

A History of St. Matthew's Church, Grandpont, Oxford

In 1889 the low-lying land south of the River Thames at Folly Bridge, which had always been part of Berkshire, was incorporated into the City of Oxford. This was a signal for much house building in what became known as 'Grandpont'. The area was named after the "grand pont" or big bridge – actually more of a causeway with a series of bridges taking a road to Abingdon which was built by the Norman baron Robert d'Oilly whom William the Conqueror had made Governor of Oxford.

Canon Alfred William Millard Christopher (1820 - 1913), who had been Rector of St Aldate's Church since 1859, raised funds for the building of a large church on Marlborough Road, one of the principal roads in Grandpont which followed the line of a former spur track from the nearby Great Western Railway. A fine church dedicated to St Matthew was built and consecrated by Bishop William Stubbs on 21st June 1890.

Canon Christopher was criticized for spending too much money on the church when a simpler structure might have sufficed. The stonework and roof structure have much to be admired. The violet and pink glass used in the windows on all but the north side gives a pleasant dappled light in sunshine. The pews were, however, stained dark brown but have now been sanded back to their lovely natural colour.

Grandpont in those early years was a thriving and populous suburb. Some wealthy people owned several houses many of which were rented to poor people with large families. Thus there was a mixture of wealth and status. The PCC Minute book records that church attendance was good. The brass lectern commemorates a curate, George Crook, who lost his life in the Central American colony of Belize in 1905.

Canon Christopher retired in 1905 and in the 1920s St Matthew's became independent from St Aldate's with its patronage going to The Oxford Churches Trust, while St Aldate's patronage remained with the Simeon Trustees. On the south wall there is a brass plaque in memory of James Arthur Paintin who lived in Marlborough Road and was a Steward on the Titanic and drowned when that liner sunk in April 1912.

The Rev Wilfred Williamson became Vicar and was in the Parish during the First World War. Sixty six men from Grandpont gave their lives in that awful conflict and two, William Reginald King and Charles George Tyrrell, both aged twenty, are commemorated in black-edged plaques on the north wall. We can only imagine the grief perhaps mingled with a little pride that the death toll caused. The death of 66 men from the parish is commemorated on the war memorial. Apparently Wilfred Williamson heard the news of the Armistice by telephone and cycled round the streets telling passers-by of this good news before they could read it in newspapers!

In 1921 land behind the church to the east was leased from Brasenose College and a small hall was built on the site. The southern boundary of the leased land followed the irregular course of a ditch. This was logical in 1921 but later seemed strange when the ditch was filled in. However, it was to have beneficial consequences for St Matthew's, when, in the 1990s Brasenose College wanted to redevelop the former Oxford City White House football ground, compensation equivalent to £180,000 was paid to the PCC.

The Vicarage was originally in Edith Road but a large house on the Abingdon Road (now Lakeside Guest House) had been left to St Matthew's by an Oxford book seller. It remained the Vicarage until 1979 but ownership went to the Diocesan Parsonage Board as part of the Glebe Measure and it was eventually sold by them in the 1980s. St Matthew's Church bought a house in Marlborough Road but sold that in the 1960s and bought a larger house in Western Road which gave an income stream for many years but which was sold in 1988 with the proceeds shared between St Aldate's and St Matthew's churches because at that time (1982 – 1994) they were again one parish.

In 1929 a man who had served in the Machine Gun Corps during the war, the Rev (later Canon) David Keith Stather-Hunt (1896 - 1979) became Vicar and was to remain as such until 1975. He never married and was a Chaplain in the Territorial Army, spending the whole of the Second World War in the Army for which he was awarded the Territorial Decoration. Shortly after his arrival in Grandpont he founded the 1st Oxford Company of the Boys' Brigade and was a keen supporter of that uniformed organization even in his old age. The highlight of the year was the Summer Camp which in later years was usually held on the Isle of Wight. In retrospect the 1930s at St Matthew's seemed a "Golden Age" for those who were there with lots of young

people and a youngish Vicar taking part in lots of activities.

In the early 1930s a new council estate was built on reclaimed ground beyond Cow Mead allotments but within the parish boundary. David Stather-Hunt raised £1000 to have a wooden church built in 1933 which was dedicated to St Luke, to serve the people of the estate who lived about three quarters of a mile from St Matthews. This building served the St Luke's end of the parish for 80 years until it was completely rebuilt in 2013, after a major appeal and fundraising effort – St Luke's Big Project – which ran from 2005 to 2014. The re-built St Luke's was officially opened by the Bishop of Oxford on 6th April 2014.

During the Second World War St Matthew's Church began to struggle in the absence of the Rev Stather-Hunt. Many men were away in the armed forces and the war was making heavy demands on those left at home with long working hours, food rationing, evacuees, worry about loved ones and the constant miserable blackouts. Even the church was blacked out for evening services. Anchor points for the blackout curtains can still be seen around the windows. Buckets of sand were placed around the church and on the roof in case incendiary bombs fell. Cecil Pain who was churchwarden (and also the local undertaker) urged David Stather-Hunt to return to St Matthew's before the war ended but he declined feeling that his main duty was as an Army Chaplain.

The years after the Second World War saw great social changes. Legislation was passed making landlords put bathrooms into rented houses so many rented houses were sold because the controlled rents that could be charged would not quickly recoup this outlay. In 1949 at the behest of the Vicar and after a sharp disagreement in the PCC, St Matthew's Church sub-let part of the Church Commissioners' land and the land which it had leased in 1921 from Brasenose College to the adjacent Oxford City Football Club for £20 a year.

Property prices in Grandpont in the late 1950s and early 1960s fell because of uncertainty caused by various inner relief road schemes, however, these never came to anything and prices then rose especially after the closure of the gas works and dismantling of the ugly gas holders. The congregation and Canon Stather-Hunt had aged. Motor cars and TV helped make church attendance unfashionable and St Matthew's struggled. The Boys' Brigade continued and marched to church down Marlborough Road on "Parade Sunday" (usually the 1st Sunday in the month) with a band playing. Soon after the end of the Second World War jumble sales had enabled the Boys' Brigade to attend an international Summer Camp in Denmark. Jumble sales and the sale of old newspapers (which were a marketable commodity then) became a feature of life at St Matthew's.

Canon Stather-Hunt was for many years Chaplain of HM Prison Oxford (now the Malmaison Hotel) and was awarded an OBE for his long, faithful and diligent service there. At Easter 1975 at the age of 79 he retired as both Prison Chaplain and Vicar of St Matthew's. He had been a familiar figure in Grandpont either working in his study which faced the Abingdon Road or driving around in his green Ford Consul. Only twelve parishioners attended his last AGM in February 1975. He had tried to modernise St Matthews, having it connected to the electricity mains and having an amplification system installed in memory of the 24 men who had given their lives in the Second World War. He had also introduced a stewardship scheme to try to make St Matthew's more secure financially.

During the interregnum after Canon Stather-Hunt had retired there was speculation that St Matthews would close and perhaps become a snooker hall. An elderly retired clergyman the Rev George Dollman, who was partly deaf and spoke with a heavy German accent, was placed in charge, however, thanks to the efforts of the Rev Keith Weston who was Rector of St Ebbe's and Area Dean, the Rev Brian Ringrose, a married man with a young family of four children, became Priest in Charge in September 1975 on his return from work with BMMF in India. A Family Service in addition to the main morning service was introduced and a toilet block (which was demolished in 1994) was built in 1977 to make the church more "family friendly".

Brian Ringrose left to move to Scotland in 1979 and it was agreed that St Matthew's should once again become part of St Aldate's Parish with the Curate of St Aldate's becoming Priest in Charge of St Matthews. The then curate Rev John Woolmer (and subsequent curates) lived at 60 Abingdon Road and that became "the Vicarage." St Aldate's and St Matthew's Parishes were merged in 1982 after a long wrangle over patronage. John Woolmer (who was fond of butterflies and playing chess) moved to Shepton Mallet about then and the Rev David Hawkins who was keen on staging dramatic tableaux in church became Priest in Charge. He is now a Bishop.

Slowly St Matthew's began to grow again with the encouragement of St Aldate's Church and the transfer of a few members of their congregation. Lion Publishing and The Bible Reading Fellowship both moved to Oxford and some people who worked for them also became active members of St Matthew's congregation. In 1982 the partly wooden floor of the Church was replaced by a concrete floor with a waterproof membrane at a cost of about £20000 - a huge sum it seemed then! During the six weeks that this took, Holy Rood Catholic Church on the Abingdon Road allowed St Matthew's to meet there.

In 1986 the Rev John Samways (a former school teacher, butterfly spotter and sports enthusiast) became Curate of St Aldate's and Priest in Charge of St Matthew's and, when in 1995 the Parish again became independent from St. Aldate's, Vicar of St Matthew's. Once again St Matthew's was well supported with a varied congregation of all ages and many differing backgrounds.

Open youth work had become a strong feature and in the late 1980s it seemed right to the Church Council for the Boys' and Girls' Brigades to be closed. One or two were very sad at this decision but the resources required and the sentiment of local families seemed to require it to be taken.

For some years it had been apparent that the small hall behind the church had been inadequate for the many activities taking place. A scheme to put a mezzanine floor in the church or a simpler scheme to replace the hall were both mooted. In 1992 Brasenose College, after an acrimonious legal battle, obtained repossession of the adjacent Oxford City Football Ground because of serious breaches of their lease agreement with Oxford City Football Club. They wanted to redevelop the whole site including the land leased by St Matthew's on which our hall was built as well as the land sub-let to the Football Club on which their Main Stand had been built.

This coincided with an offer to sell to St Matthew's a yard on the north side of our site known as "Crapper's Yard" (because for many years it had belonged to the Crapper family). It contained lock up garages and a derelict stable block from Great Western Railway days. In a complicated but generous deal involving the sitting tenant, Bernard Crapper the owner and former member of the Boys' Brigade, sold it to St Matthew's Church and it was redeveloped as St Matthew's Family Centre. Funds were available from the sale of the house in Western Road and from a deal done with the developers of the Football Ground. The developer built a new Vicarage on Marlborough Road by the church and gave it to the PCC, who were able to sell it to the Diocesan Parsonages Board. Further funds needed to be raised and The Bridge Builder Appeal was launched by John Samways. He showed great energy and initiative in both fund raising and getting the various permissions needed for the development. Many gave time, money and much prayer, and gave thanks when the scheme was completed together with a refurbishment of the church. During the redevelopment St Matthew's met in the Gas Club which has now been demolished and is now Grandpont Place. A Bridge Builder Trust to maintain and renew the church buildings in the Parish was set up and is still seeking donations - enquiries to St Matthew's Parish Office.

John Samways left to become Rector of Keynsham near Bristol and was replaced in 1998 by the Rev Steve Hellyer who was Priest in Charge but was given permission by Bishop Richard Harries to be referred to as Vicar, and who was finally instituted as such in January 2010.

St Matthew's Church now has a similar appearance to when it was built in 1890 following the removal of the Choir Vestry and the placing of the Rood Screen (both of which had been erected as first World War memorials) with modification at the rear of the church. Recently it has been decided to "worship in the round". Since the floor was replaced in 1982, the pews are no longer fixed and they and the chairs which supplement them can be moved around. This gives flexibility and allows changes to be made to suit the needs of our church members in the Twenty First Century. More recently still, in 2013 a fixed projector and retractable screen were installed in the church to allow for more visual presentations in Sunday worship. More changes will no doubt follow as St Matthew's continues to try to meet the needs of worshippers and of the many people who make use of the parish centre.

Patrick Moles, April 2009. Revised and Updated March 2014.