

## The Shrigley Church: Work in Hand

1<sup>st</sup> April 2009 marks the 75<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the cutting of the first sod for the building of the Church of Saint John Bosco at Shrigley on the day of his canonisation in 1934. The completion of the church was marked by a solemn opening five years later on July 24<sup>th</sup> 1938. First thoughts of the building of a church existed when the Salesian Missionary College was opened in 1929 when the founder of the Salesian Congregation was still Blessed John Bosco.



The cutting of the first sod on 1<sup>st</sup> April 1934

It seems appropriate, therefore, for the Shrigley Association to mark the anniversary. Though the building no longer serves its original purpose, its enduring magnificence proclaims to any observer what that purpose was, and the Shrigley Association Archive has a substantial collection of photographs to show the work of preparing the site, quarrying the stone, completing the building and landscaping the surroundings. These photographs deserve to be used in some way to mark the achievement.



The building of the Shrigley Church

However attractive faded, sepia coloured photographs may be to some, they must be given a focus to have general appeal. Peter Roebuck and I discussed this and it seemed to us that the unknown men, the quarrymen, the builders, the stonemasons, the roofers and the artists who created the finished interior, collectively have the power to invest these old photographs with something more than nostalgia. Their hard work and craftsmanship are evident. The building methods of an earlier age and the harsh climate of Shrigley's hilltop location are to be seen as challenges that were faced and overcome.

Who were these men - not the Salesians who willed the result, nor the architect who created the design – but who were the working men who built the church? Did they have personal stories that are still worth telling as part of a project to mark their achievement? Do they have descendents who can tell us about their lives?

Most, if not all of them, must have died long ago. Because a local firm, John Clayton Limited, of Sunderland Street, Macclesfield, was responsible for the work, the men it employed must have been local too, living in Pott Shrigley, Bollington, Macclesfield and other places within easy reach of the site – workmen's bicycles can be seen in a shot of the quarry – it might just be possible that if the photographs could be publicised someone might exclaim, "That's my grandfather!" or "That's my father!" and be able to give names and personal details of men long dead.

These were the assumptions, the premises, that led us to start work.



The quarry

I outlined these ideas to Louise Davenport, then PA to the manager at the Shrigley Hall Hotel, and she suggested we start the search by contacting what she called ‘the drop-in centre’ in Bollington. What she was referring to was The Bridgend Centre in Palmerston Street. Its publicity leaflet states its aim, as a Community Social Enterprise, of ‘Putting the Heart back into Our Community’. Ann Mayer, the Community/Heritage Worker on the staff, welcomed my enquiry and suggested that I use some of the photographs that I showed her in a display which she would mount prominently to appeal to the many elderly people who use the centre who were the target audience in the search.

Ann Mayer herself suggested avenues of enquiry that we might pursue, and first of all gave us the name of Derek Bowden, an active octogenarian who had lived most of his life in the area. Being a Catholic, too, well known in the local Parish of St Gregory’s which is run by the Salesians, Derek had been aware of the College at Shrigley and had, later in life, attended

some of the annual concerts given by the folk group the Spinners held there. When he saw a copy of the programme for the opening of the Church in 1938, he was able to say what had become of some of the local advertisers in the programme who had been supporters of Shrigley in that first decade.

The property occupied by Cooney's Premier Clothing House, retailer of 50/- suits, is now the Threshers Off-Licence. If you bought a suit at Clooney's you were give a free pair of braces!

**COONEY'S**  
*Premier Clothing House, Bollington*

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**50/- SUITS**  
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**For Men, made to own requirements**  
We defy competition from any quarter  
whatever  
No extras charged for  
Hundreds of the latest cloths to choose from

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**LARGE SELECTION OF MEN'S, YOUTHS'  
AND BOYS' SUITS ALWAYS IN STOCK**

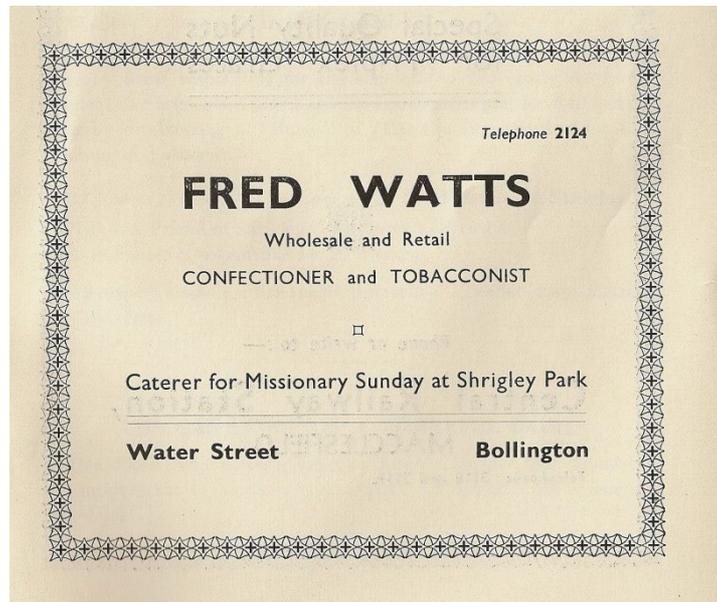
**MENS from - - 30/-**  
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**See our Stock of Men's, Youths' and Boys'  
RAINCOATS**

Including Navy Gabardine Raincoats for School Wear

Fred Watts advertised himself as a Wholesale and Retail Confectioner and Tobacconist of Water Street, Caterer for Missionary Sunday at Shrigley Park. Fred had a daughter, Alice, Derek said, who did darning of socks for the boys at the college.



This last detail caused Peter Roebuck to remember that there was a reference in a footnote in his book, *The Foundation Decade at Shrigley*, to a photograph in an early edition of the *Salesian Bulletin* of a group of local women who did this kind of work for the College. Fr Patrick Sherlock SDB, Provincial Secretary, found and copied the photograph and accompanying article for us.



Blessed John Bosco's Guild

This group was known as *Blessed John Bosco's Guild*, which was, in the words of the article, "composed of ladies from the neighbouring towns, who come regularly to the College to mend and look after the boys' linen". This photograph was subsequently passed on by Derek to Fr Francis Mageean SDB, parish priest. Visiting a parishioner, Harry Potts, born 1921, he showed him the photograph. He not only confirmed Derek's information about Alice Watts, and identified her, but also identified his own mother and an aunt as members of the Guild in the photograph.

While this information was of interest as relevant to the history of Shrigley in its first decade, it did not advance the search for the identification of the craftsmen who worked at Shrigley.



The appeal for information

On the day when I had arranged to collect the display of photographs from The Bridgend Centre, where they had been on display for a month or so, I did not expect to do anything other than to collect the material and move on. While many of the elderly who had seen the display had been interested, none had come up with any identification of the men working at Shrigley.

However, when we went to the centre, Ann had a note recording a late request, made that very day, from someone who had not visited the centre, to see the photographs as he had an uncle who had worked as a stonemason on the Shrigley church. She gave us the address and phone number of John Plant who lived in Bollington Cross. A call to the number received no answer. We left Ann and went to Shrigley where we saw Louise to tell her of our disappointment at our lack of progress. She said that there were a couple of members of the golf club named Plant who might be related to John. That seemed the most promising link of the day, though later it transpired that they were not related to the man we were about to meet.

I would not normally make an unannounced call on someone. However, we decided that we would not have such an opportunity again for a long time to follow up such a positive lead as we had been given in the name and address of John Plant. We made a call at John's house. No-one answered the bell. As a last resort, I went down the side of the house to see if there was anyone in the garden. There was. It was John Plant. He seemed to be expecting us.

We showed him some of the photographs, focussing on the best of the enlargements, a man working on building a wall of the church. This was the one we hoped he would identify, as it fulfilled our expectations, as a good clear picture of a man we took to be a stonemason creating something that even unfinished struck us as the work of a craftsman. In addition,

the detail of the wall he was building was so clear that I imagined we would be able to go and identify the exact part of the church that he was working on.



A workman building the church that John Plant initially identified as his uncle

John Plant was the man who exclaimed, “That’s my uncle!” as he identified his Uncle Jim, James Lynch. He spoke most movingly of a man who was more than the name ‘stonemason’ implied. He was a man of learning, of wide interests and talents, a compassionate and devoted family man. As a young boy, John had listened and learned things from his uncle. He remembered his uncle’s hobby of collecting rock and fossil samples, something that had led, he thought, to his uncle’s choice of profession. He spoke of his interest in astronomy, of his correspondence with Sir Bernard Lovell, astronomer at Jodrell Bank, the space exploration and tracking centre a few miles away near Holmes Chapel. His uncle was a musician, as was John himself.

Most movingly, he spoke of James’s care for a son who had had a serious accident while travelling by bicycle to his father’s place of work at Shrigley. Though the details of the accident were unclear and not fully explained, details of the effort that the father James put into the rehabilitation of his injured son, also called James, were vivid still. The need for the son to relearn how to write, with left rather than right hand, was indicative of the level of injury sustained in the accident. The son’s subsequent achievements, of playing chess well enough to be able to beat a British Grand Master, and of acquiring an education that led to a successful life and career were both fostered by the father’s devotion.

Unwittingly we had put John in the position of making an error in identifying his uncle in our collection of photographs. His uncle was in one of the photographs, but not the one initially chosen, not the one we willed him to choose. However, John was fired by our search for

information on the builders of Shrigley's church. He took our display, intended only for The Bridgend Centre, to ask Fr Mageean if it could be displayed at St Gregory's to continue the search for information. The display was put up there for several weeks.

John also remembered that his uncle had two children, a son and a daughter, and though he had lost contact with that side of his family, he had exchanged Christmas cards with his uncle's daughter for many years, though he had not seen her for a long time. He gave us her address.

With my letter to Mrs Joan Handley in Macclesfield, asking for information about her father, I included a copy of the photograph we believed to be of her father. The letter went unanswered for a week or two, then one evening I had a phone call. The young lady, ringing from Cambridge, introduced herself as Sue Lynch, niece to Joan, granddaughter to James Lynch. Joan was now in a home and unable to answer her own post. Sue travelled up from Cambridge regularly to visit her aunt and attend to her affairs. On her visits to Macclesfield Sue stayed in her aunt's now empty house.

Her first piece of information came as a shock. The man in the photograph was not her grandfather, definitely not James Lynch. We had a problem. John Plant had said the man was his uncle. Sue Lynch said the man was not her grandfather.

Who to believe? John would have been closer in age to his uncle, a young lad when James was in his prime. Sue, born much later, would have known her grandfather when he was precisely that, a grandfather, a much older man. John had discussed the man in the picture with few doubts, reassured by me when I said that in those days – the 1930s – men often looked older than their years, so any feeling that the man might look too old for his uncle were laid aside.

How could the conflict be resolved? As the conversation with Sue continued, it was clear that the two of them were talking about the same man. There was no doubt about that. They both spoke of his talents, his interests, about the accident to his son, the devoted care that had been lavished on the boy who had had such a bad accident, the person who was, in fact, Sue's father. Anecdotes were related in almost identical terms. Surely a grand-daughter could not be wrong about her grandfather. Equally surely, a nephew could not be wrong about an uncle who had played such an important part in his young life.

I arranged with Sue that I would send her a few more photographs, to see whether any other workmen in our archive were her grandfather. Conversation with her had convinced me that James Lynch was much more than a builder of walls. This man had worked on the Macclesfield War Memorial, responsible for much of the lettering on that monument. He had had a long and distinguished career, and she said she would send me a copy of a photograph she had from The Manchester Evening News showing her grandfather working as a mason.

In the meantime I sent her photographs of three men. One was of a man working on an intricate carving of a pillar on the High Altar of the Shrigley Church, doing the kind of work a man of such talent as she described her grandfather to have would have done.



One of the two photographs I sent to Sue Lynch

This was surely not the man in the original, wall-building photograph.

Was this the same man as the one standing on the right with the man we had always identified as the architect, Philip Tilden, the one on the left in the picture below? Was this James Lynch?



The other photograph I sent to Sue Lynch

Sue Lynch phoned back very quickly after receiving the pictures to say that the man on the left, the one thought to be Tilden, was her grandfather James Lynch. How could this be? We had even included this identification of him as Tilden in the appeal display, and Peter Roebuck's book made the same identification. We knew Tilden to be multi-talented. As well as being architect of the Shrigley church, he had painted the Stations of the Cross for the church and had painted the picture of St John Bosco for his altar within the church, the one that included a depiction of the church itself. It seemed only fitting that, with a mason's hammer, he would turn his hand to doing a little carving around one of the church doors.



One of the Stations of the Cross painted by Tilden



Tilden's painting above the Altar of St John Bosco

When Sue Lynch's picture of her grandfather arrived it showed a much older man and it was dated November 1951. All that remained to be done was to examine the earlier photo of him and compare it with another one of Tilden taken at the opening of the church in July 1938, to explain why the mistake had been made, both by us and by John Plant. Tilden and Lynch looked remarkably similar to each other.



James Lynch in 1951



James Lynch 1930s and Philip Tilden 1938

One Sunday afternoon I visited Sue Lynch at her aunt's house in Macclesfield. We had an interesting hour talking about her grandfather and looking at a collection of family photographs. She was going through her aunt's possessions, looking for anything relevant to what I now sensed was a common purpose; to establish her grandfather's role in the building of the Shrigley church. John Plant already shared that purpose, and having seen the 1951 photo of his uncle, he was sure he had got the wrong man in his earlier identification. This was an easy mistake to make under the circumstances.

The next step was to bring Sue and John together. This meeting took place on another Sunday afternoon, and it was a pleasure to hear them talking about family matters, looking at albums and sharing knowledge about a man they both loved and admired.

By this time, however, Sue had been through more papers and had come up with fascinating details of her own father's accident on the road from Macclesfield to Pott Shrigley all those years ago. More importantly, it clarified her father's and her grandfather's roles on the Shrigley workforce.

The impression I had got of the son's accident was that he had been riding his bike, bringing his father his lunch, as a son would, from home to work, perhaps because he had forgotten it in the morning. However, there had been more to it than that, and the reason was, as Sue Lynch knew, that the accident had given her father what he called an out-of-body experience, interesting in itself but with further details that are pertinent to the original purpose of seeking to know more about those who built the church.

James Lynch, the elder, had been born in Macclesfield in 1897 and had attended Macclesfield Art School. He married Miriam Plant at Macclesfield Parish Church in 1920 and had two children, James born in 1921 and Joan in 1922. During the war, Lynch had seen action in France on the Somme and other battlefields serving with the Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders. He had met his wife while on leave.

His son's accident is best appreciated in full from his own hand-written account, illustrated by the sketches he added.

I was masoning for a firm of builders, on a new Chapel for a Salesian Order College; the site was near by the college at the small village of Pott Shrigley, some 7 miles from Macclesfield. There was my father, who was the foreman, 2 other masons, 3 quarry masons, known as stone dressers and myself, the apprentice.

I enjoyed the work, as I drove the chisel with the hammer, I felt the stone followed my very thought. I was right handed.

As the youth in the group, I would do, when asked, other tasks that came along. The circumstances of my last task would lead to a most extraordinary experience.

I was asked to go to Macclesfield, by bicycle, and fetch a heavy mason's mallet from the mason's yard. As the firm's lorry was returning to Macclesfield, I put the bike on the back of the lorry and got a lift back to town.

Back in town I picked up the mallet and started my journey to the chapel site; I was pedalling nice and steady when, at about two miles out, I saw, at about 100 yards ahead, a lorry. In those days (1930s) lorries could not go too fast at the best of times, and this was loaded. The road was a good road with a footpath on one side.

I stepped up speed to a fast lick, in the hope that I might steal a tow from the back rail rod (one held on with one hand to the back rod) of the lorry. As I approached to grab this rod, I

was then moving at speed, I began to lose control of the bike and I veered over to the right hand side of the road, and saw for one fleeting moment, an oncoming lorry. Then, black out.

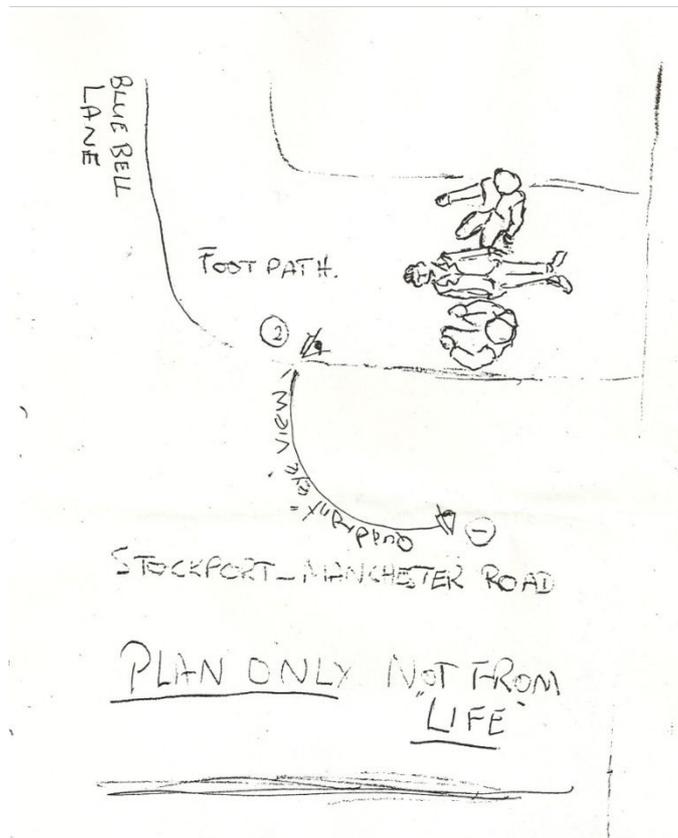
Then I was aware that I was looking at myself from about 6 to 8 feet above in the air and about 8 feet away. At this point I would like to mention that I am very myopic and in normal circumstances would not see a face, let alone details at that distance.

I had been placed on the footpath, that was on the left hand side going out of town. I saw myself and two men, both were kneeling beside my prostrate body, one of the men I knew, he was the village policeman P.C.Twigg, a very tall, thin man and well known in that area (known as Tytherington) the other man I did not know was a stoutish, smaller man.

From my vantage point (that is Jim 'A' in the air) I could see myself (Jim 'B') lying on the footpath with my legs going away in perspective and my head nearer to Jim 'A', my right side being the nearer side. P.C.Twigg knelt beside the prone body of Jim 'B' on the right hand side. He wore a flat cap, a dark jacket and trousers, though not matching. I (Jim 'A') noticed that P.C.Twigg wore black boots with cycle clips. The other man was on the left hand side of me (Jim 'B') was similarly dressed though I (Jim 'A') could not see his boots as the body of Jim 'B' obstructed the view. He also knelt.

I awoke in hospital. I had received a blow heavy enough to fracture the left hand side of my skull leading to some brain damage. But I was young enough to recover and to become a successful artist, but now I am left handed.

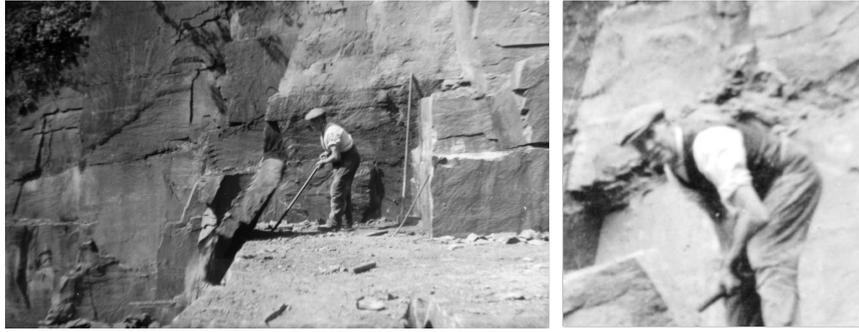
I have thought many times since of the experience of "seeing myself". Did I die but the strength of my "self-hood-ness" that was left in my body pull back a kind of essence that was trying to escape? Or did I touch another dimension of a parallel universe? Without spectacles!



The fact that the young man was actually employed on site at Shrigley is of great interest, and we must speculate about his age when the accident occurred. The first sod of the church was cut in April 1934, when the boy would have been 13 years old. The church was completed and opened only in July 1938, when he would have been 17 years of age. As there were, in Peter Roebuck's words "long periods of inactivity ... and it was only from the early autumn of 1936 that building work became rapid and sustained" we must assume that it was well after this date, when the superstructure had risen well above the foundations, that mason's skills would have been in full demand, and the request for young James to go to the mason's yard would have been made. So perhaps we can assume that his accident took place sometime after late 1936, possibly 1937. There was severe weather in the winter of 1937 and 1938, when snow lay on the building site for several weeks. Also, I sense from the tone of the account that it was likely to have been in better summer than in bad winter weather.

Particularly interesting, to me, in the account, is the information that the elder Lynch was foreman in a workforce of seven, including 3 quarry masons. We can show photographs of some of these anonymous quarry workers.





Quarry masons at Shrigley

Though we have learned few details about the James Lynch's work at Shrigley, other than the fact that he worked there, we have found that the foreman in charge of the masons was a talented, able and caring man whose story deserves to be told.

Peter and I still hope to encounter relations of the men who worked under him in the hope that someone is able to tell their stories too. If those stories are as interesting as that told of James Lynch by his granddaughter, Sue Lynch, and his nephew, John Plant, then the intention of marking their achievement in building the Shrigley Church, by re-telling them, will be closer to fulfilment.

Mike Kilduff

August 2008