

CHAPTER 14.
THE 1950's - PAIN AND PLEASURE.

There is no doubt that the 1950's were years of financial hardship for St. John's - indeed, to describe these years as a succession of financial crises would be no exaggeration. Of all the church officials at this time, the most thankless post must have been that of Treasurer, who continually had to juggle with meagre resources to pay the bills and it was only the generosity of individual members who dug deep into their pockets for gifts and loans which kept the Church doors open.

It is said that every cloud has a silver lining and the cloud of financial difficulty which hung over St. John's provoked a church social life which has not been equalled since. Money had to be raised and this was a great incentive to arrange drama productions, film shows, jumble sales and the like; and, as always, whilst raising money a lot of fun was to be had. In the 1950's, television was in its infancy and car ownership was the exception rather than the rule, so that people had to provide their own entertainment - and much of it was church based.

Dorothy and Stanley Simmons take a nostalgic look back at those days of painful accounting and pleasurable activities:-

"It was a sad day when the old St. John's Hall (formerly the tin church) in Hobnock Road disappeared for it held a host of memories of happy times spent there.

It must have been during the war years that Mrs. Spencer organised a club for girls. We met in the Hall after School, once a week, and played all sorts of games (including charades) in addition to learning country dancing.

As we grew older, plays and operetta became the highlight. Mrs. Caulton was always the wardrobe mistress and she seemed to be able to conjure up any type of costume from bedspreads and the like!

The religious plays (Passion and Nativity plays) were of course, performed in church and this is when Mr. Fred Beer came into his own. He was the 'Gaffer' of Holly Bank Garage, and from there he borrowed planks of wood to make the stage. These planks would rest on banana boxes and beer crates and it was amazing what could be fixed up. If you look closely at the pillars on either side of the entry to the chancel, it is possible to see two 'eyelet hooks' set into the brickwork. It was from these two hooks that a wire would be strung to hold the curtain which shut off the chancel and at the same time provided a backcloth for the production.

Fred Beer was active too in the Youth Club which was also held in the old St. John's Hall. His wife would play the piano and he would teach us a few dancing steps. There was a whole variety of activities in this youth club and as the years went on, other leaders took over.

The old hall was also the venue for many dances and often the music would be provided by Mac Thomas and his band. French chalk sprinkled on the floor gave a beautifully smooth dancing surface and Rev. Spencer would often take us round the dance floor.

Other attractions were Whist Drives and Social Evenings, the main one of these being on Shrove Tuesday when we had our last fling before Lent, which was taken very seriously in those days.

Another regular feature in the old hall was the Friday night film show. This was put on by a Mr. Loasby and his two sons and we saw some first class films - though the seats were a bit hard! Admission prices were 6d ($2\frac{1}{2}p$) for children and 1/- (5p) for adults.

Summer Fetes and Autumn Fayres (known in those days as Garden parties and Autumn Sales) were also regular happenings.

The Vicarage in those days was Lowerfield House (now known as The Old Vicarage) on the corner of Hobnock Road and Brownshore Lane. Here the ladies of the Church would meet to make articles for the Autumn Sale, at which event 'jumble' would also be available! Looking back, it is marvellous how there were always refreshments available for in the early 1950's we still suffered rationing and shortages. At these 'Sewing Sessions' everything from Altar Linen to dishcloths would be made.

Harvest Festivals in the Church were always followed by Harvest Suppers in the hall, and on one of these occasions, when the men were waiting on, Don Pitchford was seen wearing a Chef's hat!

Certainly the atmosphere in the hall was warm and friendly - and smokey too, at times when the wind was in a particular direction and the old stoves registered their protest!

As well as the Church Hall there are wonderful memories of our Church in the 1950's.

One memorable annual event was the Children's Festival when we marched to Church from the playing fields in Sneyd Lane, led by the Band of the Church Lad's Brigade from Wednesfield. What an impressive sight it was! First the Band, then the Processional Cross held high and glinting in the sunshine, then the choir and then the children with all the girls wearing white cotton veils on their heads. These could be quite uncomfortable but we were not allowed in Church with heads uncovered!

Ascension Day we looked forward to - for the wrong reason! We went to Church first and then had the rest of the day off!

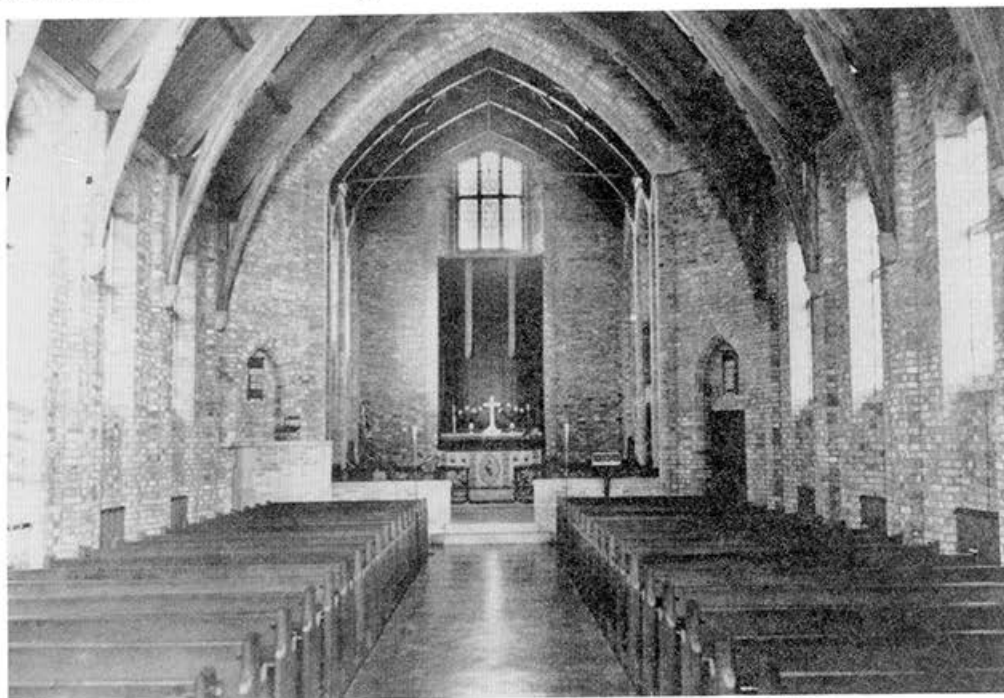
Inside the Church, on the East Wall where the cross now hangs, was a lovely blue curtain stretching from the window down to the Altar Table. Only men and boys were allowed in the Choir Stalls, the female choristers having to sit in the organ gallery!



Rev. and Mrs. Wilkinson.
Rev. Wilkinson was Vicar of Essington from 1955 - 1960

The Sunday School was also held in the Church but only in the Nave, the Chancel being regarded as too sacred. Different classes were held in different parts of the Nave, and, frankly, things could become chaotic! Even the Church bell in those days was rung differently. First it was rung for ten minutes, then there would be a break, and when it started again you knew you had to get a move on for the service was about to start.

Times change, but the memories linger on. No doubt, when St. John's is celebrating its Centenary, today's youngsters will look back with similar nostalgia to the 1990's.



The Interior of St. John's Church in the 1950's