

The Gresleys and St. Michael and All Angels, Observatory, Cape Town

Geoffrey Ferrers Gresley, was a nephew of **Sir William Nigel Gresley** (1806 - 47), ninth baronet, of Drakelow Park in Derbyshire. He was born on 17 August 1851 but was thought too delicate to go either to public school or to university. He went to Ceylon as a tea planter but soon fell seriously ill and had to return to England. He evidently made a good recovery as he lived to the age of 82, despite a life of considerable hardship. **Gresley** was ordained priest in 1879 and went to the Cape as chaplain to Bishop (later Archbishop) West Jones. He then served as rector of Woodstock and of Claremont and as assistant chaplain on Robben Island. It was as curate of Salt River, where his **Aunt Louisa** was the wife of the rector **Joseph Taylor**, that he came onto the Observatory scene. Appointed priest in charge of this area, he rented Scott's Hall in Lytton Street for £4.10.0. a month from 1 November 1897, holding his first service there six days later. He organised a day school for coloured children there and in May 1899 also used it for his Sunday School. On many Sundays there would be only five communicants and he must have been gladdened when no less than 56 took communion on Christmas Day. The parish could not pay him a salary but he had a small private income and very spartan tastes, so he just managed. His lodgings consisted of a succession of single rooms and occasionally two rooms and were sparsely furnished. The only creatures to be in comfort there were his cats whom visitors used to find occupying the few chairs. He had six cats, five of which were pure white. Sarah Beatty, the verger's daughter, was his housekeeper for many years and continued with him in his retirement at the Strand and Faure.

Gresley was devoted to children. After Saturday morning catechism he would walk a party of his scholars up the slopes of Devil's Peak to the Rhodes Memorial or across the open fields to Woodstock beach or, a long walk for young people, to Milnerton to gather wild flowers. At a church bazaar he disguised himself as a gypsy woman and told his parishioners' fortunes. Knowing them as he did, he was able to startle them by his predictions - until a small boy noticed the large masculine shoes and gave the game away.

The Anglicans decided they must build a church and a committee of twelve began to function. Its most prominent member was Sir David Gill, the Astronomer since 1879 and a most valuable member of the congregation. He served as St. Michael's first church warden and its lay delegate at diocesan synods and he and Lady Gill were indefatigable in raising funds for the church. It was at first intended to construct in three stages though in fact only the proposal for the first stage, the nave, was adhered to. It has been said that it was based on **Gresley's** chicken house on Robben Island. Baker certainly paid no attention to any such design - perhaps it was just one of **Gresley's** jokes. The foundation stone (which can still be seen in the west wall) was laid with full masonic honours on 23 July 1898 by C.W. Barnett-Clarke the Dean of Cape Town and by the Deputy Grand Master of the Western Division of freemasons and copies of the Cape Times and Argus of the day before were deposited under it.

A **Glastonbury** chair was designed by Baker. St. Andrew's Rowbarton in Taunton, of which **Gresley's** brother **Roger** was rector, gave a font of white stone which the Castle Line kindly brought for only half the normal freight charge. All was now ready for the consecration and this was performed by West Jones on 4 April 1899, with Bishop A.G.S. Gibson preaching the sermon on "The House of God, the Home of Man". The next day the first wedding took place and the alms box was rifled. This happened three times in the first week. **Gresley** must have asked the police to watch the church because in July he wrote "Church handcuffed by night policeman finding door open." Hitherto **Gresley** had made his entries in the Salt River registers but now he opened his own, making his first entry for marriages on 5 April and for baptisms four days later.

Bubonic plague broke out in the Western Cape in 1901 and an isolation camp was established at Uitvlugt (now Pinelands and N'dabeni). **Gresley** volunteered to minister to its inmates. This was against the wishes of the medical officers who warned him that if he was admitted he would not be allowed out. "I don't want to come out, I want to go in," he told them. Inside the camp he did excellent work until he caught the disease himself though, fortunately, he recovered. The outbreak of the Anglo-Boer War in October 1899 brought changes in the life of the community, with many young men joining up. Troops were stationed nearby and some came to worship. They were entertained with concerts and war funds were raised. **Gresley** was surprised in February 1900 to find 1000 sheep from the Argentine, imported for military rations, grazing in the field to the north of the church, with soldiers acting as shepherds.

With the further growth in the village's numbers the nave became too small and people had to be turned away when there was not even standing room. It was decided to carry out both remaining stages of the building programme at the same time, thereby raising the seating capacity from 350 to 600. Baker and Masey completed the specifications by December 1903, the tender of McAllister for £6036 was accepted and some funds were raised. A Ladies' Collecting Association was formed and **Gresley** himself paid many visits to Cape Town and obtained money or pledges from its wealthier residents. The Society for the Promotion of Christian Knowledge in England gave £150 and the largest private donors, of £50 each, were the archbishop, J.W. Jagger, Dr. A. Y. St. Leger of Avondale in Collingwood Road and **Gresley** himself. He also received some support from his family and friends in England. But money also had to be borrowed, a factor which would lead to endless trouble in the years to come.

St. Michael's was consecrated by the Archbishop on Trinity Sunday 18 June 1905, with Archdeacon R. Brooke preaching and J.W. Williams, the Bishop of St. John's, being among those who managed to be present despite torrential rain. So the parishioners were blessed with one of the finest churches in the Cape Peninsula - but at heavy cost in future anxiety. They certainly made valiant efforts to regain their solvency. **Gresley** received no salary and his curate brother **Roger** only £150 a year. There was always great need to employ a curate but often there were no funds to pay one. The vergers on £56 a year and the organist on £24 were by no means over-remunerated. No rectory was built until 1922 and even that had to be sold only four years later: it was not until 1935 that a rector here got a home of his own when the present rectory came into being.

Gresley was made a canon of St. George's Cathedral in 1915 and it was truly "the end of an epoch" in Observatory when he retired in the following year. It was fortunate that he was prepared to rough it for, as far as comforts were concerned, he had had a truly appalling time. Apart from the £150 a year the diocese seems to have paid him, in some years all he received was £7 a month to pay his rent. He had no less than nine moves in his first ten years, being, as he said, harried "from pillar to post, if his lodging (which were always dignified by the name of "the rectory") being usually a single room or two rooms when he was lucky. **Gresley** and his brother **Roger** lived for a while at Strand, where he did valuable services as a volunteer nurse in the serious influenza epidemic of 1918, and then at St. Raphael's in Faure but made their final home at **Butleigh** in Somerset. **Gresley** died on 1 July 1933 and his brother three years later.

Innumerable stories were told about him. Unlike most white folk he normally travelled third class in trains to be in contact with the poorer people. Quite late in life he found a very big man ill-treating a horse and beat him with the man's own whip and then went into St. Michael's to ask forgiveness for losing his temper. The school children found him a most entertaining companion on their many walks together. He was a competent artist and had won a prize for a water colour at the South African Drawing Club's exhibition in 1889. He is sure to have made sketches of the Observatory scene and it is sad that at present none of these can be traced.

In the church are several **Gresley** related items:

- 1) The small processional crucifix on the north wall is probably the original altar cross brought by **Gresley** from Uitvlugt chapel when the plague camp there was closed down. It was dedicated on 18 June 1905.
- 2) The image of Christ the Good Shepherd on the south wall was given by **Fr Roger Gresley** in memory of "four and a half years of happy ministry at St Michael's". An oak missal stand carved with foliage and the figure of a lion is marked on the back "**R. Gresley- 1914**".
- 3) The Rood which hangs from the chancel arch, designed by Kendall, was given in memory of **Fr Geoffrey Gresley** and dedicated by Archbishop Phelps on 14 August 1936. The teak cross, which is 2.4 by 1.4 metres, was carved by F. Bakker and Co. The figure on the cross is 1.2 metres high and was made by Faith Craft Works of Westminster.
- 4) The copy of A Virgin and Child by Murillo in an ornate frame on the South Wall was given by **Fr Geoffrey Gresley** in July 1910 in thanksgiving for his recovery from plague in Uitvlugt camp.

Abstracted from the church's history written by Robert Langham Carter