

7. 1841 – 1870 LIFE HERE AT THE TIME OF FR. GREENHALGH

An old Ordnance Survey map of the 1840s shows a much different picture of Weld Bank from what we know today. In Burgh Lane, Burgh Hall and adjoining farm are shown but the only other dwellings from there to the church are the White Cottage (now known as the White House), the Oaks House and the Oaks Lodge and three cottages at the end of the church wall in Burgh Lane which are named ‘Wilcock’s Tenements’. The White Cottage was inhabited in the writer’s early days by a well-known Weld Bank character, old Neddy Green, father of Alderman John Green¹ and it was there that we were able to buy a pennyworth of toffee on our regular walks to Throstle Nest Wood and to the waterfall at Birkacre. This cottage is now inhabited by members of the Frearson family whose grandfather and uncles farmed Frearson’s Farm, almost opposite the church drive.²

Weld Bank Lane is almost blank except for the school and Willow House. At the top of the lane, there are one or two cottages with fields flanking either side. There are about seven small collieries marked on the map on the Burgh, Gillibrand and Duxbury lands, the largest evidently being Burgh Colliery which had a single rail track running from it past Plock Farm across Weld Bank Lane and ending at the weighbridge at the junction of Chorley Moor and Harrison Road with a cottage adjoining. At the junction with the church drive, there appear to have been field gates cutting off both Carr Lane and Burgh Lane and these would have had stiles for pedestrians, the gates being used for the passage of cattle, farm carts and coaches.

Carr House is the only building shown down Carr Brow whilst across the fields, Red Bank House, once the home of Mr T.H. Kevill and family, is shown

¹ Alderman Green was the father of Miss Barbara Green, once an excellent teacher of history and later deputy head of Lark Hill Convent School, Preston.

² Frearson’s farmhouse was demolished in the early 1960s – see photo – and was situated where the four bungalows are now at the end of Burgh Lane. The White Cottage (White House) is no longer inhabited by the Frearson family who, although very numerous in the early 20th century, has completely gone from our community. I believe the last member of Weld Bank to have the name Frearson (as her maiden name) was Teresa who died in 2020 though there are still many of us, myself included, who are descendants of Frearsons.

as is Red Bank Cottage at the junction of what is now Southdowns Road and Bolton Road. The road to Bolton once ran past the rear of the high row of detached houses and across to Red Bank where there was a cobbled ford over the River Yarrow and a wooden footbridge. The writer remembers being shown the stones still remaining nearly 60 years ago by his father. It was at this spot during the Civil War that a party of Cavaliers composed mainly of Scottish lancers were chased across the Yarrow by a troop of Roundheads and then turned back as their pursuers were in the water. They inflicted some casualties including the killing of Colonel Thornhaugh, one of Cromwell's troop commanders, the date being August 18th, 1648.

Pilling Lane had four houses at the Bolton Street end and was then all fields to Weld Bank except for Lighthurst Farm and the little white cottage a few yards away. Drinking water round here was obtained from the Pilling Fold well on the roadside near the farm but half a century ago this had degenerated into a cattle trough though the water was crystal clear and slaked many a school boy's thirst on his way through the lanes to Weld Bank School.

It can be seen what an agricultural type of parish Fr. Thompson had in those days and could well be described as "truly rural". Chorley itself was then building many houses and streets and one can well understand Fr. Thompson having the idea of building his church nearer the town; he would undoubtedly have done so but for Cardinal Weld's gift of land. Had he done so, Weld Bank would never have existed and we would be the poorer for it.

The map shows the importance of agriculture to the people in those days by the fact that all the fields have names (some very unusual ones) whilst many buildings are without.

Fr. Greenhalgh gets to work

The next parish priest to come to Weld Bank was Fr. Henry Greenhalgh, a nephew of Fr. Thompson. He came at a time when the country was going through a difficult time with a succession of bad harvests and suffering the effects of the Corn Laws which, from 1815 to 1845, forbade the import of wheat until the home produce reached 80s a bushel. When these laws were at last repealed in 1846, it was just in time to save the country from starvation though many thousands had already succumbed. Then the potato blight in Ireland sent thousands of starving Irish to seek life elsewhere and Lancashire received many thousands. They came bereft of everything but their religion so that many local churches found their accommodation too small. Despite the prevailing industrial conditions, Fr. Greenhalgh determined to enlarge Weld Bank church and this he did by adding the two side aisles and a bell and clock tower, the previous walls being where the present pillars now stand. The stained glass windows in the top are much older than the others. The previous barn-like structure is still quite obvious. He also added the main porch, baptistry and confessionals. The extensions were done by local Catholics using local materials. The lodge house at the start of the drive was built about this time as it is of the same stone.

Of course, all of this put the parish into debt so that when a movement was set afoot for the provision of another church in Chorley to accommodate the increased numbers, most of whom now resided in the town itself and were growing fast in numbers, Fr. Greenhalgh showed little enthusiasm.³ But another church was obviously needed and meetings of Catholic men were held, first at the Fazakerley Arms, then at the Rose and Crown and a petition was sent to the Bishop of the Diocese which was received favourably.

³ See Fr. Greenhalgh's letter

St. Mary's school and church

The Mechanics Institute in Chapel Street was used for a time as a Chapel and a warehouse at Sumner's corn mill on the opposite corner, now the Becconsfield Buildings, was used as a Sunday school. Then the Mount Pleasant estate, formerly the residence of the Harrison family, was purchased and St. Mary's school Chapel, commonly known then as the two-decker, was opened in 1852, later to be replaced by the present church and schools.

By 1845, Saint Mary's school was functioning and owing to the expense of keeping two schools going, Weld Bank day school was closed, a great blow to the Catholics of Weld Bank, Coppull, Charnock Richard, Duxbury and areas adjoining. Fr. George Gibson was placed in charge of the new parish and there is evidence that he had a hard time maintaining it, so much so that he had a breakdown in health and a few years later was transferred to the little parish of Hornby on the death there of the Rev. Dr Lingard, the well known Catholic historian.

Also in 1845 a start was made on a Catholic mission at Leyland, the worshippers meeting in a house in Towngate near where the first church was later built. This prompted Fr. Greenhalgh to hand back to Leyland a pre-reformation chalice which had come into the possession of the Rigby family at Burgh Hall at the start of the penal days, then handed down to the Chadwicks who in turn left it with Fr. Thompson at Weld Bank. It was probably kept back from the inventory at Leyland Parish Church in the 1550s, used by various missionary priests and then handed to the Rigbys for safekeeping. There is an inscription on the base: "Restore mee to Layland in Lancashire". Now it was back in Leyland and we believe is still in use.

In 1854 Canon Greenhalgh, as he then was, was made Dean of the Chorley Deanery which then extended from Leyland and Clayton Green in the north to Orrell in the south, Hindley in the east to Wrightington in the west and

included the whole of Wigan, a large district which the good Canon had to visit periodically on horseback.

In 1863 the large clock, which is such a prominent feature of the church tower at Weld Bank, was installed. Nearly 100 years later it was showing its age and Canon Waring replaced it with the present one in 1957⁴.

Still another parish

Canon Greenhalgh had still another parish to form before his life's work was done. This was at Anderton, where on December 6th, 1863, the new Church of Saint Joseph was opened by Bishop Turner of Salford because Bishop Goss of Liverpool was unwell. The foundation stone had been laid just over 12 months previously.

Adlington and Anderton had increased in population during the previous years by the coming of the canal and the railway and the building of a number of textile mills so a Catholic chapel was deemed necessary to save the three mile journey to Weld Bank. Impetus was given to the project when Mr Charles Stonor offered to give land sufficient for a church, school, presbytery and burial ground. The architect was Mr Edward Pugin, son of the well known A. W. N. Pugin. Mr Stonor was a wealthy man who had recently built Anderton Hall at a cost said to be £60,000 on the banks of the Lower Rivington Reservoir.

The stonework was done by the Chorley firm of John and James Catterall and it came from the Anderton quarry but the circular window at the West End was from Denham Hill quarry, Whittle. After Mr Stonor's donations, the cost

⁴ From a note made by my father in a copy of the printed book, it is possible that these dates are slightly wrong. My father, who looked after the clock before it was electrified and rang the bell, also before electrification, believed the clock to have been installed in 1854 and replaced in 1960. I have no evidence to prove or disprove either set of dates.

to the congregation was some £1200 which was soon raised. The first pastor was Fr. P. J. Kane.⁵

Members of the Catterall family were also responsible for the presentation and erection of the three statues which are such a prominent feature on the front exterior of Weld bank church: Our Lady of Dolours (a.k.a. Our Lady of Sorrows) and Saint Gregory the Great at either side of the main door and Christ carrying the Cross over the doorway.

After 28 years as rector, Canon Greenhalgh died on October 19th, 1870 and he is buried at the north corner of the church just outside the entrance.

Cruel days

We have mentioned before the slave labour of the mines and the factories, which was partially abolished by an act of 1841, but there was another form of cruel treatment of young children still legal - that of sending boys of five and six up house and office chimneys to clear away the soot. Chorley was not free from this evil practice as a business card published in 1867 shows. It states:

“William Burgess, Chimney Sweep. of No. 36, Bolton Street, Chorley, flatters himself in having boys of the best size for such branches of business suitable for a tunnel or a chimney and that it is now in his power to render assistance in a more extensive manner than usual. He also carries his boys from room to room occasionally to prevent them staining or marking any room floor with their feet.”

We like the last part of the advert - it shows a commendable consideration for the feelings of his customers!

⁵ At the ceremony on the opening of St. Joseph's, Anderton, Canon Greenhalgh presented a chalice to the new parish which is still occasionally used today. It had belonged to Fr. William Gillibrand and is dated the

This cruel practise was declared illegal in 1875 though the reform was strenuously opposed. One M.P. said: “the boys generally employed are not usually the children of poor parents but the children of rich men begotten in an improper manner”. This apparently made it all right! Six was considered the most suitable age for training boys but boys of four and five were often driven up chimneys 9 inches square and up to 60 foot in height.

The cemetery

In the middle of the century, Chorley had gained a reputation of being one of the most unhealthy towns in the country with a death rate of 30 per thousand, due no doubt to the rapid rise in population and the indiscriminate building of houses without any sanitary considerations. The two town cemeteries also came in for criticism, it being said that, at Weld Bank, coffins were often piled three or four deep before being filled in. No doubt the cemetery was being used by Catholic families from neighbouring areas in addition to parishioners and the space became overcrowded. Indeed, a number of enlargements of the cemetery have had to be made over the years and at one time it was quite common for human remains to be dug up when a new grave was being prepared.

The writer remembers a time during the First World War when, with a school friend, he had been engaged in a fruitless fishing expedition to the large pond at the bottom of the cemetery grounds. Returning through the churchyard they investigated a small wooden shed behind a wall. It was half full of skulls and other human bones evidently awaiting re-burial. Our speed down the church drive has probably never been equalled!