

No. 21: 'A hymn-writing curate'

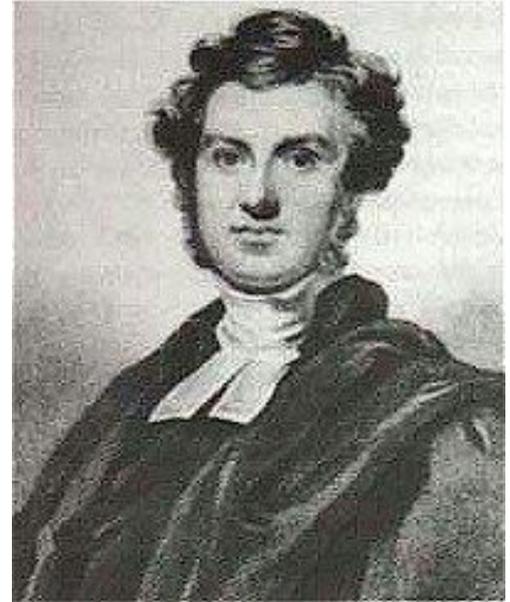
It was on a snowy spring morning in Huddersfield that I came across the book that inspired this month's blog. I was around at Rockleigh – the home of Jean Angell, the wife of Dennis who was for many years Director of Music at Holy Trinity. The family were sifting through Dennis's many hundreds of books and I picked up a well-thumbed copy of a book entitled *Christian Hymn-writers*.

Later while flicking through it my eyes landed on a chapter about Hugh Stowell, 1799-1865. His was a name I recognised as one of Trinity's earliest curates but I was unaware of his fame as a hymn-writer.

Over time his hymns have dropped into obscurity, but the book written in 1982 states that two of his hymns are found in most of the hymn-books in 'present-day use'.

Stowell was born on the Isle of Man, where his father was an Anglican rector. He graduated from Oxford in 1822, where he was noted for his poetical gifts and his 'almost unrivalled powers as a public speaker'

Stowell served as curate at Holy Trinity from August 1823 to October 1825 under the leadership of its first Incumbent, Rev Henry Maddock. He was the third in a long-line of curates that worked at Holy Trinity and was once described as an "an extemporaneous firebrand". Stowell was 'thrown in at the deep end' at Holy Trinity at a time when Maddock was very unwell and he 'held the fort' during the interregnum after Maddock was forced to resign due to his ill health, aged just 45. Maddock died months later.



Rev Canon Hugh Stowell

Stowell quickly 'cut his teeth' in his ministry at Holy Trinity and was an important part of the early life of the church here. He left Huddersfield to become Curate in charge of St. Stephen's, Salford, and later Rector of Christ Church Salford, in 1831. He went on to become an Honorary Canon of Chester Cathedral in 1845, and in 1851, Chaplain to the first Bishop of Manchester and later Rural Dean of Eccles.

A great question of the Victorian era on which Stowell frequently spoke was that of national education. He urged that education should be available for all and that it should be closely linked with the Christian faith. On one occasion he spoke to a vast city audience and held their 'breathless attention' for three hours on this subject. The Sunday schools of Salford grew rapidly due to his influence. He was well-loved by children and many of his hymns were written for children and to use in the Sunday schools to teach biblical truths.

The Parish of Salford was a cradle of the Industrial Revolution with its many mills, factories and later canals and railways. Stowell's ministry reminded the local population that fervent commercial enterprise was not a substitute for faith. He constantly reminded his hearers that 'man shall not live by bread alone but by every word of God.'

His hymns are full of biblical imagery. His most famous hymn, 'From Every Stormy Wind', copied below, links the 'mercy-seat' of the Old Testament scriptures with the person and work of Christ. The mercy-seat was part of the lid of the ark of the covenant, as described in Exodus 25:21. The mercy seat concealed the people of God from the ever-condemning judgement of the law. The verses of the hymn relate the mercy-seat to trials, to joys, to Christian fellowship, to sufferings and temptations, to blessings descending from heaven; they close with the believer urging his own hands and tongue and heart to never forget the mercy-seat.

From Every Stormy Wind.

Rev. Hugh Stowell.

Dr. Thomas Hastings.

1. From ev - 'ry storm-y wind that blows, From ev - 'ry swell-ing tide of woes,
 2. There is a place where Je - sus sheds The oil of glad-ness on our heads;
 3. There is a scene where spir-its blend, Where friend holds fellowship with friend:
 4. There, there on ea - gle's wings we soar, And sin and sense mo-lest no more,

There is a calm, a sure re-treat: 'Tis found be - neath the mer - cy-seat.
 A place than all be-sides more sweet: It is the blood-bo't mer - cy-seat.
 Tho' sun-dered far, by faith they meet A - round one com-mon mer - cy-seat.
 And heav'n comes down our souls to greet, When glo - ry crowns the mer - cy-seat.

Stowell saw the value of music, not just for worship but also in the teaching of the core truths of the gospel. The singing of hymns was becoming an increasingly important element of the worshipping life of the Anglican Church in the nineteenth century. In total, there were about 50 hymns published by Stowell and so he was one of the great hymn-writers of his day at a time of great change in the church.

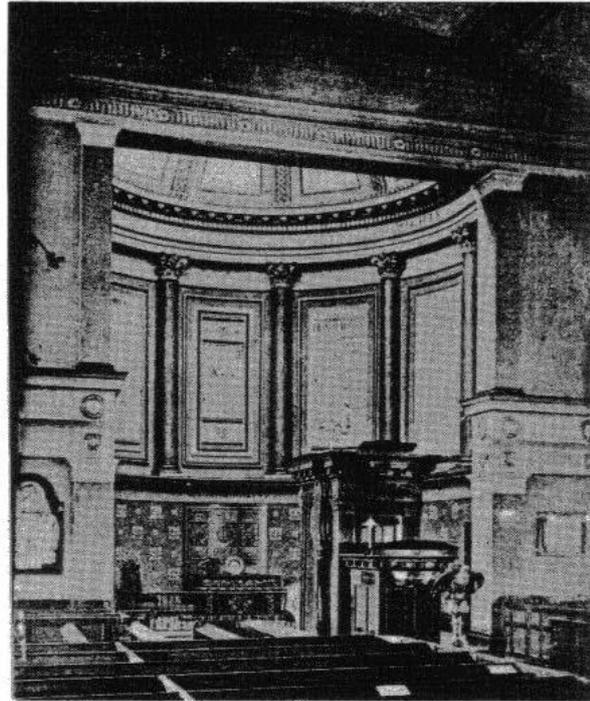
In addition to writing hymns, he also compiled an early hymnbook: *'A Selection of Psalms & Hymns Suited to the Services of the Church of England'*, published in Manchester in 1831.

In the first half of the century the Church of England was racked by the debate between the 'Oxford Movement' or Tractarians and the Evangelicals. The Tractarians wanted the church's practices to become more catholic; the Evangelicals held the teachings of the protestant reformers in high regard. Stowell was a forthright Evangelical in these discussions. His view suggested there was a connection between Britain's safety and a God-given prosperity through faithful adherence to Protestant principles.

Stowell gained "national notoriety" as a consequence of a libel case brought against him in 1840 by Daniel Hearn, a Catholic priest. Stowell alleged that Hearn had forced one of his parishioners, John O'Hara, to crawl on his hands and knees through a Manchester street as a penance. O'Hara was known to be insane and was not called as a witness, Stowell's defence claimed that whatever a clergyman said in the performance of his duties was not libellous so long as the clergyman believed it to be true. Stowell was found guilty and ordered to pay damages of 40 shillings, a decision that was reversed on appeal.

During his curacy at St Stephen's Salford, Stowell became hugely popular as a devoted minister and 'a vigorous and inspiring' preacher. Within weeks of his arrival, there was no standing room left in the church. A new church was built in the parish, paid for by the parishioners, Christ Church,

Acton Square. Stowell remained at Christ Church from its consecration in 1831 until his death on 8 October 1865. He was buried in the church's graveyard.



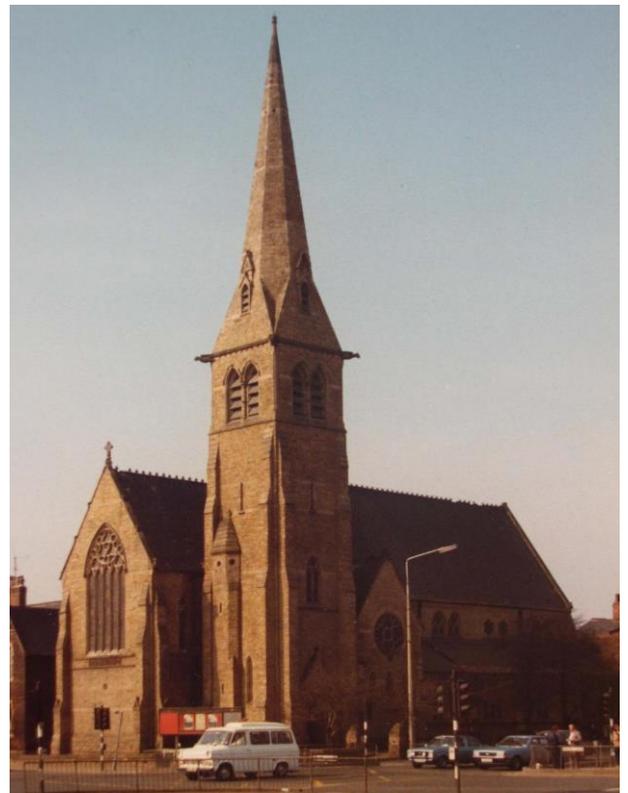
CHRIST CHURCH, Salford Left: The west end of the Church. Right: Interior. Note the position of the pulpit, font immediately behind and the Lord's Table. (both illustrations are a reproduction of postcards)

"On the day of his funeral the whole of Salford is in mourning. The mayor and 250 other mourners set out for a one-mile procession." The city of Manchester seemed to "sit solitary. All members of the public realized that a man of God had gone to his rest."

After his death, the Stowell Memorial Church, was built, by public subscription. The church with its 45m spire was constructed at a cost of £8,000 to honour his life and work, an act unprecedented in its day. The church was consecrated in 1869. A memorial school for 400 pupils was also opened nearby. A portrait of him hangs in Salford Town Hall.

In the later twentieth century, largely due to 'slum clearances' in the area, the church suffered falling congregations and eventually closed in 1981. The church was demolished soon after to make way for housing and the construction of the M602 motorway but the spire was retained and landscaped as an important landmark in an area 'not renowned for its architectural beauty'.

Stowell's legacy of faith, hymns and teaching clearly made their mark on the lives of countless worshippers over many years after his death. His commitment to the word of God, exercised in his early ministry here in Huddersfield and beyond in Salford could be seen in his passion for education and mission.



Stowell Memorial Church, Salford.
Photographed shortly before its demolition.

Hugh Stowell re-opened Holy Trinity in 1846, after the church interior was reorganised. He was clearly held in great regard and was well remembered despite such a short time spent in Huddersfield.

Stowell was one of at least 46 curates that have served at Holy Trinity over the past 199 years. Their ministry may not be as lengthy as those of a vicar but worthy of recognition!

One of Hugh Stowell's most well-known hymns was often used at funerals:

*Jesus is our Shepherd:
Guarded by His arm
Though the wolves may raven,
None can do us harm;
When we tread death's valley,
Dark with fearful gloom,
We will fear no evil
Victor o'er the tomb!*

Andy Barber
August '18

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