

A History of
Christ Church, Ilfracombe
Muskoka, Ontario



SETTLERS first reached Ilfracombe by the old Stisted Road, coming north from Utterson and Aspdin, and thence east along the Town Line that separates the Districts of Muskoka and Parry Sound. Among the new-comers was Captain Harston, who undertook for a fee to instruct young gentlemen out from England in the rudiments of Canadian farming. His dauntless attempts atop the rocky bluff overlooking Buck Lake are humourously described in "English Bloods" by F. M. Delafosse, one of his early recruits.

In the spring of 1878, prayer meetings were conducted by Captain Harston in the farmhouse of Charles Smith on the west bay of Buck Lake. Meanwhile the land on an adjacent hill was cleared, and a log church was commenced early in the year 1879. At the opening in July by the Rev. Mr. Patterson, the church was so filled that many had to stand during the service. Such opportunities of hearing a clergyman came so seldom that people would travel miles to be present.

Captain Harston continued services with occasional visits from the Rev. Wm. Crompton, who himself conducted another school of farming in Aspdin. Soon after, with a grant from the Society for the Promotion of Christian Knowledge, he secured the services of the Rev. A. S. O. Sweet, a graduate of St. Augustine's. Mr. Sweet took sole charge until Oct. 1884, when because of ill health he returned to England. Captain Harston also left about this time after his protégés were established around the lake.

The Rev. John Manning arrived in 1885, and the parish records date from this point. The next spring, the present stone church overlooking the lake was begun on land secured from Amelius Baldwin. The corner stone was laid on July 28 1886, by Mr. Manning, and the church opened for Divine Service in the autumn of 1887. The baptism on April 10 1888 of three children of J. A. Warriner from Round Lake was the first in the new church.

Mr. Harry Aylwin, a divinity student from Hamilton, Ont., carried on the work with much acceptance among the people during the summer vacation of 1888. He returned in four years to serve the church as deacon, and his wedding on Jan. 10, 1893, to Catherine Fair, a teacher in the Sunday School, was solemnized by the Rev. Wm. Chowne of Novar.

At the end of Aug. 1888, the Rev. Laurence Sinclair was appointed by his Lordship Bishop Sullivan of Algoma to the sole charge of Christ Church, Ilfracombe, which was the centre of the mission containing Novar, Hoodstown, Stanleydale, and Axe Lake. Stanleydale (Ashworth) and Novar were separated from the Ilfracombe mission in 1890, when Ravenscliff was added.

A meeting of the building committee was held in Sept. 1888 to decide on the lining of the chancel which was being paid for out of \$50.00 received from the diocese. This was completed in time for the Harvest Thanksgiving Service conducted on Oct. 5 by the Rev. Wm. Chowne, of Rosseau, the Rural Dean, who was visiting the Ilfracombe mission.

The Christmas of 1888 was memorable. "The congregations of the 5 point mission assembled in Christ Church on Thurs. Dec. 27 at 3 p.m. for Divine Service. Immediately after, gifts in number above a hundred were given to the children of the various Sunday Schools. All then resorted to the village mill by Buck River, where tea was provided, followed by a 'magic lantern' entertainment given by Captain Whidden; the rest of the evening was filled with songs, recitations, and speeches. Nearly 200 folk were gathered together on this occasion, some coming from as far as 14 miles even though a change in weather had made the roads almost impassable with ice and water. Baskets were brought filled with provisions so liberally that abundance was left over at the end of the entertainment."

In February 1889, Bishop Sullivan visited the mission of Ilfracombe. Large congregations met his Lordship at each of the points, including 17 candidates for confirmation and 15 baptisms. Mr Sinclair presented 7 children and 5 adults for the first confirmation at Christ Church. Since then, every ceremony of the Church has been held except for an ordination. Mr. Sinclair himself was ordained at the triennial council of the Diocese of Algoma in Trinity Church, Parry Sound, on Trinity Sunday, June 16th, 1889.

Thursday Feb. 27, 1890, is recorded as a highlight in the early days of Ilfracombe. At 3 p.m., a large congregation assembled to greet Bishop Sullivan, who arrived with the Rev. Thomas Llwyd, Rural Dean of Muskoka and Rector of Huntsville, to consecrate the new Christ Church. The petition for consecration was read in the porch by Mr. Stotesbury, the

vestry clerk, after which the procession began with the 24th Psalm read responsively by clergy and congregation. Following the form of consecration and his sermon, the Bishop proceeded with celebration of the Holy Communion.

At a business meeting after the service for which all the congregation remained, his Lordship expressed his entire satisfaction with the work of the mission and the good will of all the people. He referred to two gifts just arrived from England, some richly embroidered texts from the Rev. A. S. O. Sweet, and a handsome altar cloth from Mrs Lawrence of London. The bishop considered the latter to be the finest in the diocese, and called attention to the remarkable way in which these prized gifts had been preserved. They had arrived at Novar station and were to be forwarded on a Monday. Mr Sinclair, learning of this, eagerly arranged to have them brought to Ilfracombe on Sunday after morning service. That night the Novar station was utterly destroyed by fire.

Mr. Sinclair at this meeting returned a cheque for \$100.00 which his Lordship had sent him for the purchase of a horse when he first arrived. Mr. Sinclair had never seen his way to do so, although his travels through the country, lantern in hand, had often been done with much suffering, due to the backward state of the roads. The bishop expressed admiration for his action and said that the money would be given to some other clergyman who had not the same strength to perform his duties without a horse.

For years, annual vestry meetings were held during Easter week. The first appointments recorded in 1889 were: Charles Smith, clergyman's warden; Richard Tothill, people's warden; Harry Stotesbury, vestry clerk; Edward Malkin, secretary of the building committee. Mr. Smith was for many years superintendent of the Sunday School, and Mrs Tothill the church organist. Other early parishioners included the families of John Fair, William Johnson, and Walter Hopcraft of McMurrich Township, Henry Thurman of Yearleys, and Frank Mackie of Fox Lake, who was warden for 25 years. Mr. Herbert Whitley also served as warden for a quarter of a century, and Mrs. R. Whitley, later Mrs. Malkin, as organist for 40 years. In 1902, Ilfracombe numbered 92 souls, of which the church population was 50, with 24 communicants.

In the sanctuary, the inspiring window of the Good Shepherd was given in memory of Mrs. Charles Smith, a faithful pioneer, who died on June 14, 1902. The lectern was donated in 1899 by E. Henderson, who lived with Amelius Baldwin across from the church, and the prayer desk was added by the congregation the next year. The service books, missal and psalter, as well as the large bible containing the Apocrypha, were presented by the Society for the Promotion of Christian Knowledge. A new altar was installed in 1962, a gift from Schumacher, Ont. The altar cross came from the Sisters of St John the Divine, and the candlesticks from St. Barnabas, Toronto. The Rev. Mr. Robinson of Emsdale provided the first communion vessels, and in 1962, the parish church of St. James in Ilfracombe, Devonshire, sent a chalice and paten for the 75th anniversary.

The pews in the nave came from St. Jude's, the old church at Hoods-town; new prayer books and hymnals were purchased in 1961 to replace the outdated copies of earlier days. The lamps, including the red sanctuary lamp, were brought from St. Thomas, Hamilton, by Mrs. Wm. Lees, whose summer home was at the narrows, whilst the lovely rose window was presented by the Rev. Charles Darling, who holidayed at Buck Lake

in early years. Seven windows in the nave commemorate members of many faithful families of Ilfracombe, the Cousins, Darlings, Malkins, Smiths, Taylors, Tytlers, and Whitleys. The eighth window is in memory of the Rev. Joseph Pardoe, who served the parish from 1894 till his death in 1904.

Soon after the Rev. Laurence Sinclair retired in 1930, the care of Christ Church was given over to the Society of St John the Evangelist in Bracebridge. The Cowley Fathers, particularly the Rev. Fathers R. J. Morley and L. E. C. Frith, served devotedly from 1936 to 1946, but were obliged to relinquish the parish after the 2nd world war. Since then, a succession of interested clergy have taken charge in July and August. In 1951, it was decided to build a church cabin for their use, and summer donations have also provided for many improvements to the church proper, such as reshingling and repairs to the floor. The old church hall, which had provided many evenings of work and entertainment, was finally taken down in 1956. Of recent years much devoted care and service has been given by Mrs. M. Taylor, who continues to live in Ilfracombe the year round.

The words of the Rev. L. Sinclair at the church's consecration provide inspiration to treasure this jewel in the Muskoka woods: "Nothing can be more encouraging than to see people continuing to meet in this church as regularly as in the past, and thus show their love to worship God in his house on earth, looking forward to that better home when we shall worship him on high in the temple not made with hands, eternal in the heavens."

Christ Church cemetery is half a mile from the church itself. The acre of land was donated by Wm. Campbell, the reeve of Stisted, on the field across from his house upon the death of his wife Sarah on Oct. 11, 1891.

The following are among those who have served this church:

1880—1884	the Rev. A. S. O. Sweet,	
1885—1888	the Rev. John Manning,	
1888—1892	the Rev. Laurence Sinclair,	
1892—1893	the Rev. Harry C. Aylwin,	
1894—1904	the Rev. Joseph Pardoe,	
1904—1908	the Rev. Christopher Simpson,	
1908—1909	the Rev. C. Ryan,	
1909—1930	the Rev. Laurence Sinclair,	
1932—1933	the Rev. Richard K. Bamber,	
1936—1939	the Rev. R. J. Morley,	
1939—1945	the Rev. L. E. C. Frith,	
1946	Br. Crispin,	Rev. C. M. Serson,
1947	Rev. E. C. Bowyer,	Rev. D. Curzon,
1949	Rev. G. F. Heathcote,	Rev. A. Haldenby,
1950	Rev. A. Haldenby,	Rev. L. R. Willis,
1951		Rev. J. F. Hinchliffe,
1952	Rev. D. C. Wickenden,	Rev. D. N. Mitchell,
		Very Rev. C. C. Robinson,
1953		Rev. J. F. Hinchliffe,
1954	Rev. G. Loosemore,	Rev. J. H. Watson,
1955	Rev. H. Vallis,	Rev. J. S. Cunningham,
1956	Rev. H. Vallis,	Rev. J. H. Watson,
1957	Rev. C. Elliott,	Rev. W. H. Gibson,
1958	Rev. G. A. Young,	Rev. K. A. Minchen,
1959	Rev. S. J. Armstrong,	Rev. C. Elliott,
1960	Rev. S. J. Armstrong,	Rev. K. Sites,
1961	Rev. D. H. Dixon,	Rev. C. Elliott,
1962	Canon C. Elliott,	Rev. Wm. Cook.