

# **The Old Vicarage, 124 Beech Lane Macclesfield**

## **-some aspects of its history and wider themes**

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The Old Vicarage, 124 Beech Lane, Macclesfield, is where my family and I have lived since September 1979. The house has neither outstanding architecture (although it is a Schedule 2 listed building) nor any connection with major events, but nonetheless its two hundred year history has interesting features.

We have in our possession many deeds and documents covering the history of the house. These do not specify its exact date of construction, although this can be narrowed down to a few years before 1816. What we do have are four indentures (or conveyances) from October 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> 1816 which record the purchase of the house by the Church of England as a home for curates (later to become vicars) of the church of St Michael. This is the main church of the town of Macclesfield which still dominates the town centre as it has done (albeit after extensive modifications) for over 700 years. It is interesting that the church is usually referred to as "St Michael and all Angels" but these indentures refer just to "St Michael".

A brief account of the town of Macclesfield at the time may be useful. The town was growing rapidly, the population of 8743 in the 1801 census doubling by 1821. The major industry was silk weaving which particularly flourished during the Napoleonic wars when French silk was unavailable. After 1815 there was a depression for several years but a boom followed in the 1820s. As to why the house was purchased in 1816, possibly this reflected both the recent good economic times and confidence for the future after the defeat of Napoleon, although more specific reasons may exist in church records.

Part of the need for these several documents may have arisen because one of the sellers of the property was the then curate of St. Michael's, the Reverend Laurence Heapy, and "the house built by Mr Heapy was assigned to him and his successors." The funds for the purchase of the house (£1500: although we cannot be sure that this sum did not include some other elements of support for the curate) came largely from The Governors of the Bounty of Queen Anne. This was a fund set up by the queen in 1704 to supplement the salaries of the lower paid clergy and in time was also used for building churches. I do not know whether it was unusual to fund the provision of housing, as in the present case – this might be an interesting

topic for further study. On one of the indentures the seal of the Governors is attached – it shows “the Archbishop and others kneeling and receiving the charter from her majesty.”

It should be noted that the property, now known as “The Old Vicarage” was not the first vicarage of the church. There is in the town at least one older one, which is now a J D Wetherspoon pub, “The Society Rooms” on what was once called Parsonage Green. This was the Vicarage for a time until either 1780 or 1816 (according to source) and gets its name from its subsequent home of the Macclesfield Useful Knowledge Society.

One feature of “The Old Vicarage” is the four blocked up windows, two each on the ground and first floors. We have no record of when this blocking took place or why but it may have been done to lessen “window tax”. This tax applied from 1696 to 1851 so would have been in force when the house was built. There were step changes in the tax and for example the tax levied on properties with 20 or more windows was higher than that on properties having 15 to 19 windows. Although it is difficult to be sure that all windows (especially some of the smaller ones) now present are original, it looks like there were originally 23, reducing to 19 after the blocking and this may accordingly reflect the wish to reduce the tax.

The next document of note that we have after 1816 is dated December 7<sup>th</sup> 1849 which is a conveyance for the sum of £400 between the Reverend Charles Adam John Smith (the then occupant of the house) and The London & North Western Railway Company, selling the latter a piece of land at the far end of the Vicarage garden. Some background to the railway system as it then involved Macclesfield may help. From 1845 there had been a line between Manchester and Birmingham to which Macclesfield was linked by a spur from a terminus at Beech Bridge, just north of my property. Four years later, the North Staffordshire Railway reached Macclesfield from the south and the railway company in question wanted to make a tunnel to connect this to the existing spur whilst also shifting the location of the station southwards. This tunnel was to run under the garden of the Vicarage. In the conveyance the mode of construction of the tunnel is specified, namely the initial creation of an open cutting, then the building therein of the tunnel and finally the replacement of the soil. Whether the whole length of the tunnel was made in this fashion, or just a short length, is not clear. The histories of the railway that I can find refer to “tunnelling” which is more suggestive of boring a hole. Ownership of the land overlying the tunnel belongs to the railway but the householder is entitled to enjoy the land, except that he may not build on it.

There are two other curious features about this conveyance. Firstly, it refers (in 1849) to “the township of Macclesfield in the parish of Prestbury” whereas another source states that Macclesfield had enjoyed parish status from 1835. Yet another source says that “St Michael’s parish was formed on October 1835 as a district chapelry, out of Prestbury parish “with the intent that “at the next voidance of the vicarage at Prestbury it became a separate parish.” This next voidance came in 1843, however which still leaves some mystery.

Secondly, the existence of this conveyance seems to have been largely forgotten in subsequent conveyances for the sale of the property which refer to the plot as it was in 1816. Its existence was rediscovered in July 1979 during searches at the time that I bought the property.

With a house dating back to the early 1800s, we can be sure that its sanitary arrangements have changed greatly over the period. We know that the local sewage works only became operational in 1896. However the house has a large grid stamped “Macclesfield Corporation 1882” in the courtyard and this may give a clue as to when major drainage work was undertaken on the house.

By the 1880s St Michael’s was in a poor state of repair, despite an earlier refurbishment in 1739, and it was decided to close the church for major repairs. These took from approximately 1898 to 1901. In the lead up to this closure, it was decided that the vicarage should be sold off. This was done at an auction held on 3<sup>rd</sup> April 1894 following which the Rev Sydney Adolphus Boyd, Vicar of St Michaels sold the property to Harriet Lane of Park Lane Macclesfield for £455. Because the property was then passing out of church ownership, a senior level of authorisation was needed and this indenture is signed and sealed by (among others) the Bishop of Chester and the Archbishop of York. Thereafter the vicar occupied a series of properties until the 1960s when a new vicarage was built –just across the road from “The Old Vicarage”.

This selling price of £455 was less than a third of the price paid nearly 80 years earlier although we have pointed out that the latter price may have been intended to cover items in addition to the house. It may also be that the great increase in house building over the (largely) Victorian period may have significantly reduced prices, although we cannot rule out that the condition of the property also played a part – although, if this was the case then, the position seems to have improved by 1921, as described below.

We have the conveyances giving the prices paid for the property on all ten occasions that it has been sold (and also a recent estimate) and these are shown in the table below. The approx. 40% increase between February 1978 and September

1979 (when I bought) remains fresh in my memory: houses were selling fast and “gazumping” was rife.

It is curious that in 1921 the house was bought by Mr E W Lloyd but on his death (1929) his executors sold the property to Mrs G Lloyd, his widow. What occasioned this arrangement is not clear from the documents, although we also have a copy of Mr Lloyd’s will where Mrs Lloyd’s name is not mentioned amongst the heirs. Prior to Mr Lloyd’s purchase we have a copy of a letter from an architect, surveyor and land agent saying “I do not consider there is a great deal of expensive repairs require doing. What requires to be done is only light work.” At this date in 1921 the house is referred to in the conveyance as “The Old Vicarage” which it had presumably been known as for some years previously.

In the early 1950s, ownership of the house changed hands in tragic circumstances. The owner, Charles Maddox and his wife Olga were last seen alive on July 8<sup>th</sup> 1953 and their bodies were found on July 14<sup>th</sup> 1953 in Coombs reservoir , Chapel en le Frith – about 10 miles from Macclesfield -where they had been sailing. There was no way of knowing who died first and hence it was deemed (following a principle of law called *commorientes*) that the younger of them, Olga, survived Charles. Her executors sold the house to the Simister family who still live locally, as do the next owners, the Simms family.

In 1971 the house was bought by the Smith family. We know from estate agents particulars and conversations with neighbours that the Smiths undertook major updating of the property including installation of central heating (the house being of a size that it required 28 radiators), and replacement of plumbing and much wiring.

From March 17<sup>th</sup> 1977 we have a copy of the listing of the property as building of special architectural or historic interest in the area.

On Feb 10 1978, presumably as a result of enquiries raised during the sale of his property, Mr Smith made a deposition stating that since he purchased the property in 1971, no objections had been raised to his use of “Beech Bank” the lane to the East of the property. The original documents from the early 1800s mention this lane but leave it unclear as to whether it belongs to the property or not –although this question does not seem to have arisen during earlier conveyancing, a similar position to that of the railway tunnel mentioned earlier.

In mid-1979 – not long before my family moved in - there was a tragedy in the house. As I have heard the story from neighbours, a couple who were visiting the then owners got into a fierce row during which the woman lunged at the man with a kitchen knife, catching him in the stomach. After some treatment at the hospital the

man seemed out of danger although the woman was to be charged with unlawful and malicious wounding. However the wound was more serious than it had appeared and after a while the man died as a result of his injuries. This resulted in the woman being charged with murder although a verdict of manslaughter was returned.

So, there we have the brief history of a house which was funded by “Queen Anne’s Bounty” to be a home for clergy, but which has a longer history (120 of its approx. 200 years) outside the church; which has seen the arrival of modern times with the coming of the railway, mains plumbing and electricity; which has seen tragedies –as well as happy family life; and which has illustrated more than once that the existence or meaning of legal documents can be forgotten and rediscovered.

**Table: Selling price of the house over 200 years**

Year	Selling price	Comments
1816	£1,500	price may cover other items
1894	£455	Sale to Mrs H. Lane
1921	£1,000	Sale to Mr E W Lloyd
1929	£900	Sale to Mrs G Lloyd
1943	£850	Sale to the Maddox family
1953	£1,400	Sale to the Simister family
1969	£7,500	Sale to the Simms family
1971	£9,000	Sale to the Smith family
1978	£40,000	Sale to the Medcalfe family
1979	£56,500	Sale to the Cooper family
2014	£650,000	estimate, quick sale basis

References:

1. Conveyances and associated documents in possession of the author.
2. Macclesfield Express archives for information on the events of 1979
3. C S Davies, “ A History of Macclesfield, “ 1976.
4. Osborne, “Sketch of the Parish of Prestbury” (undated).
5. W R LeFanu, “Queen Anne’s Bounty, a short account of its history and Work”, 1921.
6. “Macclesfield Genealogical record” at [forebears.co.uk/englan/Cheshire/Macclesfield](http://forebears.co.uk/englan/Cheshire/Macclesfield).

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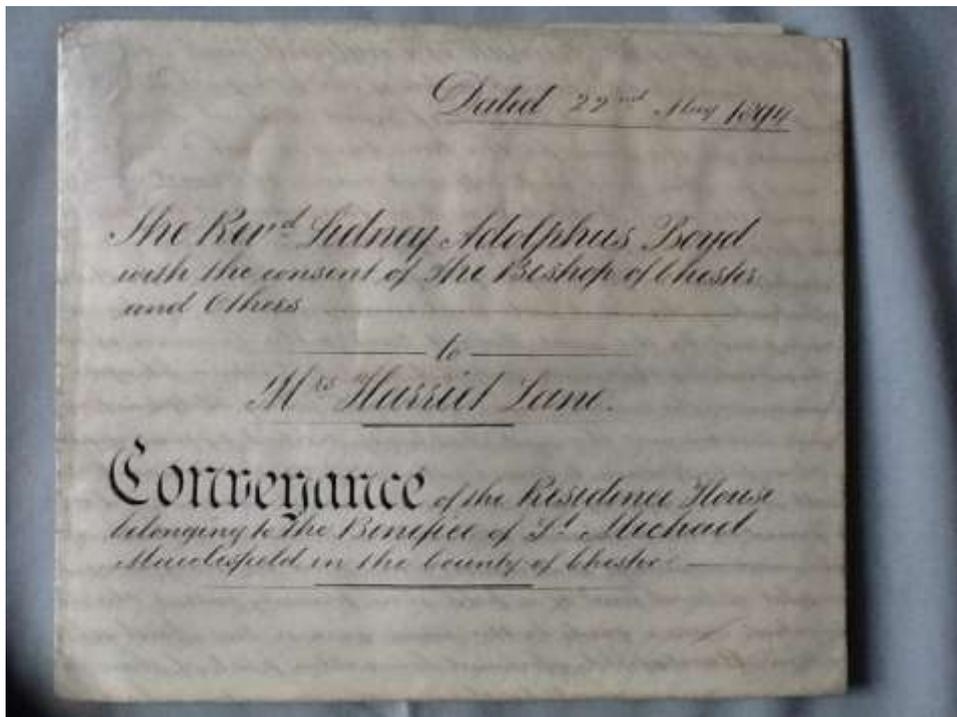


**“The Old Vicarage” taken from across Beech Lane.**

Note the two blocked out windows at the near corner and the bay window added at some later date.



**The seal of the Governors of the Bounty of Queen Anne, attached to one of the deeds of 1816**



**Title page of the conveyance of 1894 whereby the property was sold by the church to Mrs Lane**



**The seal of the Bishop of Chester attached to the conveyance of 1894**



**The seal of the Archbishop of York on the conveyance of 1894**