

St Peter's of Belsize Park

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St Peter's of Belsize Park is a hundred yards from my flat. It's a Victorian Church of no particular architectural interest, but it is surrounded by lovely trees and was built on the site of Belsize House, which was once the home of Spencer Perceval, the only British Prime Minister to have been assassinated in the House of Commons.

It is beautiful, and it is decaying, with darkness about it that I could feel when I first dropped in, after work, to one of its monthly, free evening concerts.

I'd first come to the church for what I thought was to be Evensong. It wasn't. It was a sad little prayer meeting in the side chapel, attended by a straggling group of 8 obviously odd and unhappy persons who didn't know each other, led by very Anglo Saxon Vicar called Jack, who led the meeting with *ex tempore* prayers of the entirely predictable kind. In the main body of the church were photographs of the congregation – no more than 20 of them, most of them apparently well past middle age. No children. But the evening prayer group, the precious few, was not of this group. We were strangers. At least one of us was mentally ill and another unable to sit and another of us was a backpacker, and another the man who brought the key to let us in, and we sat in our semicircle of sea-grassed seated chairs. The paint on the walls is peeling off with the grey bubbles of rising damp, and the macramé ornament is grey with dust. I tried to feel meditative and felt embarrassed instead.

Yet this was a church that had once been crowded and fashionable, whose first vicar was described as 'the most wonderful old man in London,' a man willing to confront his bishops over injustice – he was sacked in Boston for setting up a church for the poor without permission. Eleven hundred people used to attend on Sundays with a waiting list for membership, and the great

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man's fine marble bust - Francis William Tremlett DD, 1821-1913 – had been installed in the choir two years after his death and was testimony to the glory days of St Peter's of Belsize Park.

Sitting at the back of the church and listening to Beethoven, I noticed five glass-fronted display boards leant untidily against the wall behind me. Expecting a history of the church, I had a closer look. A receipt for the sale of a slave, Jack Ass Goliath, in 1857; another for the services of a slave hunter dated 1853, and both looked original: the transcript of a letter from a traveler describing a slave market in Georgia; a daguerreotype of John Brown, old photographs of Abraham Lincoln and a letter from the first and only Confederate President, Jefferson Davis, referring to his visit to the vicar of St Peters of Belsize Park! And storyboard on the causes and effects of the American Civil War on Britain, and on the history of slavery in Britain. About half an hour's walk from my flat is Kenwood House, on Hampstead Heath. That was where the great English Attorney General, Lord Mansfield once lived who, in the remarkable Sommerset case of 1772, found as a matter of law that English Common Law had never acknowledged the condition of slavery, and thus ordered that the black slave brought within the jurisdiction by his American owner must be released upon the presentation of a bill of *Habeas Corpus*. It was one of the highlights of the history of the Common Law and the independence and courage of the judiciary. It took nearly another 60 years for slavery to be abolished in Great Britain, by an 1834 statute.

So, why were these things found in a church that had seen better days and seemed to have a congregation of, at most, a score, in leafy Hampstead? Because, according to the last and most disturbing of the display boards, the 'most wonderful old man in London' was a passionate supporter of the Confederate cause. He was not alone. The British government would have benefited from a weakened America and covertly supported the Southern cause, but would not commit support until it seemed that it was likely to be successful. Lancashire cotton workers had suffered terrible famine when, because of the northern blockade of the Southern states, the supplies had dried up. In 1863 Francis William Tremlett had given several fiery sermons, © Moira Rayner. www.moirarayner.com.au. St Peter's of Belsize Park. Published in Eureka Street April 2001

and published them, on the nobility of the Southern states; the virtues of their cultured, gentlemanly society and of their benevolence to the slaves, who loved them, and whom they had Christianised. He was renowned for his commitment to the Southern cause. He had even written to his bishop demanding support for his petition to the Houses of Parliament calling for the cessation of hostilities, through granting independence to the South. His vicarage, known as 'Rebel's Roost', had been visited by not only Jefferson Davis but also the Captain of the Alabama and Colonel Beauregard, who won the first battle of the American civil war at Bull Run, for the South.

I talked to the current vicar about Tremlett, and discovered that 'the most wonderful old man in London,' this celebrated and popular man, had been married at least twice, though no-one ever saw and he never spoke of the first wife, thought to have been 'a chronic invalid.' He had put his own money into the building of the church and had dedicated the balcony to his second wife. His daughter Louise never married and lived with her father, devoting herself to good works, according to a well-polished brass plaque in the side chapel. But the plaque placed under the window dedicated to Tremlett's memory is so far above the line of sight that it cannot be read. The display, the Vicar said, is not original but reconstructed. He had found there were no historical documents in the church archives at all, which was most remarkable, and inexplicable. He added that he found the memory of Tremlett an inspiration.

I did not ask what his example would inspire a 21st century vicar to do. He seemed pleasant and sincere, and a bit sad. His church is very close to the post-war high-rise 'subsidised housing' where the poorest live, in the heart of fashionable and expensive Belsize Park, so perhaps his real work is done there.

I walk past his church, not my church, on the way to and from work, at dusk and at dawn and late at night, and on the way to the village, and sometimes there are dogs being walked in the church's front garden, but never any people. After the services I have never seen people chatting or a social gathering. If there are weddings or funerals there, in the whole time I have

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lived here I have never seen it. St Peter's of Belsize Park is just plain sad. On Sunday mornings a shabby chap hangs around the front door, cadging cash from the few going within. When I go in, I wonder whether there are ghosts, or at least some kind of memory recorded in the stones, of the congregation of eleven hundred and the waiting list of the rest, who admired and wanted to worship in the church of, a man who believed that slavery was the work of God.