

WORLD WAR ONE AND ALL SAINTS

The centenary of the beginning of World War One prompts a look in the town archives to see at how the conflict affected All Saints.

What it shows is a real contrast between triumph and tragedy; and All Saints' two major WWI artefacts - the memorial tablet on the north wall and the book of remembrance in the cabinet underneath - demonstrate this clearly.

The memorial tablet names 46 Pocklington men who were killed in the war, but the book below it lists 300 from the town who fought in the conflict. The memorial was unveiled in 1921 by Lord Nunburholme of Warter Priory, who in 1914 raised four battalions of the East Yorkshire Regiment at his own expense. The tablet also exemplifies the disorganisation of that immediate post war period - when it was first erected it showed just 39 names; on closer inspection you can see that seven extra names have been squeezed in at the bottom to take it up to the current 46 Even that is some way short of the 53 names on the town's main war memorial outside the Post Office.

There would have been much thanksgiving for those 250 or so who returned safely, albeit that many of them had sustained lifelong injuries and illnesses, and the ratio of 53 tragically killed to 250 'returnees' is significantly better than many other places.

But amongst the town's war dead were several key members of the All Saints congregation that must have created a massive hole in the day to day functioning of the church.

The Robson family, probably All Saints Church's leading worshipers, was devastated by the conflict. Thomas Robson, a local solicitor (his firm became Powell & Young) was also clerk to Pocklington Rural District Council, clerk to the town's magistrates, clerk to Pocklington School's governors, agent for Arthur Duncombe, the local MP, and Steward of the Manor of Pocklington. He was the vicar's warden for 12 years, and was the driving force behind All Saints restoration in the first decade of the 20th century, also remaining treasurer of the Church Restoration Fund until the debts were paid off. A newspaper report stated: "In the work of restoring the Church he took the foremost part. It was largely through his enthusiasm that the 1902 and 1908 restorations were carried out in such a splendid style."

Thomas's four eldest sons were all sidesmen at All Saints, his youngest was an organist, and his wife, Eva, was also a leading light in the life of the church, involved in social and fund raising events and 'good works'.

However, the family's pre-war industrious life of commercial prosperity and public service was shattered 1914-18. Eva passed away in 1915, then three of the Robson boys, Richard, Frederick and Edward, died within three weeks of each other in early 1918, the latter two killed at the Somme.

The youngest Robson, Stanley, was also serving in France in 1918, but was immediately withdrawn from the front line after his brothers' deaths. After the conflict the early promise shown on the organ at All Saints became a full-time career in church music. He was organist, choirmaster and music teacher at Grimsby Minster for 25 years (where one of his music students was [Bishop] Eric Kemp). He and his wife, Ethel, who had lost her brother, Thomas Jennings, in the war, retired to Pocklington in later life.

However, his father, Thomas Robson, never recovered from his tragic losses, resigned all his Pocklington positions in 1919 and went to live with his other surviving son near Doncaster, dying a few years later.

Much has quite rightly been made of the spontaneous show of Christian spirit on Christmas Day 1914, when carols were sung, gifts exchanged and football played in No Mans Land.

But this has to be tempered against Christmas Day 1915 when Captain George Scott was shot and killed. He was another All Saints sidesman who lived with his wife and two young children in the Market Place at Barclays Bank, where he was the branch manager.

The clergy also suffered. The vicar of Pocklington, Rev Arthur Fisher, who had previously been a missionary in the Punjab, conducted many funerals and memorial services in All Saints during the conflict. He also had to bury his own son, Thomas, who died in 1917 after serving in the Balkans.

Rev Fisher, vicar of Pocklington 1908-1921, had ten children. One son became Canon John Fisher, Rector of Harlow, another Sir Godfrey Fisher, Consul-General for California, another, Arthur R, served as a surgeon in the Royal Navy in World War One.

A Pocklington born and bred man, Rev Fred Seaton Smith, married Martha Boyden, also from Pocklington in 1911, and had become an Anglican curate in Bradford in 1913. He was an Army chaplain when he died four days after the armistice was signed in a French field hospital. He had contracted 'Spanish Flu' in the last days of the war, a pandemic that is claimed killed up to 100 million people worldwide 1918-20.

But again, alongside these tales of tragedy came comfort and renewal. A former Pocklington curate, Rev Joseph William Wright Moeran wrote a popular book called 'Illustrations from the Great War', which brought comfort to many. First published in 1915, it was reprinted in 1917 and linked passages and quotation from the scriptures and the classics to events of the war. Better known is Rev Moeran's son, EJ Moeran, who suffered severe head injuries as a despatch rider in World War One but later became a noted composer.

All Saints might have lost four esteemed sidesmen, but three more, Lionel Silburn, H E Currell and Creswell Butters, survived war service.

Several Pocklingtonians served as chaplains in the army and navy during the conflict, and several from town and school turned to the church after the war and became clergymen. Among them was Rev. Angus Finch who was born in Pocklington in 1898, was under age when he joined the Kings Royal Rifle Corps as a private, and served on the Western front for three years, before being captured south of Ypres by the Germans and held as a prisoner of war for the rest of the conflict.

After the war, he trained in the ministry at Mirfield was ordained at York Minster in 1922, serving as an Anglican minister for over 50 years, including three separate spells as rector of Hastingleigh, Kent.

All Saints had a wide influence during the war years. There was an army camp at Ousethorpe at the end of the Mile, and throughout the war it had a battalion in residence, either training to go to war or recuperating from time at the front. This meant thousands of men from all over the country attended services at All Saints before or after war duties. The church also welcomed a contingent of Belgium refugees who were billeted in the town and local villages, and All Saints played a major part for the massive fundraising efforts in the town throughout the conflict. The church was also the focal point for many post war celebrations and services of thanksgiving as the town tried to get back to some degree of functioning in the early 1920s.

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