

St Boniface Antwerpen



A history of the Anglican Church in Antwerp

Introduction

St. Boniface Church has roots going back to the 16th Century, deep into Antwerp's history and that of Anglicanism. Antwerp then was a metropolis of world class, the most important trading and financial centre in Western Europe, as a seaport, the spice trade, money and wool markets. There are many paths down which one can go in this history of the Church.

In 2010, our church celebrated its centenary and work on much needed major repairs, to preserve the heritage of this beautiful Church, commenced. A few years ago, St. Boniface became a recognized State Monument, but even before that it was, and is, always open for pre-arranged visits and conducted tours.

Prior to April 1910, the British Community's Services were held at the "Tanner's Chapel" loaned to them by the authorities, and named from the French "Chapelle des Tanneurs" (Huidevettersstraat), after the street of that name, and this remained the Anglican Church in Antwerp from 1821 until St. Boniface was built and consecrated.

Building St. Boniface in the Grétrystraat

The history of St. Boniface as it now stands began on June 23rd, 1906, in the presence of a large number of Belgian and British notables, when the foundation stone of the Church was laid with much ceremony, by the British Minister to Belgium, Sir Arthur Hardinge. This ceremony was followed by a public lunch at which more than 70 persons were present and where acknowledgement was made of the debt owed by the community to Mr. Llewellyn Evan-Thomas, the Treasurer, "without whose unfailing interest, wise counsel and ever ready help the project would never have got so far". This gratitude was expressed in more enduring form when the brass eagle Lectern was placed in the Church, bearing the inscription "Presented to the Church of St. Boniface, Antwerp.



to the Glory of God and in grateful recognition of the untiring labours of Llewellyn Evan-Thomas (Treasurer of the Church Funds) in connection with the building of this church, May 1910."

Mr. Evan-Thomas was Church Treasurer until 1936 and was a member of the Church Committee for 42 years. He was also a Life President of the British Colony and in 1900 he established the Missions to Seamen in Antwerp. He was made a Commander of the Order of the British Empire for his work in connection with British hospitals in Belgium.

Further work was interrupted until finally in April 1910, the building of St. Boniface was completed, at the Grétrystraat. The new church in Rue Grétry as it was then (Grétrystraat), was appropriately dedicated to an Englishman: Winfrith of Crediton, known to history as St. Boniface, Missionary Bishop, and one of the most important figures in 8th century Europe. It would be the first time the British Community had a church to call their very own. The Consecration ceremony of the new English Church building to place on April 22nd 1910 with a moving Service conducted by Bishop Wilkinson.

Description of the Building

The Church of St. Boniface is a Gothic building with a lofty tower in the north-west corner. It consists of a wide centre nave separated from the north and south aisles by rough red granite columns. There is a large well-raised chancel with carved oak choir stalls and an imposing altar seven steps above the level of the nave. On the north side of the chancel, separated from it by a handsomely worked iron screen is the Lady Chapel and on the south side is the organ chamber in which was placed the reconstructed and enlarged instrument from the old English Church. There is a triforium and a clerestory which give the church a very lofty effect. The large stone statue of St. Boniface which stands on the north side of the sanctuary was presented by Sir Cecil Hertslet, the British Consul-General. The inscription near it reads:

"This Church is dedicated to the Glory of God and in honour of St. Boniface, English missionary to North and Central Europe, Apostle of Germany and Archbishop of Mainz; born at Crediton, Devon, A.D. 680, martyred near these shores June 5th, 755. Consecrated April 22nd 1910."

The fame of this statue spread far afield. The makers of a stained glass window for Truro Cathedral in which St. Boniface was to be represented wrote to the chaplain to ask for a photograph of the statue to help them in their design. It had been described to them as being "very fine". There was also a request from a church in South Africa for a photograph which would help them in a choice of a statue for their own church.

Windows

The original East Window was donated by Mr. Evan-Thomas but this was destroyed in the first World War; it was replaced by the same donor by one which was even more beautiful than its predecessor. When news of the tragic death of explorer Captain Scott - who had visited Antwerp in 1906, and attended a Service in the Tanner's Chapel - reached Europe, the Antwerp authorities decided to name one of the new streets after him, and the British Colony erected a Memorial Window to him and his four companions, later in St. Boniface which was unveiled in June 1914. The centre light shows St. Nicholas, the Patron Saint of Seafarers, holding the traditional model ship - in this case, the "Terra Nova", with St. Stephen and St. Alban in the outer lights.

An outstanding event was in 1921, when the West Window was unveiled. This window was given by the firm of Gellatly, and Hankey as a War memorial to the British dead of the city, especially those connected with the firm. The window represents four British heroes, King Arthur, the poetical ideal of kinship, King Alfred, the founder of the Navy, King Oswald, the religious warrior, and Edward, the Black Prince, the type of chivalry.

Four other memorial windows have been placed in the church at various times. A window in the east end of the Lady Chapel dedicated to the memory of Miss Muriel Macrae depicts the visit of the Shepherds to the Stable in Bethlehem. Another window in the Lady Chapel representing the Madonna and Child was unveiled in 1926 in memory of Effie, Lady Hertslet. A window depicting the Annunciation, in memory of Mrs. Louise Hayman, was unveiled in 1935. The fourth window showing Christ the Consoler was a memorial to Lt. H.A. Debenham who was killed in the First World War. Permission to place windows in the church must be obtained from the Commission Royale des Monuments and this body considered this window to be so remarkable for the harmony of its composition, design and colour that they asked for a replica of the design for their own archives.

All these windows were, however, private memorials and the chaplain and Committee decided that a special effort should be made for the further embellishment of the church to which the whole congregation should contribute. This was to take the form of a series of mosaics under the East Window where it was considered that colour was rather lacking. The mosaics were to symbolize Prayer and Praise; Prayer was to be represented by angels swinging censers, and Praise by angels with musical instruments. Donations were called for and two Jumble Sales were held to raise the necessary funds. The panels were dedicated in November 1925.

A brief history of the Anglican Community in Antwerp

The Anglican Church was always a reflection of the English/British presence in Antwerp, and the first settlers were English merchants with their cloth trade (trading began as early as the 12th century). But they needed somewhere to worship. Their affairs were conducted by a Governor and a Court chosen from amongst them, and meetings began and ended with prayers. Their religious life and behaviour were guided by specially appointed chaplains. They installed a chapel with furnishings imported from England, and this chapel, was probably dedicated to St. Thomas of Canterbury their patron, and was open to visitors as well as their members.

16TH CENTURY

Antwerp became the focus of the politico-religious struggle between the Protestant North and Catholic Spain, and as such was stricken by terrible events, such as the iconoclasm in 1566, then the Spanish fury in 1576, and the fall of Antwerp in 1585.

The Reformation in the 16th century was the movement for reform of abuses in the Roman Church, and the establishment of Reformed or Protestant Churches. In Antwerp there were many politico-religious exiles, as the Low Countries became a haven for many English Reformers who fled from persecution. Authorities in Antwerp took no steps against the foreign communities settled in their midst, many of whom practiced the "new religion". They took this attitude because they relied on the merchants for their prosperity and therefore would not drive them away.

Antwerp was the cradle of the English Bible, and the number of great names associated with the Church of England during this period is noteworthy. Tyndale was burned at the stake as a result of his translation work on the Bible, Lambert and Rogers as chaplains suffered the same fate. Gilpin who was acting chaplain in Antwerp, became known as the "Apostle of the North" and refused the Bishopric of Durham in order to continue his mission in what he called the neglected North. Cartwright and Travers as the representatives of English Puritanism all stand forth upon the contemporary scene.

Antwerp's decline as a centre for the merchants meant that their long association with the city was finally coming to an end. The Spanish Agent in the Netherlands was reporting to Philip that all English merchants were "heretics". The Company introduced a statute that all its members must belong to the Church of England. They were in fact left in peace by the authorities, in spite of the increasing severity of the Edicts against the Reformed religion.

Relations between the English Government and the Regent of Netherlands were strained for various reasons, but English support of Protestants in the Low Countries, and the Spanish intolerance of "heretics" did not help. However, the major cause was economic, and the merchants had to leave when the sale of cloth was forbidden.

The Spanish conquests, and the expulsion of all Protestants robbed the town of its most prosperous and industrious citizens. Dutch cruisers closed the mouth of the river Scheldt to commerce, and the once-proud Exchange where five thousand merchants had met daily to arrange the affairs of Christendom now stood silent and deserted. The river Scheldt was closed by the Peace of Munster in 1648. It was the end of an epoch.

1650-1814

For almost 200 hundred years there were very few English people there and no settled community as there had been in the past. During this period the Low Countries were known to the British simply as the battlegrounds of wars against Louis XIV and Napoleon. So we come back, after a brief glance backwards into Antwerp's history, to the surrender of the town by the French in 1814, and the opening of the Scheldt by the establishment of the United Netherlands of Belgium and Holland.

19TH CENTURY

It was then that a British community came and settled in the town. They had no church, and at first held their services in a room at the Bourse. Later they were granted the use of the Church of the "Annonciades" in the Korte Winkelstraat in common with the Protestant denominations. But it was not convenient sharing this building with so many other churches, and the British Colony petitioned the Government of the United Netherlands for a church of their own, and a portion of the subsidy which had been granted to the Church of the "Annonciades".

This request was granted by Royal Decree of June 13th, 1821, when the entire use of the Chapelle des Tanneurs, was accorded to them, on condition that the Church Committee made itself responsible for: "expenses of installation and maintenance during the occupation".

But: the subsidy would only be granted if the services conformed to the rites of the Dutch Presbyterian Church (that is, one governed by "elders" all of equal rank). This decision was completely opposed to the toleration professed by the laws of the country, and to the scruples of the greater part of the English community who had been brought up in the Anglican Church. They therefore had to refuse the subsidy on a point of conscience and support their church by their own unaided contributions, until after the separation of Belgium and Holland in 1830. They received then a subsidy from the Belgian Government in common with all officially recognised Churches.

The Chapelle des Tanneurs remained the Anglican Church in Antwerp until the completion of the Church of St. Boniface in 1910, when the members gave back to the authorities the church so kindly lent to them in 1820. It is noteworthy that one of the many chaplains who served the "Tanner's

Chapel", was the Reverend Robert Byron (1851-1883), who served for 32 years and initiated the possibility of a new church organ. A subscription list was opened, and eventually an organ was purchased from the firm of Forster and Andrews of Hull and installed in the church in September 1873, and subsequently installed in St. Boniface. In 2001 the organ was able to be refurbished from the many sponsors and donors. A memorable Service of Thanksgiving was held followed by an organ recital.

Several chaplains later and with critical financial problems concerning repairs to "Chapelle des Tanneurs" (Tanner's Chapel), came the idea in 1885 of building a new church. A building fund was started in 1885, and for the very first time Bishop Titcombe visited the Chapel, and helped draw up a letter of Appeal to the British and American communities. In 1890, a Decree by Leopold 11, established the English Church as the Anglican Parish Church of the Province of Antwerp, and therefore entitled to receive financial help which was allotted to all the recognized churches. It also laid down that the Church Committee was to be composed of the Chaplain, and at least four members elected at a yearly General Meeting. It is under this Act that the Church still receives a financial grant from the Belgian Government. Plans were drawn up for a church with a Vicarage and schoolrooms, to be built in the Avenue d'Amérique (Americalei), where a new quarter was being laid out. The plan of this church was the same as that eventually followed for the Church of St. Boniface except for the gardens by which it was to be surrounded.

20TH CENTURY

After Reverend Stanley's (1891-1900), resignation, the Reverend Michael Kearney (1900-1910) was appointed chaplain. During Kearney's ministry, definite progress was made towards the long-postponed fulfilment of the congregation's desire for a new church. In January 1904 a plot of ground was bought in the Rue Grétry (Grétrystraat), and the Church Committee applied for permission to build a church according to the plans of their architect Michel de Braey. Reverend Kearney did not live to see the completion of St. Boniface in 1910, for which he had worked with much devotion. He died in the same year and is buried in Berchem cemetery. The congregation decided to place a memorial to him in the new church, and this took the form of a stained glass window, in the south aisle with St. George slaying the dragon, in the centre light, and St. Patrick and St. Andrew on either side.

There was great need for a Church Hall and a Bazaar was held to raise funds for this purpose and, at the same time, to pay off a debt of 11,000 francs which remained in the Church Building Fund. The hall was built and should have been opened officially in the autumn of 1914 but the circumstances of WW 1 breaking out did not permit this.

FIRST WORLD WAR 1914-1918

After the outbreak of the First World War, many members of the congregation still remained in Antwerp. At ten minutes before midnight on Wednesday, October 7th, the bombardment of Antwerp began. Four shells fell close to the church, one on the Vicarage garden, and all the windows of the house were blown out as well as the East Window of the church.

Arrangements were made for the evacuation of 1500 British subjects on a Canadian Pacific ship but Mr. and Mrs. Harrison, who were two of the last to leave, escaped by barge to Flushing, a journey which took three days. The Germans entered the town on October 9th. The protection of the British

interests and property were entrusted to the American Consul, Mr. Tuck Sherman, who afterwards took the altar crosses, other brasses and the Communion silver to his own home for safe-keeping and on his departure passed them on to the wife of the Danish Consul, herself an Englishwoman by birth.

A little congregation gathered weekly in either the Lady Chapel or the vestry so that the church might not be abandoned and Mr. Sherman himself read either Matins or Evensong. The Vicarage was occupied by his parents to save it from being requisitioned by the Germans. After 1917 and the entry of the United States into the War, the church was under the protection of the Dutch Consul. During the latter part of the war the Rev. H.S.T. Gahan of Christ Church Brussels visited Antwerp regularly to minister to the British prisoners interned there.

As the British community began slowly to return to Antwerp after the Armistice of 1918, the Rev. Edgar Ealand of the Missions to Seamen officiated in the Church of St. Boniface until Harrison's return in August 1919. The congregation was greatly diminished and the financial situation of the church had also been affected by the war.

Mr. Harrison resigned the chaplaincy in July 1931 after 21 years of single-hearted and conscientious work as chaplain. The Rev. Julian Turpin was appointed in his stead but remained for only two months before accepting the living of Misterton in Somerset. After his departure the Rev. Forster Haire of the Missions to Seamen acted as chaplain until the arrival of the Rev. Rupert Shiner in November 1931. Mr. Shiner immediately began to display the energy which Harrison had hoped for when he resigned to make way for a younger and more active man, and a Church and Altar Guild was formed for the care and beautifying of the church. During his chaplaincy the church celebrated its Silver Jubilee and a special service was held to mark the occasion. Great effort were made to set the church on a sound financial basis was made, and these were largely helped by a gift of 300,000 francs from Mr. Evan-Thomas for the endowment of the Church.

SECOND WORLD WAR

Shiner resigned in June 1935 and was succeeded by the Rev. R. Wainwright who had been Vicar of Staleybridge and previously a missionary in China. The years leading up to the Second World War passed tranquilly. In May 1940, on the approach of the Germans, the greater part of the congregation left Antwerp and the church was left under the protection of the American Consul. In August, two church members who had remained in Antwerp, Mrs. Flandre and Mrs. Rogers visited the Vicarage and found the shrubbery so overgrown that they could scarcely force their way through to the door. Open windows gave free passage to wind and rain. Mrs. Flandre decided that it would be much better for the Vicarage to be occupied and asked the American Consul for permission to take possession. He was wholeheartedly in agreement and suggested a move as soon as possible. She moved in under cover of darkness on September 7th and remained there throughout the war.

The church books and vestments were all packed away and the Communion silver was hidden in a gas oven at the Vicarage. Shortly after this the Germans decided to use the church for their own services and their chaplain occupied a first-floor flat at the Vicarage. He demanded the return of the Communion silver but Mrs. Flandre denied all knowledge of it and was faced with the problem of its safe keeping. She decided to appeal to her doctor who agreed to hide it with his own. It remained under his protection until the arrival of British troops in 1944 when it was returned to the church.

Shortly before their departure the Germans removed the lectern and the altar from the Lady Chapel and placed them in a chapel at the St. Marie Hospital, Berchem.

They were safely returned to the church after the Liberation.

With the arrival of British troops in Antwerp, the church came under the control of the Military Authorities and Army Chaplains conducted regular Sunday services, which were also attended by the civilians in Antwerp, until the return of Mr. Wainwright in February 1947. He remained as chaplain until his retirement in 1953. The Rev. J.E.G.T. Williams, Principal Chaplain of the Control Commission and Rural Dean of Germany was appointed in his stead.

During the war, the German Occupation authorities broke open a safe in the Westminster Bank where several Minute and Letter Books belonging to the old English Church in the Rue des Tanneurs had been kept. These included a copy of the document recording the loan of the Church to the Anglican Community by William, King of the United Netherlands, in 1820.

It was the perusal of these records, and the feeling that it would be a suitable way of marking the Jubilee of the Church of St. Boniface, that led Sarah Baines to writing a history of the Antwerp Chaplaincy, upon which this edited version is based. The Church was consecrated in April 1910 but it was on Sunday, September 25th, 1960 that the Jubilee was celebrated. The preacher at Matins on that day was the Reverend. J.B. Boniface Samuels, Vicar of St. Chad's, Coseley, Staffordshire, whose Baptism, was the first to take place in the Church. Festal Evensong at 3 p.m. was a memorable service. The preacher was the bishop, the Right Reverend Roderic Coote, Bishop of Fulham, who took as his text St. Paul's words "(Christ) the head over all things to the Church which is his body, the fullness of him that filleth all in all".

In the course of an inspiring sermon the Bishop spoke of those who were with us in spirit, in time and in eternity, among them even our Patron Saint, St. Boniface. The visitors in the congregation included Dr. Lode Craeybeckx, Burgomaster of Antwerp, the representative of the British Ambassador to Belgium, the Governor of the Province of Antwerp and many others prominent in the life of the city. Particularly welcome were the two or three who had been present at the Consecration of the Church. It was a great occasion and the anthem sung "How lovely are Thy dwellings", touched a responsive chord in the hearts of all.

Almost fifty years later, we look forward now to celebrating the CENTENARY of our Church.

Kindly adapted and edited from Sarah Baines' history of the Anglican chaplaincy in Antwerp by Maureen Smith, February 2008.

St. Boniface Anglican Church, Antwerpen, April 2011.