

MARCH 14th, 1979

The vicar of Spondon — an English Worthy

Domesday Book tells us what it was like in the beginning: "In Spondone Stori had 5c. of land taxable. Land for 5 ploughs. Now in lordship 3 ploughs. 14 villagers and 2 smallholders have 4 ploughs. A priest and a church; 1 mill, 5s 4d."

Spondon has changed very greatly since then, never more so than in the last 30 years.

Stori is forgotten, and Henry de Ferrers, the Norman after him. The ploughs no longer keep pace with the people. The 14 villagers have become 20,000.

But there is still a priest, and a church.

In its foundation it is the same church, re-built in its present form in the 14th century, after a great fire had destroyed the first stone structure.

As Pevsner says laconically in his "Buildings of England" it "would be architecturally unusually interesting, if it had not been so thoroughly restored." There still remains a great deal of interest, including links with the leper hospital which was for centuries a feature of Spondon.

For the last 40 years, St Werburgh's Church has been in the care of one man, the Rev. T.E.M. Barber, who became vicar on March 17, 1939.

It is a formidable time for any man's ministry. If you look on the list of vicars in Spondon church you will see only one man since 1300 who has gone for more than 40 years. I doubt if even in Mr Manlove's 42 years he became so thoroughly a part of the place.

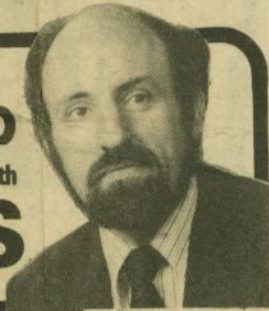
The rambling vicarage and its walled garden are surrounded now by the new estates, whose very shape and style spell change. The land that was tilled within earshot of the sacristan's bell for a thousand years is now an estate agent's paradise.

But if you walk through the vicarage gates in the gloaming, and come upon the bucolic figure of the vicar with his dogs, you could still be in a country parsonage 200 years ago.

Ted Barber was born to the cloth, though he did not immediately don it. His father was the vicar of Hucknall, Canon T.G. Barber, who earned some celebrity (and a Greek decoration for his efforts) by opening Lord Byron's tomb on the centenary of the poet's death, thus becoming the first man for a century to glimpse those famous features (Byron's body had been embalmed before being sent home from Greece, where he had died in the War of Independence). Ted and his sisters were present on this macabre occasion.

Ted went to school at Repton, and spent some time as a traffic apprentice with the L.M.S. before going to Cambridge, where he was a hurdler of distinction. He was by now sure of his vocation, and after a period at theological college, and one position as a curate-in-charge, he was

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recommended to the Drury-Lowe family for the Spondon living.

And here he has been ever since, through the war, and the huge post-war expansion of Spondon.

One of the first things he did was to found a boy's club in Spondon which is still flourishing.

It started out in two rooms at the back of the vicarage, with games facilities in the gardens, and it maintained a close link with worship at St Werburgh's. Many of the boys were also choirboys and servers there.

One of the first generation, Mr Dickens, went on to become churchwarden. They form a network of friendships and mutual help throughout Derby today, and the vicar, more often than not, baptises a child now whose parents he not only christened, but also watched grow up in his club.

I know from personal experience how far this interest goes. If there is a possible eviction on the horizon, or a prisoner to be visited, Ted Barber will have been there to give what help he can.

He is not a great one for the stuffer socialising, and having never married does not have to add a wife's aspirations in that direction to his own.

A passing tramp will get as warm a welcome at his door as a prelate. He is his own man, in this and all things, helped from time to time by his three sisters, but always four square on his own feet.

No doubt this helps in a parish where you have to face both the stresses of modern life, and the claims of the past.

Despite the press of the new estates you are very conscious of the past in Spondon church. Outside, there are still the deep grooves in the stone where the longbowmen sharpened their arrows, before practising at the butts for the real thing, which perhaps overtook them at Agincourt, or some homespun foray in the Wars of the Roses. There is still the window through which the lepers watched divine service. If you hear that service today, it will still be in the cadences of the 1662 Prayer Book and the Authorised Version. There is no great pressure for change. "He's seen off three bishops, after all," they say in Spondon.

Mr Barber has also seen off a ghost, which may be more difficult.

In his early years at the vicarage, he was conscious of the presence of a monk, murmuring, "Patient endurance," as he passed. After the discovery of a well in the vicarage gardens some years ago the monk was heard no more. The imagination can run riot on a story like that.

Next Sunday his parishioners, plus a brace of bishops, will celebrate Ted Barber's 40th anniversary at St Werburgh's with him.

"He is closer to God than anyone else I know," one of them says. Let us just say that he is much loved.

When you meet him, still ruddy of face and firm of stride at 72, you know you have met a fortunate man, too, who can be described best in the old style - an English Worthy.

Last Saturday I went out "on the beat" with the Derby ambulancemen from the Raynesway station.

I have mentioned their cause in this column in the

turned out to pop people back in bed, answer bizarre false alarms, and - when I was with them - help a lady from Mickleover, whose daughter had fallen off a horse, at the Infirmary itself.

We are very near to a settlement in the public service disputes now, and I hope the ambulancemen go back too. All that holds this up now is the promise that their comparability study will put them in the same league (though it cannot put them in the same place in the league) as the other emergency services.

That seems fair to me, and should commend itself to all the others who have commented on this particular dispute in the Trader.



Ted Barber as a boy with his father, Canon Barber, and his mother and sisters.



Ted Barber in 1977.