

The Floating Church.

BY L. S. LEWIS.



It is unique, being the only one of its kind in the world. The yachts used by the various missions to fishermen cannot exactly be called floating churches, in the strictest sense of the term; whereas the extraordinary structure dealt with herein is a regular consecrated church, which visits its congregation, instead of waiting for the congregation to come to it. A portrait of the pastor very properly appears on the first page of this article. He is the Rev. George Broke, vicar of Holme, Peterborough.

We hear a good deal about the troubles of the clergy in crowded cities, where there is but one pastor to a population of several thousands; but no one ever seems to have thought about the hardships endured by ministers in out-of-the-way parts of the country. Many of these heroic men have to work single-handed a parish which, though containing only a few hundred people, is scattered over many square miles of lonely country.

Mr. Broke's parish is situated in the Fens of Huntingdon, which, like the rest of those vast tracts of fertile land, were, until comparatively recent times, marsh, bog, and shallow lakes. The chief difficulty connected with most of these Fen parishes is that the ordinary parish church, parsonage, and village, proper, are not really in the Fen at all, but in the clay country bordering it. This latter is locally called the "mainland" or the

"highlands." As the Fen gradually becomes drained, houses are built farther and farther from the "village," until at last a single parish may be scattered for miles.

The parish of Holme, in Hunts, is a typical instance of this. That part of it which contains the parish church and village, and which is situated on the clay, to the west of the Great Northern main line, is only about 400 acres in extent; whereas east of the railway the parish spreads thinly over 4,500 acres.

Half a century ago much of this Fen land was the bed of the Whittlesea Mere.

Holme, however, is blessed with nine miles of navigable canal, and this circumstance suggested to Mr. Broke the idea of the floating church. Mr. Broke had been a curate at Great Marlow, and possibly the recollection of many houseboats had something to do with the notion.

Here is a view of the floating church. The "building" proper is but 7ft. high, and is erected on a flat-bottomed lighter, 40ft. long. The interior measures 30ft. in length. No greater height than 7ft. could be allowed on account of the bridges beneath

which the church has to pass. Even now (strange as it may sound) the sacred edifice has to be in very low water indeed before it can reach one particular station.

The floating church—St. Withburga's, by name—is also the cheapest church on record. She (or it) cost only £70. The church is towed by a horse to a different station on each Sunday of the month. And, by the



THE REV. GEORGE BROKE.
From a Photo. by R. W. Howes, E. Dereham.

way, if much Gilbertian language strikes the eye in this little article, it must be attributed entirely to the topsy-turviness of a subject which deals at the same time with a church and with a boat.

The church carries two flags. The St. George's Cross on top was presented by

the vicar before the floating church was finally settled in all its details. He thought of a big caravan, but the appalling state of the Fen roads (or "droves," as they are called) in winter put this out of the question. Besides, there was the expense to consider. The Church Army vans cost £100 each, plus the cost of the



From a Photo. by]

1.—THE FLOATING CHURCH.

[the Rev. Geo. Broke.

the Archdeacon of Huntingdon, and beneath this the St. Andrew's Cross is flown, as a signal to laggards that service is about to commence. Thus, these flags serve instead of bells, and they can be seen for a great distance across the level Fen country.

horses. The next idea was a dismantled railway carriage, costing, say, £7, fixed on a second-hand barge, which might be picked up cheap for about £30. Dismantled railway carriages, by the way, play an important part in the lives of the Fen people. It costs



From a Photo. by]

2.—COMING TO SERVICE.

[the Rev. Geo. Broke.

In the foregoing photo. the congregation are seen coming to service. The horse on the near side is the motive power. He is a sober, respectable animal, fully conscious of his high mission.

Several other ideas suggested themselves to

a good deal to bring bricks and mortar into these lonely places, but the railway company will always let the people have an old carriage for little more than a £5 note. As a fact, many Fen folk live in these railway carriages (as at Ramsey St. Mary, near Holme),

and spend the greater part of their lives in them.

It is a curious parish altogether. A big van has been run for years in connection with the school. This van starts out at eight o'clock in the morning, and makes a round of six miles to collect children from the outlying dwellings. The children when school is over are again taken in the van and deposited at their own doors.

The vicar, Mr. Broke, tells us that the floating church supplied an urgent want. There were several grown-up children found who had never been baptized at all; indeed, the very first baptismal ceremony that was celebrated in the floating church was marked by a curious incident—the child cried out indignantly, "Give me back to grannie!"

The very interesting photo. next reproduced shows the interior of the floating church. "The room itself," writes Mr.

allowing room for three extra members of the congregation."

There are, altogether, thirty-six chairs, with ample room for kneeling between the rows; there are, besides, two small benches for the choir. The internal fittings are well shown in the reproduction. The east end is furnished in harmonizing shades of red. The diminutive American organ is one of the very smallest made, and is admirably suited to the "building." The desk, fixed to the wall on the right, serves the double purpose of pulpit and lectern, and it can be folded back when not in use. For a baptism the font, with its stand, is brought down and placed on the lower step in front of the altar; and for a celebration of the Holy Communion the stone basin is removed, leaving the oak stand to serve as credence-table.

It is an amusing fact that, when the vicar's wife and a lady friend were completing the



From a Photo. by]

3.—THE INTERIOR OF THE FLOATING CHURCH.

[the Rev. Geo. Broke.

Broke, "is built of deal with oak joists, and it is matchboarded inside. The windows open upwards, and hook on to the roof. Entrance is obtained by a door in the bows, opening on to a short flight of steps. To avoid stooping in descending, part of the roof slides back some 3ft., just like the hatch of a ship's companion. On the left on entering is the vestry—merely a small recess curtained off. So precious is space, that when I emerge from the vestry to conduct the service, this curtain is thrown back, thus

internal decorations, the latter was seized with unmistakable symptoms of *sea-sickness*! Members of the congregation have also been smitten with the same distressing malady during service; and some of the choir girls have had to resign on the same account. You see, during Divine service, the church swings out to the full length of her moorings, and is then brought up sharply. She then commences to rock gently, and forthwith returns slowly inshore again, to repeat the same performance.

"The bill for the church," remarked the vicar, "was an interesting document. 'To one Floating Church, £70.' Just that and nothing more. It was built by a boat-builder at Stanground, near Peterborough. He took two months to complete the church, and on receipt of her we only had three days in which to fit her up before the Archdeacon came to conduct the ceremony of dedication. We had about 120 people at the dedication service. Not all inside, of course. And I should tell you that many of my own congregation remain *outside* on fine Sundays. They sit on the bank near the open windows, with prayer-books in their hands, and follow the service very closely."

The vicar's wife has a girls' class in the floating church one night in the week. The girls work in the fields, and would not care about a four-mile walk to the parish church after the day's work is over.

Mr. Broke is a great enthusiast and an earnest worker. He welcomes strangers to his unique church, and he assures them that its stability precludes the possibility of the church going to the bottom. "St. Withburga's is not insured," remarks Mr. Broke, jocularly, "but

there is a sinking fund. The church," the vicar goes on to say, "is built of deal, with oak knees. The bows are higher and heavier than the stern. She is steered by a tiller, and moved by towing." One man, it seems, can lug St. Withburga's a short distance, this sweltering duty devolving occasionally upon the senior churchwarden.

Our last photo. shows the church lying idly at her moorings on a week-day. The outside is painted green. The hull is tarred and the roof covered with tarred felt. The flagstaff lets down like the mast of a Norfolk wherry. In short, in inception and execution, the church is a monument of ingenuity, and is thoroughly appreciated. Untoward incidents are few. One Sunday morning, however, a stout labourer was in a hurry out of church, and he slipped off the plank bridge leading from the bows to the bank. Of course, he fell with a terrific splash into the water. When fished out, half-dead; a comrade and fellow-worshipper, wishing to offer a little consolation, whispered earnestly in his ear, "Never mind, mate, thank God, you've got the parson here to attend ye in yer dying moments!"



4.—AT HER MOORINGS.
From a Photo. by the Rev. Geo. Broke.