

**A Short History
of the Parish of the Ascension
Berwick Hills Middlesbrough
1953-2023**



Ron Marshall

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FOREWORD

On Saturday 20th May 2023, we celebrate the silver Jubilee of the Church of the Ascension and 70 years since the parish was established.

A lot has changed in the life of the parish over the years. God has carried out his wonderful work and the parishioners have been privileged to be able to witness this. We pray as we continue to witness him through words and deeds in this part of the UK.

The written history of any parish is very important to remember the beginnings, the developments, successes, struggles, opportunities availed and even lessons learnt from the failures.

In our parish we are blessed with Ron and Marion, who are a dedicated couple of the parish. On my request, Ron happily took on the role to write an article about the history of the parish. This has two parts. The first part covers the clergy, and the second part is focused on the parishioners.

I am sure the history of our parish will be beneficial for all to remember the past and to look ahead to future opportunities and to meet any challenges that may come.

Father Emmanuel Nazir
Priest in Charge



Above: Canon David Hodgson with the 'Fan the Flame' organising team.



Left: The church under construction

*Below left: Licencing of Fr Emmanuel
25th March 2019.*

Below right: Canon David Hodgson designed the Church of the Ascension



The roots of the parish of the Ascension were established in the early 1950s in an area of East Middlesbrough developed by the local council as new housing estates. Originally the land had been part of the Pennyman estate centred on Ormesby Hall but in 1947 Ruth Pennyman, the last of the family died and the extensive lands between Ladgate Lane and the Trunk Road passed into the hands of Middlesbrough Borough Council. There were a number of farms on the estate, and these gave their names to the new housing developments of Berwick Hills and Park End. It must have been an exciting time for the new residents. They had spent their lives in basic two up and two down houses in central Middlesbrough. Many of the houses had no bathroom, an outside toilet, one cold internal tap and limited cooking facilities. The people had battled through the years of the Second World War and the subsequent period of shortages and difficulties. Now they were given the opportunity of living in a modern property with a kitchen, a bathroom, hot water, an inside toilet, and a garden. There were 'green' areas where their children could play in safety. It must have been like a slice of Heaven. Many of them had been regular attenders at churches in Central Middlesbrough like St Paul's, St Aidan's, All Saint's, St Columba's and St John's and settling into their new properties they had a longing to have a church of their own.

They began meeting in each other's houses for worship and as members grew, they moved on to a wooden hut on the estate. During this time, they made a priority of raising funds and eventually they raised enough money to build a dual-purpose brick property in Penrith Road. It was designed to be used both as a church and a social centre. Their members continued to grow and eventually the York Diocese decided to establish a new parish. So, the parish of the Ascension of Christ the King, Berwick Hills was established to serve the new housing areas of Berwick Hills, Park End and later Pallister Park. A new parish priest Rev Simon Hankey was appointed as curate in charge in 1954 and the new PCC began work to establish the new church as a key element in the development of this important part of East Middlesbrough.

The development of any parish church is directly linked to the mission and commitment of its priest. Rev Simon Hankey laid the spiritual foundation of the new parish. He established a firm base for the growth of faith in the area and guided the parish in its early formative days. It was in 1960 that Simon moved on and was replaced by the first vicar Rev. Ron Woodley a priest whose dedication and solid discipleship resulted in further growth both in members and missionary outreach. The desire for the permanent church building was growing. The

congregation began buying individual bricks for the new development and after a lot of hard work a new church building was designed and constructed alongside the hall and the vicarage in Penrith Road. The new church was consecrated by Donald Coggan, Archbishop of York in 1966 and became an important part of the community. Rev Ron Woodley and his wife Pat were particularly gifted at creating a family church and the new building was often full on a Sunday morning of worshipping grandparents, parents, and children. Rev. Ron Woodley was an outstanding priest, and it was inevitable that he would be called to new challenges and so it was that in 1971 he was appointed as Rector of Stokesley. He later became Archdeacon of Cleveland but will always be affectionately remembered for his work at the Ascension. A new priest was appointed at the church Rev Dennis Franks, a man with a particular mission to young people. He established a very successful youth group and the worship in the church took on a new approach with guitarists Fred Hutchinson. Brian Norland and Gary Cox leading the congregation in the modern church music which was becoming popular in the 1970s. The church developed a very strong youth section, so much so, that one of their members Alan Sutherland was ordained as a priest in the Anglican Church and emigrated to USA to further his ministry. Rev. Dennis Franks was supported in his work by the ministry of Rev Philip Bishop who became the curate and made a great contribution to the life of the parish and later went on to serve as the Rector of Guisborough. Rev. Dennis Franks left the church in 1974 to serve at the parish church in Saltburn and Rev John Goddard was appointed as his successor. John was a charismatic leader. He had a particular calling to spirituality and holiness in worship and this was reflected in the atmosphere of prayer and praise that became evident particularly in the Parish Eucharist on a Sunday morning. The church was full and the worship, teaching and preaching inspiring. The church became the centre of the community and the outreach by the people and by Rev. John and his wife Vivienne resulted in a spiritual renewal in the whole area. The work in the parish was reinforced by the ministries of curates Graham Williams (1975-1978) Trever Jones (1979-1981) and John Masshedar (1981-1982). This successful period in the history of the parish left a true Christian imprint on the development of East Middlesbrough.

When Rev. John Goddard moved to All Saints Middlesbrough in 1982 the P.C.C decided that it was important to have continuity and as a result his curate Rev. John Masshedar became the new vicar and he continued successfully to develop the parish. Father John and his wife Liz continued to extend and enrich the worship at the church and its commitment to the immediate area. Rev. John

Masshedar was a man of calm humility, prayerfulness and measured action and his work was supported by the ministry of Rev. Simon Hobbs who joined the parish as a curate in 1983. Simon was an excellent musician and an outstanding teacher and preacher. When Rev. John Masshedar was appointed Rector of Sleights, North Yorkshire in 1984 Simon successfully took on the responsibility of running the parish until he accepted a post as parish priest in Ingleby Berwick. Rev. Malcolm Spenceley was appointed as vicar in 1985. Malcolm had a particular interest in the healing ministry and the gifts of the Spirit. The worship in the church took on a different nature. He worked diligently in the parish until he moved to Scarborough in 1993. Marion Marshall was licensed to the parish as a reader in 1990 and her ministry enriched the parish in leading prayer groups, taking on responsibility for the Sunday School, preaching and using her linguistic skills in writing articles.

Fr. David Hodgson, the rector of Loftus, was appointed as the new parish priest in 1993. David was a larger-than-life personality with a wicked sense of humour. He was also an outstanding theologian, and his teaching and preaching restored the sacramental nature of the church. The Rev. Richard Locke became curate in 1994 and played an important part in attracting new members to the congregation and particularly working with young Christians.

It was in 1995 that the P.C.C were informed of a major investment programme to rebuild Berwick Hills Centre. Finance was to be provided from the European Union, the UK government, and Middlesbrough Borough Council to build a new swimming pool, youth centre, library, health centre and T.A.D centre. Morrison's supermarket agreed to build a major new supermarket. However, as part of the scheme, it was proposed that the Church, Vicarage and Hall of the Ascension would be demolished, and the plant moved to an alternate site 250 yards down Penrith Road. It was dramatic news and led to considerable prayer and soul searching amongst the church congregation. However, it was finally agreed that the church would take part in the scheme. Father David was to be involved in the planning and he designed the new church. The design was based on the plan of the Chapel of the Beatitudes on the shore of the Sea of Galilee and was based on an octagon inside a square with a main central worship area and 3 chapels and a narthex in the corners. As part of the scheme Morrisons Supermarket agreed to fund the building of the new church, vicarage, hall, and curate's house and fit a new pipe organ in the church. The investment totalled more than £1m.

It was indeed a sad day to watch the demolition of the church building.

People had fond memories of Christian love and fellowship of weddings, baptisms, and funerals within its walls. Whilst the new church was being built Sunday worship continued in the Transfiguration Chapel in Penistone Road. The limited seating was full every Sunday and the worship was lively and meaningful. Over the next two years we were able to follow the progress of the new church and in 1997 the Bishop of Whitby Gordon Bates laid the foundation stone. The following year 1998, the new building was consecrated by the Archbishop of York, David Hope, who reminded us in his sermon of the importance of the 'living stones', the people in the future of the church. A new curate Rev Tim Whitwell arrived and took up residence in the new curate's house. The congregation responded to the challenge of the new church. It was a very successful part of the parish story. Rev Tim Whitwell moved to Loftus as rector in 2000. His infectious smile and the joy of his faith left happy memories. Rev Adam Gaunt was appointed as the new curate in 2005. He was a sound theologian and was a great support to Father David Hodgson who had begun to suffer from several serious health problems. Adam took the church out into the local community and carried out invaluable work in local schools and the nearby youth centre. Adam's ministry at the Ascension was highly valued and in 2009 he was appointed as Rector of Loftus. Paul Skelton joined the church as Reader in 2002 and involved himself with valuable community projects and has been an important witness in the area. Before leaving the parish Father Adam Gaunt organised a week's mission. Two visiting priests stayed with us and a whole week of special services were held. The initiative was called "Fan the Flame" an outreach into the immediate area.

Father David was finding life very difficult with his various health problems. He needed help desperately and in 2015 Rev Richard Brown arrived as curate. In October 2016 Father David fell and fractured his ankle and he was taken into hospital, but his condition deteriorated, and he died in intensive care. It was a deeply shocking time. Father David will be remembered with thanks and affection for his almost 30 years of service at the Ascension. Following his death, the church went through the long period of vacancy supported by visiting priests, the commitment of the P.C.C and particularly the churchwardens.

In March 2019 Rev Emmanuel Nazir was appointed priest in charge of the parish. Father Emmanuel had been serving as a curate in Portsmouth following several years attached to the Papacy in Rome.

The country was plunged into the COVID pandemic during 2020 and the parish, like many others struggled in this dark time.

As the church recovered from the pandemic it faced a few problems. Attendance had fallen and Father Emmanuel decided that new approaches, such as an outreach to the local area with a food bank and attracting new people through the Mustard Seed Project were the ways forward. Father Emmanuel also started a new parish magazine with the help from his wife Fauzia and this has been an important tool in advertising events and featuring people's thoughts on matters of faith.

In 2023 we will celebrate the 25th anniversary of the consecration of the new church building remembering the mission and commitment of the Christians in the earlier years of the parish and looking forward to the future of proclaiming the gospel through word and deed in this part of the world.

Right: The consecration stone.

Below: The altar of the Church of the Ascension

CHURCH
OF
THE ASCENSION
OF
OUR LORD JESUS CHRIST
THE KING
CONSECRATED
20th MAY 1998
BY
+ DAVID +
LORD ARCHBISHOP OF YORK





Mayor's Sunday in the first Ascension Church c.1989.



Parish annual pilgrimage to Walsingham c.1995.

The Living Stones of the Ascension

When the original congregation at the Ascension, Berwick Hills were working towards building their own church 70 years ago they bought individual bricks to construct the new building. Eventually they succeeded and a beautiful new church was built alongside the existing hall and vicarage in Penrith Road. So, the story of the church began and those parishioners who had provided the material to construct the building now became the 'living stones' in the development of the parish. We remember them with love and gratitude and thank God for their commitment, faith, and love.

May Whitehouse served as churchwarden in the early days giving the young parish a firm foundation. Her husband Edgar Whitehouse supported her and served on the altar. May suffered a serious stroke in the 1960s but Edgar continued to bring her to church in her wheelchair. They were one of the many couples who served the church in its early formative years.

Charlie Wilson attended with his wife Nan Wilson. Charlie had been a well-known and respected policeman in the town before his retirement. He will always be remembered as a gentle giant, full of love and affection and of care for his wife Nan in her illness. Charlie and Nan's daughter Margaret Davies continued the family link with the church and in later years served as churchwarden. Margaret's husband Harry Davies was also a regular communicant and responsible for the covenant and tax rebate scheme. Margaret and Harry's daughter Janice Simmons remains as a regular communicant today and her daughters Charlotte Simmons and Suzie Brown maintain the family link with the church. Suzie currently serves on the PCC as safeguarding officer.

As well as the material support of the church it was also vital that there was an element of prayer and worship. Hilda Bakewell was a lady whose spiritual commitment to church in the early days was of great importance. Hilda was a Christian of great faith and hope and she carried that into her life within the parish. Hilda's daughter Jennifer Hoggett continued this service serving on the PCC for many years and singing with her husband Harry Hoggett in the church choir. The family link continues to the present day as Jennifer's daughter Lesley Charlton together with her friend Barbara Dickinson are now the coordinators for social events in the church and Lesley's son Jay Charlton has maintained the family connection by taking over the responsibilities of church treasurer.

Many of the original congregation of the church had lived through the terrible days of the Second World war and they were Christians of great faith and spiritual wisdom. Two such were Edith Phillips and Lena Edon. They lived

as close neighbours and were firm friends. Edith had suffered from polio in her early years and was confined to a wheelchair, but this did not stop her playing to an active part in church life. She was the chief distributor for the parish magazine producing 1000 copies a month to carry the Christian message into the homes of the area. Lena for many years served as churchwarden and PCC secretary overcoming family problems with faith and dignity.

Tom Parry served on the altar. He had served in the army during the war and took part in the D Day landings. Together with his wife Esther Parry they organised the first Pie and Pea suppers at the church reaching out to the community and generating welcome funds. Tom's friend Ernie Cowell also served on the altar and as they were similar in stature and appearance, they often were compared to two book ends at either end of the altar. Ernie's wife Gladys Cowell was also a regular communicant.

This was a pattern in the formative days of the young parish as couples and families attended the church together. For many years Keith Myers and his wife Audrey Myers made a significant contribution to the church and Keith for many years took on the considerable responsibilities of church treasurer. Keith and Audrey encouraged their next-door neighbour Ethel Crossman to come with them to church and over the next 40 years Ethel played a vital role as verger, churchwarden, and unofficial housekeeper for Father David Hodgson. In 2012 Ethel received the Royal Maundy money from Queen Elizabeth II in York Minister, as recognition of her service to the church and the community.

Marjorie Yare and her son Robert together with Marjorie's close friend Olive Pettit and her family were regular church members in the early years of the parish. Len Harton and his wife Betty Harton were another couple who worked hard for the church in its early days. Len had served in the RAF during the war, and he was a Christian notable for his enthusiasm and commitment to the church. Len was a server on the altar for many years and his son John Harton has followed him in this role and involved himself in social activities reaching out to the community.

Mike Foden was another church member who served in the RAF. Mike and his late wife Muriel have been loyal supporters over the years and David, Mike's son, is now bringing him to church.

Other couples who have supported the church over the years include John and Jean Alexander, Les and Nell Gill, Harry and Beryl Green and Les and Alma Wilkinson. Les served the church for more than 25 years as churchwarden. Jean and Herbert Lane were also members of the original congregation.

All congregations have members who can be described as a "one off". As

far as the Ascension is concerned one such was Stuart Goodwin. Stuart married his wife Susan at the Ascension in the 1980s and tragically she died young with a brain tumour in early years of their marriage. Stuart fulfilled many roles at the Ascension maintaining the church grounds and serving on the altar for many years. Ray Ankers served as sacristan for many years. He had a great sense of humour and was always ready to welcome visitors to the church with a ready smile and a friendly word.

Maud and Tommy Keenan were another couple who were regular communicants and Doreen and Harry Whitfield had a strong commitment to the parish.

It was in the early 1980's that Audrey Knott was licensed as a reader. She served the parish with loyalty and dedication for many years. Her prayer life and compassion for people in general are a fond memory.

Kath Linklater and her close friend Betty Maloney were loyal supporters of the church. When Kath moved as a resident into Ormesby Grange Care home she continued her evangelical zeal and love of the gospel and Maureen Hart served the church as treasurer for some years and brought joy to the church with her prayer and worship.

As a young man Terry Leathley became a member of the congregation in the late 1990s Within a few weeks his wife Liz and their children had joined him, and it became evident that Terry had a special calling and after encouragement from Father David Hodgson he was selected for training at Mirfield Theological College and was ordained priest. Since his ordination he has served the parishes of St Hilda's Whitby and St John's South Bank with distinction. Norah and Lenny Coward were members of the choir and committed members of the church for many years. Hazel Crossman is another long-standing member of the congregation who has served in the choir and assisted in social events.

Ron Marshall was appointed as organist in 1974 and at the time the church had a uniformed choir of 25 children. Over the years the choir became an adult singing group. Ron served as churchwarden in the 1980s and later took on the role of treasurer for more than 20 years. He received the Maundy money from Queen Elizabeth II in 2012 as a recognition of service to church and community.

Ron's wife Marion Marshall was licenced as a reader to the Ascension in 1985. She has worked with enthusiasm and dedication for the past 35-years officiating at more than 100 funerals, preaching and teaching in service and prayer groups. She has also found time to organise fund raising events like Summer and Autumn

Fairs and produced several memorable shows, concerts and pantomimes.

Carol Jenkins became a member of the congregation following the death of her mother Joan. Carol was so moved by the love and welcome she received from the congregation that she encouraged her father Eric Jenkins to join the church. Eric had served in the navy during the war, and he was a man who really was 'the salt of the earth'. He became 'Uncle Eric' to many of the young people in the church, a mark of his generosity and friendship. Carol later became churchwarden and covenant secretary and was directly responsible for the church in the difficult days of vacancy following the death of Father David Hodgson.

Paul Skelton and his wife Sue Skelton joined the Ascension from St Oswald's church in 2001. Paul has worked in his capacity as licensed reader since that time. As well as his spiritual work within the church he has worked at extending the influence of the church in the local community. Paul's wife Sue served as churchwarden and continues to work in the recently established food bank.

Sue Lister has contributed to the church in recent years with her artistic skills. She also served on the PCC and as a member of the choir.

Julie Popplewell has served as a PCC member for many years and held the post of safeguarding officer for some time. At present she is serving as a volunteer in the Food Bank. In more recent times Valerie Oliver has introduced the work of the Mustard Seed Initiative into the church and has been licensed as a church community minister.

Other regular communicants over the years have included Ray and Joy Barnes, close friends Celia Bird, Rita Spence, Edie Freeman and Olive Green, near neighbours Audrey Robertson, Elizabeth Bateman and Maureen Taylor and also Carole Lewery and Linda Merryweather.

At the present time dedicated Christians continue to support the parish in difficult situations. Jean Art and Pauline Marsden regularly provide sustenance, Mary Lowe and Janis Tate are regular communicants, Christine and Mick Aldridge represent the church at Hastings House, Kenny Duffield is a loyal server and PCC member, and Jeff Saxton is a committed churchwarden. Father Emmanuel's wife Fauzia Nazir is a committed florist, keeping the church looking beautiful.

There have been many other living stones of the Ascension who have helped to build the church here in Berwick Hills. As we celebrate 25th anniversary of the present building and the 70th anniversary of the parish we thank God for their service and commitment and look forward to the future and the challenges of proclaiming the gospel in the modern world.



Above: Lesley and Barbara: The ascension sharing duties duo.



*Left:
Fr Emmanuel
with the
Altar team.*

*Right:
Celebrating
Ron and
Marion's 60th
wedding
anniversary.*





Above: The first church in Penrith Road.



Left: The nave of the new church.