

**The Opening of the School-Church of Acol, and the Sermon
Preached by the Bishop of Dover on that Occasion
- October 1876 -
By Alfred T Walker**

The School-Church of Acol was formally opened on Thursday 5th October 1876, by the Rt. Revd the Bishop of Dover. There was a celebration of Holy Communion at 8.30 in the morning, and in the afternoon a special service – a form of Evening Prayer with special prayers for the dedication of a church – followed by an address by the Bishop.

The little building was crowded to excess at the opening service, most of the gentry and residents of the neighbourhood being present. The choir of Birchington Church was also present.

The Offertory on that day amounted to £41 15s 6d, leaving a debt on the building of £55. The Bishop announced at the end of the service that a gentleman who was present had kindly offered £5 on condition the other £50 was raised within a week. The week was extended but the amount was finally collected. Mr. Gray of Birchington Hall, now Spurgeon's Homes, gave £20 in addition to his previous subscription of £30 and the Marquis of Conyngham gave £15.

The Bishop in his address observed that he had come from the Cathedral of Canterbury, perhaps the noblest of our British Churches, to take part in that service, in that small but in all things well ordered and comely House of God, which was erected in that part of Birchington Parish. No-one, he thought, could stand up to speak on behalf of God and His Church in the midst of the Isle of Thanet without having brought to his mind very prominently the continuity of our Church of England. Not far off in an adjoining parish was the sea beach where St. Augustine landed on his way to Canterbury, where was the palace of the Saxon king. But St. Augustine was not the beginning of Christianity in this Island of Great Britain, for we knew well how he travelled to the west, and met there relics of an older Christianity. Therefore it was impossible to stand there in Thanet without this thought – that the Church of England today was not the Church of England of yesterday only, or the day before. The Bishop then proceeded to observe that he thought there was a special interest about the erection of that House of God.

In the case of some of them there were absolutely no remains of the Church which once existed. There was for instance not far off at Sarre the Chapel of St. Giles, dependant upon the mother church of Reculver, and its various district chapels --- Herne, St. Nicholas, and All Saints, (at Shuart) which had so utterly perished, and it seemed that the very name of All Saints had passed out to a church in a different ecclesiastical region --- the parish church of Birchington. In their drive from Canterbury that day they had come to the name of a parish church with which they had more immediately to do – he meant Woodchurch –in the wood only a short distance to the east of them, the chapelry dependant upon Monkton Vicarage. It seemed so far as he could gather that the last record of any service held in that church – the Church of St. Nicholas-in-the-Wood, distinguished and separate in their minds from possibly the very important church of St. Nicholas-at-the-Wade, or Ford across to the mainland of Kent --- was almost exactly 300 years ago in the

early part of the reign of Queen Elizabeth. Now that church had almost utterly perished, although he was told there were some traces of its foundation stones even left to that day.

There at Acol within sight of the place where the chapel of Wood once stood they had that little House of God, that new chapel of ease to the mother church at Birchington, there at Acol reproducing in its work, he trusted, for God, nay, almost reproducing in the very name the history of the little Woodchurch – for was not Acol, Acolt? As his own parish in Middlesex was Acton or the little town in the oak forest, so was not that little place there the Acolt or the Oak Wood? So that little Acol church took upon itself in its work as almost in its name the labours of that church which once had passed away hard by. And thus might it ever be in this our beloved and venerable Church of England, the old, interwoven and intermixed indissolubly with the new, the new arisen with fresh vigour out of the crumbling ruins of the past.

Might that humble House of God, might the stateliest church in our land even unto the humblest mission rooms in our crowded city parishes be, on the one hand and infidelity on the other, superstition and formality leading many a soul also to give up utterly in despair the thought of its own private and personal responsibility before God, and to yield up that responsibility to some fancy living voice, a superstition and a formality too apt, alas, and on the other hand, the danger of unbelief, and unbelief more dangerous than ever, an unbelief pressing upon us in its most perilous phrase, an unbelief which came before us with noble aspirations and high moral strivings, an unbelief striving to put before us a philosophy of life which was utterly different from the cross of Christ, Christ's open Easter grave, Mount Olivet and the descent of the Pentecostal spirit.

God grant that in the Church which they had met that day to dedicate to Almighty God's service, Christ and Christ crucified would be simply set forth."

In conclusion, the Bishop said that a collection would be made for the sum still outstanding upon the building.

It is interesting to note that when the Foundation Stone was laid the previous 18th April in 1876, the Quex Park Bell Ringers assembled in the Waterloo Tower by the request of Capt. Cotton and rang a peal. In the evening they retired to the Crown and Sceptre where a substantial dinner was provided for them, and Mr. T. B. Reed took the Chair.

In July 1876 Archbishop Campbell licensed the Rev. John Alcock and his licensed Curates to officiate in the building, known as the School-Church of Acol, in celebrating the Holy Sacraments. Every Baptism which is celebrated in the building had to be duly registered in the Registry of Baptisms belonging to the Parish Church of Birchington.