

**This work is the Copyright of the authors and/or Wakefield Historical Society and is not to be copied in any medium without explicit written permission**

### **Dr J W Walker the Churchwarden**

In its obituary of the Society's first president and distinguished Wakefield historian, John William Walker (1859-1953), the Yorkshire Archaeological Journal notes that 'he gave valued service as a churchwarden'.<sup>1</sup>

It does not seem that this has been much elaborated. The following account will aim to expand the comment at least a little. Walker was born in Wakefield on 15 October 1859, the son of a medical practitioner, Thomas Walker. J W Walker's own career in the medical field need not concern us much here. After an education at Wakefield Collegiate School and Queen Elizabeth Grammar School, he was apprenticed for a period with Dr Holdsworth of Burneytops House, Wakefield.<sup>2</sup> He later trained at University College Hospital, London, spending much leisure time pursuing archive material relating to the history of Wakefield in the British Museum and the Public Record Office.<sup>3</sup> Back in Wakefield, he joined his father's practice. He became a member of the Yorkshire Archaeological Society in 1884, served as its joint secretary between 1888 and 1897, and was president of the Society from 1938 to 1948.<sup>4</sup> His first major work, *The Cathedral Church of Wakefield*, was published by W H Milnes in Wakefield in 1888, marking the year in which the Diocese of Wakefield was established and the parish church of All Saints became a Cathedral. Walker was elected as a Fellow of the Society of Antiquaries at the same time. In the following year he became one of the Cathedral's churchwardens.<sup>5</sup>

Churchwardens were appointed annually in May at the annual Vestry meeting, or meeting of parishioners. This is sometimes termed in the minute books the Visitation because it was an occasion for the Archdeacon, the Diocesan Chancellor, or the Bishop to make a formal visit. ask searching questions, and offer a homily. At the time Walker became a churchwarden, the norm was for eight to be appointed, four of them nominated by the vicar and four elected by the people. Wardens might be re-chosen or re-elected year after year. Following the election the wardens would meet by themselves and nominate their officers – a chairman, a secretary, and a treasurer, for the ensuing year. Normally a warden would serve in a particular office until the next annual meeting, when another warden would be chosen to take his place. He might well then serve for the following year in another of the official positions. The elected chairman always relinquished the chair to the vicar if he was present.

Walker was nominated first by Norman Straton as one of the four vicar's wardens on 15 May 1889. The following year he was again one of the vicar's wardens and was elected as the secretary. In 1891 he became the chairman. Perhaps he did the job particularly well as he was re-elected in 1892 to serve for a second year. He was a vicar's warden again from 1893-4 but without any office and he ceased to be a warden at the Vestry meeting in 1894.

The churchwardens normally met at monthly intervals on a weekday evening often starting as late as 8pm. Their work involved managing the cathedral premises, handling the congregation's income and expenditure and determining what should be done with the money

given at the offertories, and hiring and firing lay staff. They oversaw the behaviour of the congregation during acts of worship. They played a key part in organising the decoration of the church for harvest festivals and Christmas and in the arrangements for other special services. Some years before Walker became a church warden they had set the annual church rate (payable by every householder in the parish whatever his or her religious affiliation) but this had been abolished by Act of Parliament in 1864.

The monthly meetings normally saw the approval of expenditure. The list of regular payments included the salaries or wages of the parish clerk (who was also the verger), the assistant verger, the organist, the bell-ringers and the organ blower. Payments were made to the parish clerk's wife for communion bread and to the West Riding Industrial Home for discharged female prisoners for laundering the surplices worn by clergy and choir.

It seems from the Churchwarden's Minutes that either the harvest festival was introduced at Wakefield parish church only in 1877 or that that was the first year in which it was celebrated in some style. The wardens asked local landowners to provide flowers, fruit and sheaves of corn to decorate the church and agreed to advertise the service in two Wakefield newspapers. It was an event that attracted far more people to the services than normal so that additional chairs were required. To have Walker, himself a medical man, amongst the churchwardens was clearly an advantage in 1890 when Dr Bevan Lewis at Stanley Royd Hospital complained about the condition in which the 400 chairs borrowed from there had been returned. It fell to Walker to call on him and no doubt pacify. There was a problem over the allocation of the offertory from the Festival: the churchwarden's account was almost always overdrawn and in the 1880s the money had regularly been used to reduce the deficit. In 1891 the wardens again determined to take the harvest income for Cathedral expenses. Vicar Straton explained that that was not what the money was for; it should be given to the poor. The following year it was Walker who proposed, successfully, that it should be thus directed. In 1893, however, the harvest offertory was again absorbed into the general fund.

It was for the wardens to determine when, outside the normal summons to worship, the Cathedral bells should be rung. They were unanimous in refusing the request for a peal in April 1891 to be rung if Wakefield Trinity won the Yorkshire Cup. (In fact they were the runners up that year.)

There were three occasions during Walker's period of office when elaborate arrangements were made for special services. There was the visit of the Duke of Clarence on 30 April 1891 when he planted a tree in the area that was to become Clarence Park. There was the installation of the new vicar, William Donne, after Straton had become the Bishop of Sodor and Man, and there was the visit of Princess Christian, Queen Victoria's third daughter, on 18 May 1893 when she opened a bazaar in the Corn Exchange, opened Bede Home - the Church of England Waifs and Strays Society house for boys in College Grove Road - and went to see the tree which her brother had planted. The churchwarden's minute book records the arrangements for this last in considerable detail. The Mayor and Corporation were to come in state. The stall which the princess would occupy in the Quire was to be decorated by Hall and Armitage, Wakefield's leading house furnishers, the neighbouring stall being removed to

make it more commodious. Matting was to be laid down the central aisle from the west door. The Chief Constable was to be asked to provide eight policemen to oversee the various gates into the grounds.

Walker was active again in relation to the Cathedral when he became a member of the ad hoc Walsham How Memorial Committee. This was set up to oversee the building of the vast extension at the east end of the Cathedral which was conceived as a memorial to the first bishop, William Walsham How and which was completed and consecrated in 1905. Walker served on the sub-committee dealing with lighting which recommended to the Memorial Committee the possible contractors for the work.

Walker also wrote a booklet, with F S Gray, to mark the completion of the extension, *A History of Wakefield Cathedral with a short description of the eastern extension and an account of its consecration and octave*. This was published in 1905 by the Wakefield printer, W H Milnes.

1 *Yorksire Archaeological Journal* Vol 38 (1953), p416.

2. Obituary, *The Wakefield Express*, 21 February 1953, page 8

3. YAJ op cit

4. Ibid.

5. WJAS, Wakefield Archives, Churchwarden's Minute Book 1864-1893 WDP3/22/1 Much of the following information is taken from this or the next volume of minutes for 1893-1904.

Kate Taylor