

Christ Church and the Community

Christ Church was established in 1857 with a mission to serve what its founders foresaw was a growing local population with significant challenges. Between 1871 and the start of the Twentieth Century Lancaster's population grew by more than half; that of neighbouring Bulk township sixfold. As mills and factories sprung up around the canal, and housing spread around Freehold, Moor Gate and Christ Church itself, poverty and the personal hardships which travel with it threatened the social fabric, and Christ Church sought actively and practically to meet that threat. Starting as a chapel serving the workhouse and Grammar School, and from the 1880s as a parish with groups including the Girls' Guild and a Clothing Club, Christ Church also established and supported two lasting organisations which gave distinctive support to a changing community.



Christ Church School's home in Moor Gate between 1875 and 1992

Christ Church vicar Rev Phillip Bartlett led fundraising for Christ Church School which opened in 1875 with three church wardens and a Chaplain joining Rev Bartlett on its board. He took a close interest in children's development, introduced pupils to scripture in the school's first week, and in 1885 a Diocesan report said "religious knowledge, as a whole, is very satisfactory, and great pains have been taken to make the instruction of the children thorough." Many of the children had not been in school before, and numbers grew from 47 on its first day to over a hundred six months later and 260 in 1882, when boys were enrolled for the first time. A decade after the school opened it had over 400 pupils and in 1925 the parish raised £6000 to double the school's capacity. In 1961 the Bishops of Blackburn and Lancaster dedicated the extension at Highfield in Derwent Road, and in 1992 an expansion of Highfield was partly funded by the church through a grant from the Ripley Church of England Educational Trust. Christ Church remains regularly and closely involved in the school's work fulfilling its motto 'Have Faith', giving every child a tour of the church building, encouraging their support for a local food bank and of course helping mark important feasts.



Pupils of Christ Church school outside the church in 1896, and with the Bishop of Lancaster 121 years later

Another way in which Christ Church engaged with its parish population was through the Gregson Institute. Built in 1889 as a memorial for Henry Gregson, the Churchwarden whose family had founded Christ Church, the Gregson was a substantial facility for the celebration of faith and the provision of social welfare amongst the workers of Lancaster.



Architects' plans for the Gregson Institute from 1888, and the building in its last days as a church property in 1982

Initially the Institute offered a coffee tavern – it was originally planned as the 'Christ Church Temperance Hall' – with a reading room and a billiards table, but the activity there grew to embrace local groups from the Mothers' Union to sports clubs, horticultural societies and ballroom dancing classes. A new hall named in memory of Rev. Bartlett was added in 1912. Of course, there was room for creative fundraising for the parish, too, with jumble sales, concerts and sales of artworks, and the Gregson offered accommodation outside church premises for Parochial meetings, a Mission Room and Christ Church Youth Club. Despite political neutrality, the Gregson tackled social issues of its day, making collections for miners suffering hardship in the 1890s, hosting the Oddfellows' workers' credit union and providing meeting space for discharged service personnel campaigning for support after the First World War. It was also a polling station and counting room for municipal elections.

Two major developments of the twentieth century were reflected in Christ Church's work at the Gregson: the era of World War meant that in 1939 the Institute was given over to accommodating boys evacuated from Salford to protect them from the Blitz, and then used as a base by the Home Guard. The expansion of education meant that the Gregson was called upon by Christ Church School to provide classrooms, performance space and dining facilities for half a century from 1918 onwards. As all kinds of social clubs were increasingly displaced by home comforts, the Institute passed in 1983 into the hands of the Freehold Community Association and was replaced by the new hall alongside Christ Church for community work which has included a Winter Night Shelter for the homeless and today provides for Scouts, Guides, Beavers and Cubs as well as a range of church activities.



Left: Lady Ashton opening the Christ Church Bazaar at the Gregson Institute in 1938, with vicar Rev Percy Anderson
 Right: The Christ Church Youth Club's 'Old Tyme Music Hall' concert at the Gregson's Bartlett Hall in 1964