

Anglican-Lutheran Society

Annual General Meeting, 8th March 2014, at Gustaf Adolf Church, Liverpool

Prof Robert Lee : The Scandinavian Seaman's Church in Liverpool

It all started with the Scandinavian Mission Appeal focusing on seamen and emigrants initiated by the Churchwardens of the Ulrika Eleanora Swedish and Norwegian Church in London. The body behind them was the Evangelical Patriotic Society set up in 1856. They brought over Pastor Gustaf Tegner 'to labour amongst the northern seamen and emigrants'. Surely that's what we want of our clergy today, to labour in a more direct and practical way!

They had to raise quite a lot of money because they had very little locally. But it seems that nothing has changed. Yesterday we heard from the Anglican Chaplain in Helsinki that when he got there they hadn't the money to pay him! The list of subscribers represents a number of Scandinavian merchants who had made their fortunes in Liverpool. Among them was Adolf Gnospelius who became chairman of the church building committee. Another was Christian Jensen, a ship-builder, and another G.W. Bahr, the Swedish and Norwegian Consul.

[As an interesting aside, Gnospelius died back in 1884. But some years ago I was going through the Liverpool telephone directory and found the name Gnospelius. I phoned, and it was his grand-daughter, Janet. We went to visit her and borrowed some material about her grandfather and we now have some of his books upstairs. Ironically, she had never ever been to the church. But I digress!]

Tegner arrived in 1870 but he didn't last all that long. He died on 12th April 1881 and was buried in Toxteth Cemetery. Although he had been seriously ill he had continued to travel around Sweden to collect money to build the church. His was an example of absolute dedication.

The architect was William Douglas Caroe, a young man of only 25 years who went on to become a major figure in the Gothic Revival movement in Britain. As you look at the church you can see so many different influences in ecclesiastical architecture from the Nordic countries. It was his first major commission, and why did they select someone so young? It was through nepotism! His father was the Danish Consul. That's how he got to design this fantastic church, so perhaps there is something to be said for nepotism after all!

It was built as a single church building with a basement. The worship space was very grand, tall and spacious. Behind the altar were a set of five painted bass-reliefs by Robert Anning Bell, donated in 1899. They are truly outstanding and helped to brighten the church and all its services until the late 1950s. Then a remodelling of the whole church building took place. A floor was put in which effectively cut the height of the church in half so that more meeting rooms could be provided. The reliefs can now be seen on the north wall of the sanctuary.

By the doorway into the worship area there is a bell which is rung at the beginning of every service, a reminder of how the church was truly a seaman's church. Sailors were the group the church was built to serve. There were so many young Scandinavian seafarers coming into the port of Liverpool in the late nineteenth century. Some years anything up to 700 Nordic ships would arrive. Each would have 12-15 young men on board, and Liverpool offered them lots of nice surprises! Drinking places lined the water front. Women of doubtful reputation plied their trade.

The church authorities were anxious that these young men might get up to things that they shouldn't! Hence the need to convert them, to distribute lots of religious tracts, to guide the sailors along safe pathways and to ensure the safety of their eternal souls. The 1881 census shows that there were 571 Swedish people in Liverpool. You could probably find the same number of Norwegians and Danes as well. Of these Swedes, 18.2% were aboard vessels, and there would have been other sailors who were in hostels. Then there were 27% who were emigrants. There were also a significant number of female domestic servants employed in the town. So the Nordic Church sought to meet their needs. The church housed a reading room which was very popular. People could come and read their national newspapers, they could be given notepaper so that they could write letters home and in the Emigrant Institute in Växjö (recently closed) you could find letters that had survived that were actually written in this room. That tells you a lot about how important this church was as a focal point, providing support for people who sometimes were in serious need.

Another facility that was developed was the Scandinavian Seamen's Home just along the road from here in Nelson Street. It could accommodate 45-50 seamen at once. The seamen were given little maps so that they could find their way around. All the significant places were marked and, of course, Number One was the church, followed by the Seamen's Home and then by the various consulates of the Scandinavian and Nordic countries. They also showed prominent hotels and hostels where emigrants could find lodging. It was a real service to people who had left rural parts of Sweden, were on their way to a new and uncertain life in America, and who arrived in this bewildering place called Liverpool having perhaps never been in a big city before.

From the start it was a Scandinavian church. It was not just for Swedes, Norwegians and Danes. It was all-embracing. It was all about a re-engagement with Scandinavian and Nordic culture and religious life that were so closely intertwined. And in more recent times the church community has reached out to the neighbourhood and started to share its various traditions – things like the St Lucia traditions – and that shows you the continuity that the church symbolises in a very positive way today. We still are a vibrant church community, we still try to meet the needs of different groups, different age profiles of Scandinavian and Nordic peoples in Liverpool and further afield. We got a grant and had a worker who was very good reaching out to local school children and people who had been past the church building, seen all the national flags and thought, 'Isn't that a strange building. It's not like a traditional English church!' But they knew nothing about what actually goes on here. So it was very positive to engage with them, and that gives an indication of the kind of work we can continue to do into the future.