

A Brief History of Parish of Tecumseth

Once upon a time, in a galaxy not so far away

Our churches have each played a role in the growth of southern Ontario and this is a brief look at some of the history of St. John's Church and the Parish of Tecumseth (which also included Christ Church and St. Paul's Church at times).

St. John's Church on the 6th Line has its roots in this area going back to the early 1800's. At that time there were no churches here and the Anglican Church religion was brought to the local farmers by travelling missionaries holding services in local homes and barns. By comparison, our present church and hall look pretty good.

One of the early records shows that in 1831 Rev R. D. Cartwright, Chaplin to the Bishop of Quebec, visited this area and reported back that the people had not seen a clergyman for a year. Given the good attendance at local services, in 1833 construction of St. John's Tecumseth was begun – just east of its present site on the 6th Concession. The first service was held in the partially built church on Aug 2, 1835 and was presided over by Rev. Adam Elliott with 200 in attendance and performing 6 baptisms. Not a bad-sized congregation for a little farm church on its first day.

Rev. Elliott was shortly replaced by Rev. Henry H. O'Neill who continued to offer services at St. John's and act as a travelling missionary till 1837. The Earl of Gallway, based on the opinion of the Bishop's Chaplin, Mr. Lockhart, requested that the Bishop of Montreal locate Rev. Featherstone Osler in Tecumseth. (Note. Trinity Church in Bond Head, as well as St. John's, has a number of plaques commemorating Osler's time here. His family, including his four sons, made quite an impact on Ontario's growth through to the 1900s. In fact his son Dr. William Osler gained an international reputation and taught at John Hopkins Hospital and Oxford University. It should also be noted that Bond Head was not only home to the Oslers but also Canada's first Postmaster General, Sir William Mulock.)

Rev Osler was appointed as missionary of Tecumseth & West Gwillumbury and conducted his first service in the still unfinished St. John's on June 25, 1837. In this building, still without lath and plaster, Rev Osler was installed as priest on July 12, 1837. The long unfinished church building was completed within a year of his arrival which was indicative of this man's drive and passion for his church.

The Osler's first rectory was a makeshift house in a former stable in Bond Head. Finding this unsuitable, Mr. Osler gave the congregation an ultimatum – provide him and his wife (Ellen Free Pickton) with a proper residence or he would leave. A sum of \$368 was raised on the spot and James Armstrong donated an acre of land on the seventh concession for the new parsonage. By the summer of 1838, Rev Osler's family was living in the new rectory. As a side note, our Diocese recently sent us the deed for this property which is now a part of the Club at Bond Head Golf Course.

Rev Osler was a popular minister, being asked to hold services in 20 different areas covering 2000 square miles of farmland from Thornhill to Penetang – and all done on horseback!! When the Bishop

refused to give him any help, he was not deterred and he first brought on a lay reader, Thomas Duke, to share some of the work. Then he started a college, trained six new ministers and built Trinity Church next to his parsonage for the lecture hall – still long before the founding of the Theological Institute at Coburg.

But this heavy work load had its toll and Mr. Osler returned to England in 1843 “completely broken in health”. On his departure, more than 110 sleighs and wagons of his parishioners accompanied him as far as Holland Landing, where he bade them goodbye.

In London and Ireland, Osler preached and campaigned for the Canadian Church Society. He returned to Bond Head in 1845 with quite a bit of financial backing. He then started Bond Head’s grammar school and saw to the building of the first school house there. But Rev Osler longed for more challenge and left for Ancaster in 1857 where there were more advanced educational facilities.

During Rev Osler’s tenure here the parish had grown to include six churches – St. John’s, Trinity Bond Head, St. Paul’s Beeton, Christ Church West Gwillumbury and churches in Cookstown & Lloydtown – two parsonages and two glebe farms. The farm surrounding St. John’s consisted of 200 acres of which Osler worked 160 acres.

When Osler left he was succeeded by Rev Dr. Strong till 1866 and then Rev John Davidson till 1875. That year, Rev Thomas Ball took over the parish and was responsible for the building of St. Paul’s Church in Beeton, which had its first service on February 29, 1880. This was a busy year for the parish as St. John’s Church was moved eastward in 1880 to the Glebe farm but was then destroyed by fire that year. The present church was opened Sept 25, 1881. Rev Strong also undertook in 1885 to move Trinity Church (taking it apart, moving pieces by wagon and reassembling the building) from the 7th Line to the Bond Head location where it still stands – although it is no longer an Anglican Church.

Rev A. C. Watt then took over the parish in 1895. A graduate of Trinity College in Toronto, Rev Watt was immediately embroiled in controversy as the Rural Dean proposed that Trinity and the Cookstown church form a new parish and that St. John’s, St Pauls and Christ Church, Tottenham form another parish. The Trinity wardens, at a special vestry held at St. John’s on April 15, 1895, didn’t take too kindly to this proposal and entered their “most emphatic protest against an such change and will resist it to the utmost”.

In this case, the wardens prevailed (sort of) and Trinity Bond Head formed a parish with St. John’s while Christ Church, Tottenham and St. Pauls Beeton formed a second parish. This arrangement held until the recent amalgamation that eliminated Trinity and St. Pauls churches.

Some other interesting points in our history include:

- Rev Watt’s wife was quite as energetic as her husband forming the Women’s Auxiliary in 1901, collecting money for a furnace for Trinity and building a fence around St. John’s Cemetery.
- The envelope system of giving was instituted by Rev Lowe during his incumbency (1912 – 1917)

- Canon Hearn, a naval architect in WWI, was instituted as rector of Parish of Tecumseth in 1923. He led the parish for 42 years and guided it through the great depression taking on many of the duties including looking after the altar, shovelling tons of coal into the furnaces in winter and living on a stipend that was often just produce from parish farms.
- Following Canon Hearn, the parish was led by Rev Herb Bull, Rev David Brinton, Rev Fran Kovar-Gough and most recently by Rev Katherine Treganowan who took the parish through its most recent amalgamation with Christ Church.

As can be seen, our Parish played a significant role in the history of Tecumseth and its towns of Bond, Head, Beeton and Tottenham. Unfortunately, since the mid-1900's it can be seen that our prominence as a religious institution in the township has declined. It is said that those who ignore history are doomed to repeat it. Perhaps we can take a lesson from this brief history as we move forward with a new incumbent and start to grow our Parish of the Evangelists once again and have it recognized as a vibrant part of our community as it has been in the past.

Larry Moore