

Centennial year for St. Alban's parish

St. Alban's — the name was given to a fine new church in Acton by its first rector, the Rev. W. F. Swallow. Alban was the first British martyr in 304 A.D. The church is celebrating its centennial year in 1972 with many special services and former rectors as guests.

How did the church begin?

The property was deeded to the incorporated synod of Toronto in 1872 by William and Esther Sharp of Hamilton. It was then described as the southeast half of village lot No. 5 in Block 1 in the village of Acton.

The church with the fine new name of St. Alban's was a plain rectangular frame structure with the door at the east end. It's the same building today, completely renovated in 1907.

The Church of England settlers had ministrations of religion before the church was built, of course.

Missionary first

Rev. Adam Elliott, a travelling missionary, called a large part of central Ontario his parish.

It's thought the first mission station in this area was at Ballinacree. One was recorded there as early as 1849 and was probably ministered to by the Rev. J. G. D. MacKenzie and the Rev. Dr. F. A. O'Meara from Georgetown. Service would have been held irregularly in a home.

No railroad cut through the bush here when Adamsville became Acton in 1845.

Progressing from an itinerant minister, the next Anglican services in Acton were conducted by the Rev. W. W. Bates, who lived at Rockwood and had congregations there and at Acton, Erin, Eramosa, Hillsburg and Garafraxa. Both he and his horse "Hiawatha" were well known.

In Acton he held services in the Old Temperance Hall.

The story goes that the roof leaked, and one winter day he slipped and fell on the icy floor.

Parish split

By 1872 his big parish was divided. Rev. William Massey took over the north — Erin, Hillsburg and Garafraxa. Acton, Rockwood and Eramosa were under the care of the Rev. Swallow, who brought the Acton parish its name and first regular Church of England services.

Mr. Swallow lived in town in a rough-cast house on the northeast corner of Main and Bower. Three years later a rectory was purchased.

The new church, free of debt, was consecrated in July, 1876 by the first Bishop of Niagara.

Mr. Swallow was a young married man in deacon's orders who stayed here till 1874 when he became a priest and was assistant to Archdeacon Palmer. He died in 1930 at the age of 92. After Acton, he had ministered at Caledon, Woodbridge, and Pine Grove.

Next to come was the Rev. Christopher T. Denroche, son of an Irish clergyman who had emigrated to Canada. Although many of his parishioners couldn't believe it, he was accused of intemperance to the point of delirium tremens! His departure wasn't altogether a happy one.

Long-time rector

Next comes a quaint and kindly bachelor, the Rev. Charles Russell Lee M.A. and the rectory on Willow St. was purchased in 1875 for him from Mr. John Sharpe. It was torn down several years ago and has been replaced by a parking lot.

Conversations were a popular social event and were one of ways used at the church to raise money to pay for this fine new parsonage. Records show a conversat in 1877 raised \$37.50 for the cause.



By then there were all of 100 people in Acton and six congregations—Anglican, Presbyterian, Methodist, Congregationalist, Baptist and Disciples.

The rector preached evenings at the Acton point in the charge. Sunday school was in the afternoon.



St. Alban's church - 1872 - 1972

By 1880 the newest rector, Rev. W. J. Pigott, wanted to build a completely new church in his two charges. He failed in Acton, but succeeded in Rockwood. All he obtained for St. Alban's was a new color scheme in 1881 — cream walls, lavender ceiling, rose pink chancel, stone-colored woodwork and a narrow fresco border.

A new organ was bought and paid for: total \$500.

It was Mr. Pigott who dedicated the new grounds for Fairview cemetery in 1886 and conducted the first burial there.

After Mr. Pigott came Alexander George Edward Westcott—and congregational confusion. Their heart had been set on a Wycliffe student and he was asked not to stay. He didn't get as far as to live in the rectory.

Died at 39

His successor was, luckily, very popular — Rev. George Brega Cooke. The rectory was too small for his family of 10 children and he lived instead on the former Beardmore property, now destined for apartments. He was on the school board and laid the cornerstone of the public school in 1892. He died of cancer of the stomach at 39, and memorial tablets were placed in the Acton

and Rockwood churches, with a font in Acton as well.

Long obituary

Week after week the Free Press reported in detail on Mr. Cooke's illness—first reported as catarrh of the stomach. Then doctors adjudged a small seed had lodged in his stomach and was growing; hence he drank carbonic acid to try to kill the growth.

Four doctors — from Acton, Rockwood, Toronto and Chicago — operated on him at his home here and pronounced a malignant growth — and no hope. When he



added including parish room for small vestry room with small transept in the nave, west door closed, old inner porch removed and new porch built at the corner; cellar with furnace, whole interior lined with pine, pulpit and altar covering, etc., new brass memorial lectern and cork carpet. The original wide boards are still beneath the present walls and flooring.

Mr. Wilson was a tall angular man who always wore a black hat with white band, trouser legs tucked into leggings, and was recalled as often walking so right down the centre of the road.

Stormy years

1909 to 1911 saw the incumbency of the Rev. Robert Ferdinand Kellerman, born in Central America, distantly connected with the emperor of Austria, a graduate of theological seminary in New York. Apparently his few years here were very stormy.

The parish survived—but he didn't. He conducted his last services in October 1911 and died the next March. In 1913 the brass communion rail was placed in the church in his memory.

Then came the Rev. H. H. Wilkinson from 1912 to 1915; the first parish hall was built during this time. It was torn down in 1952.

Churches important

Free Press files over the years show the church's close involvement with the life of the town. Each week, in those days, there was a special article of "church news". A special sermon could rate a full column of reporting.

Concerts were detailed, naming the participants and their solos and recitations. The Sabbath School for many years "picnicked in Warden Warren's bush" (now Warren Grove) at the east of town. "The most attractive feature was the tea," a well-fed participant reported to

the editor one year.

Special events would fill the church to overflowing.

Next rector was Rev. C.H.E. Smith, from 1915 - 1917, then the Rev. K. F. Munson 1918 - 1921, the Rev. G.H.L. Baugh, 1921 - 1926, the Rev. P. A. Sawyer, 1926 to 1933, the Rev. E. Brillinger, 1934 - 1937, who later had a brilliant record as a padre in the war.

Church historian

The Rev. Arnold Brooks will be the guest speaker at St. Alban's centennial service on June 25 of this year. He was in Acton from 1938 to 1944. He was very interested in the church history, and compiled many of the early facts which have been adapted for this account of the parish history.

He was followed by the Rev. F. A. Pulker from 1944 - 1948.

The death of the Rev. W. G. Luxton was a shock to the parish and town. He was rector from

1948 to 1952. The new parish hall, then underway, was named in his memory. Many donations and much volunteer work made this fine building possible. It is a popular meeting place for church groups and many others.

He was followed by the Rev. Ralph E. Price, now of St. Catharines, from 1952 to 1964. Mr. Price was a welcome centennial guest last Sunday.

The Rev. Evan Jones was here from 1954 to 1958, is now a Presbyterian clergyman, and preached recently at Knox church here.

The Rev. Hank Rooker was here from 1958 to 1961 and is now with the board of education at Niagara Falls. He's expected to be back for anniversary Sunday June 25.

In 1960 for the first time Acton became a separate parish. Rockwood then joined with Erin. Just last month Rockwood became affiliated with St. James, Guelph.

Most recent rectors are the

Rev. Don West, 1961 to 1965, now a probation officer in Ottawa; the Rev. Ritchie McMurray, 1965 to 1968, now Anglican-United chaplain at the University of Guelph, and the present rector, the Rev. Harry Dawson.

For the past ten years the rectory has been a bright new home in Lakewood subdivision. The meandering old rectory next door to the church was torn down.

Over the years the addition of plaques, stained glass windows and church furniture has added to the charm of St. Alban's.



CORNERSTONE OF St. Alban's parish hall was dedicated in June, 1951. On the left is the rector, the Rev. Luxton, who died the next year; subsequently the new hall was named in his honor. With him left to right are United church minister the Rev. E. A. Currey; warden H. Jolley, H. Oakley who laid the blocks, T. Cook who donated the stone, warden T. Jones, Very Rev. W. E. Jackson, dean of Niagara, who dedicated the stone, the Rev. W. R. Craven of Hamilton Beach and Knox minister the Rev. R. Armstrong.



IN JUNE, 1951, choir proceeds to site for dedication of parish hall corner stone.

died his obituary ran to over a column in the Free Press, recalling his early work as a missionary in sparsely-settled Muskoka, when he travelled miles on snowshoes. "His liberal views and free association with the members of all churches made him a general favorite," the editor wrote.

Bell installed

In 1895 came Rev. John Keith Godden and during his stay Rockwood pressured to have the rector live there, unsuccessfully. The rectory was raised, repaired and enlarged. He had the bell put in which has ever since called the people to worship.

Electric lighting brightened the interior in 1899.

An aristocrat from the West Indies came in 1902, the Rev. Joseph Grayfoot Browne who stayed three years before returning south due to his wife's health. Canadian winters weren't for him.

They say one night he knocked a door during a snowstorm to explain pitifully he'd lost his hat, his horse and his way. He took over a parish in the Barbadoes.

Hopes unsuccessful

His successor, Rev. Matthew Wilson, was a Scot from Cheshire, who arrived in town in 1905 but like his predecessor, returned to his native land after a couple of years here. The frame church was 38 years old now and he too hoped to replace it. A building fund was begun and a great three-day fund-raising bazaar was held in the town hall in 1905. Among the workers was Jalna author Mazo de la Roche, then a parishioner.

But the ambitious plans of 1907 for a new church never came to pass. All they could do was fix up the old church. Later the same year the Bishop of Niagara re-dedicated the church with its improvements: widened and enlarged chancel; new wing

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