

Canon John Edward Bowers 1923 - 2019

Vicar of St Helen's from 1963 to 1988



John Bowers was Vicar of St Helen's, Ashby for a quarter of a century and is fondly remembered by older members of the congregation. He had a long and distinguished career in the Church of England. Educated at Dulwich College and King's College, London, he was ordained deacon in 1951 and priest in 1952. He married Judith Orme, a nurse, in 1957, and they had four children together. Canon Bowers held the following roles:

- Priest Vicar and Sacrist of Southwark Cathedral (1955-57)
- Chaplain to the Forces, Territorial Army (1955-67)
- Vicar of St Peter's, Loughborough (1957-63)
- Vicar of St Helen's Ashby-de-la-Zouch (1963-88)
- Chaplain to the Forces, Reserve of Officers (1967-78)
- Rural Dean of Akeley West (1976-88);
- Hon. Canon of Leicester Cathedral (1978-88)

He died on 18th October 2019, aged 96.

Canon Bowers appears to have been a 'force of nature' at St Helen's, leading on the urgent roof repairs in 1963, and the major restoration project of the 1970s which included installing new floor slabs to replace worn out Victorian floor tiles, renovating interior walls and repairing guttering. He also led on the rebuilding and development of 'The Cottage' and the celebrations for the church's 500th anniversary in 1974 and on a major organ restoration project in 1985-6, costing some £35,000.

Death Watch Beetle

One of the first issues faced by Canon Bowers after his arrival at St Helen's was the discovery of a serious infestation of Death Watch Beetle in the roof timbers of the church during routine electrical work. The cost of replacing timbers was estimated at £11,000 and a joint appeal for funds was launched in May 1963 with the Ashby Urban Council. In the end, the repairs cost £13,000.

A new Church Hall

St Helen's had built a Parish Hall at the top of North Street early in the 20th Century, but increasingly difficult access to the decaying building across a busy main road during the 1970s provoked the decision to sell it in favour of 'The Cottage', No. 4 Churchyard, which had been purchased from the Ashby

Endowed Schools Foundation in February 1947. Plans for the new parish rooms were drawn up in 1975 and planning permission for 'demolition of existing building and erection of small meeting room' at No. 4, Churchyard, was granted on 18th February 1976. In order to create its garden, a strip of land from the old vicarage garden was conveyed by the vicar to the Leicester Diocesan Board of Finance in trust for St Helen's PCC in June 1978. The Old Parish Hall was sold and is now the Venture Theatre.

500th Anniversary of St Helen's & The Ashe Lectures

Canon Bowers was instrumental in organising a series of celebrations for the church's 500th anniversary, which started on the Patronal Festival in September 1974, continuing until September 1975.

He wrote many letters, outlining his ideas for the anniversary year of the church and inviting people, schools and local organisations to take part in events. He announced the preparation of a commemorative booklet; he asked Ashby Grammar School to produce a 'Christmas Drama' in the church and he asked Sydney Kendall from Ashby Dramatic Society to produce a Passion Play during Holy Week 1975. This took the form of 'The Life & Times of St Helen,' performed on 18 June 1975.

In May 1975 a 'Parish Festival' took place and Lady Huntingdon, better known as Beatrix Potter scholar, Margaret Lane, visited to lecture on 'The Secret World of Beatrix Potter.'

The major restoration of the church was now complete. The building had been thoroughly cleaned and new floor tiles laid down. Two hundred new hassocks, or kneelers, had been embroidered by the ladies of the church and Dr Donald Coggan, then Archbishop of York and shortly to be Archbishop of Canterbury, had visited to give the 'Ashe Lecture' in Oct 1974. The anniversary year ended with a flower festival in September 1975.

The Ashe lectures, revived by Canon Bowers, were quite major events which filled the church and at times over spilled into Manor House School next door. Endowed by Francis Ashe in 1654, The Ashe Lecture provided for weekly lectures in the church by a "godly, orthodox and ordained minister". This was later amended to one lecture each year. Twentieth-century lecturers include Geoffrey Fisher, Donald Coggan (mentioned above), Donald Soper and George Carey.

Canon Bowers also wrote a number of hymns, some of which are in the Church of England Hymn Book, Common Praise. His hymns have been sung in many countries across the world, including Australia and the USA.

Julie Starkey & Anne Heaton
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