

A Lay Achievement:  
The Story of the Guild of All Souls

By Richard K. Cowie (1988)

Nowadays we find it amusing to read, in Blackmore's Lorna Doone of Parson Bowden's dilemma as he knelt to begin the prayer for the King's Most Excellent Majesty, and Sam Fry, speaking as one who "mislaketh popery", tells him that the King is dead and therefore may not be prayed for. Bravely, Parson Bowden insisted 'he will want it all the more. Let us pray for His Gracious Majesty'. But nobody cried 'Amen' for fear of being entangled with popery.

This attitude regarding the dead still existed in England in 1873 when The Guild of All Souls was founded. Although in these days it is difficult for us to understand this, the formation of The Guild was then a brave enterprise.

This bold step was taken by three laymen – Joseph and Walter Plimpton, and Edmund Frederick Croom – all associated with the then famous church of St James', Hatcham. They met on Saturday, 15th March 1873, and decided to invite other members of the congregation of that church to join them in forming a guild to be known as 'The Guild of All Souls', which would have the following intentions: -

1. To provide furniture for Burials according to the use of the Catholic Church, so as to set forth the two great doctrines of the Communion of Saints and the Resurrection of the Body.
2. Intercessory prayer for the Dying, and for the repose of the souls of deceased members and all the Faithful Departed.

The founders' next action was to invite the Rev'd Arthur Tooth, then vicar of St James', to become the President of the new Guild; an invitation he accepted. The members of the Guild met at St James' once a month for their Guild Office – the Litany of the Faithful Departed.

The original intention of the founders would seem to have been simply parochial for, at their second meeting, they passed a resolution beginning 'That in the opinion of this Meeting a Burial Society or Guild is much

needed in this district'. Within a month, however, they were extending the area of their activities.

However, it was some years before any appreciable extension of The Guild took place. Advertisements were then put in the Church Times and the Church Review, which created an immediate demand for membership and made it possible to open branches of The Guild in widely separated districts. From this time The Guild progressed steadily and has made acceptable in many of the parishes of the Church of England the doctrines which it formed to promulgate; although prayer for the Departed is still not accepted everywhere.

The Guild still accepts as its primary task the organisation of an uninterrupted chain of intercession for its departed members, and for all the Departed – it is in fact the largest Chantry Guild in the Church of England and possibly in the Anglican Communion.

The Guild has always been a truly Catholic society, and played an important part in the Catholic revival in the Church of England. In 1904, The Guild obtained the advowson of the parish of St Stephen, Gloucester Road, in London; and this caused The Guild to form a Patronage Committee whose task it would be to see that in any change in incumbency the priest nominated and presented to the 'vacant Benefice, the Advowson or Patronage of which shall be vested in the Trustees, shall be in sympathy with the objects of The Guild, and by his practice and teaching will assist in the preservation and promotion of Catholic dogma and ceremonial in the Church'. Dr Darwell Stone and the then (2nd) Lord Halifax were members of the Patronage Committee. Many advowsons have since been acquired by The Guild, and by responsible use of its patronage, The Guild has endeavoured materially to strengthen the Catholic position in the Church of England.

Notwithstanding what was said about the Catholic policy followed by the Patronage Committee it should be remembered that, when The Guild originally sought to obtain the advowson of a prominent London church, it was to fulfil its Council's desire to establish a Chantry Chapel in the metropolis. There had been several unsuccessful attempts to obtain an advowson before that of St Stephen, Gloucester Road, became available. A quick decision had to be made – and was – and has never been regretted. Lord Victor Seymour was the incumbent of the living when The

Guild received the advowson, and he fully co-operated with his new patrons and the policy of The Guild. This close and happy relationship has continued with all the succeeding parish priests.

The Guild's records show that many of the leading workers in the Catholic revival were closely associated with The Guild. Such names as Suckling, Stanton, Hanbury-Tracy, Sellon, Dennison, Magee and H. W. Hill occur again and again.

The Guild of All Souls obtained much favourable publicity from its admirably arranged Solemn Requiem for the soul of Queen Victoria in 1901. This was sung in the Church of St Matthew, Westminster, on Tuesday, 5th February 1901, and attended by a large and distinguished congregation which more than filled the church. The extent that the Guild has now succeeded in making known Catholic doctrine on prayer for the Departed is obvious from the fact that this Requiem created a major sensation. The secular press was mystified and regarded the whole thing as exotic. The religious papers showed their varied beliefs. The Church Times printed a very full description, and finished by saying, "a general opinion was expressed that this beautiful and well-ordered service, with all its Catholic accessories, might well be followed in great churches on great occasions for Requiems". The Daily Telegraph said, "To all seeming the ceremonial proceeded in the highest and most elaborate manner known to the Anglican Church". The Daily Mail headed its short paragraph, "Queen's Soul Prayed For". While the Protestant press produced all its armoury of invective, the Tablet called attention to the fact that the procedure closely followed the Roman use.

One of the most enlightened articles on this almost historic event appeared in the Manchester Guardian which began, "...Much has been said and written these last few days about the beautiful music which accompanied Queen Victoria's progress to the tomb. Yet in the minds of many of her late Majesty's subjects there was something lacking. Such of them as were acquainted with the more ancient usages of the Church, and more particularly with her music, must have regretted that the tender moving strains to which the nameless musician of some early century had set the Requiem aeternam had not been sung at the Queen's funeral. The omission was yesterday supplied in the service which was sung at the Church of St Matthew, almost under the shadow of the Palace of Westminster, thanks to the initiative of The Guild of All Souls, and the co-

operation of the English Church Union...The Church, then, was abundantly equipped for the celebration of Queen Victoria's Requiem with all the ceremonial adjuncts to which High Churchmen are attached".

In November 1904, much to the indignation of The Guild Council who regarded it as an unwarrantable interference with their affairs, the Secretary, Mr Walter Plimpton, was summoned to give evidence before the Royal Commission on Ecclesiastical Discipline, which demanded to be furnished with copies of the publications of The Guild. These were sent to the Commissioners "with a covering letter of protest and explanation".

The fact that the Royal Commissioners made this demand from The Guild proves, however, that by then The Guild had become the recognised body in the Church of England concerned with this particular article of the Faith.

As was said above, The Guild was originally formed as a Burial Guild – to educate the people of the English Church in the way of ordering Christian burials, and to provide funeral furniture; and to further this intention The Guild has over the years provided thousands of sets of black vestments, and quantities of palls and copes, to needy parishes and mission throughout the world. The black vestments presented to York Minster by The Guild were used regularly, as also were those formerly on loan to Ely Cathedral, and the Parish Church of Walsingham. Sets have also been presented to St George's Cathedral, Jerusalem, and to Lambeth Chapel. At the obsequies of the late Ecumenical Patriarch Athenagoras The Guild lent vestments to the Anglican delegation, which was led by the Archbishop of Canterbury.

Two great achievements can be claimed for The Guild of All Souls. It has raised Christian burial in this country from a state which was almost barbaric to its present universally accepted standard of decency. Besides this, it has probably done more than any other body to restore the true implications of the doctrine of the Communion of Saints to the Church of England and to the whole Anglican Communion.

We have left to the last what many of us regard as the most important activity of The Guild to-day – its work of intercession. by a carefully organised system, The Guild ensures that its deceased members, and all the faithful departed, shall be remembered before God. A Chantry Book

has been published which contains the names of all members who died in the first century of The Guild's existence, and this is kept up to date by amendments published in the half-yearly intercession leaflet. It is hoped updated reprints of the Chantry Book will be issued every fifteen years. The year's mind of those whose names are in our Chantry Book, or the intercession leaflet, are kept at our Chantry Chapels and in many of the churches in which there are branches. In this way a member retains association with The Guild even after death. No other guild ministers to its members in this way. At the request of members, their friends and relations may also be remembered in this way.

At the tenth Annual Meeting, on 26th May 1883, the following resolution was carried – “That it is desirable a definite effort should be made towards providing a Guild Chapel, and that special contributions towards the Reserve Fund be invited for this purpose”.

A circular letter of 23rd June 1883 to all members called attention to this Fund, and continued –

The proposed Chapel is intended to be a home for The Guild, a centre for its special devotion...a place where the One All-Prevailing Sacrifice may be permanently and regularly (if not daily) offered on behalf of the souls of departed members, and of all the Faithful Departed....a fitting memorial of those departed members.”

As by 1904 it had not been possible to erect such a Chapel, the Church of St Stephen, Gloucester Road, London, became the centre for The Guild's commemoration, and it continues to be our Central London Church for this work.

Through the years, many attempts were made to erect or secure a building specifically for the use as a Chantry, but without success. Then, in 1963, the Guardians of the Shrine of Our Lady of Walsingham in Norfolk, made available a plot of land in the grounds of the Shrine. The foundation stone for The Guild Chapel was laid by The Rt Rev'd Robert Mortimer, Lord Bishop of Exeter, on the Feast of St John Baptist 1965. The completed Chapel of St Michael & The Holy Souls was consecrated on 13 October 1965 – the Feast of St Edward the Confessor, by the Rt Rev'd William H. Brady, Bishop of Fond du Lac, a trustee of the American Branch. This beautiful and peaceful Chantry Chapel, designed by Mr Laurence King, FRIBA, OBE, is now a place of prayer which is visited by

thousands of the pilgrims to the Shrine. In it the Holy Sacrifice is offered daily, and those whose names are in The Guild's Anniversary Book or Intercession Leaflet are remembered at the Mass on their year's minds. Priest members are welcome to offer the Holy Sacrifice with intention, on application to the Chantry Priest.

To mark the centenary of The Guild in 1973 the Council was able to appoint its first Chantry Priest, Fr Hum. A few years later it also purchased a residence for him, where the present Chantry Priest now lives, and is able to maintain contact both with visiting priests and pilgrims, and with enquirers. The hopes of the founders and Benefactors have now been realised.

Of the three laymen who first saw the need and possibilities for such a Guild – one – Walter Plimpton – remained actively associated with it until his death in 1924.

The Guild has always been a Lay Achievement: indeed, for more than forty years the elected Council was composed entirely of laymen. At first this was very necessary, as priests known to belong to The Guild incurred the Episcopal ban. The situation is quite different now – bishops, priests and thousands of lay-people are members of the Guild, and maintain our regularly intercessions for the Departed both at the Holy Sacrifice and at The Guild Offices, as well as in their private prayers. The very different outlook of the Church of England to-day is the measure of The Guild's success in making acceptable to most members of the Church the doctrines and practices for which the founding members had to fight so hard.

#### Presidents of The Guild of All Souls in England

The Rev'd Arthur Tooth 1873

The Rev'd J. P. F. Davidson 1888

The Rev'd The Hon. A. F. A. Hanbury-Tracy 1900

The Rev'd C. P. Hankey 1924

The Rev'd F. G. Croom 1926

The Rev'd C. P. Shaw 1936

The Rev' Colin Gill 1965

The Rt Rev'd Cyril Eastaugh 1973

The Rev'd Peter Laister 1985

The Rt Rev'd Kenneth Newing 1986  
The Rt Rev'd John Klyberg 1988  
The Rt Rev'd Keith Newton