

HERITAGE CIRCLE

Roy Tricker, 100 not out – 100 years of the St Edmundsbury Diocese

Roy Tricker gave a very humorous, but well researched, talk about a potentially 'dry' topic to the September meeting of the Heritage Circle at Rickinghall Village Hall. He totally engaged his audience when he spoke about the creation of the St Edmundsbury Diocese 101 years ago which was sanctioned by an Act of Parliament in January 1914. Roy traced the years of deliberation and argument leading to the founding of the diocese.

Population growth prompted consideration of diocesan boundaries in the mid-19th century. Essex was part of the Diocese of London because the county's boundary began at Stratford. However, as the population of London grew significantly, Essex was given to the Bishop of Rochester in 1845, despite the communication problems caused by the Thames. By 1907 it had become apparent that Essex needed to be reorganised again into a single diocese covering the county and at the same time the future organisation of the Church of England in Suffolk was questioned. Unfortunately, this presented a challenging problem as it was comprised of two counties, East and West Suffolk, for civic administration.

East Suffolk was part of the Diocese of Norwich which, by 1907, had 1,151 parish churches and 890 beneficed clergy. This was too much for the bishop to manage. By contrast, West Suffolk was part of the Diocese of Ely. A committee was set up to explore what could be done. There was early agreement that East and West Suffolk should form one diocese. Then the problems began.

Initially, the new diocese was going to be called the Diocese of Suffolk until it was realised that all Church of England dioceses were named after the city where the cathedral was located. This began a debate about the future cathedral city. There were two possibilities. Ipswich was the county town but Bury St Edmunds had a long history as a centre for pilgrimage although it did have the disadvantage of poor communication links with London and the rest of Suffolk. Scrutiny then passed to which particular church should be the cathedral. Ipswich had 12 churches but they tended to be quite small and none had the possibility of being expanded. However, Bury St Edmunds had two large churches, St James' and St Mary's, with potential for expansion as both had church land around them. It was agreed that Bury St Edmunds would be the cathedral city but the next problem emerged. Where should the bishop live? A compromise emerged as Ipswich was chosen. However, the new bishop was to find himself with the unwieldy title of the Bishop of St Edmundsbury and Ipswich which had to appear on all official documentation.

Just as the parliamentary bill was being written, yet another difficulty arose. Neither St James nor St Mary's had been designated as the new cathedral. This led to serious disagreements but there were only five days in which to make the decision or the bill would have missed its place in the parliamentary calendar. St James was chosen leaving the congregation of St Mary's outraged. There were accusations of malpractice as it seemed that a biased and unrepresentative group had got together in secret to make the decision. Then further complications came as the location of the bishop's residence in Ipswich led to considerable debate. In addition, there were concerted attempts by parishes to opt out of the new diocese. The Lowestoft area was successful in staying with the Norwich Diocese after considerable pressure exerted by the local MP. A row over whether the bishop should have a new crozier, a papist symbol, was followed by fears that the Bishop Hodgson, a northerner, was not suitable for Suffolk. However, eventually the new diocese successfully established itself and has been able to celebrate its centenary.

The next meeting of the Heritage Circle will be at 7.30pm on Wednesday 28 October at The Village Hall, Rickinghall IP221HD when Sue and Steve Williams will be speaking about Stowmarket's Gun Cotton Factory Explosion of 1871. Further information about the Heritage Circle is available on its website, www.heritagecircle.onesuffolk.net.

Gerry Gurhy