



FROM THE PARISH ARCHIVES
Number 20 March 2012

**The Planning, Building and Governance of a New Church: Saint
Margaret's 1860 - 1861**

Welcome to the twentieth edition of "From the Parish Archives". We hope that you will enjoy reading about the history of the Parish. This is especially so with us in our 150th year.

The "From the Parish Archives" aims to be factual. However, any opinions expressed are personal and may not be necessarily shared by other parishioners.

Geoffrey A Sandy, Parish Archivist and Parish Historian.

Introduction

The building of a new church or a parsonage may be viewed as a project. Like all projects success depends on being very clear on what the end results are to be and whether these can be achieved within the constraints of time and scarce resources. If a project is to be completed on time and within budget then proper governance and organisational processes must be put in place. These principles were as relevant in 1860 and 1861, for the planning, construction and fitting-out of the Church of England in Little Eltham, as they are today for any building project. This issue is devoted to a discussion of these important issues in relation to the new church of Saint Margaret's. In turn these are:

- clarity of the end result
- completion on time
- completion within budget
- proper governance and organisational processes.

Clarity of the End Result

At a public meeting of 25 May 1860, three resolutions were passed. The first asserted that by building a Church of England it would tend to the morality and well-being of the district and the spiritual welfare of its inhabitants. The second concerned the opening of a subscription list. The third recommended a number of men to form a church committee to carry out the object and wishes of the meeting.

The church committee worked with the appointed Architect Nathaniel Billing on the specifications of the church. The sketches and drawings of the Architect reveal a church that was bigger than what was actually built. If there was clarity originally it

was compromised by the reality that the committee lacked sufficient funds for such a building. However, the north wall of the church that was built was “temporary” and it was always intended that the church be enlarged at that end.

The other compromise that was “forced” on the committee related to the coloured brickwork and size of buttresses. Originally the brickwork of the church was to “more patterned” than was built. However, the Diocesan Architect, with support of Bishop Perry, did not like the many colours and requested it be toned down. The original size of the buttresses was also considered to be too large and this was altered on the Architects sketches and drawings.

The church that was built was in accordance with the amended specifications, namely a smaller size, less polychrome brickwork and smaller buttresses. Below is the original church as envisaged by the Billing and the committee.



Original Church as envisaged by Nathaniel Billing

Completion of Time

We do not know precisely the planned completion time for the church so it is difficult to assess whether this goal was met. During 1860 there is an expectation that the church be completed by the end of 1861. It took approximately 19 months from the vision (May Public Meeting) to church opening on the 12 December 1861. We may judge that the project was completed on time. This is a good outcome given the size and complexity of this project.

Completed on Budget

Again, we only have an approximate idea of the budget for the new church, if any. We do know that an earlier estimate was £500 but this was later increased to £900. We also know that Nathaniel Billing estimated that the original “larger” church would cost £1200. The actual cost of the church was approximately £1100. The committee did pay all contractors in full even if at times they had to wait some time before

sufficient monies were available.

Proper Governance

The first church committee meeting was at the Fountain Inn Hotel on the 1 June 1860. This hotel was located on the west side of Main Road and Pitt Street, opposite the present Eltham Hotel. It adopted 12 Standing orders to govern the conduct of its meetings. One example is that all works were to be let by public tender; another is that all payments be paid by cheque and countersigned by the chairman and the secretary.

Because of the adoption of these standing orders from the outset, it enables us to evaluate the performance of the Church committee during 1860 and 1861 against these principles. Space does not permit a comprehensive assessment here but we may cite a few examples.

The exercise of a casting vote by the chairman in the event of a division was never used. In fact the norm was unanimity by the committee. All major works associated with the building of the church were let by public tender. All monies collected for the building were paid, as per the standing order, to the Treasurer within 14 days.

In summary, we may judge that the church committee did adhere faithfully to its standing orders during 1860 and 1861. It was an efficient and effective committee despite some evidence of tension and conflict between its members.

Organisation

During 1860, a number of organisational units of the adherents of the Church of England were established in Eltham. The largest group were the subscribers to the Church Building Fund. When a meeting of subscribers took place it was akin to the modern general meeting of parishioners, except no women were permitted. From amongst the subscribers was elected the church committee. In modern parlance this was the vestry. The subscribers also elected the church and denominational school trustees.

The church committee could establish sub-committees and it did. The two most important were the building and the residence. The former were specifically concerned with the building of the new church and the maintenance of the temporary church. The latter was concerned with finding a suitable residence for the Lay Reader and liaising with the landlord on his behalf.

Conclusion

If we treat the planning, building and fit-out of Saint Margaret's church during 1860 and 1861 as a project, then we may conclude it was overall a successful one. It had a timely completion. There was little option but to accept the compromise insisted by the Diocese. However, the other compromise that resulted in a smaller church than originally envisaged, was forced by a shortage of funds. Whilst, early expectations of the cost were too low, a common fault with projects, it was soon amended to a more realistic amount. That "budget" was met although at times with some difficulty. The governance processes established were sound and faithfully adhered to. The organisational units were appropriate for this early period in the history of our church.