

Memories of Rev. Wood

Ainsworth

By the Late Rev Wood Vicar from 1905 to 1931.

I moved from a curacy in Bolton to become vicar of Ainsworth in 1905, in succession to the Rev J.A. Lauria. It was not a big living or deemed an important change. The income was about £260 per year. The house – well, it had never been built for a parsonage. Rooms were small and it was not compact. Too many stone passages. Still, it had its advantages. We had a coach house and stable – a paddock of nearly an acre. There were trees at the back of the house. And it was out in the country and stood some 500 feet above sea level. It was not a big house, nor did it look like a house for the gentry but it was a great improvement on living in a street – and it has become very dear for it has been home for more than twenty years.

Ainsworth Church is a great contrast from a large town Church of earlier ministries. It is a small, very plain, rectangular meeting house, with galleries, onto which has been added (back in the 1830's) a tower at one end and a short chancel at the other. Some fine oak furniture, including a pulpit, prayer desk, lectern and communion table brought from the old Bury Parish Church, has been imported. When I was appointed Vicar in 1905 there were straight backed pews with doors, some limed with baize, along the side walls. Short benches up the middle. We had gas lighting.

Services were at 10:30am and 3pm. We subsequently changed from 3pm to 6:30pm. I have often questioned the wisdom of changing from the afternoon. True, it is a sleepy time – but to expect people to change the habits of a lifetime, to spend Sunday evenings which they had ever spent at home at their firesides – at Church. Well, many who used to come at 3pm. never came at 6:30. We used to get the scholars from Sunday School both mornings and afternoons. I fear we won't get many of them now.

Ainsworth (or Cockeysmoor to give it its old name) is an isolated village. It stands on the hills three miles from everywhere. 3 miles to Bolton – to Bury – to Radcliffe – and to Tottington. It is not on the high road to any place. You must needs journey specially to it if you would visit it.

Trams have since linked up Bolton, Bury, Radcliffe etc, but you must walk down from the moor if you would travel by them. Former expeditions from Ainsworth to town were done on foot.

There are no workshops or mills on the moor save one weaving shed. The people walked to town and to and from their work at the bleachcrofts and weaving sheds at Brightmet, Bradley Fold, Elton, Radcliffe, and near the "coach and houses", Bury Road.

A big branch shop of Dobson's textile engineering works has been opened at Bradley Fold since my coming and a weaving shed has also been erected there. We anticipated a large increase in population in consequence, which failed however to materialise owing to the war.

The trams running from Bolton to Bury on the lower road have made a great difference to our accessibility. Formerly strangers passing through the village were comparatively few - and were generally noted. The village consists of one short street. On one side old stone built cottages – with

cellars in which hand loom weaving was done – built about 1750 to 1780. Rain tubs caught water for washing.

Water supply and gas had only been brought to Ainsworth just before my advent. Indeed it had not got to the vicarage in Mr Lauria's day. We had a pump behind the house. There was of course no bath. The village relied on wells, which sometimes failed.

The place looked rather dilapidated back in 1905. Many of the old stone slate roofs and chimneys have been re-slated and repaired. Some new houses have been built and altogether Ainsworth looks better off. Wages in those days were not what they are now. Workers in the crofts got less than £1 a week. And there was short time.

But even this was better than back in the old day of handloom weaving. I remember old Hampson Hardman telling me of when he worked for a firm at Nangraves (near Bury), how they carried home their warps and took back the cloth when woven. They "settled" 12 times a year. The works kept a fruit shop from which they obtained fruit supplies on credit. This was the usual dialogue: "Well, Hampson, let us see! You have brought in so-and-so?" "Yes". "You have had so many pounds of this and so much of that." "Yes". "Well, that comes to this much. You owe us so-and-so". It always ended "You owe us" there was nothing to draw. You went home without a penny – only some more warps to weave! You had to be content with your porridge and skimmed milk. Tea only on Sundays

Things are much better now. Most of the older houses have been put into good repair. Several rows of new houses have been built. They are comfortably furnished and the homes are clean. Indeed the people are generally "house-proud". They are usually a thrifty, self respecting, intelligent class of people – most of them own their own homes. Pianos are common. Many of the children from the cottages have, by means of County Council scholarships, been sent to secondary schools in Bury, Radcliffe and Bolton, where they will hold their own.

There were six licensed public houses on the moor when I came here in 1905. Drinking in the old days was hardly considered a vice. Today you rarely see anyone under the influence of drink. Men don't spend their time in pubs as they once did. By voluntary arrangement, with due compensation, the licensed houses are now reduced to two only – that is, on the moor.

During the past twenty years many improvements have been made in material things to do with the Church. The Church itself has been put into sound repair. A new floor has been laid, it has been re-seated. A new organ, a new font, new Reredos, electric lighting installed. It has been twice beautified. The Churchyard has been greatly improved, trees from the gateway planted - and as I write – the Churchyard extension is at hand. It was completed and consecrated by Bishop Temple in 1927.

The schools have had attention – screens dividing the main room into classrooms – a permanent platform erected – a new floor laid. The schoolyard has been extended, new offices outside erected and electric lighting introduced. Between 1928 and 1929 the schools were extended at a cost of over £1200.

Besides this, a mission Church has been erected for the Bury Road district. A Sunday School and Sunday services initiated and land for the future needs of the Church there has been acquired. Lord Wilton gave the land but the buildings have been paid for mainly by the efforts of the willing band of helpers who gathered at St. Oswald's as we called it. All working folk.

The spirit of self help and generous giving is characteristic of these Lancashire folk. They pay their way and they are not afraid of facing liability. If they approve the end they say “get on with it. It will get paid for” and so it is! As an example, when it was mooted about 3-4 years ago that we should light the Church and schools with electric light, and do sundry other things, it was estimated that £700-£800 would be required. The question arose, how are we to raise the money? Somebody suggested a sale of work. An amendment however, was put that a direct appeal should be made to our Church members. Within two weeks promises amounting to over £200 were made. All from the cottages, several promised as much as £5. Many would give up so much a week until paid for. There was no outstanding debt left when the work was finished.

The same generous giving marks our Sermons day. There is no collecting beforehand, some subscriptions are sent by old friends. But at the three services on the day collections are taken amounting to from £70 to over £100. No big donations. No wealthy givers!

All this sounds as if this was an almost ideal community. There is, of course, the other side of the picture. We have three places of worship in the village – the Church, the Unitarian chapel, and the Methodist chapel. The Church is a pre-reformation foundation, the building is not ancient, but there is mention made of “Cokkey Chapel” as far back as 1515, and we have records giving names of families at that date which are still with us – Greenhalgh, Lomax, Kirkman.

Camden, of Elizabeth’s day, mentions the “little wooden chapel among the trees at Cokkey”. The Church seems to have been dominated by Presbyterian ideas during the days of the Stuarts. Some of its ministers had not been episcopally ordained. Apparently they did not use the “Book of Common Prayer”. Three of the ministers, who had served at Cokkey – Goodwin and Lever from Bolton and Peter Bradshaw, then at Ainsworth, were ejected by the passing of the Act of Uniformity on 1661. The sympathies of the people were doubtless with their pastors. No Episcopal minister seems to have been appointed to succeed after Bradshaw. The Church was served by non-residents who took Sunday services, both at Cokkey and Bradshaw. There seems to have been no resident minister in Ainsworth until a Mr Parker, a curate, came early in 1800.

Meanwhile, the Presbyterian meeting house had risen. A licence procured in 1672 for a Widow Dickinson’s cottage which led to the erection of the Presbyterian meeting house in 1715. So that the Unitarian Chapel, as it is now called, is one of the oldest non-conformist places of worship in the country.

The Methodist chapel was built in 1847. It began, I am told, as a Sunday school for children who had no Sunday clothes. Methodist preachers held open air services on the moor. Amongst their converts Robert Brooks (of the quarry – grandfather to Robert Brooks, secretary to the Co-op), began this school.

When I came to Ainsworth on 1905 there were no trams running between Bolton and Bury.

Bradley Fold consisted of two rows of cottages facing each other this (north) side of the railway station. There was also a row of (Parr’s houses) houses near Brown’s print works. The road known as “Cinder Lane” connecting Bradley Fold with the Bury Road was narrow and winding. The advent of the works of Messrs. Dobson and Barlow and the building of a weaving shed and the sinking of a new colliery shaft near Countess Lane all gave promise of a new neighbourhood in that quarter. It looked as if the weight of the population would be there rather than on the moor. New houses were built. To meet this situation the Church began to bestir. Arrangements were made for a cottage lecture to be

held in a hut which served as a shop and restaurant for the new work people. This was subsequently rented to be used for a Sunday school under the superintendence of J.W.Sydall. Then Sunday services were added. Next came the building of the mission Church and Sunday school. No sooner had the Church vacated the hut then it was rented by the non-conformist to start a non-conformist chapel. But this never flourished. They gave it up shortly after the start of the war.

St Oswald's was built and opened during the first year of the Great War, 1915. War took away our young men. It also stopped building development so that the new neighbourhood did not materialise. The addition of St Oswald's increased greatly the responsibility and work of the vicar. I did not take the additional Sunday service every Sunday but on alternate Sundays – a Mr Makin, a licensed (honorary) Reader taking alternate Sundays with me. Mr Johnson, until he became too feeble with age, always read the prayers.

I have never regretted building St Oswald's. It has always been a centre of active work. Its band of helpers have carried on most devoutly and loyally. From the first they have paid their way and by their own efforts mainly has the debt been paid. They owe nothing, and the land is secure for the future needs of the Church.

Another addition to the work of the vicar was the taking over of the Joint District Isolation Hospital, just built as a sanatorium for tuberculosis cases – a provision of the new Health Act. There were housed for some years about 40 or 50 patients in a hopeless stage of consumption. Once each week I contrived to visit the patients. I also held frequent services. Shortly after the end of the war, the sanatorium reverted to its original use as an isolation hospital and the T.B. patients were moved elsewhere.

July 16, 1928. Yesterday was our "Sermons" at Ainsworth. Sermons Sunday is one of the outstanding events on the moor. For the last few weeks graves have been receiving attention. Stones have been scrubbed, grass and weeds have been cleared and the Churchyard made tidy. There are few neglected graves at Ainsworth Church at Sermon's time. Those who no longer live on the moor try to have the graves attended to. Flowers are placed on graves. I estimate that quite 500 wreaths and bouquets adorn our Churchyard on Sermon's day.

This year we were favoured with golden weather. The day began with Holy Communion at 8am. at which a score or so were present. At 9:30 we assemble at the schools, then there is the procession through the village. The little singers in white lead – followed by our Boy Scouts in their Scout uniform. Vicar and Church officers are in front of the Brass Band which plays hymn tunes. Scholars past and present walk - noticeable amongst them is the goodly band of 30 or 40 young men who form our Men's class. Returning to the Church we gather about the gate in the road and led by the band we sing "the Church's one foundation" and "Jesus shall reign". The Church is filled morning, afternoon and evening. Indeed, in the evening there are many in the Churchyard who could not get into the Church. For these an overflow service is arranged. Hymns known to all are sung. The little singers sing their children's hymns. One verse from each hymn generally being sung by some child's voice alone. The choir, of course, have their part – there are anthems afternoon and evening. Practising for the Sermons engages choir and children for some weeks before the great day.

Sermons is a very happy time of re-union. Those who do not attend the ordinary services of the Church will try to be present on this day. And old friends and scholars turn up and renew old ties. It is a wonderful demonstration of the affection felt for the old place – their old school – their old Church. Much interest is shown in the amount collected during the day. If the collections are "poor" there is

some depression – but if they are up there is much joy and pride. Yesterday there was much elation. The collections totalled just over £100 – this is indeed a notable collection. The Sermons come just after the end of the Radcliffe holiday. The village mill had been closed for a week. Trade has been very bad. Money is scarce. But we have a scheme of school extension in hand. The collections, after providing for the Day School charges, would go to the new fund. Generally the whole of the Sermons are collected on the day. This year the Women's Class and the Young Men's Class each contributed £5. And an anonymous donor gave £10 because he understood that we needed extra money.

In May 1929 was opened a Parish Hall together with cloakroom and kitchen, as an addition to our schools. The need was felt. Our schools were used not only for the Day Schools and Sunday Schools but also on three evenings in the week for evening continuation classes under the L.E.A. but the school was the meeting place for all our parochial activities – M. Union – the G.F.S. – Men's Society – Socials – Dramatic Society – Lectures – Tea Parties etc. These meetings were crowded, usually on a Tuesday evening, the night when the E.A. were away - sometimes three or four meetings running together. Piano and singing in one room – a quiet meeting in another. Then also we were under pressure from the E.A. to improve the lighting etc. of our premises and increase the accommodation. Plan and estimates were prepared and the cost has run into about £1,300. At first we thought to carry out part of the scheme – the cloak room, kitchen and new windows for infant room. This was as far as means seem to allow. But enthusiasm carried its way. The whole scheme was launched in the Autumn of 1928 and completed by May 1929. The money came in wonderfully, over £600 had been raised by the time of the opening. There was no overdraft at the bank. The Diocesan Loan Fund lent £300 for 3 years free of interest – other friends have lent sums from £300 - £10 free of interest. There is yet to be received a grant of £50 from the Diocesan Education Society. There is the winter's efforts before us and we have planned for a bazaar next Easter when we hope to clear off all the debts. In two years!