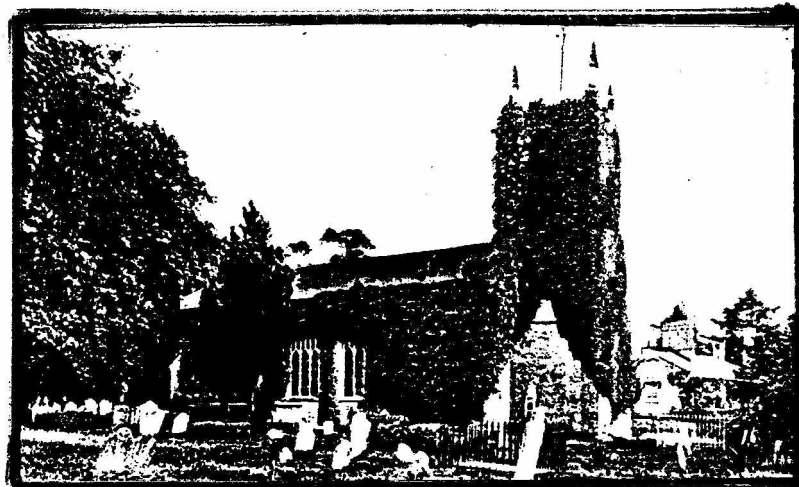
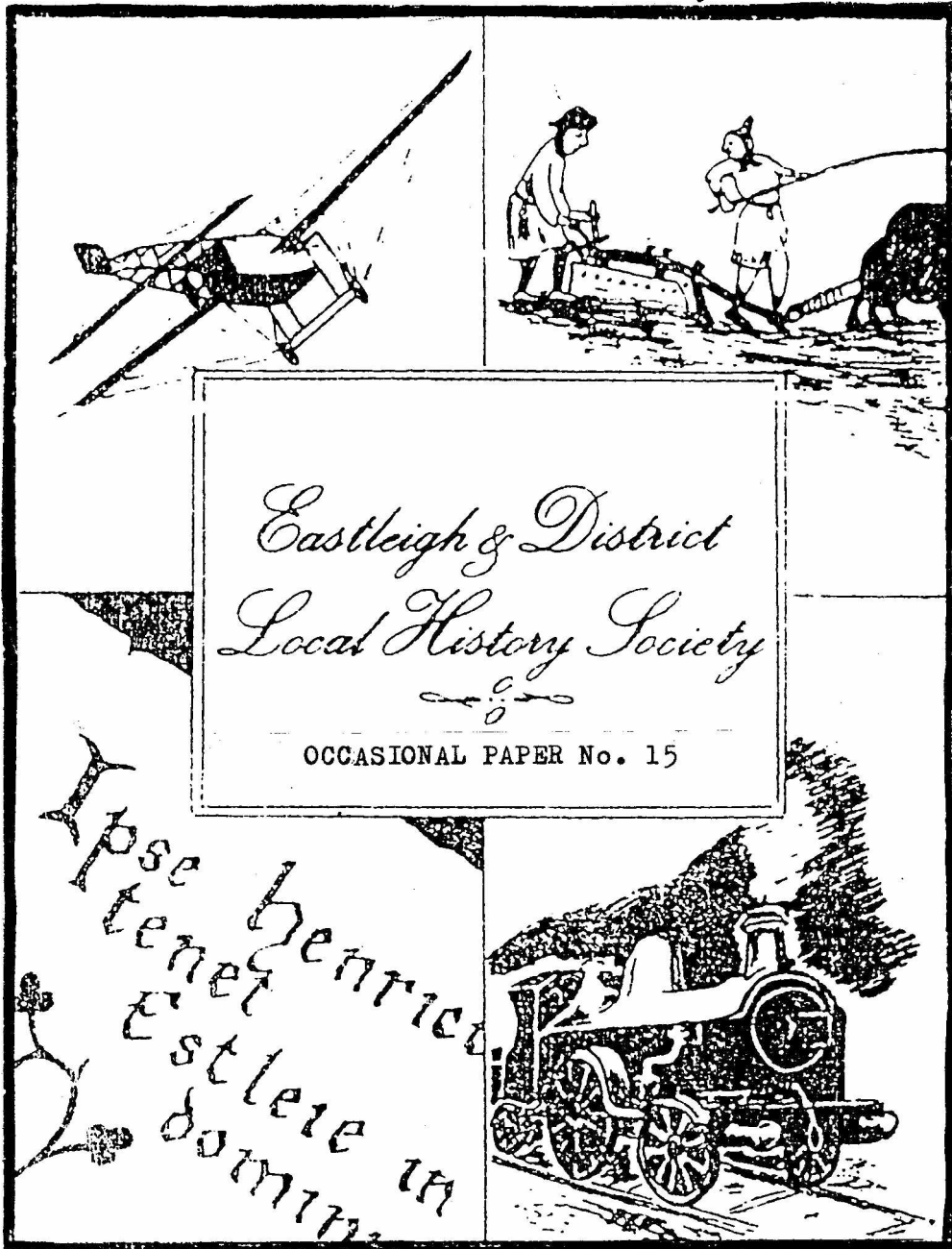
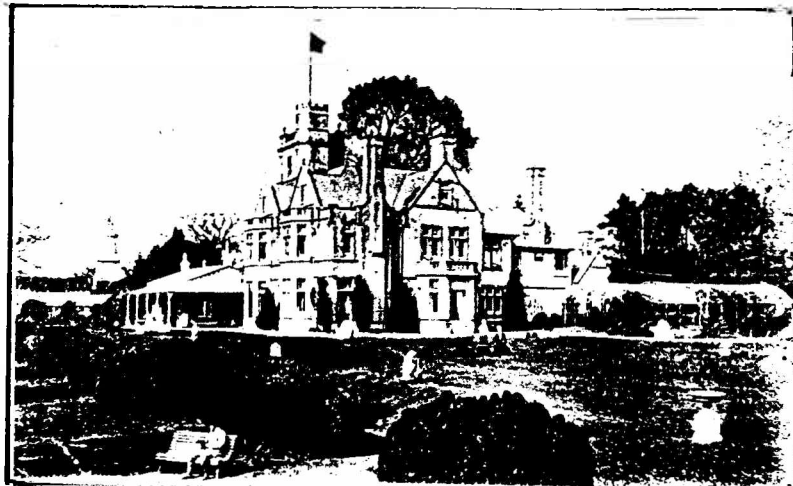
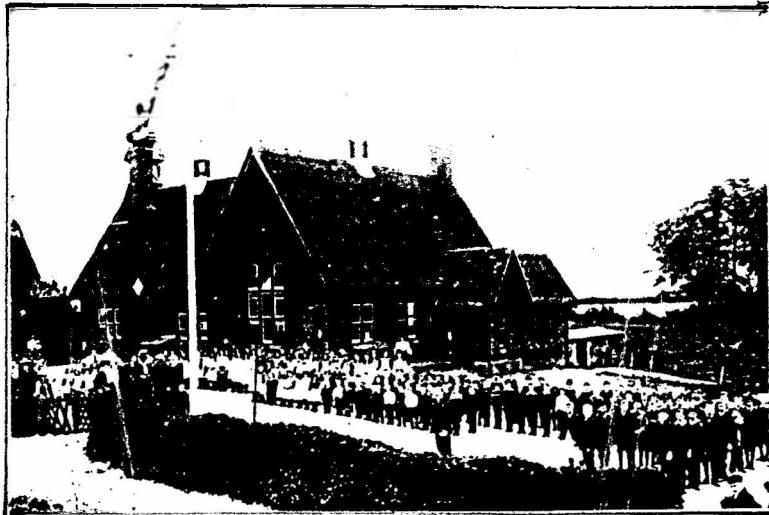
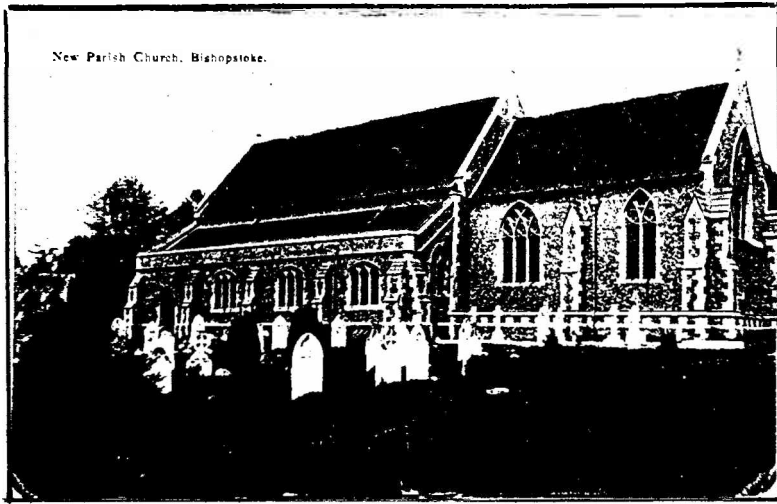


A protest meeting at Bishopstoke.





A PROTEST MEETING AT BISHOPSTOKE

At 8 p.m. on Thursday, 28th November 1985, members of the Eastleigh and District Local History Society were able to re-enact the proceedings of a Protest Meeting which had taken place exactly 80 years previously. A copy of the original report of the meeting had been found and the speeches made at the time came to life again.

The meeting, called to protest against the destruction of the old Parish Church at Bishopstoke and the levelling of the graves in the churchyard, brought to a head unrest and ill feeling that had been simmering in the district for many years, particularly among the gentry who lived in houses scattered along the banks of the River Itchen and whose serenity was being disturbed by land development and the construction of low cost houses, as a result of the London and South Western Railway Company's decision to set up its Carriage Works nearby.

The new Parish Church of St. Mary had been opened on 12th November 1891, largely in order to cope with the growing number of parishioners. Previous churches had been sited lower down Church Road, near the house known as The Cottage. The last one, built in 1825, was still there although neglected and in need of repair. Proposals made at a Vestry Meeting in November 1883, for restoration of the church and enlargement of the churchyard "*by taking in the Yew Tree and the piece of waste land on the East side*" had not been carried out.

For a long time, the area had been a haven of pleasant living for retired sea-faring men and other wealthy owners. Admiral Sir Henry Keppel lived in The Cottage, Vice-Admiral Cumming lived on the corner of Spring Lane and Church Lane, Henry White, who was Clerk and Local Administrator to the Urban District Council, lived at Oak Bank, Cornwallis Simeon at St. John's (renamed Asfordbye in 1934), Willoughby Piggott at Oak Grove, the Cottons at The Mount and so on. In the old church, all these people had the their own "faculty pews", for which they paid rent, and there was little seating left for the ordinary workers now living in the parish.

Such faculty pews did not exist in the new church. The Minutes of a Vestry Meeting, held on 5th April, 1888, record that Mr. Barton "*would present a site for a new church and Burial Ground on his own land, and give £1,000 towards the Building of this Church, on condition that all the seats were free and that he was allowed to nominate the Architect*". A meeting of parishioners, held on 20th August 1888, agreed, nem. con.

Records of subsequent events help to explain the growing discontent. In April 1892, not long after the opening of the new church, the Old Brigade were disturbed to read in The London Gazette that the new church was to be substituted for the old church for interment, and even more so when a letter from the Bishop's Secretary was read in the new church stating that "*The Bishop wished that the old church, with the fences of the churchyard, should be kept in decent repair, and used as a mortuary chapel until his Lordship gives further direction on the subject*".

Later that year, Canon Stenning became rector in the place of Rev. Nash, who had been involved in the changeover from the old church to the new. 1893 saw the Cottons move into The Mount which they had had built. Mr. Cotton, J.P. was a prominent Quaker of the Southampton Meeting. He also served for a while as a County Councillor. He took a great interest in the parish where he lived and was Chairman of Managers for the Boys School. In 1896, major housing developments took place on the Longmead Estate and the new Rector wished to make an effort to clear the outstanding debt on the new church. However, the old differences and ill-feeling were still prevalent and his appeal provoked renewed protests. They rumbled on until brought to a head by two events of some importance involving newcomers to the parish.

In 1903, a new resident, Mr. R.W. Bourne, moved into the Manor House and Rev. S.N. Sedgwick was inducted into the living. He proved to be particularly popular with the working men in his parish. Moreover, he wanted to sell the old Rectory opposite the old church, since he found it much too large, and have a smaller house built nearer to the new church. The Bishop decided to appoint a Commission to resolve the issues, but the impartiality of the members of the Commission was queried. A Church Defence Committee was set up and Mr. Bourne, being a newcomer to the place and likely to be regarded as impartial, was elected Chairman. The Committee decided to hold a Public Meeting in the Boys School, Bishopstoke, mainly "*for the purpose of Protesting against the proposal to pull down the Old Church and level the Graves*", but also to object to the Rector's proposal to sell the old Rectory.

The meeting took place on Thursday, 30th November 1905. According to the report of the proceedings compiled by the Reporting Staff of the Eastleigh Weekly News, "*There was a crowded attendance, standing room being at a premium: while many more were unable to obtain admission, so acute was the interest taken in the subject.*"

Among those present was Mr. Charles Alexander Laishley, a local plumber, a member of the Bishopstoke Church Council and also of the Eastleigh Urban District Council, of which he became Chairman in 1903 and again from April 1907 until his death in September 1909. It was he who proposed the main motion. Expressing his views in forceful language, he claimed to have lived locally for 40 years and that the destruction of the old church "*is the greatest bit of sacrilege that has ever been done or would be done since I have been in the village*", that the Bishop's Commission "*is the most one-sided that has ever been asked to sit on any matter*", that if the graveyard were desecrated "*we shall be going back to the days of heathenism*" and that the removal of the church "*will interfere greatly with the beauty of the parish*".

Speaking on behalf of working men in the parish, a Mr. Barrett made some telling remarks about the lack of funds available to keep the old church and graveyard in good condition. He criticised the rich for having neglected the fabric and the fences, saying, "*Since I have been here, I have found it is the working class that has kept the church going*". He was even more forthright concerning the faculty pews. "*All the gentry who wrote those letters read by the Chairman were faculty pew owners, and were opposed to the poor people sitting in their pews, even when they were away on holiday. Is that Christianity? Do you want to go back to the old days when the poor people had to wait behind until the gentry had gone up to receive Communion, and afterwards they might go up?*" Again later, "*In the old church there is only thirteen pews you can use without the condescension of the faculty owners.*"

In a long speech, Rev. Sedgwick tried to put the facts before the meeting "*because an extraordinary amount of misapprehension has been allowed to creep in concerning the matter..... I am absolutely impartial on the question, with no bias one way or the other. The choice lays with the people of the parish, and that is the policy I have adopted.*" He supported the Bishop's action in appointing a Commission and Mr. Barrett's views on faculty pews and lack of financial support from the gentry for repairs. He was adamant on his right to dispose of the Rectory. "*I hold that Bishopstoke is a working man's parish, and I am a working man's parson. Why should I be compelled to live in a great house as if I were a landed gentleman – apart from the fact that I can't afford it?*" The Rector ended by apologising if he had "*hit hard*". Later, he proposed an amendment to the resolution expressing confidence in the proposed Commission, but it was defeated.

Among the remaining speakers was Mr. T.A. Cotton, who claimed he had a right to be present “*as a parishioner paying a large tithe*”. He tried to ease the situation and reconcile opposing attitudes. He appealed for a return to more friendly feelings and a reasoned outcome of the issue. The Chairman finally put the slightly amended motion that “*We, the parishioners of Bishopstoke, and others, having an interest in the Bishopstoke old Parish Church, protest against the destruction of our old Parish Church and the levelling of the graves, and we humbly pray the Rt. Rev. the Lord Bishop of Winchester, through the Commission which is about to sit, to command that Divine Service be said at least once every Sunday in the said Bishopstoke old Parish Church*”.

It was carried unanimously. Obviously, none of either side wished to see the old church demolished. Then followed a debate on the second resolution. “*We, the parishioners of Bishopstoke, protest against the sale of the Rectory and glebe land, and we hereby instruct Mr. A.O. Parkin, our Churchwarden, to respectfully request the Rt. Rev. the Lord Bishop of Winchester, not to permit such sale.*”

The discussion hinged largely on whether the Rectory belonged to the Rector and that he had the right to sell it, as claimed by Rev. Sedgwick, and what would happen if “*such a bonny house, with its fine orchard and grounds*” were sold. In the words of Rev. Simeon, who proposed the motion on behalf of his brother, Cornwallis Simeon, “*First they wanted the old church to go; now they want the Rectory to go. It seems that everything in the parish is changing, and that all our forefathers knew and loved is to be spoiled I do not think we ought to have the land broken up for a lot of smaller houses, of which we have quite enough already*”.

He was interrupted at this point by shouts of “*No, no, we want more*”, “*It is a working Man’s place*”, “*You are speaking for yourself*”, “*Let ‘em all come*”, and he quickly moved the resolution, which was formally seconded.

Rev. Sedgwick again registered his protest. “*I have to thank Mr. Simeon for some very estimable advice, but I decline to enter into any discussion on the subject of the Rectory, as I consider it an unwarrantable interference into my private business. I cannot see what harm there is in putting up cottages for working men to live in.*”

And Mr. Barrett had the last word. *“The question has been very nicely put from a residential point of view. It is the same old story, though. First of all they did not want the dirty working man, but they could not keep him away. Then the second objection was to the hooter in the morning, but that didn't come off. It is all very well. They try to keep the working man from residing amongst them, but when they want us to come to a meeting they are very glad to see us. I know one thing, and that is our rates are going up, and I say we do want the houses. ‘Let ‘em all come’”.*

On putting the resolution to the meeting, the Chairman declared it carried with only three dissentients. He promised to see that the two resolutions and other papers and petitions would be brought to the attention of the Commission.

There followed various votes of thanks and the Report of the Proceedings ends with the sentence, *“Cheers for the Rector concluded the meeting.”*

Despite the protests, all the fears of those present at the meeting were realised. The old church was demolished, the gravestones set against the walls and the ground handed over to the Urban District to be used as a Recreation Ground. The Rectory was sold. However, the Yew Tree is still there.

Stan Roberts

December 1985

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