

## Revd Charles Girdlestone and the building of St Peter's Upper Gornal



Revd Charles Girdlestone, Vicar of Sedgley 1826-37

Revd Charles Girdlestone (1797-1881) was vicar of All Saints' from 1826-1837.

He went up to Wadham College at Oxford University in 1815 and graduated in 1818 with a First in Classics and a Second in Mathematics, and taught there for three years after he had graduated.

He was ordained as a priest, and gained an MA (possibly in Theology?) in 1821.

After appointments as a curate at Hastings and then Ferry Hinksey near Oxford, he was appointed by the patron, the Earl of Dudley (John William

Ward 4<sup>th</sup> Viscount Dudley and Ward) as vicar of All Saints' Sedgley in 1826. He arrived when the Earl was financing and rebuilding the church, which reopened in 1829.

From 1829, England was in the grip of a cholera epidemic, and the parish of Sedgley suffered very badly from it. There were 1,350 cases of cholera and 290 deaths in the Parish in six weeks in August and September 1832.

It caused great poverty and hardship in the area, and Girdlestone's response was to carry out a survey of his parishioners to ascertain their condition, and to provide them with bibles.

This was carried out by the church's active parishioners, who visited people in their homes. Called 'Liber Parochialis', it is a very detailed social survey of Sedgley, and is also something of a local census. There is a copy at Dudley Archives which was transcribed by an All Saints' parishioner, the late Dorothy Inett.

Girdlestone was also an author. His major work was a commentary on the Bible, for use by families in their homes. He first published a New Testament commentary in the 1830s, and completed the Old Testament later in his life.

Girdlestone had many friends from his Oxford days whom he invited to come to Sedgley to deliver

sermons, which were used to raise funds for the church and parish.

The building of St Peter's was part of a wave of new church building in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

At the beginning of the century the difficulty of creating new parishes – a process that until 1843 required an Act of Parliament – meant that the Church was poorly represented in England's new manufacturing cities.

The government had begun to remedy this. In 1818 it had voted £1 million to be spent on new churches, which was followed by another £500,000 in 1824, producing a surge in church building.

The enthusiasm for building or restoring churches continued in Victoria's reign - between 1851 and 1875, 2,438 churches were built or rebuilt.

It was a time of great religious fervour and debate throughout the country. At one extreme were the Evangelicals, who focused on the Gospel teachings rather than ritual, and emphasised preaching and Bible study. At the other, High Churchmen of the Oxford Movement revived rituals, images, incense and vestments not seen in England since the Reformation.

It isn't clear where Revd Girdlestone stood in the context of religious debate at the time – he may well have pursued a middle course. He might have identified with the Evangelicals, as he was a prolific

writer, preacher and publisher of sermons. On the other hand, he knew John Henry Newman, a leader of the Oxford Movement, whom he had assisted in getting his first clerical appointment - and who later signed one of Girdlestone's books. The Oxford Movement was very concerned with the social problems of the day.

Another factor that galvanized Anglican church building was the vast influx of workers from the countryside, employed in the new industries of the Industrial Revolution in places like Upper Gornal. Non-conformist churches were especially successful in attracting the new arrivals who were deterred by what they perceived as the class-ridden hierarchical nature of Anglican churches.

In the immediate vicinity of St Peter's, the local industries were quarrying, coal, fireclay and ironstone mining, nail making and brick making (and some working with fireclay). This type of employment was practised by the majority of the population.

The documents in St Peter's file at Dudley Archives give some idea about the people and processes involved with bringing the new church into being.

A Memorandum of 1838 records the raising of £280 by parishioners, for the purpose of purchasing the 'copyhold' (a type of leasehold) of the church site. The transaction was carried out at the Sedgley

Manor Court (probably held at the Court House, Sedgley).

The same book records the grants received for building the church:

1835 Diocesan Society £600

1836 Her Majesty's Commissioners £600

1836 Incorporated Society £300

Hyndman's Trust £100

Diocesan Society Additional £200

Incorporated Society Additional £150

Subscriptions raised by Charles Girdlestone contributed a total of £257. Contributors included Lord and Lady Ward (£10 each – worth about £1000 today).

A document signed by the Bishop of Lichfield in 1841 assigns the income from the rental of pews to the vicar of the day as a stipend, with a small sum allocated to a clerk.



Revd William Lewis, Vicar of Sedgley 1837-70

Much of the preparatory work for building St Peter's was carried out by Charles Girdlestone. However in 1837, when Edward Stanley was appointed bishop of Norwich, Girdlestone accepted the living of Alderley, Cheshire, which the bishop vacated.

His work was continued by his former curate, Revd William Lewis, who became the new vicar of Sedgley.

**Martin Jones**  
**June 2018**