

A BRIEF HISTORY OF ROUNDHAY ST. JOHNS CHURCH.

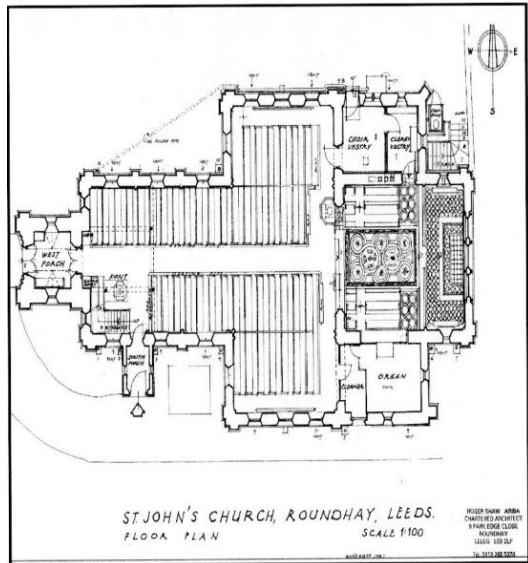
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Roundhay St. John's Church is 176 years old. It was erected entirely through the munificence of Thomas Nicholson of Roundhay Park. Although a Quaker it is understood that he cherished the idea of building and endowing a church on the borders of the Park. However, due to his death, it was left to his brother Stephen Nicholson, a banker, who founded the church in 1826.



The church, school, vicarage and almshouses were included in the original Nicholson scheme, but it was not until 1837 that the school and almshouses were built. A petition to the Crown was submitted and sanction under the Act of Parliament (5 George IV cap. 21) was passed in April 1824 for a Perpetual Cure and Benefice, the church to be known as "Saint John Forever." The Act further provided that seating for not less than 360 people, 80 of which, in the body of the church and 20 in the gallery had to be free to accommodate those persons whose means and circumstances made it impossible to buy a pew; everyone else had to pay; "pew rent". Permission was also given to build a house for the residence of the minister.

The architect was Thomas Taylor whose buildings were almost exclusively churches. The plans showed that it would be of the Gothic order, built in the form of a cross, with transept, and gallery at the west end where it was proposed to erect an organ. It was in fact, a copy of Christ Church Woodhouse, near Huddersfield.



The first stone was laid on September 22nd 1824 by the Rev. William Hiley Bathurst, Rector of Barwick. It was an occasion of some ceremony and ostentation. Ale, roast beef and plum puddings were lavishly handed out to workmen, wives and children comprising some three or four hundred. The consecration of the church is described in the "Leeds Intelligencer" of Thursday January 19th 1826 as follows:-

"The church was crowded to excess. The congregation was composed of almost all the families of Roundhay scarcely any, either rich or poor, were absent and numbers of Ladies and Gentlemen from Leeds and the surrounding neighbourhood were present. The west gallery was almost filled with children who observed the greatest order.

"The workmen and children repaired after the ceremony to the schoolroom near the premises of the patron of the church, where they were regaled with ample supplies of roast beef and ale, and the children with plum cake.

"The whole day passed off in a manner well calculated to impress on the minds of such as beheld the scene, the importance of the benefits to be conferred upon the neighbourhood by the erection of the structure."

The first regular church service was held on March 12th 1826. The incumbent was the Re. Charles Musgrave, Vicar of Whitkirk who lived at Whitkirk. In the register of marriages he signed himself as "Perpetual Curate" of Roundhay in three marriages which took place between May and August 1826. Mr. Musgrave resigned from Roundhay on March 30th 1827 on being instituted Vicar of Halifax.

From August to October 1827 there appears to have been no regular minister until the arrival of the Rev. John Dodsworth who was found signing as Perpetual Curate from 5th November 1827. As there was no vicarage at that time, it is probable that he would have been provided with accommodation at the Mansion or in the properties of the Nicholsons. It is said that the building opposite the Canal Gardens (now occupied by the "Roundhay Fox" public house) was used as a vicarage.

Externally the church is much as it was originally, its severity somewhat softened by its woodland setting. Internally it was very different. The chancel was only 15 feet long and there was but one vestry - the present choir vestry. The pews, known as horse box pews, were high, each having its own door. In the chancel there were a few seats used by the Squire, (Mr. Nicholson) on one side and the Vicar's family on the other. A three-decker pulpit stood on the north side of the chancel arch. The windows were of plain glass and the congregation were protected from the sun during the summer months by crimson blinds. In the winter heat was provided by stoves. Lighting was probably by oil lamps, though later gas lighting was installed. St. John's was typical of its time when churches were very Protestant indeed, devoid of any decoration, when even a cross on a prayer book or gable might be regarded as rank popery.

Mr. Dodsworth last signed the registers on 11th August 1839. During his 12-year ministry there were 46 marriages, 83 burials and 104 baptisms.

During the next half-century the population of the district rose from something over 300 in the 1830's to 802 in 1881. It was then described as a "... township and genteel village with views around which were very pleasant, the land well wooded and the

air remarkable for its salubrity..." An observer of the time also noted that "the peace of the village was seldom disturbed except by the rumbling wheels of the farmer's gigs and carts.. .pleasure seekers pass on their way to Boston Spa in dashing dog-carts commodious wagonettes or even on a veritable stagecoach...."

Until the 1840's the spiritual needs of Shadwell and Seacroft had been met by St. John's, but then they acquired their own churches and parishes. Curiously, St. John's, although responsible for an area, was not assigned a parish until 1972 when it was transferred from Whitkirk to Allerton Deanery. However, in 1923 the institution of Rev. T. Noel Pearson as Vicar of Roundhay instead of Perpetual Curate suggested that Roundhay had become a Parish in its own right.

Towards the end of the Rev. Thomas Davis's 48 year ministry (1839-87), (a gentleman, who, it was said, rode the parish on his donkey) the patronage of the church was acquired by Mr. James Kitson (who built Elmet Hall in 1863). About this time (1885) extensive alterations were carried out inside the church. The chancel was lengthened and another vestry added. The three-decker pulpit was removed and the present one, the gift of Mr. Henry Marshal Sykes, replaced it. The flooring, seating and the furnishings were modernised at a total cost of £2,000. The lecturn was presented in memory of Mr. Francis Lupton who died in 1884 and the organ was dedicated to Mr. James Kitson in 1885. For some years the singing had been accompanied by what "could only be termed a barrel organ", for it worked by handle and played only a limited number of tunes. Later a small organ was erected in the gallery until 1885 when the present two-manual instrument was installed in the chancel. The choir were seated in the north transept until the new chancel was furnished, and was composed mostly of children from the Sunday School with only a few men, but anyone who so wished could sit and sing in the choir, there being no regular members. However, a regular choir was formed after the installation of the new organ and they donned cassocks and surpluses for the first time Easter Day 1889. The accounts for 1891 show £35 for choir salaries, which, presumably, included the organist.

In 1888, the reredos, in the form of a triptych, the gift of Mr. Hawthorn Kitson of Elmet Hall, was presented to the church. The plain glass windows were gradually replaced by stained glass lights, beginning with the east window, in memory of William Nicholson Nicholson by his widow in the 1860's. This was followed by a single light dedicated to Thomas Davis by his children and next to it on the south wall of the nave another in memory of Lucy Helen and Robert Bertram Lupton. In the 1870's three windows to the Cooper family were installed in the south transept. In 2001 these windows, badly in need of attention, were taken out, repaired and replaced at a cost of £18,000, raised by voluntary contribution. Others in the sanctuary were dedicated to Fanny Thompson, Henry Hudson, whilst in the north transept Lieutenant Edwin Hudson, Royal Engineers (1870) was remembered as well as 2nd Lieutenant Tom Willey and two members of the Ives family, these last three killed in World war 1. A number of memorial plaques and decorated stone tablets also appeared during the later years of the 19th and early 20th centuries.

In 1922 a war memorial in the church was unveiled. It comprised three soldier saints "in fine mosaic" at the east end on either side of the altar, with two tablets, one on the north wall of the sanctuary and one on the south bearing the names of "These men of Roundhay (who) died for their country". Those who fell in World War 1 are recorded on a bronze plaque near the organ. The balance of the sum raised for the war memorial was put towards the building of a parochial institute. With this in mind and to celebrate the centenary of the church a fund was raised with promises of £800. A donation of £500 was added to this in memory of Mr. and Mrs. Scott Stanley by Miss Dora Netherwood. The foundation stone of the present hall in Fitzroy Drive was laid August 18th 1927.

The problem of accommodation at services was becoming acute as far back as 1892, aggravated by the system of pew renting and pews not being occupied. Pew holders were asked to consent to announce all seats "free" at the commencement of each service. The system of pew renting was discontinued following negotiations, completed in December 1925 for the purchase of the advowson from the patron, Mr. J. Hawthorn Kitson. But it was another ten years before the money was paid off.

In the 1960's the refurbishment of the almshouses began and some improvements were made to the school, but it was not until 1990 that a new church school was built in North Lane. But perhaps one of the most significant events in the life of St. John's was the signing of a covenant with Roundhay Methodist Church in which, "...without forcing... the participating churches to go beyond what their consciences allow, they have agreed under God so to work together that our churches may worship more harmoniously and engage in mission and service to the world more favourably and effectively...."

The signing of the covenant took place at a joint service of the two churches, at St. John's on Sunday 1st November 1988. It was attended by the Bishop of Ripon and the Rev. Michael Townsend, Chairman of the Leeds Methodist District.

(Much of this article was taken from the book "A history of St. John's Church Roundhay" by J. Dickinson and G.D. Webster. It is now out of print though one or two copies are available for borrowing at Oakwood Library.)



In The Crypt