

## **9. 1897 – 1944 LIFE HERE IN THE TIMES OF FR. TEEBAY, CANON BANKS AND DEAN BILSBORROW**

### **Fr. Teebay and the old school condemned**

After Dean Lennon came Fr. George Teebay, a quiet unassuming pastor but one who put in hand many alterations to the church and later found himself saddled with the provision of a new school, to be followed by the arduous years of the First World War. He erected a new high altar and did away with the arches round it which had been such a feature since the church was built.

The large gallery at the back of the church which housed the organ loft, the choir and, at the front, a number of sittings was reduced by doing away with the sittings, a move which met with some opposition from their usual tenants. Then word was received that, after 1911, the school would not be recognised for the Government grant as it was considered out-of-date and inadequate for the needs of the larger numbers of children, consequent on many new houses being built in the area.

### **The new school**

But his flock rallied round and on 19th June, 1913, the foundation stone was laid of the new Weld Bank school, Very near the site of the old one and it was opened in 1914 -a fine two-storey building with corridors opening on the classrooms, with movable partitions for assembly purposes and a teachers' rest room. In fact, it was the most modern school in the area for some years. It could accommodate 384 children and the cost was £5000, a debt which took over 20 years to clear off.

The new school was under the headship of Miss Mary Lilley who had been head of the previous school for some years and she made it a valuable asset to the parish. A strict but fair disciplinarian, she held the affection of both teachers and children. One's memory is inclined to dim with the years but

we remember such as Miss Wilson, Miss Lucas (happily still with us), Miss Seed, Miss Knight and others, all of whom stayed loyal to the school for many years.

Miss Knight went down in Chorley's history as the author of the "Golden Book", a volume still preserved in Astley Hall, Chorley, containing photos and sketches of most of the local men who were killed in the first war. She later took her book and travelled the world obtaining signatures of the chief participants in that great conflict so that, as an autograph book alone, it must rank among the best in the world and as an historical exhibit is priceless.

Miss Lilley formed the Confraternity of the Children of Mary and made it one of the largest and best in the Archdiocese. In this she was assisted by Miss Wilson, daughter of Mr. John Wilson, who later followed Miss Lilley as leader of the Confraternity. Nor must we omit Miss Eccles, another grand teacher and head of the Infants' Department for many years.

There were many other good teachers, of course, but were before or after the writer's time but they will be remembered with affection by readers privileged to have been taught by them.

Fr. Teebay's last years were saddened by the loss of many of his young men in the war and he died on 26th April, 1920. His remains joined his predecessors in the clergy vault.

### **"Poor Coppull"**

The village of Coppull had been served intermittently for some years chiefly by Fr. Teebay, assisted by visiting priests and in 1903, a school Chapel dedicated to Saint Oswald was erected, Fr. Teebay saying the first mass. The

school opened the same year, the teacher being Miss O'Malley and on the first day she had 11 pupils. One of these was Mr Bob Critchley, now of Weldbank Lane and but who then resided at Charnock Richard. This school was a boon to these and others from that area who previously had had to make the long trek to Weld Bank.

After ordination in 1908, an energetic young priest called Fr. Thomas Clarkson, joined Fr. Teebay. He came with the twofold object of assisting the parish priest and of starting a parish at Coppull, then a small mining village with a growing Catholic population but desperately poor. Gifted with a ready and witty tongue, he started with nothing but soon had many friends and began campaigning for his new parish "poor Coppull" as he always referred to it. His fund raising was chiefly by ticket raffles and it was said of him that he was never without a book of tickets of some kind in his pocket.

He was an expert beggar and would make use of anything given to aid his parish. A story is told that one day he was chatting to a farmer friend of his in the Fylde area when he asked him if he had anything to offer as a raffle prize. "Aye", said the farmer, "tha con tek that beast" and he pointed to a cow in his fields. It was a shock to the farmer next morning when a lorry rolled up for the cow. The farmer had only meant the offer as a joke but he kept his word and Fr. Clarkson made a handsome sum from the sale of the animal!

He must have been one of the first in this district to own a motor cycle which he used to journey to Coppull until he obtained a house there but still contrived to be of great assistance at Weld Bank. There are quite a few Weld Bank children whose first experience of riding pillion was on the old-type machine of Fr. Clarkson's. He also did much to cement a friendship between the people of Weld Bank and Coppull which continues to this day.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> It's interesting to note that the wheel has now come full circle and the present rector of Weld Bank, Fr. Graeme Dunne, is also rector of St. Oswald's parish at Coppull.

It was a great day for Fr. Clarkson when, in 1926, the present lovely little church was opened and later a presbytery acquired. He added a cemetery and later a parish hall was opened until he had a self-contained parish backed by a willing flock. In his later years, this lovable priest was dogged by ill-health and he died in 1952.

### **Canon Banks comes to Weld Bank**

Fr. Teebay was followed by his friend Canon Banks who came to Weld Bank at 71 in the autumn of his years, to a parish he had known as a boy and had loved all his life. He had had a long and distinguished career as President of St. Edward's College and he left a memory of gentleness, sanctity and devotion which it is pleasing to record. During his seven years as parish priest, the old parish continued the even tenor of its way; the industrial depressions of the first post-war period preventing much in the way of debt-reducing or improvements. After catching a chill on the way to a chapter meeting, he died on 16th February, 1927. The statue of the Virgin and Child near the pulpit was erected as his memorial.<sup>2</sup>

### **Changes at the school in the 20<sup>th</sup> century up to 1974**

On the retirement of Miss Lilley in 1927, Mr Philip Turner took over and he introduced some modern features into the school, including the house system, cap badges etc. He brought the school, with the help of a fine body of assistants, to a high level of efficiency in religion and secular knowledge. The children were especially noted for their polite and courteous behaviour.<sup>3</sup>

But the 'new school' became overcrowded and it was decided to build a new infants' school. Mr T. H. Kevill of Burgh Hall once again came to the rescue

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<sup>2</sup> In recent years this statue has been moved near to the rear door of the church nearest the old graveyard.

<sup>3</sup> This comment brings to mind one of my first days at Lark Hill Convent which I attended after leaving Weld Bank School in 1965. Whilst walking in the grounds at lunchtime, my friends and I were stopped by a couple of retired nuns who asked if we were new girls and when this was confirmed, they wanted to know which primary school we had attended. When we mentioned Weld Bank, we were told that it was a very good school and that we had a lot to live up to.

and donated a site near the Old Plock Green Farm. Archbishop Downey laid the foundation stone in April 1953, his last public appearance for he died less than two months afterwards and Archbishop Godfrey opened it in 1954. Miss Wilson was the first headmistress, to be followed on retirement by the present head, Mrs McAllister. A link with the old days is the statue of the Guardian Angel in the hall of the new building – it once stood over Miss Lilley's desk. The school can accommodate over 200 children and was built at a cost of £32,000.

On Mr Philip Turner's premature retirement owing to ill-health, his place was taken as head of the Senior School by Mr J. McGeown who has continued the high standard started by his predecessors.

With the increased interest in education and different standards as to how children should be educated, two other schools have now been erected at Weld Bank: St. Augustine's and St. Hilda's (now merged into Holy Cross School). These cater for Catholic children from Chorley and villages around so that now there are four schools within a few hundred yards of the old church – Weld Bank is now a veritable seat of learning.

### **Still another Catholic church for Chorley**

In the first decade of the present century and for some years before, there had been much building in the Harpers Lane and Eaves Lane district of Chorley and another church was deemed necessary. Thanks to an anonymous donor and the efforts of the Catholics of that district, the Church of Saint Joseph was opened in 1910 and a school was added off Railway Road. The first parish priest was the Rev. Fr. Motherway, still remembered with affection in the parish.

Since then the parish has grown until now it is the second largest Catholic parish in the town in size of population and a second fine school has been

added behind the church, together with a parish hall and a large house adjoining. Hollycroft is now the men's club complete with its own bowling green. A previous men's club, now used by the school, was erected on land given by Mr T. H. Kevill ten years after the church was opened, as a memorial to the 49 men of St Joseph's who had made the supreme sacrifice in the First World War and as a memorial to the first rector, Rev. Fr. Motherway.

### **The coming of Dean Billsborrow**

Following the death of the aged Canon Banks, the parish entered a new phase with the coming of Fr. Richard Oswald Billsborrow, formerly of Saint Hugh's, Liverpool, and a nephew of Bishop Billsborrow of Manchester who had also served a period in the USA. Of a tall, handsome appearance, he quickly endeared himself to all sections of the parish with his witticisms and down-to-earth sermons.<sup>4</sup> He was gifted with a rich, resonant speaking voice which he used to good effect in his sermons or the reading of prayers. Who can forget his reading of the Prayer for England:

*“ . . . of Augustine, Columba and Aidan, who delivered to us inviolate the Faith of the Holy Roman Church; remember those who shed their blood for Christ, especially Thy first martyr, Saint Alban and Thy most glorious Bishop, Saint Thomas of Canterbury; remember those holy Bishops and Kings, those holy Monks and Hermits, those holy Virgins and Widows who made this once an Island of Saints, illustrious by their glorious merits and virtues”*

or how he put across those scholarly pronunciations of Archbishop Downey with their impressive beginnings, “Richard, by the Grace of God and favour of the Apostolic See, Archbishop of Liverpool and Metropolitan, To the Clergy and Faithful of the Archdiocese, Health and Benediction in the Lord . . .”? Many of us have fond memories of Fr. Billsborrow and his voice to me can never be forgotten.

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<sup>4</sup> His wit is evidenced in a comment reported in 'The Universe' in about 1931 in an article about some young boys and girls who gave 'sermons' about the life of Our Lord from the pulpit. "Fr. R. Billsborrow said that the two little girls, apart from those "unfortunate who said 'I will'" were the first of their sex to speak from the sanctuary." One of the little girls was my mother, then aged 6. (See photo of article)

Quickly sizing up what was needed in the parish, he immediately called a meeting of the men. The men's club was still functioning but with only a small membership and not truly representative. He asked for an organisation of all the men, one which could be called upon to help in the various schemes he had in mind - and he got it. The Men's Guild was formed under the chairmanship of Mr Philip Turner who, the same year, had replaced Miss Lilley as head teacher at the school. It soon had a large membership, the numbers at the monthly Holy Communion often exceeding 100. A men's monthly service was also held in church.

The new Guild committee worked hard and cooperated with the women and young ladies of the parish in various money raising events with a view to extinguishing the debt still outstanding on the 'new school', then over 15 years old. The club did not flourish as had been hoped and repeated requests for a licensed bar met with refusals as not being diocesan policy. The writer remembers a council meeting when the treasurer, Joe Hoole, reported his inability to pay a bill for repairs to the billiards table as he had nothing in the 'kitty' and members paid the following year's subs. to meet the cost.

### **Debt cleared**

But parochial work went on apace and by means of dances, Sunday evening house parties (these were very popular gatherings), hot pot suppers etc. money was gradually being raised, so much so that on the first Sunday of 1936 Fr. Billsborrow proudly announced that he had paid off the last of the new school debt and that for the nine years that he had been at Weld Bank, his flock had raised an average of £1.00 a day for this object, a total of £3,600 in the period. The cost of the school when it was built in 1913 had been £5,000 But interest had swollen this to £7,500. These figures seem chicken-feed nowadays due to the altered value of money but were vast sums in those days, with the war years and industrial depression.

A feature of those and earlier years had been the New Year's tea party and concert. The teas always had to have two sittings, the ladies vying with each other in providing the most sumptuous spread. It was considered an honour for families to have their own tables and some of these were held in families for two or three generations. For about ten of those years the Scarlets Party, of Liverpool, were always popular entertainers.

Efforts were now able to be concentrated on more visible improvements which the rector had in mind including the resurfacing of the church walks which were very hard on the feet and the interior decoration of the church and presbytery. He had received an anonymous gift of £100 for the renovation of the sanctuary. In less than three months he could report that the drive had now been completed - the only requirement now, he said, being that it should have much more pedestrian traffic! The Weld Bank clock had been repaired and now kept time regularly with Greenwich though perhaps occasionally it might be a few seconds slow in favour of the latecomers!

About this time also, Weld Bank was frequently being visited by those lesser types of cracksmen who specialise in robbing church poor boxes so the rector affixed a card to the boxes, worded:

“Notice to Burglars: the money boxes in this church are emptied daily and would not repay the risk of breaking open. Is the chance of 3d worth the risk of 6 months?”

In the middle of May 1935 the whole outside front of the church was decorated with multi-coloured bunting and the new papal flag of the crossed keys in white and gold floated proudly from the flagstaff. The occasion was, of course, the canonisation in Rome of SS Thomas More and John Fisher.

## **The highest point**

In addition to the many repairs and improvements which Dean Bilsborrow carried out to the church interior, he found that the large wooden cross which surmounted the tower and had braved the storms of over 100 winters, was becoming much the worse for wear and he had it replaced with one of non-corrosive metal. There has long been a tradition at Weld Bank that the church is the highest point in the borough of Chorley and that, if one stands on the entrance step, one is on a level with the Chorley town hall clock.

It is a fact that a ship's captain visiting friends at Weld Bank early this century stated that he had often seen the church cross through his glasses when his ship was standing off Southport before entering the Mersey for Liverpool. Certainly, if one makes the somewhat arduous climb to the circular windows above the clock, one is rewarded with a magnificent view of the surrounding country. The height of the church tower from ground level to the cross on the top is 80 feet and the builders claimed that the foundations of it go down into the ground about the same distance - so it can be said that the church is on a sure footing.

## **New clubrooms**

In 1938 the men decided a new club room was needed and they really got down to business so that, in a short time, commodious new premises were erected adjoining the old building and this time a licensed bar was provided. Once again Mr T. H. Kevill came to the rescue and he doubled every pound that the men raised. Since then there have been a number of improvements including a ladies room and the old parish hall joined to the new building forming a comfortable lounge. Now the parish can boast of an amenity which will bear comparison with any in the district.

## Second World War

By now, of course, the war clouds were gathering and a number of our young men were soon conscripted into the forces, some never to return. Mr Philip Turner had relinquished the chairmanship of the Men's Guild in favour of Mr William Brimley, a past president of St. Mary's YMS. Mr Turner now devoted his attention to the Boys' Club which soon flourished in the parish. One of its leaders, Jimmy Herberts, distinguished himself in amateur boxing circles. He was a promising young man in many ways and deep sorrow was felt in the parish when he was later commissioned in the RAF and lost his life in a raid over Sicily.

The war years began with its black-out restrictions on church services but parish life went on despite difficulties. We were spared the bombing though one or two did drop harmlessly in Gillibrand Woods. The Home Guard had two look-out posts in the parish, one on the Moor pit coal tip and another near Throstle Nest Wood.

But the trickle of conscripts soon became a flood and many of us recall kneeling before Fr. Bilsborrow for his blessing ere we departed for our various theatres of war and how, with tears in his eyes, he would dismiss us with a final pat on the head and the injunction "Don't forget your prayers, lad".

Later in the war, it became obvious that our rector was a sick man and on 22<sup>nd</sup> October, 1944, he was called to his reward. The sorrow of the parish and district was evinced when he was laid to rest with his predecessors in the churchyard. Some weeks later, the sad news came to a small RAF camp in the heart of the Burma jungle and the visiting Portuguese padre announced at his Sunday mass: "This mass is being offered at the request of one of your comrades for the repose of the soul of his pastor, Fr. Bilsborrow, of Weld Bank in England."<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Tom Gillett himself, the author of this book, was, of course, the soldier in the Burmese jungle who had requested the mass for Dean Bilsborrow.

## **Monsignor Crank**

Mgr. Crank, rector of St. Mary's, Chorley, who had acted as Master of Ceremonies at the funeral of Dean Lennon over forty years before, had since dominated the religious life of the town and had made St. Mary's into a model parish for the rest of the archdiocese. On his retirement, he was a welcome visitor to Weld Bank at the invitation of his former curate, Dean Bilsborrow, when he was asked to preach charity sermons and open Sales of Work<sup>6</sup>. On one occasion, he stated that he had conceived a deep love for the old parish and he had asked the Dean that his remains should be placed in the priests' vault in Weld Bank churchyard, "along with those staunch Chorley Catholics of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries". His wish was eventually granted, though his friend, the Dean, was the first to go.

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<sup>6</sup> For those not familiar with the phrase 'Sale of Work' – these were organised by the ladies of the parish, (the Women's Guild) and involved each of them contributing either bought or, often, homemade, items and then manning the stalls in the Parish Hall. So there might be a stall selling jams or cakes or knitted goods and stalls that were games such as tombola or pick the shortest straw etc. with donated prizes. The aim was always to make money for the church and, in this, the ladies did a magnificent job with each sale raising many hundreds of pounds.