

## **CrossTown and St Cross – Past to Present**

The area of grass and water called The Moor separates this side of Knutsford from the smart shops and restaurants in King Street. This side has long been called CrossTown though no one is sure how this name came about. Perhaps it was simply because it is ‘across the Moor’. Perhaps it is because there was once a large stone cross by the road to Mobberley. And why is the church called St Cross? – there was no person called Saint Cross. It refers to the wooden cross on which Jesus was put to death by the Romans. Perhaps it should be called Holy Cross church, but it isn’t.

In this slide show we will show you a little of how CrossTown developed over 300 years, and how the people of this community and its church have always been deeply interconnected.

Let us therefore roll back the years to the time of the English Civil War, when Cromwell’s Roundheads were fighting King Charles 1<sup>st</sup> Cavaliers. The map shows only a few cottages along the Mobbeley Road near the Builders’ Arms pub. The gentry live across the Moor in King and Princes Street. In Cross Town most people are craftsmen, tenant farmers or workers on the Norbury Booths estate of the wealthy Legh family.

In those days almost everyone went to church. Knutsford was in the parish of St Mary, Rostherne, and people had to walk 4 miles there and back on a Sunday. During the week local farmers and workers attended a small church, near Longridge, dedicated to Saint Helena of the Holy Cross. All that remains today are a few gravestones laid where the walls once stood. One of the oldest stones marks Peter Atrobus who died at the beginning of the Civil War. Near him we see James Johnson, the local ironmonger, who lived through the war and died, aged 35, in 1679.

Saint Helena was mother of the Roman Emperor Constantine. She was a devout Christian and travelled to the Holy Land in search of the true cross of Jesus. She did find a wooden cross and took it back to Constantinople. The name ‘Helena’ is still with us.

So what happened to St Helena’s church? In 1741, 100 years after the Civil War, Knutsford parish became independent of Rostherne and Saint John the Baptist’s church was built in the town centre. Helena’s church was declared redundant by the new parish authorities and all its equipment and records removed to the new St John’s. St Helena’s was allowed to decay and be stripped for building materials.

The people of CrossTown were upset and annoyed by this. They felt that they had been robbed of their heritage. In protest they refused to attend the new church, and the ‘us and them’ feeling between the two sides of the Moor hardened. This went on for generations. Eventually Mr Peter Pennington Legh, the Victorian land owner of Booths Hall, supported his tenant farmers and workers by pressing for Cross Town to become an independent parish with its own church and vicar. He drew up plans for the new church building, and provided the materials on condition that the local people built it with their own hands. It was completed in 1858. Here some boys are playing a form of cricket on the BarnCroft field behind the church.

The first vicar was Lawrence Riley, who was also master of the local Grammar school. An old farmhouse next to the new church was converted to his vicarage and the stable to a school room and dormitory for the boys.

Though the new church had been built with love and conviction, it had not been well designed. Either the foundations were too weak or the roof too heavy, because alarming cracks soon appeared in the walls. The second Victorian vicar, Reverend Ralph Bradbury, was driven to distraction by trying to keep the place together. Sadly the only sensible solution was to demolish this hand-built church and have a new one professionally designed.

This map of 1874 shows how CrossTown has developed. Note the tannery – it would have smelled awful. The railway had come to Knutsford in 1862 and brought many well-to-do people into the neighbourhood. Money was raised for a new church and the architects Paley and Austin engaged. Their design shows a spire, but it was never built. Here some Victorian bricklayers are working on the new church, the year being about 1880.

At about the same time a day school for boys and girls was built across the road from the church, paid for by the congregation.

The church tower was added in 1887 to mark Queen Victoria's Golden Jubilee. Here is the finished church in 1890. In this wintry scene we also see the school.

The same photographer took this picture in 1890 when standing near the Builder's Arms. Note the houses and small businesses at the top of Hollow Lane.

Several men were employed cutting reeds on The Moor. These were used to thatch the local cottages and others woven into baskets and sold at Gidman's shop in King Street. These men probably took a drink at the Builders' Arms, which looked quite different in those days.

By 1892 Ralph Bradbury's health was very poor. He had to resign as Vicar and wrote a touching letter to his congregation, explaining that he felt "heart-broken" at leaving "so many warm-hearted, generous friends".

One of his friends, a Church Warden, was the wealthy Charles John Galloway, director of the Manchester firm of Galloways who operated a prosperous iron foundry and boiler making factory. He built a country mansion for himself and his wife Annie in CrossTown on the site of the old tannery. He called it Thorneyholme, but the locals nicknamed it 'The Boiler House'.

The drive up to it is still well known.

Their 27 year old son Percy was killed in India in 1893. In memory of him, the Galloways commissioned the famous artist Edward Burne-Jones to design the magnificent stained glass west window to St Cross Church.

Tragedy struck again a few years later when Annie died. To commemorate her, Charles had Burne-Jones design a second church window.

During the Second World War Thorneyholme was used to station American army officers. By the time war ended, the place was so dilapidated that the then owners sold it to the Council, who demolished it to make way for new housing. Only the East and West lodges and a garden wall remain.

The new Vicar after Reverend Bradbury was William Armour, who served for 43 years. We can see how much the church was central to community life from the strong all-male choir in 1907.

The congregation, which was most of the CrossTown community, raised yet more money to install an organ, and to extend the school because the population had grown. There had been plans for a full peal of bells, but instead the money was spent on the school. That is why St Cross church has only one bell.

Here is the Cross Town school football team in 1927. They won 8 league games out of 8 played. Pupils attended this school building until 1966.

After the Great War of 1914-18 a war memorial to local servicemen was erected at the corner of Thorneyholme Drive, with Reverend Armour leading the dedication ceremony.

Cross Town maintained its independence from the other side of Knutsford by having its own May Queen and May Day parade, and its own silver band. Madge Hamman was the May Queen in 1919. Here we see the bunting out along Mobberley Road with a crowd in front of the Builders' Arms.

The next long-serving Vicar was Eric Thomas, who came to St Cross in 1939, just six weeks before the outbreak of the Second World War. The vicarage and adjacent parish room were used to billet troops training to parachute in Tatton Park.

After the war Mrs Thomas started the Young Wives Group in an effort to get normal life going again. Her initiatives were continued by the Leigh family who came in 1952 when Reverend Richard Leigh was made Vicar. One of the sons, Peter, was a keen amateur photographer and he snapped many aspects of CrossTown life, such as the choir in 1959. Church services drew large congregations. All the women are wearing hats, the done thing at the time.

The church room, part of the original farm buildings, was regularly used for Brownies and Guides, Scouts, Christmas parties, whist drives and other social gatherings, pantomimes and plays. Here is 'Murder at the Vicarage'!

In spring the May Day fete remained as popular as ever.

In summer the annual garden party was a major social occasion. Here Lord and Lady Merriman are supporting the fund raising -- he was a senior judge.

On Remembrance Day Mobberley Road was closed during the service at the war memorial. The Scouts, Guides and Cross Town band all took part.

From the church tower in about 1960 Peter Leigh snapped perhaps the last steam train chugging towards Manchester. In the distance you can see the old gas works and the laundry in Drury Lane.

Looking down Mobberley road, the water tower is there but only a few of today's houses. Before the flats were built in Ella Grove, there was a dairy on the corner and a bicycle repair shed.

And here are two photographs of the top of Hollow Lane.

A few other old photographs show places in Cross Town that now look very different. This place is hardly recognisable as the junction of Brook Street with Hollow Lane, where the traffic lights are now. The cottage on the corner and the Congregational church are both long gone. For many years the local grocers and convenience store was Thompsons, opposite the Legh Arms. It later became CrossTown post office.

Next to Thorneyholme stood another mansion which has since been demolished. It was called Woodlands. In 1929 it was taken over as a boarding school for boys called 'Knutsford College, Woodside'. The school closed in 1954. St Vincent's School and the houses on Manor Park South are built on its grounds.

Yet another long gone building is Booths corn mill at the edge of Cross Town where the Longridge Trading Estate is now.

Peter Legh also photographed the change-over from the old vicarage to a new one built in 1956. The old one had long been unfit to live in. Being an ancient farmhouse it had stone floors and in winter there was ice on them! The old parish rooms were demolished along with the old vicarage soon after the new vicarage was completed. The school building was then used as a parish room until a new one was built in the 1980s immediately next to the church. Today the parish rooms are regularly used by the congregation and local organisations.

One of Reverend Leigh's regular duties was to take services at Sharston House, which at that time was a nursing home for retired clergy and their wives. This picture was taken in about 1972.

Christenings, weddings and funerals have marked the cycle of life at St Cross. The church yard has for generations been the final resting place of many local people. Here, for instance, is the headstone to the Caldwell family who had run a well known plant nursery along the Chelford Road since the time of the French Revolution. They had many distinguished customers included Peter Pennington Legh Esquire of Booth Hall and Lord Egerton of Tatton. When the business closed in 1992, the land was sold for housing.

Indeed, much of the story of Cross Town in the post-war years has been the development of housing, with some light industry at Park Gate and Longridge. The Longridge estate was built in the late 1960s – near to St Helena's church -- sponsored by Manchester City Council, and many of its residents came from Manchester.

The growing population needed shops, a doctors' and schools. Cross Town Infants moved to a new building on Manor Park, and Norbury Booths Junior School opened in 1959. Then in 1970 St John's Wood school opened on Longridge. Later these three schools merged into today's Manor Park School.

During these many changes the church kept up a lively community presence. Here is the choir in 1978.

In the 1990s, the T-Mobile company contracted with St Cross church to install mobile phone aerials on the tower roof, one of the highest points in Knutsford.

In recent time St Cross has had two lady Vicars. Jayne Shepherd had been a hospital chaplain before coming to Knutsford in 2011. Children at Manor Park School will remember her taking classes there, where she was a school governor.

In Jaynes' time the church hosted several popular Christmas Tree Festivals. Many Knutsford businesses, clubs and groups created a decorated tree -- some witty, some just beautiful.

Jayne left in 2015 and we now have a new Vicar, Paul Deakin, here with his wife Angela. From the church tower they can see the whole of Cross Town. Our shared heritage looks forward to our shared future.

END