, He whom we all worship, and the one to whom the church is dedicated, Jesus Christ, ‘is the same yesterday and today and for ever’ 17.

17 Heb. 13:8