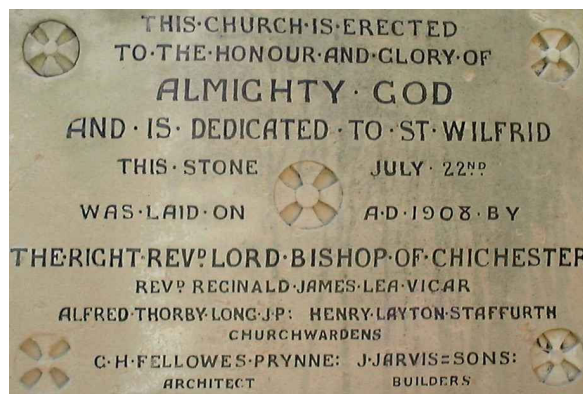


The Laying of the Foundation Stone of St. Wilfrid's Church 22nd July, 1908

We are now less than 2 years away from a very big 100th birthday party – a century since the dedication of St. Wilfrid's church which took place on 23rd April 1910.

This morning we remember what took place 100 years ago next Tuesday – the laying of the foundation stone. This was when years of planning ceased and the actual building work started. If you have never seen the foundation stone do have a look – it's tucked between the east wall facing Victoria Drive and the external door which leads into the Lady Chapel.



In the lead up to the dedication centenary it is worth noting how different Bognor was in those days – no talk then of demolition and regeneration – all open fields from the West of Bognor to Aldwick as the wonderful old postcard of a farmer leading a cow past St. Wilfrid's church reminds us!

In the mid nineteenth century the population of Bognor was just 1,900 people but the opening of the railway in 1864 triggered a rapid expansion. Within nine years Bognor became a Parish in its own right away from South Bersted and the little St. John's chapel in the Steyne (which had opened in 1822) became the Parish church. All thoughts then were how the church, which was struggling to service the needs of the expansion of the town could cope - how times have changed!

The very first discussions took place about 'the growing needs of the West end of Bognor' in 1891. This was the very year that St. John's in the Steyne was being demolished as it was far too small, and still four years before the spire was added to what was the much larger replacement church of St. John's in London Road.

The site of St. Wilfrid's was settled by 1895 and in July 1896 a tin chapel was built on the site of today's vicarage. It could hold 200 people – more than we have here today! In 1905 the plans for a new church to seat 950-1,000 people were unveiled at the Assembly Rooms and outlined by what was to become the church architect – George Fellowes-Pryne.

In the spring of 1908 a start was made on the first phase of the building and the foundation stone laid on 22nd July by the Rt. Rev. Charles John Ridgeway, the new Bishop of Chichester. It was reported that a very large crowd assembled at the corner of Ellasdale Road and Victoria Drive around the site of the new church to witness the service and ceremony of stone laying in brilliant weather.



By December 1908 storm clouds were gathering on the financial side as an appeal was raised for £2,000 to cover the £10,000 needed to complete even the first phase of the church. By then it was clear that the phase to complete the design -three of the five bays, a bell tower, spire and a baptistery would have to be deferred.

We now know that the building never expanded further than the first phase – some responsible for the financial maintenance of our buildings will be relieved to know that! However, let us thank God for what we do have and for the vision and dedication of the past generations of God's followers which led to its foundation. PG