

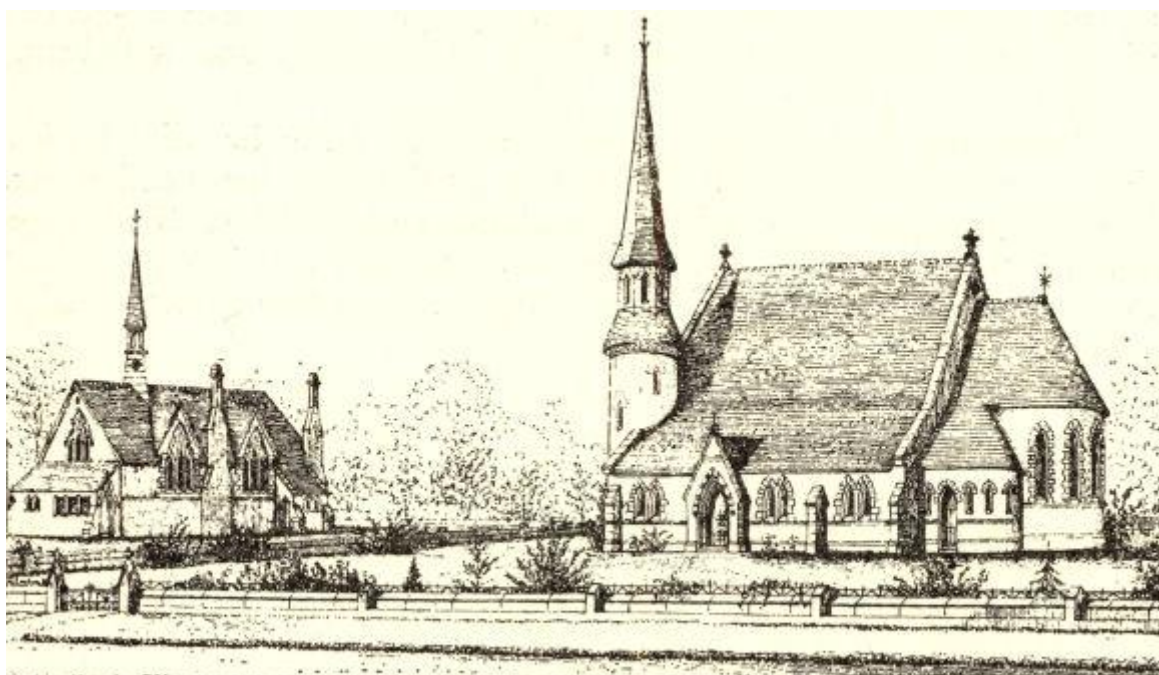
High Wych History – St. James’s Church – 1

Theo van de Bilt

The first stone of St. James’s Church High Wych was laid on 25th August 1860. The building was consecrated on Thursday 27th June 1861 by the bishop of Rochester. The first vicar was Henry Frank Johnson. The architect was C.E. Pritchett and the contractor a Mr. Dickenson, both of Bishops Stortford. Previously High Wych had been part of Sawbridgeworth Parish. Why was it built when it was built and why was it built where it was built?

Two 19th century surveys held into religious observance shed some light. The first was done in 1847 by William Upton, a Baptist minister, who limited himself to Hertfordshire. Four years later a government sanctioned general survey was done for the whole country. Neither survey was completely accurate but they did both show the strong religious commitment at the time. Upton was of course eager to identify places ripe for expansion for non C of E outfits whilst the national survey set itself the task to check in how far the Church of England catered for the fast growing population.

Upton’s survey tells us of cottage preaching in High Wych with a branch chapel in Allens Green both looked after by the Revd. John Gill of Sawbridgeworth. This later became what is now known as the Congregational Church. Upton concludes: “Very little is doing here in the Church. Dissenting movements are vigorous and useful”. The 1851 survey mentions an independent Allens Green Chapel. A Mr. George Houseden of Duke’s Farm, tells us there are 70 free sittings. The Sawbridgeworth independent Chapel (again now Congregational Church) was set up in 1814. Three years later a breakaway group set up shop in “High Whites”, having obtained a cottage from a Mrs. Rumble. One of these, a minister by the name of James Stewart was named on a register at Somerset House.



St. James' Church and National School, High Wych. *Architect's drawing*

All in all therefore there was a lot of disparate religious activity going on and it is clear why the Church of England wanted to establish itself (more) strongly in High Wych.

Henry Frank Johnson was born at Walbury Manor, Great Hallingbury on 17th December 1834. He was the youngest of four brothers and his parents were John and Emma. John Johnson was a colonel with the 86th Regiment, also known as the Regiment of Foot or the Royal County Down. He most probably served in India prior to being put in charge of the regiment in 1820. During that time the Regiment mainly served in Ireland. Colonel Johnson retired in 1826.

Henry was most close to his older brother Frederick, born in 1831. The career of the brothers ran very much parallel in that both went to Eton, both went to Trinity College Cambridge and both entered the ministry. Frederick became the first curate of St. John the Fisherman of Great Yarmouth. The church was consecrated in 1857 and indeed specifically catered for the fishermen. After initially finding it difficult to reach this clientele the new curate personally visited the ships and houses in the district. Soon the pews started to fill with seamen and their families, exactly the sort of people the church was meant for. The ladies, in their smart dresses, and their gentlemen were turned away to other churches! Sadly Frederick Johnson's ministry was a short one. He died on 20th December 1859 at the age of 28 years. He was due to be married three weeks later!

One can imagine the grief young Henry must have felt on the passing of his older brother. It can therefore not have been a coincidence that St. James High Wych, when it came to be built was similar in style to St. John of Great Yarmouth. It should also be mentioned here that a window in St. James's High Wych is dedicated to the memory of Frederick William Johnson.



Brother Frederick's Church: St. John the Fisherman Great Yarmouth



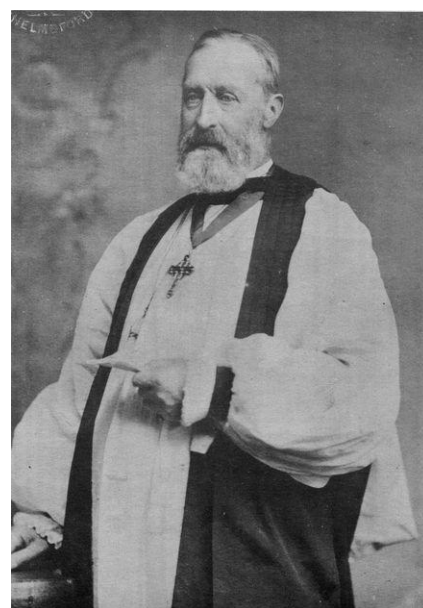
Frederick's Window at St. James's

The actual building of St. James's took about a year. It was of course part of a larger complex of which the school, the school house, the vicarage also known as the Grange and St. James's cottages all formed part. The school was the first to be finished. The opening ceremony took place on Saturday 13th April and was attended not just by many local worthies but also many prospective pupils and their parents. The reverend Moody, then vicar of Gilston, held a moving address emphasizing the value of early education.

Four and a half months later, on Thursday 27th of June, High Wych Church was consecrated by Joseph Wigram, the recently appointed bishop of Rochester. According to the Herts and Essex Observer of two days later villagers treated the occasion more or less as a holiday. The church was chockablock full. Amongst the congregation were some thirty local clergymen and many other dignitaries. Mostly though, the congregation consisted of new High Wych parishioners. The Observer wrote: "It was gratifying to see with what pleasure and pride the poorer for whose benefit the church is mainly erected, seemed to regard the completion of the work, which had provided for them a beautiful fabric consecrated to the service of God, in which they could assemble for the purpose of prayer and praise of a perfect equality, as well as affording to those who live in its vicinity, greater facilities for attending divine service."



Joseph Cotton Wigram, Bishop of Rochester
from 1860 to 1867



Henry Frank Johnson, first vicar of High
Wych, later bishop of Colchester

Henry Johnson stayed 18 years in High Wych. He was well regarded by all. In November 1869 a baby girl was born to him and his wife Emily Ann. Sadly the child died one week later. In honour of Margaret Emily Johnson another window in St. James's was dedicated. Henry and Emily Ann did not have any more children. In May 1880 our region became part of the newly formed diocese of St. Albans. That same year Henry Johnson became rector of Chelmsford. In 1895 he was appointed bishop of Colchester. Through all that time though, he did not forget High Wych. In 1897 Bishop Johnson officiated at a confirmation service at St. James's. Fifty candidates were presented, thirty eight from Hlg Wych. In November 1908, Emily Ann Johnson died. Only a few weeks later Henry Johnson himself passed away whilst visiting his friend, Canon Dacres Oliver, rector of Wilton. The funeral service was held in High Wych where indeed Johnson was buried. In his will he left an estate of £ 60,848.

Sources for this article were: Paul Davies, Grace Dunn, Anthony Giles, Judith Burg's book on Religion in Herts, The Story of Sawbridgeworth, (still available through the SLHS), the Congregational Church centenary booklet, the Herts and Essex Observer, Wikipedia, Ancestry.co.uk and as always county archives aka HALS.