

James Jordan Serjeantson - Rector 1868 to 1886

From the early 18th century until 1867, the clergy at St. Michael's were "perpetual curates" - appointed by the incumbent of St. Mary's. These were paid a cash stipend, but had no income from tithes and glebe lands, and were often of lower social standing than Rectors. At the start of December 1867, the then perpetual curate, Thomas Gnossall Parr, who has been in post as a Perpetual Curate since 1831, was made the first Rector of the parish. He was not to enjoy that title for any length of time and fell ill and died shortly afterwards on December 23rd 1867. He was succeeded in June 1868 by the first to actually be appointed to the post of Rector- James Jordan Serjeantson (pictured).



Serjeantson was born in Liverpool in 1835, the son of a Liverpool merchant and an Irish mother and attended Liverpool Grammar and Rugby Schools. In 1854 he matriculated at Trinity College in Cambridge and was awarded his BA in 1858 and his MA in 1861. He was a rowing blue and part of the University crew that lost the boat race in 1857 by 11 lengths. There have only been six larger losing margins in the 190-year history of the race, so I doubt it was an experience he relished. He was ordained deacon in 1859 and priest a year later, both at Lichfield Cathedral. He served a curacy at Stoke from 1859 to 1868 before coming to St. Michael's. He left Stoke in June 1868 to high praise from his incumbent and the Archdeacon, with gifts (including a hall clock) from parishioners and Sunday School children. He married Elizabeth Buckley, a clergyman's daughter in August that year and they were to have seven children.

It is clear from the records we have that he was an assiduous, hard-working parson, much admired and respected by his parishioners. In June 1877, he notes in the service register that "this is the 1000th sermon I have preached in this church". In June 1983, he was to write again "this is the 2000th sermon I have preached in this church". This is an average of around 130 per year! Some indication of his activities can be judged from the activities of Holy Week in 1882 shown below. In total there were 16 sermons or addresses that week, all preached by Serjeantson.

Palm Sunday	Morning	Holy Communion with 15 communicants
	Afternoon	Sermon on Philipians 2.8
	Evening	Sermon on John 15.13-14
Monday	Unspecified	Address "Christ suffered and died as a sacrifice for sins."
Tuesday	Unspecified	Address "Christ suffered and died to make atonement."
Wednesday	Unspecified	Address "Christ suffered and died as an example."
	Evening	Sermon on St Mark 14. 71-77
Thursday	Unspecified	Address "Christ suffered and died to enable us to live a holy life."
Good Friday	7.00	Sermon on Romans 4.25
	9.00	Sermon on St Matthew 26.39
	Morning	Sermon on Isaiah 53.3
	Afternoon	Sermon on Two words from the cross
	Evening	Sermon on the last words
Saturday	Unspecified	Address "Christ suffered and died that we might have life eternal."
Easter Day	8.00	Holy Communion with 43 communicants
	9.30	Holy Communion with 17 communicants.
	Morning	Sermon on Isaiah 38.16 and Holy Communion with 49 communicants
	Afternoon	Sermon on Colossians 3.3 and baptism of five children
	Evening	Sermon on 1 Corinthians 15.14
Monday	Unspecified	Baptism of four adults
Wednesday	Evening	Sermon on Romans 5.2-21

He presided at the pastoral offices - 1123 baptisms, 1189 marriages and 215 funerals in total over the years of his incumbency and also presented 20 to 30 young people each year for confirmation. One of the more memorable funerals was that of William Corfield and his wife Theresa, his elderly mother and four young children who all died from suffocation in a house fire on Breadmarket Street, next to Dr Johnson's birthplace in January 1873. The press reported that James Serjeantson's voice trembled

with emotion as he read the words of the funeral service around the grave before the coffins were lowered one by one.

Theologically, he seems to have been very much against the ceremonial associated with the Anglo-Catholic Oxford movement and is recorded as a signatory of a letter of 1875 to the bishops that argued against legalizing the use of eucharistic vestments and the eastward position for celebrating the eucharist. Some aspects of current worship at St. Michael's would have certainly made him uncomfortable! The service register indicates he was a strong supporter of the Melanasian Mission, formed by Bishop Selwyn, the former Bishop of New Zealand, and indeed one of his curates, Rev John Still (1869-1871), left Lichfield to become a missionary in the South Pacific, at a time just following the martyrdom of Bishop John Patteson in the Solomon Islands.

Serjeantson had gifts other than his preaching and pastoral abilities. Within twelve months of arriving in the parish he was awarded the prize for the best variegated geraniums at the annual flower show (which almost certainly didn't go down well with some of the more established exhibitors!) and he was also a valued member of the bell ringing team. His name can still be found on a number of memorial boards in the belfry, that commemorate the ringing of specific peals - for example he was part of the team that rang a complete peal of Grandsire Minor in 1876. He also served as a Workhouse Guardian and took an in various educational initiatives within the city.

In 1881 he and his wife, their two sons, Cecil (10) and Ronald (7), and three daughters, Mildred (5), Edith (3) and Monica (1) lived at the Rectory on Mount Pleasant, with a housekeeper, cook and two servants. Two other children died as babies - Edward in 1870 and Joyce in 1884.

He died on New Year's day 1886 and was buried four days later with the Bishop of Lichfield presiding at his funeral. His final illness seems to have been short - he was still presiding at funerals two weeks before he died. Elizabeth was to outlive him by 33 years. Their graves, and the graves of their infant children, are, at the time of writing, currently inaccessible in the very overgrown area at the east of the old churchyard. I have not succeeded in identifying them, although I have received many bramble scratches in the trying. But James Serjeantson does have other memorials. A fountain on Greenhill that was erected in his memory in 1886 contains the inscription.

Erected by parishioners and friends in grateful and loving memory of the Rev J J Serjeantson MA, Rector of St. Michael's, Lichfield.



In addition, a plaque in the chancel at St. Michael's reads

To the glory of God and in loving memory of James Jordan Serjeantson M.A. for 17 years rector of this parish who by the sympathy and energy with which he fulfilled his ministry on Christ endeared himself to his parishioners and by the brightness of his manner and his cheerful readiness with which he brought out the stores of his varied learning won for himself the esteem and love of all classes. He fell asleep January 1st 1886 aged 50 years.

Both memorials speak eloquently of the high esteem in which he was held in the church and the city and the love that his parishioners felt for him. He perhaps deserves more recognition as the first to be appointed Rector of the parish.

Chris Baker