

8. 1870 – 1897 LIFE HERE AT THE TIME OF DEAN LENNON

Coming of Dean Lennon

The coming to Weld Bank of Dean Lennon in 1870 heralded nearly 30 years of continuous progress in almost every facet of parochial life. This was due not so much to the fact that he had a loyal and devoted flock but that he saw what the parish required and he had the wherewithal to provide it from his own resources.

Coming from a wealthy Liverpool family he received early training in accountancy and the management of estates which was to be put to use in many ways for the good of the diocese and his own parish and Chorley in particular.

After receiving his theological training at the English College, Lisbon, he served a number of Liverpool parishes for short periods, including the Pro-Cathedral and he was placed on the financial board for the diocese. Appointed parish priest at Newton-le-Willows, he set about building the church of Saint Mary and Saint John which he opened in 1861.

Coming to Weld Bank nine years later, he arrived at a time when the Education Act of 1870, making school attendance compulsory, was causing much misgiving throughout the country and school building became urgent. Weld Bank school, which had been closed for some 20 years owing to the cost of maintaining two Catholic schools in the town, was reopened and thrown open to all denominations. He restocked it with books and furniture and soon found the accommodation inadequate so he added classrooms, all at his own expense as it was obvious this was beyond the means of his flock.

In addition to his own large fortune, Fr. Lennon was bequeathed two or three large estates from relatives and the income from these he considered it his

duty to devote exclusively to religious objects. To the new Catholic seminary, St. Joseph's College, Up Holland, he gave several thousand pounds, followed by the gift of £1000 a year until his death. £1000 went to the new Westminster Cathedral and large sums to new churches at Warrington and Longton and he made possible the school-chapel at Withnell.

Sacred Heart Church

For nearly 20 years the Catholics of the eastern end of Chorley, which in those days was the poorest part of the town, and their pastor Fr. (later Dean) Barry had been struggling to maintain a parish which met in a small tin hut. The numbers had gradually doubled over the previous 20 years chiefly by the coming of many Irish emigrants fleeing from the poverty of their home country. In 1894, Dean Lennon insisted on something more worthy and his magnificent contribution of £10,000 ensured the erection of the present handsome example of ecclesiastical architecture, dedicated to the Sacred Heart, which forms a lasting memorial to his munificence and his devotion to the cause of religion.

The church was completed a year before his death and, in a pastoral letter, Archbishop Keating said: "the Catholics of the Sacred Heart, Chorley, will, we are sure, ever remember in their prayers one to whom they owe so much."

And the good Catholics of Colwyn Bay in North Wales owe their splendid church, very similar to Chorley Sacred Heart, to the munificence of Dean Lennon as a plaque on the building shows.

He took a great pride in Weld Bank church and parish and devoted himself to the well-being of his flock. More than one of his parishioners had good reason to be grateful to him for financial assistance in the professions or commercial ventures and he took a deep interest in their futures.

To the church itself he devoted much attention making it one of the most attractive interiors in the country. A lover of the beauties of nature, he enlarged and restocked the gardens behind the church, installed greenhouses and paid for the upkeep. He was particularly fond of chrysanthemums and was an ardent patron of the local Chrysanthemum Society and, for a time, he was its president.

He was particularly generous to the men of the parish, providing a men's club which also did duty as a parish hall and, though much altered, is still in use and he also laid a Bowling Green alongside¹. A lover of music, Dean Lennon became a generous patron of Weld Bank Prize Band, took a great interest in its affairs and defrayed the cost of new uniforms and instruments.

Long hours, hard work and poor wages together with uncertainty of employment in the frequent industrial depressions of the last decades of the 19th century sapped the vitality of many men. The spectacle of many wives and children grouped outside public houses whilst the men folk drowned their sorrows inside was all too common. More than one old Weldbanker has told me how the cry would be heard in pubs along Pall Mall and Chorley Moor: "Heigh up, lads, t'Dean's comin'."

His commanding figure with stout walking stick would be seen entering the pub and, if the occasion warranted, he would stand a round of drinks, chat with the men until it was consumed, then urge them on their way home. Any laggards would be gently but firmly prodded on to the street.

The Dean's public work

Dean Lennon also took a great interest in the affairs of Chorley town itself and for 15 years he was a valued member of the Board of Guardians, being

¹ The parish hall has been leased to the company that also leases the Weldbank Lane school building. The whole complex operates as an independent school for children with special needs. The bowling green is no longer and is part of the property that is leased.

always re-elected at the top of the poll. Devoted to the welfare of the poor, he was a frequent and welcome visitor to the local Workhouse where he always strived for the betterment of its inmates and always came away much lighter in pocket. At meetings of the board, he often supplemented the meagre sums doled out by a half-crown or five shilling piece from his own pocket to a particularly deserving case. It is related that, on one occasion, two vagrant brothers appeared before the board with a request that they be allowed to emigrate to Canada. The board had neither the power nor the money to assist them but Dean Lennon considered that they deserved the chance of a new life so paid their passages and gave them a sum to help them start off in the colony.

For many years the people of Chorley had to rely on a public dispensary for the relief of suffering but in the 1890s its work had increased so much that a cottage hospital was called for and Mr H. N. Rawcliffe offered to defray the cost. Dean Lennon gave the land for the new building off Gillibrand Street, also a plot of land opposite for a garden and he paid the cost of wood-block paving in front of the hospital to reduce the noise caused by horse-drawn traffic past the building.

He served on the hospital board of management from its inception until his death and his name is preserved in Lennon St which runs by the side of the building. This hospital has now been replaced by the present hospital on Preston Road. There is a large notice board in the entrance of the present hospital built in 1933, on which is recorded the principle gifts and donations since the first hospital was built and the second donor, following Mr Rawcliffe, records the Dean's gift of land but it seems a pity that all these years his name should have been recorded as "V. Rev. Dean Benson". In the interests of accuracy, may we ask that this mistake should be rectified?

Somewhat fastidious in his ways, he was particularly keen on the cleanliness of his horse and coach and the late Mr Seth Booth, who died in

1929, could vouch for the fact that he would never enter the conveyance until he had assured himself that horse, harness and coach inside and out were spotless. Mr Booth, born at the Oaks Lodge in Burgh Lane, was his coachman for many years.

He had a particular love for children and he was beloved by them in return. Another Weldbanker, Eliza Wilson, remembered Dean Lennon offering her an apple but only on condition that she first sat on his knee for a 'donkey ride'.

Early in 1897, the Dean began to show symptoms of the malignant complaint that was to cause his death and these grew worse during the summer. He rallied a little in September and he prepared to journey to London to see a specialist and hoped to go on to Lourdes to pray for Our Lady's help. But it was not to be and during the evening of October 12th, numbers of his sorrowing flock gathered at Weld Bank on the news that he was sinking fast. Children from school, weavers in their clogs and shawls and miners still in their pit clothes knelt in prayer. He died the following morning to the regret of Chorley and district.

For two days and nights the Dean lay in state before the altar and a continuous stream of mourners from far and near filed past the catafalque. During the night, his male parishioners took it in turn to watch before the bier. Bishop Whiteside of Liverpool presided at the requiem which was attended by over 60 priests, the Mayor and members of Chorley Corporation and a vast assembly of civic leaders and parishioners. Fr. Barry of Sacred Heart preached the panegyric. The Weld Bank band attended and played the Dead March from "Saul". Men of the parish bore the coffin to the graveside. Their names are familiar to many, all old Weldbankers: T. Hoole, T. Rosbottom, T.H. Moore, T. Calderbank, T. Green, R. Booth, R. Mercer and Jos. Hunter.

‘Poor Joe’

A hundred years ago, the sight of those poor afflicted people who were mentally retarded was common in the streets of Chorley and they were often the victims of cruel jokes and other forms of ill-treatment by the more ignorant of the populace, particularly the children and young people. But these unfortunates found a good friend in Dean Lennon who always had a smile, a word of encouragement and a coin to help them on their way.

One such was known as ‘Poor Joe’ who had been befriended by the Dean on numerous occasions. The day after the Dean's funeral, this man was observed to make his way to the churchyard and place flowers on his grave. The incident came to the notice of John Wilson, who, as was his wont, put it in verse. Here it is:

AN INCIDENT AT THE GRAVE OF DEAN LENNON

We stood besides the grave wherein he lies,
Our dead dead priest, interred but yesterday;
And musing on our loss, wet grew our eyes
Above the hallowed clay.

When lo! there came in at the churchyard gate,
A creature most peculiar and uncouth,
Whose wandering gaze revealed his witless state –
An idiot in sooth.

But now his features bore beneath our scan
A look of sorrow, very deep and true,
As with the flowers he carried, he began
Dean Lennon's grave to strew.

Huge lovely dahlias over it he spread,
The while big tear-drops ran down his face;
In broken speech saluted he the dead,
Then sadly left the place.

Bereft of sense, he yet had sense to know,
That in the Dean he lost a generous friend,
Whose hand was ever ready to bestow,
Whose pity knew no end.

Poor lad! Rude children mock thee in the street,
And men make sport of thine infirmity;
But thou hast what in man we seldom meet –
There's gratitude in thee!

Poor man's doctor

In the same year that saw the demise of Dean Lennon, a smart young Irishman, fresh from the medical schools of Dublin, arrived in the town. He came to gain experience in his chosen profession with the prospect of more lucrative posts elsewhere but he liked what he saw and remained amongst us for over 50 years. Dr. R. J. Maguire became a familiar figure in the town, first on horseback, then on bicycles, latterly by car and nowhere was he more popular than in the Weld Bank district, where he had many patients. He became known as “the poor man's doctor”, one reason being his habit of forgetting to send in an account for his services to homes where he knew the money would be hard to find. Along with his good lady, he did many good deeds by stealth and generations of Chorley people have reason to bless his memory.

Mr John Wilson

Perhaps the best known and most revered Weld banker at the end of the last century and the early years of the present was Mr. John Wilson. He came to Chorley from his native Yorkshire in 1888 to join the Postal Service, being the youngest of a family of 13. A poet of no mean ability, he had already written a book of poems on his hometown of Pontefract entitled “Pomfret Cakes” when still a youth. Coming to Chorley, he quickly became a lover of the town and its neighbourhood which he passed on in verse. He married Miss

Rostron, a Weld Bank girl and resided in Pall Mall until his death in 1918 at the age of 59.

A lover of local history, he must have spent many hours of solitary study looking up old manuscripts and parish registers. Future historians of Chorley have relied very much on his research as we ourselves must admit. He delved deeply into Chorley's past, wrote a history of Chorley Parish Church and another book on the Chorley family whilst his deep knowledge of heraldry and armorial bearings enabled him to trace back for centuries the pedigrees of many local families.

A quiet, charming, soft-spoken man, many of us have fond memories of him as our Sunday School teacher, along with such as Mr Thomas William Moore, Mr Bob Coyle, Mr Harry Howarth and others. After Sunday School he would accompany us in procession up to the church for Benediction service where some of us would have to stand before the altar to answer questions put to us by the rectors.

John Wilson invariably took part in the annual Walking Days days complete with his "tall shiner" hat. He collected much information of the early days of Weld Bank and, had he lived a little longer, there is little doubt he would have written its history and this book would have been unnecessary. He left behind the memory of a great-hearted man to whom Chorley and Weld Bank owes much.

Weld Bank band

The writer has in his possession a booklet published in 1897 in connection with a bazaar held that year in the old school to raise funds for new instruments for Weld Bank Band, the secretary at that time being Mr Thomas Hodgkinson, still well-remembered. It contains much information, including the fact that the bazaar was under the patronage of Lord Balcarres, M.P., The

Very Rev. Dean Lennon and many other local gentlemen including three of the Thom family, then owners of Burgh Hall.²

It includes many advertisements of local firms, nearly all of whom are now just names to present day readers. Of Weld Bank advertisers, there are one or two still well-remembered. It includes the Mitre Hotel, whose proprietor was then Mrs Worthington, “where there is good stabling and accommodation for visitors to the bazaar from a distance and a choice of the best wines, spirits and beer, with tobacco and cigars of fine quality”.

Miss Isabella Rostron, of the Moor Road Post Office, announces she is a grocer, tea and coffee dealer, with best Indian tea at 2s per lb. Miss Rostron was very well-known in the parish and a spinster. She had the reputation of being something of a matchmaker, often holding musical and social evenings at her home for friends from around the districts where she introduced young people of both sexes and was said to be responsible for a number of happy marriages. She also found homes for a number of girl orphans brought from Liverpool by Dean Lennon.

Duxbury Corn Mill was then a going concern, managed by Mr Nicholas Gillett and his sons - the eldest Richard, being the first secretary of the men's club. The mill fell into disuse early this century but Mr Nicholas Gillett and his son Tom continued to farm the adjacent land for another 25 years or so with the help of two daughters.

The Weld Bank Minstrel Troupe and the Weld Bank Concert Party gave a number of shows during the bazaar. The names of many stall-holders are still remembered and many of their descendants are still active in the parish.

² I have included photos of a bazaar which was clearly held in the Parish Hall. However, I have no proof that it was the one in 1897 which Gillett refers to though the pictures do seem old enough to be from that era.

In those days, the band was known as St. Gregory's Brass Band and always played for the parish in the annual walking days and for the Corpus Christi processions through the church grounds. Intimately connected with it were members of the Ralphs family, both father and son conducting the band for many years. Naturally, Mr John Wilson was a supporter and, in the booklet about the bazaar, there are a number of his verses, the first one being:

“Where e'er they go, the ladies,
With smiling faces cry:
Here comes the band, whose music
Makes care and dullness fly!
A better band for dancers
Is nowhere in the land;
There's nought can beat the music sweet
Of the boys of Weld Bank Band.”