

11 Change and Challenge

The Changing Pattern of Church Life

The Church of England began a period of fundamental change in the late 1960s and this continues. Matters, both social and theological, which had previously never been mentioned were openly discussed and changes were made to almost every aspect of church life. The major break came when synodical government was adopted in the 1960s and a strong lay influence flooded the thinking and practices of the church. New translations of the Bible, some good, some bad, flooded onto the market and there was a period of experimentation with the liturgy which culminated in the adoption of the Alternative Service Book of 1980. Relations with other churches improved dramatically to the extent that Pope John Paul II was able to join the Archbishop of Canterbury in worship in Canterbury Cathedral, an event which would have been unthinkable only ten years earlier.

Waves of immigration brought new religions to England and an eroding of the dominance of the Church of England within the Christian Community. Immigrants brought their beliefs and practices with them and, for example, joined the Roman Catholic Church or formed new charismatic sects.

Purley saw a period of rapid growth with the population rising from 1000 in 1951 to 4000 in 1981. The proportion attending church fell substantially, but there was still enough of a rise in attendances to make the 1870 church inadequate for the purpose and to justify a major expansion. Services became much more informal, which did not go down too well with many of the older members of the congregation, but new families brought new ideas and the church flourished, taking on a decided evangelical flavour.

It is however much too soon to judge the long term effect of these trends and this had better be left to the judgement of history.

David Evans 1975-1990

David Evans was brought up a Baptist in the Welsh town of Morriston on the outskirts of Swansea. He admitted one time that he had had a job with Liptons which was before he joined the army and saw service in Malaya during the emergency there. It was in Malaya that he found his vocation and he left the army in 1965 to study for the priesthood at St Michael's College, Llandovery. He was ordained in 1967 and was curate of St Peter's Cockett until 1970 when he left for a spell as curate at St Austell from 1970 to 1975. He earned a BA degree from the Open University. He was inducted to the living of Purley on 27th February 1975.

David was responsible for many changes in church life in Purley, some were bitterly opposed at first but such was his approach that almost all were not only accepted but welcomed. One of his first changes was to stop taking collections during the service and to ask people to put the money in the plate as they came into church. This was followed in 1977 by a stewardship campaign which had a dramatic effect on the church income.

Mrs Lehive left a bequest to the church which was used to purchase a second hand piano. 1976 also saw many other bequests including three stoles, new carpets, books and a new chalice. Later a Home Communion set was added to the church plate. There were shock waves around the parish when he announced that the pews were to be removed and replaced by free standing chairs. The old pews were sold and sturdy good looking wooden chairs with rich red padding were obtained. The new comfort that they gave soon overcame any misgivings and longings for the old benches. The Lych Gate was restored in 1982 with the old wooden gates replaced by new wrought iron gates at a cost of £290.



David Evans with his new chairs in the church reoriented for a Christmas service. The cross made from timbers of the former north aisle can be seen to the left of the south door. [M00454]

His next idea was to dismantle the church and abandon the present site to rebuild it at the new roundabout where Knowsley Road joined the proposed Purley bypass. His argument was that the existing site was too secluded and few people were aware that Purley even had a church. He started talking to Messrs Wimpey who were developing the new area but after speaking with a few of his parishioners he realised that the project would never get off the ground and it was quietly dropped. However he did get a road sign at the top of New Hill directing people to the church.

Hugh Duncan, the owner of Purley Park had given the church a small parcel of land off Hazel Road to be used for a church hall but David felt that this site was too disconnected to the church and instead began negotiations with the developer of Purley Gardens (Church Mews and Waterside Drive) to purchase a plot adjacent to the church. This really did seem a goer and plans were well formed when the developer suddenly doubled the asking price and put it out of reach. Finally he turned to Richard Perkins, a Reading architect and asked for ideas on extending the church. Richard came back with plans that were both affordable and which generated considerable excitement. After a further foray into looking at the possibility of turning the church around through 90° and extending southward over the graveyard, turning the chancel into a lady chapel, Richard's ideas were accepted. This is dealt with more fully in the next chapter.

He introduced the Pastorate, a move to get more people involved with the ministry of the church. He had two Lay Readers, Dick Martin and Norman Horsley and recruited several other people to take more responsibility. One of the consequences was the formation of three youth groups, the Explorers, the Ichthyians and the Pathfinders. The Mothers Union withered away after its President, Phyllis Fothergill, died. David was appointed Rural Dean for the Bradfield Deanery at a time when there was a great shortage of clergy. Parishes were being combined and several were without an incumbent for several years. The living of Pangbourne was combined with that of Sulham and Tidmarsh in 1987.

As a true Welshman David loved music and introduced Purley to a completely new range of hymns and songs. He bought new hymn books including '100 Hymns for Today' and was not above making the congregation participate in a choir practice. His version of the hymn 'Oh for a thousand tongues to sing' will remain in people's memory for its fervour. Several times he

brought choirs from his home town of Swansea to sing for us and he provided new monk-style scarlet robes for the church choir.

He introduced a new family service entitled First Worship which attracted a completely new congregation who eventually changed the whole approach of the church from traditional Anglican to give it a decided Evangelical flavour. The 8am Holy Communion was dropped but new mid week services were introduced as well as re-enactments of Jewish Passover suppers on Maundy Thursdays. For most of his Christmas Eve services it was standing room only.

He arranged fetes at Purley Hall and Scrases Farm and several Barbecues at Hardwick House reached by Thames pleasure boat. For the elderly he introduced Lunch Pot to provide a midweek opportunity for socialising. Ray Herring who had been a noted commercial artist provided several line drawings, many of which are still in use, but his great work was a painting of parishioners in a variety of historical dress crowded round the font. This still hangs in the extension.

On Sunday 3rd November 1989 David announced that he had accepted the living of St Mary's Bryanston Square, London. The children, Geraint and Nicholas, were now grown up and had left home. David and Diane were ready to face a new challenge. He moved on from there to a parish near Horsham and is now retired. Perhaps the main thing that can be said is that David Evan's rectorship saw more profound change than that of any of his predecessors. Many of the changes he wrought himself, many resulted as a response to external pressures and challenges.

A tribute to his style of leadership can be seen in the way the parish coped during the inter-regnum. All the services continued to be held, the church fabric was cared for, church organisations continue to flourish. As one visiting priest observed - 'You don't really need a rector, you are far too well organised!'

Finale

The role of the church has dramatically changed. Its place in society and in the local community has changed. It is much too soon to begin to tell the story of the incumbencies of Roger Howell who was inducted to Purley in 1992, and David Archer who came in 2009 so we will end the history here. However we will add a few chapters and appendices which, by and large, will be brought up to 2010.

To celebrate the Millennium in the year 2000 there was a special series of sermons preached by various former rectors, among them David Evans. The bells were refurbished and rehung and were ready to ring in the millennium. Several parishioners participated in producing a cross-stitch hanging depicting the church and the many organisations in the Parish.

