

FROM THE PARISH ARCHIVES

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The Sad Tale of Our First Vicar

Welcome to the third edition of "From the Parish Archives". We hope that you will enjoy reading about the history of the Parish. This is especially so with the 150th anniversary in 2011. This version was slightly revised in September 2011.

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

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The Appointment

St Margaret's church was opened on the 12 December 1861. The lay people of the area had carried out the building project with effectiveness and efficiency and no doubt looked forward to the appointment of their first Vicar. The leadership group of the church were the Trustees and the Church Committee of the Parochial District of Eltham, Greensborough and St Helena. Chief among them was Henry Dendy who had moved from Brighton to Eltham and had donated the land on which the church was built. The other prominent men (there were of course no women) were Henry Stooke, John Lindsay Beale, Alfred Armstrong and Thomas Batt. They with Dendy were the Trustees. The Church Committee consisted of C S Wingrove, John Pearson, David Pearson, John Gardner, Charles Hamilton, Isaac Hill and W B Andrews (Secretary).

A letter, dated 20 March 1864, from the Diocesan Registrar to the Honorary Secretary advised that the Reverend Robert Mackie is appointed Vicar and will begin from the 1 June 1864. Prior to Mackie's appointment the Church was served by Lay Readers and for nearly three years 1862 to 1864 Mr Dixon Bertram served in that capacity. He resided in a rented property owned by George Stebbing. George was a local pioneer builder who built some of the buildings we can still see today in Eltham. He built the cottage at 88 Pitt Street and lived there during the 1850's. He was also responsible for the design of Shillinglaw Cottage which was built in about 1859. His most impressive building is our church.

The archives reveal that the appointment of Robert Mackie as first Vicar of our Parish was an unhappy event for both priest and people. The relationship between them and also the priest with the wider community deteriorated quickly. Not only was it sad but it was at times unedifying. Looking back we can say with some understatement that it was not a great start for the new church.

The Vicars Letters March and July 1865

On the 20 March 1865 Robert Mackie wrote to Henry Dendy and we get a sense of how far relationships between the church leadership and the priest have deteriorated in nine months. This is evidenced by the words of Mackie himself. He says *"I cannot attend the meeting which you intend to have on the 22nd because of the spirit which you and a few others have manifested towards the Church and me"*. He goes on to say *"I am quite astonished at men professing Godliness, to be so disposed, in endeavouring to injure the Church of their father, and to bring a slander upon its minister"*. Towards the end he writes *"I humbly pray that we shall meet above in heaven, where all differences and contentions will be laid aside"*.

Another grievance of Mackie that is spoken about in his letter is that he is adamant that *"it is quite improper to hold meetings in the Church for secular purposes. It is a place for prayer and praise and the reading of God's Word"*. It is obvious from the letter that this was not the first time he had raised the matter. Apparently this fell on deaf ears.

Another grievance of the priest is evident from another letter dated 1 July 1865, also to Dendy. It asks that Henry Dendy *"speak to Mr and Mrs Stebbing. They have given Mrs Mackie and me continual annoyance for some time"*. The tone of the letter is threatening because Robert Mackie says that if Dendy (and the Church Trustees) do not stop the Stebbings' he will *"give the case into the hands of some men of business to see what can be done with the Trustees of the Church at Eltham"*.

Henry Dendy's forthright response to Mackie followed on the 5 July. We learn that the grievance was about Stebbing having access to water on his own property that Mackie rented. Dendy told Mackie that in order to prevent any further misunderstandings between you and the Stebbings' *"you will at all times allow him to use any reasonable quantity of water he may require from the Tank at the rear of your house"*. And, he added for good measure *"it having always been the understanding that he should do so"*. That is, Mackie well understood this.

The Trustees Letter May 1865

In a letter from most of the Trustees of the church to his Lordship the Bishop dated 6 May 1865 we learn that there was dissatisfaction from the time the Vicar was appointed and that this has increased over time. Dendy claims this is evidenced by the bulk of the congregation quitting the church and that subscriptions towards his (Mackie) stipend had dwindled away to a mere trifle.

The Trustees then build their case for his removal from the Parish and they *"pull no punches"*. First and foremost is that Mackie has *"an unfortunate defect in his speech which causes one half of what he says to be unintelligible and at times makes his reading perfectly painful both to himself and his hearers"*. One is left wondering how such a person could have gained qualification as priest in the first place and why a Bishop would appoint such a person to a new church.

Second, the Trustees also criticise “*the poverty of the subject matter of his sermons and the wretched style and ungrammatical language in which they are written*”. So even though half of what the priest says is unintelligible the Trustees believe he has not got anything worth saying anyway.

Third, they claim he goes out of his way to increase his own unpopularity in the district. As examples “*denouncing persons from the pulpit, designating as judgment any misfortunes that have happened to those he may have been at variance with him and endeavouring to introduce religious discord*”. If this be accurate we wonder if the Bishop knew of this unfortunate mans character and again ask was he a suitable appointment to a new church. Any church.

Finally, the charge of fostering religious discord is expanded upon. Apparently Mackie vigorously opposed and behaved as a bigot towards a person standing for election to a civil office on the grounds that he was a Presbyterian. Dendy reminds his Lordship that this matter had already been drawn to his attention and also pointed out that Presbyterians contribute to Mackie’s stipend and that they “*warmly assisted us both with their purse and time in the erection of our Church*”.

The letter ends with “*his retention here can only be productive of ever increasing mischief and injury to the Church, whereas his removal to some other district where his peculiarities might be considered as no disqualification could be of no detriment to him, but would be hailed with joy and satisfaction by his present flock*”. The Trustees want him sacked but are “happy” to land him on some other poor unsuspecting Parish. It seems moving problems from one Parish to another is an old practice.

The Bishops Response

In response to the Trustee’s complaints the Diocesan Registrar on the 30 June 1865 sent a letter to Henry Dendy advising of the Bishop’s forthcoming visit to Eltham to meet with certain persons privately. The meeting was to be at John Beale’s house. The incumbent was not informed. The letter also added that “*his Lordship will be glad of information respecting roads*”. The meeting, that must have included all or most of the Trustees, took place on Wednesday 5 July. We can only surmise that a decision was made then or shortly after that Robert Mackie was to be removed from the parish. Again we can surmise that the Bishop subsequently met with Mackie privately and “persuaded” him to resign.

A letter dated October 5 1865 from the Bishop’s Registry and signed by William E Morris who was “*Your very obedient servant*” was sent to the Church Committee care of H Dendy Esq. It informed the Committee that the Reverend. R Mackie had resigned the Cure from and after the 31st of December. And so this sad and at times unedifying tale came to an end.

Postscript

Further, William Morris declares that “*his Lordship desires me to express his hope that you will endeavour to raise a proper stipend for Mr Mackie during*

the short time he continues with you". Let us hope that that such an endeavour was made and the rancour and bitterness was partly set aside by both parties. As an aside, on the 2 August 1865 George Stebbing took back the house Mr and Mrs Mackie were living in and was ready to take legal action if Mackie did not give up quiet possession.

Morris ends his letter requesting the Committee to inform him "as soon as you are in a position to do so what stipend from local sources may be offered to another clergyman". That clergyman was the Reverend Josiah Hollis, our second Vicar from 1866 to 1869.