

## The background story of St John's Church, Whitchurch Hill

by Peter Hawley, Whitchurch and Goring Heath History Society, 2022

The ecclesiastical parish of Whitchurch has from earliest times included a substantial area known as Whitchurch Hill, now part of the civil parish of Goring Heath. By 1880 it was recognised that the burial ground at St Mary's Whitchurch was so overcrowded that an additional site was required, and it was decided to locate this at Whitchurch Hill.

Mr C L Gardiner of Coombe Park presented land at Whitchurch Hill for an additional burial ground (including a small area for overflow from Goring Parish Church), a new recreation ground and parish rooms and £1,000 towards the building of a "chapel of ease" for the parish of Whitchurch.

The parishioners of St Mary's rallied to the cause and a simple but lovely church was erected at a cost of £1,891, overseen by a committee led by the churchwarden Dr Francis Bateman (great-grandfather of the late Tanya Hawley) who was later buried at the site with Tanya now



laid to rest beside him. Other prominent early burials from down the hill included Whitchurch House resident Mr Robert Grey (Governor of the London Foundling Hospital) and his wife.

The architect appointed was Mr Francis Bacon of Highclere and it certainly proved a happy choice. His design provides a flint-clad building, with elegant brick interior, eighty feet long, much more than the average cemetery chapel, with space for up to 200 worshippers. The immaculate interior brickwork is by Messrs Wheeler of Reading. The church was dedicated by the Bishop of Oxford in 1883. Particular features are the open apsidal chancel area, clear lancet windows and plain brickwork, providing an excellent acoustic which has served well for many musical events. The delightful Walker organ was a gift of Miss Slatter, sister of the then rector of Whitchurch. There are prominent wall monuments including one to Field Marshal Smiley, the owner of Great Oaks (now the Oratory Junior School).

Stories vary about the call for such a fine church. The fast increasing population at Whitchurch Hill clearly had difficulty in getting to St Mary's, particularly in bad

weather before the re-excavating and surfacing of Whitchurch Hill in the twentieth century, but Canon Slatter's explanation is perhaps less generous: "*The poorer inhabitants had been discouraged from attending the old Parish Church by the gradual encroachment of their privileges by the growth of the lower village and the number of houses erected there for the wealthy.*" Most of the pews in St Mary's were privately rented which excluded the poorer parishioners until the present open pews were provided there in response to a national campaign at the turn of the century.

The churchyard was handsomely planted but a cross shaped "avenue" of cypresses alongside the Church had to be removed in the 1980s. The porch and lychgate were added by the Palmer Family of Bozedown as a war memorial after 1918. Although a separate clergy house was for a time maintained, St John's has always been treated as an integral part of Whitchurch Parish with alternating services, by the same clergy, choir and Parochial Church Council.

