

Reverend Richard Gee

Vicar of St Lawrence, Abbots Langley

1844–1878

It was early in the reign of Queen Victoria that the Revd Richard Gee became vicar at St Lawrence Church, Abbots Langley and where his endeavours to help, encourage and supervise the many charities, school funds and Parochial interests have been his legacy for 30 years' ministry in the parish.

He began his work as a curate, studying at Wadham College, where in 1843 he took an MA. In 1844, when Vicar Lewis retired after 23 years at St Lawrence Church (1821–1844), the opportunity came for the young Revd Gee to take up the much desired appointment. Having married Mary Ann

Jackson, of Hillside, Abbots Langley in 1839, he had always hoped for a living in his wife's parish and eagerly set about the challenges ahead.

One of his first tasks was to continue his predecessor's work on the Nave and Chancel in the church. He next began re-examining the schools. A girls' school was needed urgently, having 'lost' their original building when the boys' school was set up. This had meant the girls being schooled in Mrs Taylor's front room, in the High Street – an unsatisfactory arrangement for the numbers involved. Forging ahead, Vicar Gee promptly contacted the National Society, applying for a grant towards a National Girls' School. By the end of 1844, with the agreed grant plus subscriptions, the new school was built – by local builder Joseph Chalk. Later, in 1851, a new school for infants was built and by 1853 the boys' school had also been rebuilt!

Vicar Gee soon began supervising the many subscriptions, donations and collections to the coal and clothing clubs for the parish, plus the foreign missions and in 1848 the 'Abbots Langley Church Club' was formed. This club was to assist any working man under 50 years, when ill. Each man paid 1/6d per month, which in turn would provide 10/- for the first 13 weeks of sickness, after which it was reduced. There were 271 contributing members with a reserve fund of £314.14s.4d.

In 1868 a 'Doctor's Club' was formed. This was for sick people, not entitled to see the parish doctor, to receive help with any medical expenses. After Christmas that same year also saw the beginning of a Parochial Soup Kitchen. It opened twice weekly and the



Vicar Gee's grave. Photo: A Ashby



Vicar Gee's Avenue of lime trees. Photo: A Ashby

cost of £13 was met by a special donation fund.

Revd Gee began many other helpful community projects: he established a bank for small savings; he obtained allotment land at Bedmond, Leavesden and Hunton Bridge; he organised a flower show in 1867; he ran three lending libraries and sold low-priced Bibles and Prayer books. There were Readings and concerts in the village and adult evening classes for those who had no previous formal education; in 1853, 39 scholars attended these classes.

He made further changes in the church with repairs, decorations and re-arranged the seating. There were changes to the services, with two on Sunday at 11am and 3pm, and Friday at 6.30pm plus an 11am service at all festivals.

In 1853 he found time to write up a paper about Abbots Langley & Kings Langley, entitled 'The Two Langleys', which was illustrated by his wife Mary Ann. It was later read at a meeting of the St Albans Architectural & Archaeological Society, of which he was a member. This paper has since been acknowledged as a rare historical work.

By 1861, with an ever increasing population, there was need to enlarge the churchyard. The Vestry purchased, at £353, 1 acre 31 poles of Sarah Smith's Cogdell Field, exchanging 37 poles of it with the piece of glebeland, which in turn became the new burial ground. After a service in the church, a procession of children, clergy and churchwardens made their way to the new burial ground, where prayers and a Sentence of Consecration were directed by the Lord Bishop of Rochester.

Soon after this the Vicar, who had a great love of trees, planted his well-known avenue of Lime trees. These run diagonally, from a path near the vicarage across the churchyard in a south-west to north-east direction, where they remain to this day. He later wrote a

paper referring to the Lime tree avenue on Watford Golf Links, from which he traced its origins to a Moses Cook, gardener to the Earl of Essex. A book on tree planting, written in 1724 by Moses Cook, mentioned the Lime avenue at Watford to which Cook laid claim, stating that he had raised the saplings himself at Hadham Hall, Hertfordshire. Vicar Gee remarked on his own similar avenue saying 'I have a weak hope that some vicar of Abbots Langley may speak of my Lime avenue in our churchyard and say "These were planted in Old Mr Gee's time"'.

During his ministry there was much concern in the area over the straw plaiters and their moral welfare. Many people, especially clergy, regarded the plaiters as neglectful of their domestic duties and several parliamentary commissions were set up to examine the industry. However, Revd Gee, a Diocesan inspector, was the only supportive voice for them. He felt, despite the criticism, 'that plait was not an unmixed evil but more of a mixed blessing, providing a much needed income'. He also felt the trade had no bearing on the morals or health of its workers but that it meant widows and the aged were not totally reliant on the parish.

In July 1863, the idea was put forward for a village cricket match, with two teams from the Manor House and Langley House servants taking part. The match (possibly the first recorded) was played on Mr Grover's meadow (opposite Langley House). The final score was Langley House 54 runs, Manor House 45 runs!

In 1870, Vicar Gee and his wife attended the opening of Leavesden Asylum. He was very concerned at the overall set up, as he saw it, of the seemingly 'prison-like inhospitable looking building'. When taken on a tour of the site he noted, with misgivings, a house for an Asylum Chaplain. He pondered over what sort of priest might be engaged. Would he preach only on the inside? Would he have

authority over workers on the outside? Would he be a rival in the battle to win souls? The first Chaplain was Revd J Finch-Smith (1870–1872). He was followed by the Revd JRB Watson who lived and worked there (1872–1902) with his daughter Caroline, of ‘Parochial Marmalade’ fame.

Perhaps it is ironic that any misgivings Vicar Gee had about the Asylum Chaplain and his work, would eventually see both priests equally serving the community for over 30 years. A further irony was their deaths, which were within months of each other – Revd Gee, March 1902 and Revd Watson, April 1903. They are buried by the church tower, near to each other.

During his years at the church he and his wife had their share of sadness too. In 1859 their eldest daughter Milbourne died from Diphtheria, aged 14 and later, in 1875, their remaining child Lilian died after a long illness, aged 21. Both were buried near the church tower. It was after the loss of their second daughter that Vicar Gee felt unable to continue his work in Abbots Langley. In 1878 he left and took up a living at New Windsor, where he became a reader in the Chapel at Windsor and in 1884 was Honorary Chaplain to Queen Victoria.

During his ministry he held many offices – becoming a Doctor of Divinity, Honorary Canon of St Albans, Chaplain to the Bishop of St Albans, Rural Dean (Watford) Magistrate on the Watford Bench and Guardian of the Watford Union.

When leaving Abbots Langley, it was said that his many years of work in the parish had improved the moral, educational and religious life of the village. All his good works, and his avenue of Limes (now over 100 years old) remain the legacy of ‘Old Mr Gee’s time’!

A Ashby

METEOROLOGICAL OBSERVATIONS

March 1903

Taken at Rosebank, Berkhamstead.

Latitude 51° 45' 40" N. Longitude 0° 33' 20" W.
Altitude 401 feet.

1903	Barometer at 3 p.m. Sea level 9 A.M.	Shade Temperatures.		Rain.		Duration of bright sunshine.
		Max.	Min.	Day.	N'th	
	Inches	Deg	Deg	Inch	Inch	h. m.
11	—	—	6 0
12	29.97	53	26	—	—	6 0
13	29.96	87	33	—	—	8 18
14	29.93	50	36	0.02	—	—
15	29.85	50	29	—	0.01	6 29
16	29.67	49	34	—	—	5 46
17	29.60	49	33	0.21	0.15	—
18	29.69	50	39	—
Total.	—	—	—	0.23	0.16	—
Mean.	29.84	51	33	—	—	4 59

REMARKS

This is the eighth week in succession that the mean temperature has been higher than is seasonable. All the days during the week have been more or less warm, and on the warmest day the temperature in shade rose to 57 degrees – the highest reading as yet recorded this month; it was, however, twice exceeded in February. On the other hand, on the coldest night, the exposed thermometer showed 9 degrees of frost. Rain fell on three days to the total depth of nearly half-an-inch. The percolation through the gauge covered with short grass, which had nearly ceased, recommenced, to a slight extent, on the 17th, and is now again coming freely through the bare-soil gauge. Notwithstanding two sunless days, the record of clear sunshine averaged nearly 4¾ hours a day. Calm and light airs prevailed until the 16th, since which the winds have been more or less high. The amount of humidity in the air was on the whole unusually small for the time of year. *Gentiana verna* came first into flower in my garden on the 11th, which is 16 days earlier than last year, and 25 days earlier than in 1901. – E.M.