

6. 1802 – 1841 WELD BANK IN THE EARLY DAYS WITH FR. THOMPSON

Death of Fr. Chadwick

Let us return now to Weld Bank where Fr. John Chadwick continued as rector in his overcrowded, little church until 1802, when he was taken ill and died. He was buried at Standish. Fr. Thompson wrote of him as follows: “I do what lies in my power to engage my successors to pray frequently for my worthy predecessor and establisher of this place and congregation and observe his anniversary, October 17th as I have always done and will continue to do whilst I live.” It must please the spirit of Fr. Thompson to know that mass is still said every year at Weld Bank on October 17th. May he rest in peace.

The arrival of Fr. Richard Thompson

Some weeks after the death of Fr. Chadwick, there rode up to Weld Bank the Reverend Richard Thompson, sent here by his bishop, Doctor W. Gibson, who had been President of Douai College in France when Richard Thompson was a student there and knew his worth. Thompson was a man of dominant personality and boundless energy who had already proved his courage in France. When the college was attacked by a French mob during the Napoleonic wars, he it was who had taken a spade and sack containing the college’s valuable silver, scaled the walls and buried the college treasure in a plot of derelict land just outside Douai. Some 50 years later, in 1841, in the same year that he died, Fr. Thompson was asked by his bishop, Doctor Brown, if he would return to France and try to locate the hidden treasure. This he did and it is said he went straight to the same spot and recovered the valuables worth some thousands of pounds. Many of these are still at Ushaw College, Durham.

But back to Weld Bank. Fr. Thompson (or Mr Thompson as he was known in those days) would find a small, barn-like Chapel, still with other farm buildings screened by trees but looking out over miles and miles of

countryside. The small town of Chorley was in the distance and the hedge-lined lanes all around bore witness to the agricultural type of congregation he had. He would also find a number of mining families among his parishioners, for the land-owners in his area still found small coal mines profitable.

Drybones

One of these was at Drybones, the wooded area between the Standish estates of Throstle Nest Wood and the Chadwick area of Birkacre. There have been many guesses as to how this pleasant spot got its rather unusual name but the truth is that when the small mine was in production, a foreman at the time took strong exception to his workers imbibing something stronger than the cold tea they were traditionally supposed to carry in the enamel mugs usually seen tied to their belts and his workmen gave him the nickname “Oud Dry Booans”. The name stuck and eventually became the name of the mine and the district.¹

Generations of Weldbankers have resided at this spot and its adjacent cottages and harrowing tales can be told of their difficulties in winter getting to school and to church, struggling through deep snow and gales. The late John Wilson was fond of the spot and in one of his poems about the River Yarrow he described it thus:

“But Drybones is the sweetest spot
Thou passest by, O Yarrow,
Though noble’s hall adorn it not
No dwellings save a poor man’s cot
Who beareth Adam’s arm I wot
The gardener’s spade and barrow.”

¹ This area was also known as ‘Three Ways’ as it is situated at a meeting point of three pathways. My father invariably spoke of ‘Drybones or Three Ways’, always mentioning both names. Just a few years ago, I met Gillian Monks, the daughter of the last owners of the house at Drybones. She had come to the conclusion that the place got the name from the Anglo-Saxon or Old English words meaning ‘three ways. Old English had much in common with German and the modern German for ‘three ways’ or ‘three lanes’ is ‘drei bahnen’ which is remarkably similar in pronunciation to ‘Drybones’. I think this is the more likely, if more prosaic, explanation of the name. Certainly the Old English for ‘three’ is ‘þree’.

Many papists

Fr. Thompson seems to have immediately made his presence felt in the parish and two years after coming to Weld Bank, the Anglican rector of Chorley gave these answers in writing to his Bishop's questions:

“Are there any Papists in your parish and of what rank are they?”

“There are many Papists in my parish but I cannot exactly ascertain their numbers.”

“Have any persons been lately perverted to Popery and by whom and by what means?”

“Since the death of the late priest, J. Chadwick, a new teacher whose name is Thompson, seems, by weekly lectures and by publishing a small tract ‘*A Summary of the Doctrines of Rome*’ to have enlarged the numbers at Weld Bank. There is a school taught by a Papist in my parish.”

The school run by Hannah Edgar had probably now ceased to exist and no doubt Fr. Thompson had started another in the farm buildings with himself as a teacher. With this school, his sermons and his writings, he was still further building up the parish, though no doubt few of his parishioners could either read or write. He consolidated the work of Fr. Chadwick, started 30 years before and seems to have determined on three things: a bigger and better church, a cemetery and a schoolhouse - all of which he achieved within the next 20 years, a truly amazing performance in those difficult times when the wars with Napoleon were at their height and high taxation was introduced to pay for these.

Fr. Thompson wrote to Thomas Weld, son of Edward, asking if he could purchase, rather than lease, the land around the church for a bigger building and a cemetery. Weld's reply was an emphatic ‘no’. He had “no intention of ever selling land in the Chorley area whilst there was breath in his body”. Some rather strong letters were exchanged. The rector then decided to build

his church nearer Chorley where by now the bulk of his congregation lived and he was offered land by Thomas Gillibrand. However, the proposal fell through because of the illness of Mr Gillibrand and the negotiations ceased.

The Cardinal's gift

A little later Mr Thomas Weld died and he was succeeded by his son, also Thomas, who later became His Eminence Cardinal Weld. He was a man of different calibre and, in 1810, he gave Fr. Thompson the title to the land on which the church was built, together with a large parcel of land surrounding it including many fields, some of which are still our church property.

Fr. Thompson could now go ahead with his plans and this he did in no uncertain fashion. He opened a subscription list for his new church and he seems to have travelled far and wide for help. In this he was successful for, by the year 1814, the church was almost complete. Its style was very similar to its present form but without the side aisles or bell and clock tower as the penal laws did not permit these. It would then look somewhat like a barn turned into a chapel whereas before it looked like a chapel turned into a barn.

First burial

The same year Fr. Thompson completed a cemetery on land adjoining the church and on July 2nd he himself officiated at the first burial of a parishioner. The first entry in the burial register reads: "John Moor, barber, of the town of Chorley, died on July 2nd in the year of Our Lord Jesus Christ 1814, fortified with all the Sacraments of the Church, and was the first to be buried in the cemetery at Weld Bank on July 5th." Thus Fr. Thompson had accomplished two of his objectives in less than five years since gaining possession of the land.

The first registers for Weld Bank church are now kept safely at Lancashire Record Office² and we are indebted to the staff for the following details:

The first baptism at the church took place on April 4th, 1802 when Anne, the infant daughter of Brian and Anne Pitfield (née Kenyon) was baptised, her godparents being John Westhead and Joan Kenyon.

The first marriage at the church was on April 21st, 1803, when Thomas Spencer married Elizabeth Jackson, the witnesses being Joan Rimmer and Elizabeth Rawsthorne. This couple would probably have to be married also at the Parish Church for, according to the laws of the time, without a marriage by an Anglican clergyman, any children born to the couple would be deemed illegitimate.

Stop the clock!

But here again we must digress a little. As we have seen, the laws of England at this time required that everyone had to be married by a clergyman of the Church of England in order to legalise any issue of the marriage. In 1809, Joseph Brimley and Anne Livesey, both of Chorley and both Catholics, desired to be married. Having obtained the licence, they journeyed to Leyland Parish Church for the ceremony. On arrival, however, they found the vicar and curate were both absent.

Determined not to postpone the wedding, the couple walked back to Chorley, arriving at the Parish Church at five minutes to twelve. At this time, and for some years afterwards, no marriage after twelve noon was deemed legal. Mr Brimley went to the House of John Gray, the parish clerk, and asked if they could be married. “You’re late,” he said “but go for Mr Cooper (the curate) and tell him to look sharp whilst I stop the clock.” At the Parson’s residence Mr Brimley was told by Mr. Cooper to tell John Gray to stop the clock. “He has stopped it, Sir” said Mr Brimley, so the wedding took place, ending just as the clock struck 12!

² Lancashire Record Office is now called ‘Lancashire Archives’ and is in Bow Lane, Preston.

This story is well vouched for and was told to Mr John Wilson by the son of the parties. The family became well-known leather merchants in the town and great-great-grandsons, Mr Eddie Brimley and his brother, the late Mr William Brimley have been prominent in the life of both Weld Bank and St. Mary's parishes.

Capture of Duxbury Hall

In the year 1812, Sir Frank Standish, the last direct male heir of the Standishes of Duxbury, died intestate. This led to a number of persons laying claim to be the lawful heirs to the property. Included in these was a young Chorley miner, Tom Standish, who claimed to be the rightful heir to the hall and estates and directly descended from Ralph Standish, an elder son living in the early 17th century. But, like others who put forward claims, he had nothing tangible to substantiate them and his claims were overruled. The hall and estates passed to a 13 year-old cousin of Sir Frank, by name Frank Hall, who had to add the name of Standish by deed poll.

Tom Standish, the miner, became infuriated at the dismissal of his claim and, urged on by many of his collier friends, he decided that possession was nine tenths of the law. In June, 1813, he led a mob of about a hundred of his friends to Duxbury Hall, evicted the servants and took possession. The affair caused a great stir in the town. The workers applauded Tom for his resource and the gentry were aghast at his effrontery.

One of his miner friends had at one time been a gentleman's servant and he took command of the situation, dressed himself in the Standish livery, insisted on Tom being attired as befitting his station and had him addressed as 'Sir Tom'. The half dozen constables then in Chorley arrived to attempt to evict the miners but were unceremoniously shown the door. Then a number of local magistrates arrived but were kept waiting until 'Sir Tom' found time to receive them but they were also sent packing. This went on for three days

with the mob feasting, poaching in the woods, which at that time contained some deer, and breaking into the wine cellar where they imbibed not wisely but too well.

A day later, Mr Houghton, Governor of the House of Correction at Preston, arrived with about twenty constables but they had no better luck, some of them being ducked in the Yarrow River. The sheriff of the county then sent for a troop of horse soldiers from Manchester and, despite some resistance from the miners, they recaptured the Hall and arrested about seventy of the men. Sixty of these were sent to Ormskirk Sessions where they got off with light sentences.

Tom Standish, with five of the ringleaders, was taken to Lancaster, imprisoned and at the following assizes they pleaded guilty and were all sentenced to 12 months imprisonment - a light sentence considering the harsh penalties then being imposed for much lesser offences. For some years after his return from prison, Tom Standish was often referred to as 'Sir Tom' and he became something of a local hero.

Chorley miners had a reputation for many years of being of a somewhat wild temperament. Fifty years earlier, they had walked to Preston during a general election where their wild behaviour caused them to be denounced by the mayor of that town. They replied by frog-marching him through Fishergate and then ducking him in a horse trough!

It appears that the minister of the Parish Church had had a hand in contesting Tom Standish's claim. At any rate he encouraged the wrath of the miners and soon afterwards he was accosted in Market Street by a Chorley miner's wife who berated him soundly in the street. She then prophesied, "Tha'll dee i' thi shoon for what tha did to poor Tom Standish". Some years later, the minister was crossing Market Street when he had a seizure and expired before he could be conveyed home.

For some years afterwards, the capture of Duxbury Hall was commemorated by the ‘Duxbury Fair’, an annual event which drew crowds from miles around to see dancing, feasting and many old-time games and athletic sports and a Duxbury Fair song was sung at the gatherings.

The church in danger

There was another occasion when a mob advanced on Chorley, this time from Preston. The early years of the 19th century saw the removal of many of the harsh penal laws under which Catholics had suffered and this led to rioting by mobs whose passions were inflamed by many bigots. The only Catholic church in Preston, St. Mary's, in Friargate, was completely destroyed by a mob who then, learning that a Catholic church had recently been built at Weld Bank, decided to give this the same treatment and a large gang set off to walk to Chorley with this object in view.

Coaches on the Preston to Manchester route brought the news to Chorley and the local shopkeepers put up their shutters whilst the men of Weld Bank rallied to defend their new church. They were joined by others who resented the invasion of “foreigners” from Preston and a hot reception was planned but it was all unnecessary. The long walk on a hot day took most of the ardour out of the men and, by the time they reached Clayton Brook and bathed their feet, many had deserted. Learning of the reception that they could expect at Weld Bank, they decided to call it a day and slunk back to Preston.

The old tar of Claughton

There appears to be no subscription list available as to who subscribed to the new church of Fr. Thompson's but we do know of one donation of £50. This was mentioned in the will of Fr. John Barrow of, near Preston. This priest, who was a personal friend of Fr. Thompson, deserves special mention.

He was one of the several sons of Edward and Ann Barrow of Westby in the Fylde. When he was 14, he was sent to the English College, Rome, to study for the priesthood. A few years later, he returned to England for a vacation but was seized by a press gang at Portsmouth and put on a warship to serve as a common sailor. He took part in some of the sea battles of the period and was once wounded. After some time, he escaped by climbing through a porthole at Dunkirk where he was tried by court martial for desertion but, on interrogation, he replied entirely in Italian so he was released as they thought they had got the wrong man. He made his way to Douai where he was ordained and in 1766, he arrived to serve the mission at Claughton where he remained for 45 years. He often referred to himself as “the old tar of Claughton”.

A man of domineering will and untiring industry, he often ignored the wishes of his Bishop but he rebuilt the Claughton Mission, increased its endowments, composed more than 500 sermons and acted as Overseer of the Roads and of the Poor in the area. He took over the Secular Clergy Fund and more than doubled its income by wise investing, yet was fond of hunting and he kept his own pack of hounds. He offended a local farmer by making him improve his roads and the man threatened to shoot Fr. Barrow on sight. Next day the priest rode to the farm, offered the farmer his choice of a brace of pistols but the man quickly changed his tune. The Vicar of Chipping also offended him and Mr Barrow swore if he caught him he would horsewhip him out of the district.

He took a leading part in having Douai College transferred to England because of the French Revolution and he offered to provide facilities for it to be housed at Claughton but this fell through. He finally assisted in the purchase of Ushaw Moor as the site for the college in 1804.

In 1809, when the college chapel opened, the story goes that Fr. Barrow, now well over 70, rode horseback over the Pennines to Durham for the opening

mass. Arriving late, the amazed clerics and students beheld, striding up the aisle, a square, large-boned man. He was travel-stained and wearing great buckled shoes, knee-breeches and worsted stockings, a huge, deep waistcoat and square coat and topping all a red wig which he deposited on the altar while he vested! Such was the man who often visited Weld Bank to see his friend Fr. Thompson (he was a good horseman) and urged him to persevere with his church building which he backed to the tune of £50, worth more like £1000 in present day money values.³

Church completed

The new church was completed in 1815 and the plans are still preserved there with an architect's letter. It shows the sanctuary with the arches which were a remarkable feature of the building and it is a tribute to the excellence of the workmanship that the church still stands and the stonework looks no worse for the storms and stresses of 150 years.

And now a school!

One would have thought that Fr. Thompson would have rested a little from his labour after completing a church and cemetery but he immediately began plans for a schoolhouse to be sited halfway down Weld Bank Lane. Three years after the church, the schoolhouse was built - an amazing performance when one considers that the congregation numbered barely 1000 people with very few of the wealthier class and trade and industry suffering heavily from the recent wars with France. There was no law in those days compelling people to send their children to school. Indeed, most of the poorer classes looked on "book learning" as a waste of time. The rector seems to have gone afield for subscriptions but it took him over ten years to pay for the building. In a list of subscribers, copied from Mr Thompson's own account book, there are the following:

Mr Gillibrand	£100	(later deducted from the total as 'not received')
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³ According to the Bank of England inflation calculator, £50 in 1809 would be now worth £3343.

Mrs Jno. Stoner	£25
Rev. R. Thompson	£25
Mr Turner	£25
Jno. Pilkington	£5
Mr Layland	£10
Messrs. Greenhough	£10
Mr Jas. Thompson	£10
Mrs Walmseley	£20
Mrs Crooke	£2
Mrs Harrison	£21
Sir Thomas Stanley	£5
Mr W. Heatley	£10
Miss Taylor	£5 5s
Miss Cath Taylor	£5 5s
Rev. R. Platt	£4 6s
N. per Mrs Stoner	£5 6s 6d
Mr Jno. Harrison	£10
Mr Jas. Harrison	£10
Mr Bradshaw	£10
Mr Walton	£2
Mrs Birch	£1
Mr Clayton	£5
Mrs Sandford	£5 5s
Mr L. Jackson	£5
Mr Thomas Parkinson	£2
Mr Thos Crook	£1
Mr L. Lucas	£1
Mr P. Jackson	£1
Cecily Gerard	£1
Fanny Eastwood	£1
Edmund Kellett	£1
Dan Comaleech	£2
Mr Weld	£10

and a good number of others gave varying sums.

NN per Rev. J.G. £70

Chas. Stoner	£5
Charity sermons	£72 with £11 collected afterwards
William Heatley	£100
Lord Shrewsbury	£25
Hon. Sir Ed. Vavasour	£2 10s

The total cost of the building was £842 19s 5d

He smoked in church

The first item of £100 recorded in the account book as the gift of Mr Gillibrand was never received. He was Mr Thomas Gillibrand, the last of the family of that name, to own Gillibrand Hall and he was reputed to be of a masterful disposition and very conscious of his own importance. He had been a regular worshipper both at the old and new churches at Weld Bank but during mass one Sunday, he pulled out his long, churchwarden, clay pipe and began the laborious task of applying tinder to light it. Seeing this from the altar, Fr. Thompson immediately remonstrated with him and he desisted but withdrew from the church and vowed never to enter Weld Bank again - and he kept his word.

His wife was not a Catholic and he ceased to practise his religion. Some years later, he became ill and it was obvious that he was on his deathbed. He asked that Fr. Thompson should be brought so that he could make his peace with God. His wife sent for the minister of Chorley Parish Church but he refused to see him and he died without being reconciled.

At his death, he was Lord of the Manor of Chorley as he purchased the Weld half-share in 1825 and he was responsible for the local market being moved from the town's green to its present position. His successors at Gillibrand, the Fazackerley's, sold the manorial rights to Chorley Commissioners later in the century. Fifty years ago, Gillibrand Hall once again reverted into Catholic hands when the good Sisters of La Sagesse began their great work

of Christian charity by turning it into a home for mentally retarded ladies, which still continues.⁴

School completed

By the year 1818, the schoolhouse was finished and in use. It served the double purpose of a day and a Sunday school. This building, the first elementary school in Chorley, stood for nearly 100 years, with slight alterations and was a picturesque old place as many old Weldbankers can still remember. Between it and Weldbank Lane was a large well-wooded plantation which was well-used for nature and botany lessons. Two cottages, one at each end of the building, served to house the master and mistress, one being converted into two extra classrooms in the late 1890s. Almost the whole exterior of the school was covered with thick ivy.

There appears to have really been two schools, one for the sons of gentlemen and the other for children of the parish and district, for in the Catholic Laity's Directory for 1820 the following advertisement appeared:

“Weld Bank School, near Chorley, Lancs,: superintended by the Rev. R. Thompson and conducted by J. Holden. Admits, in addition to day scholars, a limited number of young gentlemen who are instructed in every branch of academic learning and useful knowledge. Board and education, comprising Writing, Arithmetic, History, Geography, etc., and English, French, Latin and Greek 30gns per annum to be paid in advance and 2 guineas entrance fee.”

This would obviously mean two classes, one for the sons of gentlemen and the other for the sons and daughters of the working class population whose attendances would be very desultory. No doubt many houses in the parish would benefit by taking in boarders whose parents could afford to pay well for housing their offspring.

⁴ The La Sagesse sisters left Gillibrand Hall some years ago and it is now a privately owned care home for elderly men and women.

The number of scholars in 1824 was stated to be 32 boys and 10 girls in the day school and 153 boys and 193 girls in the Sunday school. The Sunday scholars attended mass at 10 o'clock, followed by two hours of study, then lunch, another two hours of class and concluding with Vespers - a hard day for children who then worked long hours during the week at anything from five to six years of age.

The master of the day school received £40 per annum and the mistress £20. Teachers at the Sunday school were unpaid and were men and women of the parish and senior scholars. A perusal of the balance sheet for 1825 is interesting. It included items on the credit side of "Payments by children £16 16s and 6d" and "Copy books and slate pencils sold 10s". An item of 8d for canes is evidence of the heavy-handedness of old time teachers.

The Chadwicks

In 1823, the Chadwicks ceased to reside at Burgh Hall which was then purchased by the Anderton family and later by Col. Thom, a member of a family who played no small part in Chorley affairs many years afterwards. One of the Thoms was a personal friend of the famous missionary-explorer, David Livingstone, and it is believed that this man was for a time a guest at Burgh Hall. The hall came back into Catholic hands when it was purchased by the late Mr T. H. Kevill nearly 50 years ago and it remains in the family to this day.⁵

However, the Chadwicks seem to have retained their connection with Weld Bank and three sisters are commemorated by stained glass windows in the church and are buried under the flags in the main porch. One of them married Mr Charles Stonor of Anderton Hall and they regularly attended church, journeying by coach with postillions. When old and infirm, Mrs Stonor was wheeled into the sacristy to hear mass. She died in 1853. Her

⁵ Sadly, Burgh Hall was demolished in the 1990s but the building which served as a chapel then coach house and later as a garage was retained and converted into an impressive dwelling.

two sisters, Miss Elizabeth and Miss Catherine, both died in 1846, one of them, though in indifferent health since her teens, having the reputation of being a great beauty among the county families.

When the Chadwicks left Burgh Hall, they had accumulated a large library of valuable books and old manuscripts with some pre-Reformation vestments and sacred vessels probably left there for safekeeping by the many priests who had visited during the penal days. These were handed to Fr. Thompson for his own library at Weld Bank where some of them still remain.

The death of Fr. Thompson

After 41 years as rector, Fr. Thompson died on December 4th, 1841, and was buried under the high altar of the church for which he had done so much. His sorrowing flock installed a stained glass window to his memory. In 1905, with the permission of the Home Office, his remains were reinterred in the clergy vault in the churchyard.

During his time at Weld Bank, Fr. Thompson had seen many alterations in the state of the country and of Chorley in particular. Until 1823, death was the punishment for over 200 crimes but Sir Robert Peel, a Lancashire man, had altered all this. He had formed a Police force in place of the old Bow Street Runners to keep order in the country and he had reformed the gaols. But most important of all to Catholics, Peel had been instrumental in the passing of the Catholic Emancipation Act which restored full citizenship to Catholics who could now occupy any position in the state except Sovereign or Lord Chancellor. Thus we were now able to lift up our heads and build schools and churches openly and with a confidence previously lacking amongst many Catholics though it had not been lacking by the priests and people of Weld Bank.

It is perhaps worthy of note that the Duke of Wellington, then Prime Minister, perhaps more to recruit Catholics for his armies than for love of us, said in a speech in favour of Catholic Emancipation: "It is beneath the dignity of a great nation like Britain to persecute the remnants of a dying sect". There seemed little prospect in Chorley of the sect dying out.

Fr. Thompson had seen boys and girls of tender years working in the factories and mines and mothers with children at the breast working long hours pushing tubs of coal down the pits. However, in 1833 an act was passed stopping the working of children under nine years in the cotton mills but many parents then took their young children from the mills and put them down the mines and infants of five and six were employed in total darkness and silence, opening and shutting doors for the passage of coal tubs pushed by their mothers or elder brothers and sisters on all fours. This was allowed until the year of Fr. Thompson's death. It is no wonder that only 42 children were attending his school on weekdays while 346 children came to his Sunday school after their slave labour during the week.