

A HISTORY OF ST MARYLEBONE PARISH CHURCH

LINKS WITH THE REMOTER PAST

A brook called the Tyburn, rising from a spring in Hampstead, used to flow down to the Thames near Westminster Abbey. It gave its name to a village situated within the angle formed by two Roman roads, one leading from the City of London and now called Oxford Street, the other, now called Edgware Road, starting its course from the site of Marble Arch, where Tyburn Tree once stood, the notorious place of execution for criminals convicted in London and the County of Middlesex.

The first church in what was then a lovely rural area was dedicated to St John the Evangelist, and was built near to where Tyburn and Marylebone Lane reached Oxford Street. Having suffered much from thieves and vandals, it was abandoned. A new church was erected in the year 1400, further from the highway and dedicated in the name of the Blessed Virgin Mary, who has ever since been the patron saint of the Parish.

The site of this second church is now marked by the Garden of Rest in Marylebone High Street and its ancient churchyard has become the playground of the Parish School.

In course of time the name Tyburn was avoided by the villagers, doubtless because of its grim association with the gallows, and the village became called, after the church, Mary-burn. Many spellings of the name exist, including the queer Marrowbone, which approximated to the actual pronunciation (in mediaeval speech the Saint was 'Marry'), but somehow or other the homely name was eventually dignified into St Mary-le-bone.

The interior of the church is accurately depicted by Hogarth in his engraving of the Rake's Marriage. Characteristically he shows a crack running through the Ten Commandments and a spider's web covering the poor box. He copied a curious inscription:

These pewes unscrud and tain in sundir

In stone thers graven what is undir

To wit a valt for burial there is

Which Edward Forset made for him and his

This memento of an Elizabethan lord of the manor has been preserved and can be seen in an aisle of the present church.

The dilapidated condition of the mediaeval structure (clearly revealed by Hogarth) made a new building desirable; it was replaced in 1740 by a modest Georgian church, which survived as a great relic of the past until 1949 when, in its turn, it was demolished. Some of the many memorials that crowded its walls, including a memorial to the cupbearer to Ann of Denmark and Queen Henrietta Maria, may be seen in the present stairways, to which they were transferred.

Famous names are associated with the old church Francis Bacon (probably), Sheridan and Lady Hamilton were married there. Byron was baptized, as was also Horatia, the daughter born to Nelson by Lady Hamilton. Among those buried in the churchyard were James Gibbs, architect of St Martin's in the Fields (the prototype of innumerable churches in the United States) and Charles Wesley.

1817

The present Church of St Marylebone was consecrated by William Howley, Bishop of London, on February 4th, 1817. It has been erected in what was then the New Road, a bypass on the very edge of London. Its gleaming white Portland stone columns and tower faced open country towards Hampstead and Highgate.

Waterloo had been fought less than two years before. England, despite post-war crises, was rich and powerful: it was her Age of Elegance. The Parish of Marylebone has become a desirable residential area, as the memorial tablets in the Church indicate, for the nabobs who made their fortune in India. Very soon the Prince Regent was to transform the district by commissioning John Nash to lay out Regents Park and its imposing stuccoed terraces of houses. One of Nash's inspirations was to create a fine view from the Park of the new church, framed between two blocks of York Terrace.

The old village of Tyburn had in the eighteenth century been engulfed in a tide of urban development spreading north from Mayfair. The population had increased to

at least 70 000. The rich landowners made provision for many proprietary chapels to be built, on the principle of private enterprise, where popular preachers harangued fashionable congregations in their rented pews. The most attractive of these chapels (designed by James Gibbs) still survives as St Peter's, Vere Street. But until 1817 the little village church of old Marylebone remained the only Parish Church for the great urban streets and squares, as well as for villas and cottages of St John's Wood and Lisson Grove. It is not surprising that a letter was written in 1807 to a magazine referring to the diminutive place of worship as a scandal to the church and nation. When he visited it, the correspondent observed five corpses deposited on the pews, awaiting burial, eight christening parties and five women to be churched. A 'common basin' was set on the communion table for baptism, but the godparents were scattered about in such a disorderly way that it was impossible to conduct the service decently. Another article referred to the parish, inhabited by many legislators and holders of high office in church and state, as 'wearing the appearance of a quarter appropriated to persons under sentence of excommunication'.

When at last a new, capacious church was built, there lay behind its provision a sad history of bureaucratic muddle and delay.

Parishes were formerly governed by vestries. The vestry of St Marylebone was originally composed of all the local farmers and tradesmen. When, however, the area had become urban, grand and wealthy, the vestry was made 'select', that is, a self-perpetuating body, not accountable to anyone but its own members. In 1770 the vestry secured parliamentary permission to raise a rate for the purpose of building a new church (and so a "statutory" church) and a parsonage. Forty seven years elapsed before the church came into existence and a freehold parsonage has not materialized yet. Several sites for the church were proposed and voted down and several designs commissioned. Sir William Chambers planned a magnificent domed structure like a miniature St Paul's; like much fine architecture, it would have been impractical to use and ruinous to maintain.

As a stopgap, Thomas Hardwick was instructed to build "two chapels of ease", one at St John's Wood (now the parish church of that name) and the other on our present site. When the latter was nearing completion, Hardwick was told to carry out improvements in order to give it the dignity appropriate to a major parish church. Accordingly, he provided the grand portico in the Roman style reminiscent of the Pantheon, and the highly individual tower, rising through circle of columns and caryatid angels to a small dome.

The interior was a notable example of what Regency churchmanship required: box pews in the nave, an upper as well as a lower gallery running round three sides and terminating in private boxes (probably with five places); a large pulpit and reading desk, draped in expensive material; a tiny sanctuary, above which hovered a choir gallery (facing the congregation) and above that in turn a huge transparency, or painted window, set between two sections of the organ. The window design was intended to represent the angel bringing good tidings to the Christmas shepherds, and it must have produced a visual shock, something like that of Sutherland's Christ in Coventry Cathedral. It was not appreciated, was soon removed, and lost without trace. As a result, the interior of the church looked more than ever like a concert hall.

The transparency was the work of the veteran painter Benjamin West, an American by birth and a President of the Royal Academy. He presented a painting of the Holy Family to the Vestry as an altar piece. On it an inscription refers to him curiously as a housekeeper in the parish. The vestrymen were deeply touched when the venerable white-haired artist offered his gift, but were dismayed when he presented his bill for the vast transparency at so much a square foot. The new church was already proving very costly, and angry complaints were coming from ratepayers, especially from those who were non-conformists or radicals.

Indeed, non-conformity, atheism and democratic radicalism were so alarming the government that it was decided to build the Commissioners' churches (nicknamed Waterloo churches) to strengthen the Establishment in popular areas. Only seven years after St Marylebone Church was built, its parish was decided to form four new Rectory Districts, adorned by All Souls, Langham Place, Holy Trinity, Christ Church, and St Mary's, Bryanston Square. By 1900 the original parish had been further subdivided into sixteen independent parishes, but their number has since been much reduced. Holy Trinity, opposite Great Portland Street Station, no longer serves residents but is the headquarters of the Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, founded in 1698 as the oldest Anglican organisation for mission and evangelism.

1884

When Canon Barker became Rector in 1882, Hardwick's interior appeared to him secular and uninspiring. Indeed, he was "strongly impressed with the feeling that this, the mother church of so large and important a parish, was in arrangement and decoration ill-suited to the religious demands and sentiments of the present day." With his churchwarden, the architect Thomas Harris, he resolved upon a total transfiguration. No single feature of the church's interior remained unaltered. Only

the shapes of the windows stayed as they were, indeed were revealed, for the upper gallery was swept away except at the rear. The most striking change was the demolition of the sanctuary end and its total replacement by the triumphal arch and the apse, for which Mrs Gladstone laid the foundation stone in 1884.

It was characteristic of Victorian boldness and confidence to take a large Regency preaching hall and to affix to it a feature modelled upon the most venerable of Christian buildings, the earliest basilicas in the city of Rome, so presenting a permanent problem of how to marry nave and sanctuary in one scheme of decoration.

At one point the architect's confidence seemed to have deserted him. He had proposed for the semi-dome of the apse a commanding Christ-figure such as is often seen in Byzantine churches, but, in the end, he permitted the insignificant representation we see now. Perhaps it was as well, since Victorian portraits of Christ tended to be melancholy or sentimental. The names of the artists who worked in the church have not been recorded.

This time there was no question of the work being paid for by the rates. All the necessary funds were rapidly raised by public subscription, and no expense was spared. In the sanctuary marble and mosaic were lavishly employed. All the windows were filled with pictorial stained glass and the space between the upper windows covered with large paintings on canvas fixed to the walls, all the windows and paintings representing a sequence of biblical and theological themes.

The surviving element of all this instructive decoration is to be found in the apse. The centre piece is the Crucifixion in Mosaic. On either side of it are stone pilasters carved with symbolic references to St Paul's great chapter on the Resurrection in 1 Corinthians 15. It is an interesting but somewhat baffling, exercise to try to decipher the symbols with the help of a Bible. Above the Altar, whose front bears a mosaic of the Paschal Lamb, is the inscription from the Greek Testament, "This is my Body". Above the Crucifixion is set the ancient symbol of the pelican in her piety, supposedly feeding her young with her own blood, and so a type of Holy Communion. In the dome, the ascended Christ in majesty is surrounded by the elders of the Apocalypse and accompanied by a remarkable heavenly orchestra. At a lower level the four Evangelists and the four epistle writers of the New Testament are depicted in the labour of composition.

Canon Barker's other great innovation was to introduce cathedral type musical services, with surplice choir of man and boys to occupy the new beautifully carved mahogany choir stalls.

All these changes caused a disgruntled visitor to complain about "meretricious music and Roman Ornateism a transformation calculated to please persons seeking after novelty". He looked back nostalgically to the old sober interior packed with worshippers on three levels and their congregational singing.

However, the choral tradition was firmly established and soon attracted the attention of Sir John Stainer, who dedicated to the organist and choir his newly composed oratorio, *The Crucifixion*. So popular was this tuneful and dramatic work in its presentation of the Gospel message that it became necessary for the choir to perform it to a full church once a week through Lent and daily in Holy Week. It is still performed here every Good Friday to a large congregation.

MORE RECENT HISTORY

Frequent performance of elaborate choral music were maintained until the War of 1939-45 struck the parish, causing considerable movement of population and a permanent change in the character of the neighbourhood. Bomb blast destroyed all the church windows, which had to be boarded up. The cable of a barrage balloon caught in the tower. After the retirement in 1942 of Dr Morrison, who had been Rector from the early years of the century, Hugh Matthews bravely accepted the living and rebuilt the congregation after the War.

Much attention was due to the fabric. Dry rot had attacked the roof and walls. The interior was dismally and grimy, the painted canvases in a state of decay. The empty windows were glazed with plain glass, but fragments of stained glass, lovingly preserved, were used to make coloured borders. It was decided not to restore the windows in the apse but to brick up and plaster the apertures. This was the end of an important part of canon baker's theological decoration. However, not everyone had admired the vanished windows.

For a time the church had to be closed as a dangerous structure. The duke's Hall of the Royal Academy of Music was hospitably made available for the Sunday congregation.

The centenary of the marriage in St Marylebone Church of Robert and Elizabeth Browning falling in 1946, Archdeacon Matthews decided that this should be the

opportunity for building a commemorative chapel. It is probably fortunate that the plan was not implemented. Instead the rear of the nave was curtained off and supplied with the necessary furnishing. Eventually it was agreed to move the chapel to the left hand aisle, with the Georgian font at one end and Benjamin West's picture behind the altar at the other. In 1884 West's altar piece had been demoted to the old village church, known as the Parish Chapel, and, when that was demolished, deposited in the crypt, whence the Revd Harington Evans was responsible for restoring it to the light of day. The aisle chapel is now appropriately named for the Holy Family.

The rear of the nave was converted into a miniature parish hall and named the Browning Room. It contains a window, donated by the Browning Society of Winnipeg, symbolising love and marriage, and important relics presented by Browning's publishers when the chapel was being planned: an inlaid table from the poets' home, Casa Guidi, in Florence, two figures carved in wood, a chair, and a portrait in relief of Robert. The London Browning Society meets regularly in the Room. On loan to the Society are two majolica plaques presented by Browning, with an autographed letter, to Furnivall.

The Room contains a simple War Memorial, the original memorial for 1914-18, erected outside, having disintegrated.

A home was found in the Browning Room for the Bread Board, which has a curious history. In 1692 Thomas Verley endowed the Parish with £50 in order to provide twelve penny loaves every Sabbath Day for the poor. Subsequently the vestrymen used the capital to pay for repairs to the churchyard wall, undertaking to carry out Mr Verley's intention themselves. When the Vestry was replaced as the local government by a Borough Council, the council continued to provide the loaves weekly until war time rationing and the price of bread made it impossible to do so.

It so happens that two of the most interesting memorial tablets are in the area enclosed for the Browning Room, one to the first and last Regius Professor of Divinity in King's College, New York, which, after the American Revolution, became Columbia University, and the other to a sub-governess who soldiered on piously amid the "jarring interests" of the Prince Regent's household.

Reference has been made to the transference of Holy Trinity Church from parochial service to become the headquarters of S.P.C.K. it was the task of Harington Evans to preside as Rector while the two parishes were being merged into one. One result of

reunion was greatly to assist the finances of the Parish church. Among other things, this has made possible a return to at least the high standards of music in worship attained in the past. The most recent restoration of the apse and redecoration of the nave walls and ceiling were undertaken in 1977 under the supervision of Mr Sean Lander by Campbell Smith, the same contractors employed by Canon Barker in 1884. The new scheme ingeniously harmonised the nave with the apse.

THE RECTORS

The word rectory is now usually taken to refer to a house, but its original and strictly correct meaning is the status of rector or parish priest. Formerly it implied two functions, the spiritual care, or cure, of a parish, and the material right of receiving, as well as any endowment attached to the living, the tithes paid by the parishioners. In the middle ages it was not uncommon for a rectory, in these two senses, to be granted to a monastic house. This happened in Tyburn, or Marylebone, when in King John's reign, the rectory was acquired by a priory of black canons at Blackmore in Essex. It then became the duty of the canons, in return for enjoying an income from the tithes, to provide a substitute rector in the spiritual sense, or "vicar", to look after the Parish.

Blackmore Priory was dissolved with other monastic houses in the reign of Henry VIII, who granted the rectory to Cardinal Wolsey. It soon passed to other hands and eventually came to the Lord of the Manor of Marylebone. The priest he appointed was not in the strict legal sense a vicar but a "donative curate", that is, someone authorized by mere gift, without any reference to the Bishop. For this reason it is very difficult to trace correctly the names of the incumbents, especially after the urban development of the parish began, when many clerical duties – endless baptisms, weddings, funerals – had to be performed by assistants and when some of the officials incumbents, styled curate or minister, were pluralists and non-resident.

For many years, then, the rectors were the Lords of the Manor, the grant folk whose names and titles and estates – Harley, Oxford, Cavendish, Portland, Devonshire, Wimpole – are commemorated in the parish streets.

In 1821, four years after the present church was consecrated, the Government purchased the rectory, the right of presentation to the living, from the Duke of Portland. Crown land to the value of £40,000 (in those days!) was given to the Duke by way of exchange. This transaction, together with the establishment of two officials, a Crown Churchwarden and a Crown Sidesman (the titles still exist),

illustrates the political importance once attached to office in the Church. Since 1821 the incumbent has been styled Rector and has certainly been a genuine parish priest.

The first rector appointed by the Crown was the sitting incumbent, Archdeacon Luke Heslop. It may be noticed that in the inscription set above the entrance to the Church he is described simply as Minister, his correct designation in 1817.

His successors are:

1825 John Hume Spry, D.D., Canon of Canterbury

1855 John Thos. Pelham, D.D.

1857 Charles James Phipps Eyre, M.A.

1882 William Barker, M.A., Dean of Carlisle

1908 William Douglas Morrison, Litt.D.

1942 Hubert John Matthews, M.A. Archdeacon of Hampstead

1954 James Bruce Harington Evans, M.A.

1958 Frank Coventry, Ph.D., Prebendary of St Paul's

1978 Christopher Kingston Hamel Cooke, M.A., D.P.S.

The royal coat of arms affixed to the rear gallery has nothing to do with the fact that the Crown is the patron of the living, that is, nominates the Rector through the agency of the Prime Minister's Appointments Secretary. From the Reformation until Queen Victoria's reign, all parish churches were required to display this token of the Establishment. The example in St Marylebone dates from 1817 and therefore shows the arms of Hanover imposed upon the more familiar quarterings of England, Scotland and Ireland.

CHRISTIAN EDUCATION IN THE PARISH

From early times the children of the parish must have been taught their catechism with more or less of diligence by the parish priest. For a few years a school for young gentlemen was housed in the old Manor House, opposite the Village Church.

However, the history of modern education may be said to begin with the establishment in the year 1750 of the Charity School, for 'instructing, clothing, qualifying for useful servants, and apprenticing, the children of industrious, poor

Parishioners. In due course it was decided to recruit only girls, to be trained for domestic services, and they, in their picturesque uniform of blue dresses and white caps, provided an auxiliary choir on Sundays, sitting at the far end of the right hand gallery. The Charity School survived into this century, when its assets were converted into an Educational Foundation, which continues, among other functions, to give valuable financial help to the present Parish School.

In 1791 a Day School of Industry was founded, for the Children of the Resident Poor, "to qualify them for those situations in life which they will be called upon to fill" and to instruct them in the doctrines and social duties required by the Church Catechism. Then in 1828 the Infant School was inaugurated, with the object of saving children under the age of seven years from the moral dangers of roaming the streets or for being put in the day-time charge of unsatisfactory people. It is recorded that the poor cheerfully contributed one penny a week for each child accepted.

It is from these two schools that the present Parish School is derived. They were brought into the system of National Schools associated with the Church of England throughout the century. The school, housed in Victorian buildings and also in a modern block, immediately to the rear of the church, with the old courtyard paved as a playground, was until quite recently educating children of both sexes at both primary and secondary level. As a result of diminishing child population in the area it is now receiving girls only, and operates as a small but flourishing Comprehensive School. It is voluntary aided, that is administrated and financed by a partnership between the Local Authority and the Church. It serves a much larger field than the Parish, but continues to bring the girls under the influence of the Parish church and its ministry as well as giving them an all round education.

The Church of the Good Shepherd, now defunct, was built in Paddington Street in Victorian times to bring the faith to people who doubtless thought that the grand edifice in Marylebone Road or even the humbler Parish Chapel (the new name given to the village church in the High Street) was not for the likes of them.

Marylebone used to contain, as well as grand terrace and squares, miserable slums, poverty and many destitute vagrants. The old workhouse was rebuilt and greatly enlarged, the plan being influenced by advice from Florence Nightingale. The buildings were more recently used for homeless old people and named Luxborough Lodge, but were finally demolished and the site used for the Polytechnic of Central London.

LINKS WITH FAMOUS PEOPLE

CHARLES WESLEY

Many famous people have lived within the boundaries of the ancient parish of St Marylebone. For Christian people, one of the most honoured names is that of the Reverend Charles Wesley.

His elder brother John is rightly regarded as the founder of Methodism. Oddly enough, the term Methodist was first applied to the Wesleys and their associates because they were regarded as being extremely methodical in observing the devotions required by the Church of England. Undergoing remarkable personal conversions, they could not be contained with its parochial system and gave themselves to a wandering ministry of evangelism through which many thousands of people were brought to enthusiastic faith.

The leaders of the movement always regarded themselves as what indeed they were, ordained clergymen of the national Church. Unfortunately their fervour ran counter not only to the worldliness of many of their contemporaries but also to the rationalism of many of the clergy and theologians. A crisis came when it proved impossible to provide newly ordained Methodists to support John Wesley's work in North America. His decision to act as a bishop and ordain men himself was the formal cause of a break between his great movement and the established Church. However, in the circumstances, the division was inevitable, however melancholy.

Charles disapproved of his brother's decision, but never lost his loyalty or affection for him.

Charles eventually gave up the itinerant ministry and, having been given a house in what is now Wheatley Street, settled there with his family. His wife was a musical woman and their two sons inherited her gifts, being famous as child prodigies. Charles the younger became the first organist of the new Parish Church in 1817 at a yearly salary of £100. Samuel is reckoned a composer of genius, but had an ill-starred career. The Wesley household in Marylebone displayed their talents in musical parties which attracted distinguished visitors to their home.

In his last illness Charles made a well known request to the incumbent of the old village church: "Sir, whatever the world may say of me I die, as I have lived, a member of the Church of England, and I pray you to bury me in your churchyard".

He died on March 29th, 1788, and his body was carried to the place he had chosen by eight of his fellow clergymen.

It is regrettable that there is nothing in what is now the Parish School playground to mark his grave, but a few yards away, in the Garden of Rest, on the site of the old church, a small stone obelisk commemorates him and other members of his family.

But his chief memorial is to be found in the hymn books of the English speaking world. Many of his hymns appear with additions and modifications, but the great inspiration was his own. Christian worship would not be the same if deprived of Love divine all loves excelling, Jesus lover of my soul, Lo, he comes with clouds descending, Hark, the herald angels sing and many others songs of praise and devotion.

CHARLES DICKENS

Dickens wrote some of his greatest novels while living a few yards away from St Marylebone Church at 1, Devonshire Terrace. The site of this house is now occupied by an office block, which commemorates some of his most famous characters carved in relief.

Dickens' times in Marylebone is reflected in his novels, especially in Dombey and Son. The parish church provides the setting for the christening of baby Paul. Naturally, the building is not described in every correct detail, but is recognisable enough. It needs to be remembered that the organ was then a dominant feature, being placed centrally above the altar, and that burials were frequent in the vaults and catacombs in the crypt. The light from the windows must have been obscured by the two tiers of galleries that surrounded the interior of the Church.

Dickens' description is worth quoting, since it gives an impression of a busy Victorian church in what was then a densely populated area:

“Pleased to bring the child in quick out of the air there”, whispered the beadle holding open the inner door of the church.

Little Paul might have asked with Hamlet “into my grave?” so chill and earthy was the place. The tall shrouded pulpit and reading desk; the dreary perspective of empty pews stretching away under the galleries, and empty benches mounting to the roof and lost in the shadow of the great grim organ; the dusty matting and cold stones slabs; the grisly free seats in the aisles; and the damp corner by the bell-rope, were the black trestles used for funerals were stowed away, along with some shovels

and baskets, and a coil or two of deadly-looking rope; the strange, unusual, uncomfortable smell, and the cadaverous light; were all in unison. It was a cold and dismal scene.

“There’s wedding just on, Sir,” said the beadle, “but it’ll be over directly, if you’ll walk into the westerly here.”

‘The very wedding looked dismal as they passed in front of the altar. The bride was too old and the bridegroom too young, and a superannuated beau with one eye and an eyeglass stuck in its blank companion, was giving away the lady, while the friends were shivering. In the vestry the fire was smoking; and an over-aged and over-worked and under-paid attorney’s clerk, “making a search”, was running his forefinger down the parchment pages of an immense register (one of a long series of similar volumes) gorged with burials.

‘After another cold interval, a wheezy little pew-opener afflicted with asthma summoned them to the front. Here they waited some little time while the marriage party enrolled themselves.

‘Presently the clerk (the only cheerful-looking object there, and he was an undertaker) came up with a jug of warm water and said something, as he poured it into the font, about taking the chill off; which millions of gallons of boiling hot could not have done for the occasion. Then the clergyman, an amiable and mild-looking young curate, but obviously afraid of the baby, appeared like the principal character in a ghost-story, “a tall figure all in white”; at sight of whom Paul rent the air with his cries, and never left off again till he was taken out black in the face.

‘Even when that event had happened to the great relief of everybody, he was heard under the portico, during the rest of the ceremony, now fainter, now louder now hushed, now bursting forth again with an irrepressible sense of his wrongs.’

‘The register signed and the fees paid, and the pew-opener (whose cough was very bad again) remembered, and the beadle gratified, and the sexton (who was accidentally on the doorsteps, looking with great interest at the weather) not forgotten, they got into the carriage again, and drove home.’

Taking into account Dickens’ power of making everything larger than life (in this case his experience of having his own children baptized at St Marylebone), one must believe that the church is a warmer and friendlier than it was then.

ROBERT AND ELIZABETH BROWNING

In the year that Dickens was writing Dombey and Son an event took place in St Marylebone Church which will be remembered while English literature exists, the clandestine marriage of the poets Robert and Elizabeth Browning. Miss Barrett of Wimpole Street was already a famous poet, but was an invalid, when she made the acquaintance of Robert, at that time comparatively unknown but eventually recognised as an outstanding genius. It was impossible for Elizabeth to marry with the consent of her eccentrically devoted father. Robert succeeded in persuading her to marry him secretly and go abroad with him. Both were convinced dissenters, but her parish church was the obvious place for the marriage to take place. So on September 12th, 1846, Elizabeth struggled, "more dead than alive", up the church steps to meet Robert at the door. Later she wrote to a friend: "What a wild, dreadful floating vision it looks like, to look back on it now! Three times I tried to write my name and could not form a letter, and someone said, I remember, 'Let her wait a moment! And somebody else thrust in a glass of water.'"

The pale signature in the register (now conserved, with all our older registers in the County Hall) bears out her weakness and agitation. The newlywed poets were not able to leave together for Italy until a week later, which gives point to her later, more relaxed account.

"Always it makes me laugh to think of the official's (the man with the wand in the church) attitude and gesture of astonishment as he stood at the church door and saw bride and bridegroom part on the best of terms and go off in separate flies. Robert was very generous and threw about his gold to clerk, pew-openers, etc., in a way to convict us of being in a condition of incognito – and this particular man had hazarded, between two bursts of gratitude, a philosophic sentiment about 'marriage being a very serious event in one's moral life'; this as we left the church. And there he stood in the doorway, his speech scarcely ended on his lips; mouth wide open in surprise!"

It is quite a Dickensian scene; and perhaps Elizabeth's man with the wand is identical with the beadle who was 'gratified' after Paul Dombey's christening.

Though Elizabeth could laugh afterwards, it was indeed a "very serious event" at the time, and Robert would have been convicted of wicked impudence had she collapsed as a result of elopement. Indirectly he refers again and again in his poem

to those moments of crisis in life when a chance is taken or refused, and his own comment to her shows what this particular decision meant:

“Oh, I know the effort you made, the pain you bore for my sake!.... I exult in the irrevocability of this precious bestowed of yourself on me – come with will, my life has borne flower and fruit – it is a glorious, successful, felicitous life. I thank God and you.”

MARYLEBONE AND THE MEDICAL WORLD

Harley Street is famous throughout the world and its name represents in a collective way a whole grid of streets where for many years outstanding physicians, surgeons and psychiatrists have established their consulting rooms.

One of the earliest incidents of importance in the history of medical Marylebone was the departure in 1854 from a house in Harley Street, where she had set up a hospital, of Florence Nightingale, with her band of pioneer nurses, for the Crimea.

Of recent years, the medical importance of the parish has been underlined by the building in Regent's Park of the magnificent new headquarters of the Royal college of Physicians and the royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologist.

In the wider area of Marylebone the royal College of Nursing, the Florence Nightingale hospital and the Hospital of St Elizabeth and St John. The Gerrett Anderson Hospital had its origin in Marylebone. It was found in 1866 as a pioneer hospital staffed and organised entirely by women for women. Its work is now sadly reduced on account of national policy. These are but a few of the medical organisations that could be listed.

St Marylebone Parish Church has a specially close link with a number of hospitals where the parish clergy act, or have acted, as chaplains:

The national Heart hospital was found in Marylebone in 1857 and pioneered the specialist treatment of heart disease. After a period of time spent in Soho, the Hospital returned to Marylebone to a site in Westmoreland Street where St James's previously stood, one of the many vanished churches of the area (The Parish Church still enjoys a small endowment derived from St James's). The Hospital is now a postgraduate teaching institution and its importance is out of all proportion to its size. The amazing revolution in the treatment of heart disease in the last few years has been the introduction of cardiac surgery, especially the replacement of defective valve.

Incidentally, it was a beloved Churchwarden, Sir Henry Souttar, who claimed to be the first surgeon ever to operate on a human heart – by inserting his finger in it. At the time this was considered to be seriously unethical! Sir Henry financed the restoration of the church tower and the clothing of the angel caryatids with gold leaf, now somewhat the worse for wear.

Another specialist postgraduate hospital is Royal National Orthopaedic Hospital in Great Portland Street, the London branch of the much larger establishment in Stanmore. An interesting indication of the change of meaning in a medical term is the bas-relief on the face of the hospital showing lame children. . Orthopaedic means literally “setting children right”, but the term is now used of every kind of treatment of defective bone. Here again the rapid advance of surgery claims our attention.

The King Edward VII’s Hospital for Officers was founded at the outbreak of the Boer War by the lady who enjoyed the King’s personal friendship, Miss Agnes Keyser. Though not a trained nurse, she was known as Sister Agnes at the King’s own suggestion. This great lady established the hospital in her own house near Hyde Park Corner, and at the age of 88, suffered the grief of seeing it wrecked as the result of bombing in 1941. In 1948 the Hospital moved into Beaumont Street and was formally opened by Queen Mary. Although it is so closely associated with royalty and has had many top people as patients, the Hospital is essentially intended to assist officers of the three services and is entirely dependent on voluntary aid. Just inside the door may be seen Fieldmarshall Montgomery’s union flag, which he presented to the Hospital.

Another private hospital, of world-wide fame, is the London Clinic, which fronts Marylebone Road between Harley Street and Devonshire Place, and is most conveniently placed for those distinguished physicians and surgeons whose consulting rooms are to be found in Marylebone.

EPILOGUE

The history of a parish is inevitably defective in what should ideally be most prominent in it, the on-going spiritual life of the parishioners. We know that every day for eight hundred years the Lord’s Prayer has been repeated by few or many of them. Every Sunday, at least, public worship has been conducted. Countless children and adults have been initiated by Baptism and Confirmation. At regular intervals, sometimes comparatively rarely, the Sacrament of the Eucharist has been celebrated. All this, regularly, for eight hundred years.

There has been on-going tradition of quiet conformity to the Christian faith, a good deal of unchristian conduct, an unknown quantity of saintly lives.

It is impossible now to know how parishioners reacted to what were important events by history book standards: the Reformation, the proscription of the Prayer Book in the days of the Commonwealth, its return at the Restoration of Charles II.

There is an occasional glimpse. In the reign of Edward VI an inventory was made of the vestments, the altar hangings, and the cost for the statue of the Virgin, which were put up for sale to such parishioners as were interested. Did the Parish find this shocking? Or just a sign of the time?

Thomas Swadlin, D.D., minister of the Parish and a staunch royalist, was imprisoned by the Parliamentarians and, with his wife and family, turned out of doors, but reinstated at the Restoration. Since he was distinguished cleric and a pluralist it is, however, doubtful if he had much to do with little Marylebone.

Another consequence of the Civil War was the seizure by Parliament of the royal hunting park of Marylebone and its leasing to farmers (it remained farm land till it reverted to the Crown and become Regent's Park).

Marylebone Gardens were not exactly known for Christian morals, but they served the wicked Citizens of London and Westminster rather than the village.

The greatest change in the Parish came about through its urbanisation, resulting more and more in the disappearance of a genuine local community (though, even now, something of that remains in the High Street), and the appearance of a new proletariat sharply divided from the respectable church-going classes. Allied to this change was an increasingly, cosmopolitan element, the first notable arrivals being French émigrés, Huguenots and, later, victims of the Revolution. In recent times there has been a great influx of Jews and, in very recent times, of Arabs, as the gleaming dome of the near-by mosque testifies.

In the ecclesiastical sense, the Parish has long ceased to be identical with the resident population. Its church, however, still stands as a witness of the faith of Christ and a question mark to the faithful themselves, to ask them how God may be presented to a godless or agnostic world.

