

A Very Brief History of St. Catherine's Church, Blackwell

The Early Years

The Blackwell area has been part of the 'Lickey' parish since it was founded in 1858, which was two years after the building of Holy Trinity Church at Lickey. At that time Blackwell was a rural, sparsely populated area but during the following 30 years the population grew. Substantial large Victorian houses were built in the district on land sold by Lord Plymouth of Hewell Grange and smaller cottages erected to house the workers and servants needed to support the Victorian households.

In the early 1880's the Rev. John Goodwin, first Vicar of the parish, felt Blackwell residents needed their own place of worship nearer to their homes and Lord Plymouth, ever mindful of the spiritual needs of the community, gave the land for the building of a church. Today's church still stands on that land. The building was financed by local residents and in the main by Mr Robert Harding Milward¹ of Linthurst Hill. The Rev John Goodwin donated the stipend he received from being the Chaplin of Blackwell Sanatorium.

Blackwell's First Church

The church was designed and built by Mr John Collett of Balsall Heath and was a wooden building on a base of blue brick and had a roof tiled in Bangor slate. It was furnished with 250 wooden chairs and heated with stoves. The opening ceremony of the church took place on Saturday 19th August 1882 and a report in the Bromsgrove and Droitwich Weekly Messenger stated "The inhabitants of Blackwell are to be congratulated on their latest acquisition of a handsome and convenient church comfortably furnished and tastefully ornamented." The church was named after St. Catherine's College Cambridge where the Rev. John Goodwin had studied. Catherine was also the name of Robert Harding Milward's mother, who had recently died.

The church was well used and became fondly known as 'The Tin Tabernacle'. One report suggests a young Winston Churchill once attended when his family were guests at a local family.

In 1884 Linthurst School opened and remained under the care of the Church of England until taken over by Worcestershire County Council in 1939.

¹ Robert Harding Milward, at the time, was an eminent Solicitor in Birmingham and related to the Redditch firm of needle makers Milwards of Washford Mill.

Blackwell's first Curate, Rev. William Allin was appointed in 1891 to share the ministry with the Vicar. From these early days efforts had been made to provide the church at Blackwell with a curate and this was mainly successful until, in the early 1980's, when Birmingham Diocese could no longer allocate funds for a curate to a rural community the size of Blackwell. Accommodation had always been provided in Blackwell for a curate and over the years various houses were purchased by the congregation for this purpose. The last one sold in 1981 when a curate was no longer considered a necessity.

The wooden church was only ever meant to be a temporary construction with an estimated life of 25 years, giving time for funds to be raised for a more substantial building. As it turned out it lasted 57 years and by the late 1930's it was constantly being repaired before eventually being replaced by the present church.

The new St. Catherine's Church

The present church sits on the site of the original church and its foundation stone was laid on 6th May 1939. It was built in a Norwegian style which was the hall mark of the architect, Mr. R.H. North from the firm North and Padmore of Llanfairfechan in north Wales. It was completed in February 1941 at a total cost of £6500. The Vicar at that time was Rev. John Corbett Rawson who had enlisted at the outbreak of WW2. This left the Curate, Rev. Beard and the Warden, Mr Greey to oversee the building of the new church. This must have been at some considerable effort by them both at a time when life was dominated by the war but they had the community behind them with many villagers involved one way or another. During the build Blackwell Methodist Chapel shared their building with the St. Catherine's congregation so worship continued.

The new church's lantern tower, Catherine Wheel west window and white rough cast walls make the building a very distinctive landmark where it stands raised above the road at the crossroads in the centre of the village. At the time when the tower was being erected local children were allowed to buy a roof tile and climb the scaffold to put it in place, hopefully under supervision!

In spite of the war the new church was consecrated on 7th June 1941 with much ceremony and the 'Messenger' commented "the new St. Catherine's church will be a place of worship unique in equipment and incorporating almost every device of modern ingenuity.

Over time the 'every device of modern ingenuity' has been replaced, repaired and updated but the church remains much as it was when it was built. It is partner to Holy Trinity Church, Lickey and a cherished and warm building where the local community is welcomed.

The Wheel

In earlier times as church life flourished so did the village social life which led to a Church Hall being built adjacent to the church in 1928-1929 to accommodate social gatherings. St. Catherine's Hall played its part in village life but its use diminished and when church finances struggled, it was rented out to the Education Committee for school meals between 1953 and 1966. It returned to its original use until 1982 when it needed extensive repairs which were financially prohibitive so the hall was demolished and the land sold. Bungalows now stand on the ground where the hall used to be.

At the end of the 20th century it was obvious that St. Catherine's needed a church room for meetings and small gatherings and the Millenium project Building-The-Way was launched. This was a PCC initiative to improve the buildings used by both congregations. The first of these initiatives was the building of The Wheel attached to St. Catherine's Church. It is with thanks to the generosity of Hilary and David Stookey and in memory of Raymond and Dora Grove that enabled this to be achieved. The Wheels circular design enhances the attractive view of the church from the road and allows for social interaction with the local community. The Wheel was completed in 2005 and its design was so impressive it won the 2005 Bromsgrove Society Award.

Holy Trinity Lickey and St. Catherine's Blackwell

'Two Churches One Family'