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Old Church Becomes Mosque in Uneasy Britain



Hazel Thompson for The New York Times

Sheraz Arshad at the former Mount Zion Methodist Church, which will become a mosque. Mr. Arshad fought for years to get Clitheroe to allow a place for Muslims to worship.

By JANE PERLEZ
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CLITHEROE, England — On a chilly night this winter, this pristine town in some of [Britain's](#) most untouched countryside voted to allow a former Christian church to become a mosque.

The narrow vote by the municipal authorities marked the end of a bitter struggle by the tiny Muslim population to establish a place of worship, one that will put a mosque in an imposing stone Methodist church that had been used as a factory since its congregation dwindled away 40 years ago.

The battle underscored Britain's unease with its Muslim minority, and particularly the infiltration of terrorist cells among the faithful, whose devotion has challenged an increasingly secular Britain's sense of itself.

Britain may continue to regard itself as a Christian nation. But practicing Muslims are likely to outnumber church-attending Christians in several decades, according to a recent survey by Christian Research, a group that specializes in documenting the status of Christianity in Britain.

More conspicuous than ever in both the halls of power and in working-class neighborhoods, Britain's 1.6 million Muslims, about 2.7 percent of the population, are at once alienated and increasingly assertive.



The New York Times

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Mark Chilvers for The New York Times
Clitheroe's main street. Although the

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local council voted to permit the mosque, the spread of Islam's influence has made some uneasy.

In Clitheroe, the tussle involved a passionate young professional of Pakistani descent coming up against the raw nerves of tradition-bound local residents.

"We've been trying to get a place of worship for 30 years," said Sheraz Arshad, 31, the Muslim leader here, his voice rattling around the empty old Mount Zion Methodist Church that will house his mosque. "It's fitting it is a church: it is visually symbolic, the coming together of religions."

With a population of 14,500, a Norman castle and an Anglican church established in 1122, Clitheroe is tucked away in Lancashire County in the north. People here liked to think they represented a last barrier to the mosques that had become features in surrounding industrial towns. But Clitheroe had not bargained on the determination of Mr. Arshad, a project manager at British Aerospace. He is the British-born son of Mohamed Arshad, who came to Clitheroe from Rawalpindi in 1965 to work at the cement works on the town's outskirts.

When his father died in 2000, leaving his efforts to establish a mosque for the approximately 300 Muslims unfulfilled, Mr. Arshad took up the challenge.

"I thought, why should I be treated any less well?" Mr. Arshad said. "One quarter of my salary goes in tax, too. I was driven to do the mosque."

In all, Mr. Arshad and his father made eight applications for a mosque, and even proposed buying a modest terrace house on the edge of town to be used for worship. Mr. Arshad said he tried to buy land from the council but was rebuffed.

Often there was booing at council meetings, and, he said, cries of "Go home, Paki!"

The authorities' official reasoning for the rejections was generally that a mosque would attract outsiders — a veiled reference to Muslims — to Clitheroe.

Letters to the local newspaper, The Clitheroe Advertiser and Times, warned that what had happened in Blackburn and Preston, two bigger nearby industrial towns with substantial Muslim populations, would happen to Clitheroe.

Mr. Arshad decided to get organized and demonstrate that he was a moderate Muslim who could take part in all the town's affairs.

He formed an interfaith scout group — Beaver Scouts — that honored many religious occasions, including the Taoist and Jewish new years. He established the Medina Islamic Education Center as an interfaith group for adults, and persuaded the local council to allow the group to lead a key committee. He organized a series of lectures on global conflict that attracted important academics.

On Dec. 21, the night of the vote on the mosque, the council chambers overflowed with 150 people. The police were poised outside. The vote was 7 to 5 for the mosque; there was no violence.

"I went in resigned to the fact we would lose," Mr. Arshad said. "In the end, it was very humbling."

The church's demarcation as a place of worship in the town's planning records helped carry the day, said Geoffrey Jackson, chief executive of Trinity Partnership, a social welfare agency, and a Methodist who backed Mr. Arshad.

So did Mr. Arshad's demeanor. "He's a top lad, with a Lancashire accent, born and bred here, and educated at Clitheroe Grammar," Mr. Jackson said.

But the fight is hardly over. Beneath the official vote lies a river of resentment among those who fear that the broader patterns in Britain will emerge here. In one sign of the tensions, some of the church's windows have been smashed.

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"There was so much opposition," said Robert Kay, a hired driver. "The people who were for the mosque were those who were not going to end up with it on their doorstep."

The Mount Zion Methodist Church became a factory for making scarves for export to the Middle East in the 1960s, when Christian church-going in Britain had already begun to decline.

Today, Britain has fewer than 500,000 practicing Methodists, and of its Christians, only about 6 percent are regulars at church, according to Peter Brierley, executive director of Christian Research. Though numbers for comparison are not known precisely, most agree that Britain's Muslims are far more regular mosque attendants.

The symbolic encroachment of Islam at the pinnacles of British power is already clear. At [Oxford University](#), town residents recently but unsuccessfully fought the building of a Center for Islamic Studies, and in the House of Lords the number of Muslim members has gone from none to seven during the decade of the Labor government.

In working-class neighborhoods, the differences are stark between white Britons and immigrant Muslim Asians, who began arriving in significant numbers from former British colonies in Pakistan and Bangladesh in the 1970s. The whites are less likely to marry, and they bear more children out of wedlock, trends many Muslims, who put stock in intact families, find disturbing.

The high rate of alcohol consumption among whites sets the groups apart, too. In Blackburn and Preston, increasing numbers of neighborhoods have become exclusively Muslim, and the growing influence of the conservative Wahhabi school of Islam is more and more apparent among women who wear black robes and cover all but their eyes.

In Blackburn, the constituency of [Jack Straw](#), the leader of the House of Commons, there are 30,000 Muslims among a population of 80,000. But in a telltale sign for the future, the number of children 10 years and younger is evenly divided between Christian and Muslim.

It is those demographics, and the visibility of Blackburn's 40 mosques alongside the ancient Christian church spires, that frightened the mosque opponents in Clitheroe.

As Mr. Arshad makes plans to renovate the church, Clitheroe's Christians are taking stock.

At St. Mary Magdalene Church, where the first stone was laid in the 12th century, the congregation has dropped to about 90 people on Sunday, and the average age of congregants is 75, said the Anglican vicar, Philip Dearden. Christenings are now rare, and he has only seven weddings booked for the year.

"Lancashire is the last place to see secularization in Britain," Mr. Dearden, 64, said. "We're seeing it now quite drastically. People don't have a conscience about religion; they don't come anymore."

In the nearby town of Kendal, an Anglican vicar, Alan Billings, has written a book, "Secular Lives, Sacred Hearts: The Role of the Church in a Time of No Religion."

He says the growing opposition to new mosques among the white population reflects an anxiety in Britain that has become more exposed since the London suicide bombings in July 2005.

"Often it's expressed as low objections, more cars, more people," said Mr. Billings, who is also a frequent contributor to the BBC's religious programs. "But it is really a deeper anxiety about what is happening in society. It is the fear of what will happen to the culture and feel of Britain."

At a Saturday gathering of about 50 believers, almost all of them white-haired, Mr. Billings warned that the church was under pressure. Islam could now be seen as an

alternative to Christianity, he said.

On a recent Sunday, only one child turned up to Sunday school classes. The story books, paper and pencils lay unused as an elderly teacher tutored the 6-year-old boy in an otherwise empty room.

In contrast, Shamim Ahmed Miah, 26, a British-born mufti of Pakistani origin in Accrington, a town next to Clitheroe, teaches 30 Arabic and Koranic students, ages 5 to 15, in three sessions daily.

Mr. Miah coaxed 10 primary school students, seated at desks in a brightly lighted community center, to recite the Arabic alphabet. He handed out sheets of paper to each student for them to draw some letters. "Be gentle, this is an art," Mr. Miah said.

Mr. Arshad is considering inviting Mr. Miah to be the imam in Clitheroe. "He's progressive," he said.

As for the new mosque, there will be no obvious changes to the church's exterior, though the cross at the top will come down.

Women will be welcome to pray in the main prayer hall, "not in a cubby hole in the corner," Mr. Arshad said.

"We don't want a dome," he said. "That looks pretty in Egypt and Turkey, but in a market town in England it looks like a big onion. There will be no external call to prayer. What matters is what goes on inside."

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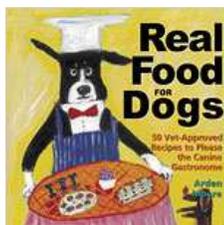
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