

Remembering Laurence Lee

Introduction

The history of St Nicholas Church Grève d'Azette has been well documented, but much less is known of the life of its founder, Rev Laurence Blackmur Lee (1864-1942). He had a church in Yorkshire before coming to Jersey in 1922. Before that, he had ministered in Phoenix, a mining town in British Columbia, where he had reordered the Anglican church. Some elements of the design of St Nicholas were thought to have been inspired by St John's Phoenix. Now, thanks to recent research, including information provided by three of his great nieces in British Columbia, more of Rev Lee's story can now be told. I have produced this short account to coincide with the 80th anniversary of his death (23rd January 1942). His story is worth telling, as the late Brian Blampied, a long-time member of St Nicholas, explains:

His unshakable faith and likeable character had been instrumental in attracting a nucleus of people who would carry the church's work forward through the war in a spirit of common purpose and good fellowship and build on the solid foundations of his dedicated work. That his achievements were unique is beyond doubt: to refurbish one church in a frontier town in Canada, then to build and establish another in Jersey must rank as an unusual feature during any ecclesiastical career.

Early Days

Laurence Blackmur Lee was born on 7th July 1864 in Wellington Circus, Nottingham, the third child of James Holwell Lee and Elizabeth Lee, née Blackmur. The Lee's were a well-to-do family, Laurence's father being the senior partner of Lee & Gee, a firm of hosiery manufacturers in Roden Street, Nottingham. According to the Nottingham Evening Post, he was:

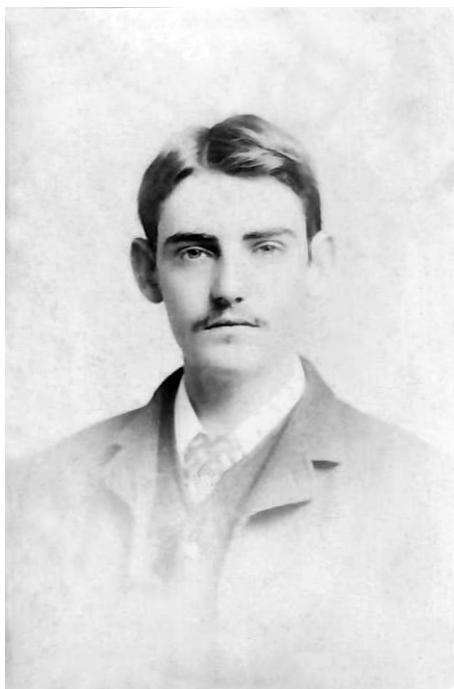
identified with many philanthropic institutions and in 1865 was placed upon the commission of the peace for the borough of Nottingham. He was an earnest supporter of the Conservative cause and a staunch Churchman.¹

James had six children with his first wife Ann Hustwayte. Sadly, Ann died in June 1861. His second wife, Elizabeth, 14 years his junior, gave him five boys: Turner (born 1861), James Percy (1863), Laurence Blackmur (1864), Reginald Blackmur (1865) and Frank Alexander (1876).



Reginald (L) and Laurence (R)

¹ *Nottingham Evening Post*, 5th March 1890



Laurence as a young man

James and Elizabeth not only made sure that their sons had the best possible education (James was educated in Trinity College Cambridge, Laurence went to Clare College Cambridge and Frank to Keble College Oxford), but also passed on to them a strong Christian faith: three of them (James, Laurence and Frank) went on to become clergymen.

Education and early Ministry

Laurence was admitted to Clare College Cambridge on 9th October 1886 age 22. He was awarded a BA degree in 1889, the same year that he was ordained Deacon in Southwell Cathedral in Nottinghamshire and priested in 1891. Sadly, his father James could not witness the event – he died in March 1890. Laurence would go on to graduate with an MA in 1893.

Laurence began his ministry on Sunday 27th January 1890 as curate of St Martin's Church Alfretton, Derbyshire. It was a most extraordinary beginning, because his elder brother James Percy Lee had also been curate there but had tragically died of pneumonia, age 26, on 17th April 1889, after only two years of service. Their grieving mother paid for a stained-glass window to be installed in James' memory in the priest's vestry. Laurence continued to serve as curate in St Martin's Alfretton until Sunday 29th August 1897, (his last service) before moving to become a curate at the parish church of St Edmund, King & Martyr, in Mansfield Woodhouse, Nottinghamshire under Rev Charles Webb.

The Vicar of St Martin's spoke of Laurence in glowing terms in the September 1897 edition of the Alfretton Parish Magazine:

It is impossible to speak too highly of Mr Lee's work. A curate may set himself a maximum, and only do what he is obliged to do and no more, but that was not the idea of Mr Lee. He was always working. He was so devoted to his work, so wrapped up in the parish, that his whole life was doing something for the welfare of the parish. Indeed, the very last thing he ever thought of was his own self. So used were we all to Mr Lee and his willing service that it is only now that he is gone that we shall fully realise what he has been to us. He did not look on while others worked, but he was ever in the thick of it, wherever work, of whatever kind, was required for the good of his parish. He has left behind him a fine monument of good service. The Saint Martin's Mission Room, it's large Sunday school of 180 scholars, it's large staff of workers, so keen and united, the growing power of the Church in that part of the parish, the increasing number of communicants and, not to mention all he did for the National Schools, tell the tale of Mr Lee's nearly 8 years work in Alfretton. That God will bless him in his new parish, and give him power and strength to continue his good work in the Church of God, is the prayer and wish of all.

Although it is not clear how Laurence found any time for leisure, he was a keen sportsman, as the following report in *The Derbyshire Times* suggests:

The gentleman's monthly handicap competition was played off on Saturday, Feb. 13th, when the winner was the Rev. L. B. Lee. The course was rather heavy after the recent snow and rain

but the scores returned were very fair under the circumstances. The full scores for the 18 holes were as follows: Rev. L. B. Lee, 111 gross score, 12 handicap, 99 net score; Mr L. S. Stroyan, 118 gross score, 12 handicap, 106 net score; Mr W. M. Wilson, 134 gross score, 26 handicap, 108 net score; Mr T. W. Taylor, 158 gross score, 30 handicap, 128 net score.²

His next move was to St George in the Meadows, Nottingham, where he was appointed as Perpetual Curate. The church had been built in 1887 and, as its name suggests, was built on the flood plain of the River Trent. The Trent burst its banks in 1910, cutting the church off from the rest of Nottingham for three days!

Laurence's mother Elizabeth died in Nottingham in March 1905, where she had been living with her niece Miss Emma Chalcroft since the death of her husband in 1890.

If 1910 was a year of drama for Laurence, 1911 would be a turning point. His eldest brother Turner, who was a lawyer in Nottingham, decided to emigrate to Canada, and Laurence decided to go too! Turner and his wife Edith along, with their four children (Doris, James, Gerald and Nancy), accompanied by Uncle Laurie, arrived in Halifax Nova Scotia on 14th July 1911 to begin the long train journey across Canada to the Trail District, Kootenay West, in British Columbia.

Perpetual curates were priests who were supported by a stipend but with no right to income from tithes or glebe land. The incumbents of many of the churches that were built in the 19th century were perpetual curates. Compared to rectors and vicars of ancient parishes, perpetual curates tended to be of uncertain social standing, and also be much less likely to be adequately paid.

Phoenix BC

Phoenix was a copper mining community from the late 1890s until 1919. What began with log cabins when copper was first discovered in 1891 became the "highest city in Canada" (4,633 feet above sea level) with electricity, telephone, post office, a newspaper, hospital, banquet hall, ballroom, an opera house, and a number of churches. St John's Anglican Church was built on the intersection of Victoria Avenue and Second Street in 1901.

Ministry was challenging in Phoenix. According to Rev Flewelling (the first minister of St John's Church):

A large proportion of the inhabitants are miners, working, as they do, sometimes by day and sometimes by night, it is very difficult to get to know them. This is not our only difficulty. We are face to face with that which causes so much loss of power in mission work throughout the Colonies - the difficulties of the division of Christendom. Men, women, and children, we have in all a population of only 1,300. This little handful of people is being formed into six congregations.

All the clergy faced the same problem, which might explain the numbers of congregations varying from one to 40 on different Sundays. And, as in other mining camps, on a Sabbath morning:

the pedestrian will hear the voice of a parson proclaiming the glad tidings of great joy to a sinful people while immediately on the other side is a party of gold-worshipping miners, busily plying the picks and shovels...

² *The Derbyshire Times*, 27th February 1897



*A view of St John's Church Phoenix from the Northeast (centre of picture)
The Brooklyn spur of the Canadian Pacific Railway can be seen in the foreground*

Rev Flewelling left in the summer of 1909 and a number of clergy from neighbouring communities provided cover until the Diocese of Kootenay decided to appoint a new incumbent. It is not known whether Laurence knew of the vacancy before leaving Nottingham for Canada, but he was inducted as vicar of St John's on 19th August 1911.

Phoenix was where Laurence first put his practical skill to use: he told the editor of the *Work in the Far West* that his first undertaking was to rectify the fact that St John's "was built the wrong way on, the sanctuary being at the north end and the body of the church, three times as broad as it was long, being entered up some twenty steps from the south end...we have now turned it around, the altar being placed at the East end."

It seems that Laurence was something of a "swinger". According to *The Phoenix Pioneer*³:

The Rev. Lee entertained the W.A. members and a number of friends at a social in the Miners' Union Hall. About 100 were present. A short address by the rector expressed thanks for the many kindnesses since his arrival in Camp, also to those who had volunteered their services in any way. Following this, a programme was held with musical selections and singing. A dance was held and refreshments served.

He returned to England in April 1915, after four years in Canada, "to minister to the needs of the poor", leaving behind his work in Phoenix where, "he personally renovated and added to the church -

³ *The Phoenix Pioneer*, 24th February 1912

addition to the accommodation of the vicarage, a veranda, a new entrance to the church, a handsome carved font, and a reredos besides other improvements..." He wrote back to Phoenix in June that he had "a rough passage through darkened ports of war zones but arrived safely."

From British Columbia to Jersey via Yorkshire

Laurence took up the position of Curate at St Paul, Thornaby-on Tees, Stockton-on-Tees, Yorkshire in 1915. He remained there until 1922, when he decided to move to Jersey after receiving medical advice to move to a milder climate. Laurence already had a connection with the Channel Islands, his brother Reginald having moved to Guernsey to become a fruit and flower grower. Brian Blampied now takes up the story:

Upon taking up residence near the Baths Hotel at Grève d'Azette he became assistant to the Vicar at St Luke's Church but, recognising the need for a church in the rapidly developing Grève d'Azette area, started to hold services in a disused wooden building previously in use as a men's club for St Luke's Church and situated in the grounds of the premises now occupied by the Girl Guides. Mr Lee organised games of his native sport -cricket on the beach for members of the choir. Access being readily available through the seawall gateway behind the church.

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One of his congregation and the owner of neighbouring property, Mr A'Court, provided Mr Lee with a plot of land upon which he built himself a bungalow.

As the congregation grew, Mr Lee sought larger premises, and as nothing else was available in the area, obtained the plot of land on which St Nicholas now stands from Jesse Boot to have his own church built. Although quite near the previous premises, the new site was in the parish of St Clement which posed a quandary over whose parish the new church would belong to, but this was overcome, and the building went ahead.

The main structure was erected by Blackmore builders, but the interior carpentry, pews, screens, etc were all built by Mr Lee himself with help of volunteers such as Mr Le Montais who helped with various tasks, including the sanding of finished articles. Mr Lee's talents as a carpenter, gained during his Canadian appointment, were then put to good use.

...

He was involved in all stages of building work from digging foundations and laying drains to making the pews, font cover, screen and lectern. He was resourceful and managed to acquire various items from other churches which



A very determined-looking Laurence Lee

were closing down or moving, most notably the Altar Cross and the Processional Cross which came from the Pier Road Mission.

...

The church hall was not contracted out but built by Mr Lee with the assistance of congregation members.

It was not long before numbers increased and a sizeable congregation and flourishing Sunday School came into being, this continued under Rev Lees' stewardship into the second year of the Occupation.

Church services were well attended by the wartime congregation, but Rev Lee's health was failing, and two years into the Occupation he died. At no time had he drawn a salary whilst establishing St Nicholas, so finances and buildings were sound and everything in good repair. He had established a successful church, Sunday school and church community just in time to serve the needs of the local community during the most trying years of the island's history.

Laurence, by his own wishes, never received any payment for his services as incumbent of St Nicholas, so it was thought that he must have been a man of independent means. Recent research, corroborated by his great nieces Linda Crosfield, Sharon Lee and Shelley Lee in Canada, has revealed that this was true: his father had been a successful businessman in Nottingham.

Laurence died on 23rd January 1942 at the General Hospital. The following report of his funeral service appeared in *The Jersey Evening Post* in the following month:

REV. LAURENCE BLACKMUR LEE

The funeral of Rev. Laurence Blackmur Lee, MA., incumbent of St. Nicholas Church, Grève d'Azette, took place yesterday afternoon. The service, which was fully choral and well attended by regular members of the congregation as well as members of the local clergy and residents in the neighbourhood, was conducted by Rev. T. H. Labey (Rector of St. Clement's), assisted by Rev. C. B. Ateyo (Vicar of St. Luke's), who read the Lesson.

During the service the hymn "Let all the Saints in concert sing" was sung, and at the conclusion the Nunc Dimittis was chanted. The coffin was of polished pine with copper mountings, the inscription on the breastplate being: Laurence Blackmur Lee, M.A. Died 23rd January, 1942. Aged 77 years.

The interment took place at St. Clement's, and Messrs. H. A'Court, J. G. Bisson, E. Mallet, A. Mallet, J. Le Montais, and others followed the procession; The committal prayers were read by the. Very Rev. M. Le Marinel, M.A. (Dean). Several handsome floral tributes were sent by friends and admirers of the deceased, and the funeral arrangements were carried out by Mr. Geo. Croad, Colomberie.

The significance of the coffin being furnished with copper mountings would have been lost on most of those who read the report of his funeral: Laurence had ministered in the mining Town of Phoenix BC. – he was well-acquainted with copper!

*Rev Martin Dryden
St Clement, January 2022*

THE LEE FAMILY



Turner Lee James Percy Lee



Reginald Lee Laurence Lee
(1865-1942)



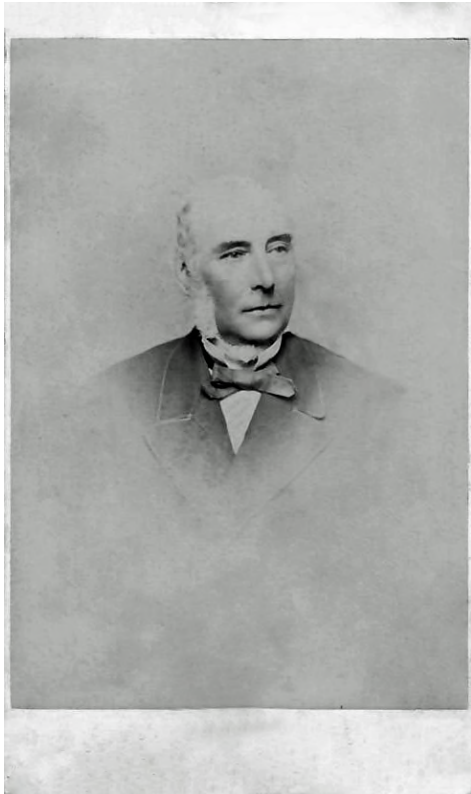
Turner Lee
(1861-1950)



James Percy Lee
(1863-1889)



Laurence Blackmur Lee
(1864-1942)



James Holwell Lee (1819-1890)



Elizabeth Lee, née Blackmur (1833-1905)

*Photos kindly provided by Turner Lee's grandchildren (Laurence's great nieces)
Linda Crosfield, Sharon Lee and Shelley Lee*



St John's Church being dismantled in the 1920s. Phoenix was abandoned in the aftermath of WWI when the price of copper collapsed, and it became the largest Ghost Town Canada had ever seen. Today, the only things that remain of Phoenix are the graveyard and the WWI cenotaph



*The interior of St John's Church Phoenix
showing distinct similarities with St Nicholas Church*