

## “Tales of the Inner City” – presentation for the HRBA

Good afternoon everyone, I'm Ian Simpson and I've been given twenty minutes to talk about a subject I could happily talk about all day: Liverpool's Inner-City churches. Specifically I'm going to take you briefly to five churches in a place you may well have heard about on the news, and sadly not always in a positive context. Welcome, friends, to Toxteth!

Toxteth as we know it today is largely a 19<sup>th</sup> Century creation – more of which anon – but in fact its history goes back much further than that, at least as far as Anglo-Saxon times. It appears in the Domesday Book as STOCHSTEDE, meaning wooded settlement. From 1207, the year in which he granted a charter to a nearby small fishing port<sup>1</sup> called Liuerpul, King John appropriated the Toxteth forest as a Royal hunting park and it continued as such until the late 16<sup>th</sup> Century<sup>2</sup>.

From around 1604 a number of Puritan families moved to the southern edge of Toxteth from Bolton<sup>3</sup>. It was only a matter of time before they needed a permanent building in which to worship and in 1618 they completed the Toxteth Chapel, known today as the Ancient Chapel of Toxteth. This is believed to be the oldest surviving Nonconformist building in Britain, although of course these Puritans wouldn't have used the term “Nonconformist”<sup>4</sup>.

It is one of two Grade I Listed Unitarian buildings in Toxteth and some brilliant people have been associated with it over the years. Perhaps the most remarkable of these was Jeremiah Horrocks, one of the founding fathers of modern astronomy. In 1639, aged just 21, he predicted and then observed the transit of Venus. Tragically he died two years later. It isn't his tale I'm going to tell you, though, but that of Richard Mather.

Richard Mather came to Toxteth at the age of fifteen, having been recruited as Master of the school built to educate the Puritan children. He displayed great talent as a preacher and in 1618 he applied to Bishop Morton of Chester – remember these Puritans were still considered to be within the Anglican family at this time – for ordination and was accepted. Bishop Morton wasn't a Puritan by any means but he had seen the goodness in Mather; “the prayer of a good man availeth much”.

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<sup>1</sup> Population maybe 200, a figure which wasn't to increase substantially for around 200 years.

<sup>2</sup> It is unlikely that any of King John's successors ever visited Toxteth to hunt or for any other reason. Certain aristocratic families had rights to use the forest in the Middle Ages and gradually took on ownership of the land.

<sup>3</sup> South Lancashire had become very polarised since the Reformation. Catholicism remained strong in what was then an area remote from the centres of power and perhaps in reaction to this the Reformed religion was highly Puritanical. We don't know exactly why these families chose to move to Toxteth – it may have been due to conflict with the Catholics but equally it may have been for some other reason.

<sup>4</sup> “Nonconformity” is a post-Restoration concept. The original Puritans were a branch of the Reformed English Church (i.e. they were Anglicans).

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Some years later, the Archbishop of York, Richard Neile<sup>5</sup>, sent a commission to South Lancashire to look into “heretical practices”. Neile didn’t mess around, he had been involved in the last burning of a heretic<sup>6</sup> in England in 1612. What were these alleged heretical practices? Refusing to wear a clerical surplice, refusing to make the sign of the cross in baptism, and administering holy communion to communicants who were sitting. He was found guilty and banned (on pain of imprisonment) from ministry until he guaranteed his compliance.

Mather wasn’t silenced, of course, and for a few years he held secret nocturnal meetings for his followers. Even a rural backwater such as Toxteth wasn’t completely safe, however, and Mather faced further persecution once Archbishop Laud’s spies caught up with him. In 1635 he escaped via Bristol to the New World where he became a very influential figure in the Colony of Massachusetts<sup>7</sup>. He was not – as we shall see – the last Toxteth minister to face persecution for practicing religion in a manner not officially authorised.

Toxteth Chapel was never consecrated, and even after the Act of Uniformity continued as a Nonconformist chapel. Possibly it got away with this because it was on land owned by the Roman Catholic Lord Molyneux!

Both Richard Mather and Jeremiah Horrocks have main roads named after them in Liverpool today.

At the other end of Toxteth, the bit closest to Liverpool, very little development took place before the 1770s. As Liverpool expanded however the Earl of Sefton obtained permission to lay out a new settlement on 52 acres of farmland. This was originally called “New Liverpool”, and subsequently “Harrington” although that name disappeared by the mid-19<sup>th</sup> Century.

The first public building erected here was St. James’ Church, built at a cost of £3,000 and opened on June 4<sup>th</sup>, 1775. This was designed by Cuthbert Bisbrowne, a builder rather than an architect. As Pevsner – surely the master of the architectural put-down – put it<sup>8</sup>, “the design is certainly elementary enough for a builder”! It seems that he was no financial whizz either as he was bankrupted in 1776 and much of the proposed development never happened.

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<sup>5</sup> Bishop of six English Dioceses in succession, York being the last one before his death in 1640. This is a record that has yet to be equalled!

<sup>6</sup> Edward Wrightman, who was convicted and burned for following the doctrine of Arianism. You’ll have to look this up – I’m a historian, not a theologian!

<sup>7</sup> As did his son, Increase Mather, and eventually his grandson Dr. Cotton Mather.

<sup>8</sup> Pevsner, Sir N. (1969) *The Buildings of England – South Lancashire*. Penguin Books. P.244.

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St. James’ was one of the first Liverpool churches to feature a structural use of cast iron – the actual first (in the country) was St. Anne’s, St. Anne Street, in 1770 but that was demolished in the 1860s. There was no Heritage Officer to save it back then!

A question visitors to Liverpool often ask is, why is the last junction on the M62 as one approaches the city from the east Junction 4? Why isn’t it Junction 1? The answer is simply that the M62 was never finished. It was intended to continue right into Liverpool to join up to the Strand and Junction 1 would have been a couple of hundred metres from St. James’ Church. Now in the 1960s much of inner-city Liverpool (and in particular the city centre end of Toxteth) had been the, erm, beneficiaries of the Council’s “slum clearance” programme<sup>9</sup> and the population of these parishes reduced sharply meaning several churches became unviable. Interestingly, writing in 1969, Pevsner notes the “poorly maintained” condition of St. James’ – presumably its maintenance budget had dwindled away with its congregation.

In 1970 vast stretches of land – and the buildings on them – were purchased to make way for the motorway and this effectively completed the depopulation of St. James’ parish. The church became Redundant in 1974. Unlike nearby St. Saviour’s Church, which was demolished, St. James’ was vested into the care of the Churches Conservation Trust. Its Grade II\* listing made it too important to lose.

Due to its condition and its rather lonely position, this can’t have been one of the CCT’s easier churches, but the Trust did make a start on the restoration work necessary to restore St. James’ to its former glory.

In 2009 the Diocese of Liverpool began negotiating with the CCT to reopen St. James’ once more as a place of worship, making it the first church to be taken out of the Trust’s hands in this way. Services recommenced in 2011, the congregation making use of a marquee inside the building which still needs a lot of work to bring it off the Heritage At Risk Register and up to modern standards for usability. Its “parish” is its churchyard and the congregation is drawn from all over the city, HTB-style.

A short distance from St. James’, up Park Road which roughly runs along the southern boundary of the old Royal hunting park, is the Roman Catholic Church of St. Patrick. This was built between 1821 and 1827 to the design of John Slater.

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<sup>9</sup> The wisdom or otherwise of the “slum clearance” programme is still fiercely debated today. Entire and well-established communities were flattened and the inhabitants moved out, often against their will, to new developments in places like Kirkby, Skelmersdale and Winsford. Many of these new homes were in tower blocks or estates which became notorious in the 1980s for crime and poor conditions, in many cases far worse than the “slums” they replaced.

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From whichever way you look at it, St. Patrick’s looks more like a Methodist Chapel than a Catholic Church and it is said that this design was chosen specifically to avoid upsetting the area’s Protestants. In fact the last of the legal restrictions on Catholics in Britain weren’t lifted until 1829 and so certain elements of the design would have been prescribed by law, for instance Catholic churches were forbidden to have steeples or bells.

Architectural commentator James Allanson Picton<sup>10</sup> (1873) found the design of St. Patrick’s, particularly the Greek Doric porticos, “absurd” although he liked the statue of St. Patrick. Today the church is regarded as one of Liverpool’s most historically significant buildings.

The statue of St. Patrick tells a tale. It is somewhat older than the church, having originally been made for the St. Patrick’s Insurance Company offices in Dublin. This company seems to have been a byword for ineptitude and corruption and it imploded in a cloud of litigation *circa* 1825. Liverpool sugar refiner Sir James Branker took the opportunity to rescue the statue and presented it to the church where it remains to this day.

Beneath St. Patrick is a Celtic cross which tells the story of the Ten Martyr Priests who gave their lives in Christ’s service, tending to the sick during the terrible typhoid fever outbreak of 1847. This story really starts in 1845 when a disease called potato blight<sup>11</sup> wiped out the Irish potato crop. This deprived the Irish people of their dietary staple and many starved to death. Many others made the relatively short trip (190km) across the Irish Sea to England<sup>12</sup>. Liverpool, being the principal port of entry, was where many of these hungry refugees stayed. Unfortunately, housing conditions in the city were generally bad and overcrowding rife even before the influx, and the poor Irish ended up being crammed into dark, damp and unventilated cellars and other such places where nobody else would live.

These were exactly the right conditions for the typhus organism to spread rapidly. It was not known at the time that it was spread by body lice, which flourished in unsanitary and crowded conditions and in 1847 a major outbreak of typhoid fever took hold in Liverpool. It killed over 8,000 people – these were predominantly from the poorest sections of society who lived in the worst conditions. The Irish Catholics took the worst hit, and their Priests who worked round the clock to visit and care for them frequently became infected.

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<sup>10</sup> Picton, J.A. (1873) *Memorials of Liverpool, Historical and Topographical, including a History of the Dock Estate*. James Allanson Picton (1805-1889) was an architect and historian who founded Liverpool’s Library service; the Picton Library, one of the country’s largest, is named in his honour as is Picton Road in the city’s suburbs.

<sup>11</sup> Commonly believed to be a fungal infection; in fact the organism responsible is *Phytophthora infestans* which is a non-photosynthetic algae.

<sup>12</sup> It is estimated that the population of the island of Ireland dropped by 25% - two million people – as a result of the Great Hunger (*an Gorta Mór* in Gaelic).

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Ten Catholic Priests died of typhoid fever along with one Unitarian minister, Rev. John Johns<sup>13</sup>. The memorial at St. Patrick’s was dedicated in 1898. The sermon was preached by Monsignor James Nugent (1822-1905), a Liverpool Priest who was a pioneer in working for children’s welfare and social justice. Monsignor Nugent deserves a talk all of his own (perhaps if I get invited back next year!) but for now we have to move about half a mile inland and up a bit of a hill to Princes Road.

In the late 1860s, Princes Road was being laid out as a new residential area for the wealthy middle class which was emerging as Liverpool’s trade links with the rest of the world grew. Several places of worship were built between 1868 and 1874 to serve this new community, including the Welsh Presbyterian Church with its 61m spire (sadly this is now a ruin) and the wonderful Grade I Listed Synagogue. Despite being very different buildings these were designed by the same Architects: the Audsley Brothers, William and George.

Also on Princes Road is the Anglican church of St. Margaret of Antioch. This was founded by the philanthropist Robert Horsfall who had already founded two churches in Liverpool<sup>14</sup>. The Horsfall family had a reputation for commissioning nationally-known architects to design their churches (of which there were ultimately to be nine<sup>15</sup>) and in this case the services of George Edmund Street were procured.

St. Margaret’s is an attractive enough church from the outside, a fairly simple brick building. Inside, however, it is quite stunning and many times I have heard first-time visitors gasp on walking in. Practically every surface of the walls and ceilings is decorated with exquisite stencilled designs. Particularly noteworthy are the scene from the Wedding at Cana which stretches across the West wall, the Stations of the Cross and - my personal favourites - the Heavenly Host at the junction of the nave and the chancel. These are reminiscent of 14<sup>th</sup> Century work. Each angel is in gold against a deep blue background, as though the viewer is looking straight up in to Heaven to see them, each with their own musical instrument, leading the heavenly host in the worship of Almighty God.

Now you will remember how Richard Mather was embroiled in controversy for forms of worship which didn’t meet official approval in the 1630s. Fast forward two and a half centuries and this sort of thing is still going on, thanks to a piece of legislation called the Public Worship Regulation Act 1874. This was enacted specifically to target the “Ritualist practices” of the Anglo-Catholics at a time when sectarian divisions were rife.

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<sup>13</sup> To whom there is a memorial in Ullet Road Unitarian Church, Toxteth Park.

<sup>14</sup> Christ Church, Great Homer Street and St. James-The-Less, Kirkdale. Both destroyed in World War II.

<sup>15</sup> Simpson, I. (2017) *The Horsfall Churches - Conserving the Legacy of Liverpool's Great Church Building Family*. Future for Religious Heritage, May 2017.

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St. Margaret's had been an Anglo-Catholic church from day one, but the neighbouring parish of St. Bride's<sup>16</sup> was an Evangelical stronghold and among the worshippers here was Dr Hakes, a leading light in the Church Association which existed to thwart what they saw as “Rome's desire to take back control of the church in England”.

When Robert Horsfall died in 1881, his son Douglas set about building a church nearby as a memorial to him and invested £28,000<sup>17</sup> commissioning a masterpiece from John Loughborough Pearson: the church of St. Agnes<sup>18</sup>, Toxteth Park, a scaled-down version of Truro Cathedral (at least on the inside) and today the church which I am delighted to attend on most Sundays. This too was to be an Anglo-Catholic church, and Dr Hakes petitioned J. C. Ryle, first Bishop of the newly-formed Diocese of Liverpool, not to consecrate it unless an undertaking not to perform Ritualist acts could first be obtained. It couldn't, but Bishop Ryle went ahead and consecrated the new church in 1885.

This infuriated Hakes, who immediately began legal proceedings against the Vicar of St. Margaret's, Fr James Bell Cox, under the Public Worship Regulation Act. The alleged “crimes” included using incense, wearing vestments, celebrating Mass facing East, and mixing water and wine in the chalice. Father Bell Cox refused to attend Court and was suspended from ministry for six months in his absence.

Upon Fr. Bell Cox's return from suspension, it was “business as usual” for St. Margaret's, incense and all. Once again the Church Association protested and once again the Priest was summonsed to Court. On May 4<sup>th</sup>, 1887, Fr Bell Cox was imprisoned at Walton – not for his Ritualist practices but for contempt of court. He served seventeen days before getting out on a technicality.

Fr Bell Cox was the last of five Anglo-Catholic Priests to be imprisoned as a result of the PWR Act – the outcry following his sentencing took care of that – but the Act itself was not finally repealed until 1965.

No discussion of Liverpool churches could be complete without doing that which Basil Fawley would advise us against: mentioning the War. Across the city several churches were lost, including the other two commissioned by Robert Horsfall. St. Margaret's was not hit directly, but suffered blast damage to the East end. The East and Lady Chapel windows were lost.

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<sup>16</sup> Just outside Toxteth (i.e. on the other side of Parliament Street) in Canning.

<sup>17</sup> At this time, you could build a decent parish church for £6,000.

<sup>18</sup> Since its centenary in 1985 St. Agnes & St. Pancras church. St. Pancras' Church was a chapel-of-ease to St. Agnes, closed in 1937.

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A practice in maritime Liverpool during the War was for each church to adopt a ship and pray for its crew; St. Margaret's adopted HMS Lively, an L-class Anti-Aircraft Destroyer. HMS Lively was laid down in December 1938 at the Cammell Laird shipyard in Birkenhead and commissioned in July 1941. She was 110m long and displaced about 1,900 tonnes.

For the first month of her career she was based at Greenock but in September 1941 she was reallocated to Gibraltar and then to Malta as part of Force K, tasked with interrupting the Italian supply lines to North Africa. She won five Battle Honours in total before being sunk, 160km north of Tobruk, on 11<sup>th</sup> May 1941. 77 souls were lost of her complement of 221, the survivors being rescued by HMS Jervis.

When the Lady Chapel window was reglazed in the 1950s by Nicholson & Co., the opportunity was taken to incorporate HMS Lively into the design as a permanent memorial.

The last of the five churches we're visiting today might look as though it is of limited architectural merit, and that would be a pretty fair assessment. It's Princes Park Methodist Church, which was built in 1964 (yes, I've just spotted that the slide says 1967) to replace an 1885 building which had become too small following a merger with another nearby church.

Princes Park Methodist Church is, however, home to a rather controversial sculpture by a local sculptor who could himself be described with the same adjective. This work is “The Resurrection of Christ” by Arthur Dooley (1929 – 1994).

The notables gathered in the bottom left picture were there to unveil Dooley's sculpture following its renovation – carried out by Dooley's one-time apprentice, Stephen Broadbent – during the summer of 2015.

And this is it – “The Resurrection of Christ”, a joyful, almost ecstatic depiction of Christ's triumph over the grave which witnesses to the central event of the Christian faith, 24h per day, 365 days a year, right in the middle of what is now a Muslim majority community.

In 1969 when it was first unveiled, this statue caused outrage. The local community was not ready for a work which depicted Christ as anything other than a white man – this despite the obvious fact that, as a Palestinian Jew, He certainly wouldn't have been white! The statue was given the disparaging nickname “The Black Christ” - a name it wears as a badge of honour today, times having changed for the better since 1969. If you look at it in the sunshine, it is actually subtly multi-coloured rather than plain black. He is the Christ for all races, for all of humanity.

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Arthur Dooley’s work features in a number of churches across NW England<sup>19</sup>. He was by all accounts a colourful character. As a young man he served in the Irish Guards, converting to Catholicism under the influence of the padre, before he went AWOL to join the Palestine Liberation Organisation - this was before the PLO was proscribed as a terrorist organisation but it still landed him a spell in prison when he got home. After this he went to work at Cammell Laird’s shipyard which is where he became interested in sculpture, experimenting with bits of scrap metal to develop his technique.

Although he developed something of a tearaway reputation, Arthur Dooley was a man of honour and principle. I am told he was an exceedingly generous man who frequently undercharged churches for work knowing that they had better things to spend the money on.

So, there we are. A selection of five out of over twenty fascinating places of worship in Toxteth. This map, which you can look at at your leisure as it will be available online afterwards, shows you where they are and how close together they are. The whole area is just 3.3 square kilometres.

This photo montage shows sixteen of the places of worship, arranged in chronological order. 1618 is at the top left, right through to 1976 in the bottom right corner. 358 years of church design in one small district! [Point out a few if time allows].

I hope you’ve enjoyed the stories, but to conclude I’d like to reflect upon the importance of telling the stories behind our religious heritage.

Unlike museums, castles, most stately homes and the like, the vast majority of our places of worship are LIVING buildings. Perhaps you wouldn’t think so, given the number of them that are closed throughout the week, but that is a different talk. They are living links to real people, real cultures and real communities. Their attitudes, beliefs and practices are tied up in the buildings they left for us and our task, our calling, our duty is to keep that link, that continuity, for the benefit of future generations.

Thinking about these stories from the past helps us to put into perspective issues that face us today. How does our attitude to refugees and asylum seekers today compare to the way those fleeing the Great Hunger were assimilated into Liverpool and other northern towns and cities from the 1840s? What can we learn about values of tolerance and peaceful coexistence from times when clerics could be prosecuted for their style of worship?

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<sup>19</sup> Examples: Liverpool Metropolitan Cathedral; St. Faith (CE), Crosby; St. Mary (RC), Leyland; Our Lady & St. Nicholas (CE), Liverpool; Liverpool Nordic Church. Dooley executed many non-religious works as well including a tribute to The Beatles in Liverpool and *La Pasionara* in Glasgow.

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As people of a Judaeo-Christian heritage, story-telling should really be part of our DNA. Right from the early days of the Old Testament when telling the story of the Passover was something God actually commanded the People of Israel to do each year, through the Gospels, the Acts of the Apostles and on through the lives of the Saints... We are surrounded by wonderful stories which inspire us, teach us, sometimes warn us, but always give us something to inform and, if we let them, improve our human condition.

Telling the stories in an accessible and interesting way is how we bring our buildings to life for new generations. There are no excuses for doing this badly (or not doing it at all) in this day and age as there are so many technologies available to help us. We need to inspire younger generations to care for and love our religious heritage, so that they in turn can pass it on.

Stories are a key part of the heritage. They're intangible – you can't pick them up, touch them or look at them in the same way you can an artefact – but they are at least as important from a heritage perspective. When I'm advising churches on applying for HLF grants or writing Statements of Significance I always try to get this across to them. A lot of them don't always “get it” at first, but when they do their enthusiasm for the task at hand is fired up and the quality of their writing improves dramatically.

Could telling their stories be the key to the future for our religious heritage? Why not? The better known and understood they are, for all the reasons I've talked about, the more likely they are to be loved. The more they are loved, the more likely people will be to take action and do something for them: visit them, volunteer time, donate money, help with grant applications, lobby politicians for funding, whatever it takes.

As a final thought, just take a moment to reflect on some of the people we've met today: Richard Mather, Jeremiah Horrocks, Cuthbert Bisbrowne, the Ten Martyr Priests, Father Bell Cox, the sailors of HMS Lively, Arthur Dooley. **Wouldn't it be tragic if these great people were simply forgotten?**