

A History of Catholicism in Middlesex

This talk has the rather grand title – *A History of Catholicism in Middlesex* – but it is really a look at Catholic history through the perspective of this corner of Middlesex. I must say that I don't know a great deal about Northwood itself but I will mention a few interesting links in the area...

When we think of historic churches we naturally think of cathedrals and abbeys. But every parish has its story. Although this is often hidden – especially if the church building is quite modern – only a little effort is required to uncover it and there are always surprises along the way. On the surface, a parish history may seem to be mainly a tale of building work, fundraising and the occasional special event. Some may think it is a narrative largely based around bishops and priests. But something much deeper – or should we say someone much greater – is truly at work. The famous preacher Mgr Ronald Knox once observed that wars and social developments were only the 'backwash on the current' of history; what really mattered was an individual's journey to God, what might be called the life of grace. Any parish church is 'a great museum of unwritten history,' he said, 'the history that really counts'. This is the real subject of this talk.

Let's jump into our time machine and go back to the origins of the faith in the area. Who was the first Christian in this area? As you know, the seed of faith was first planted here during Roman times. Writing in the second century, Tertullian mentioned that the Gospel had reached those parts of Britannia which the Romans themselves hadn't penetrated. There were places of Christian worship in Roman London and a citizen of nearby Verulamium was martyred for his Faith in Christ around 209 – St Alban. If legend is believed, the city church of St Peter-upon-Cornhill served as an early cathedral in the second century AD, thanks to the influence of a British leader, King Lucius, who is said to have invited papal missionaries into the country. The Faith probably declined in the London area after the departure of the Romans but experienced a 'resurrection' with the mission of St Augustine of Canterbury and his monks in 597. Having founded the bishoprics of Canterbury and Rochester, he sent St Mellitus to establish the diocese of London and build the first Cathedral of St Paul. He also founded the church of St Pancras near King's Cross, and other churches too.

Some have suggested that St Lawrence's church at Cowley (in my parish) has very early origins. Archaeological excavations reveal the presence of a Roman road that probably ran past it. This means it is quite possible that the first church here was built on the site of a pagan temple, perhaps in Roman times or shortly afterwards.

And so, for nearly a Millennium, Catholic London grew and flourished. On the eve of the Reformation the city was full of churches and monasteries, and one foreign visitor remarked that Londoners 'all attend Mass every day, and say many Paternosters in public (the women carrying long rosaries in their hands), and any who can read taking the Office of Our Lady.' People visited the shrines of the city, like the tombs of SS Mellitus and Erkenwald at old St Paul's (the third largest church in Europe) or St Edward the Confessor at Westminster Abbey, and made pilgrimages to places like Willesden, where there was a shrine of Our Lady.

The Church became the dominant force in society and this was very much the case in the Hillingdon area. Take a place name like Bishopshalt - now a school in Hillingdon, it stands on the site of a manor used by the bishops of Worcester as they made their trips to London, perhaps to see the King. Ruislip had an ancient connection with the great abbey of Bec in Normandy, where Lanfranc and St Anselm were abbots. The local church building would have been the most important and most beautiful in the area.

And, of course, if we cross the county boundary, we should mention the Manor of the Moor, situated by the River Colne below what is now the sports field of Northwood Preparatory School. It belonged to St Albans Abbey and so passed to Cardinal Wolsey, when he became titular abbot. He enlarged the building and was even compared to the palaces at Hampton Court and Richmond. Such was its importance as one of the great houses just outside London, that an important treaty was signed here in 1525 - the Treaty of the More - possibly one of Northwood's great moments!

Then the Reformation changed everything. We don't know much about its impact in this area. Poor old Catherine of Aragon stayed at the Moor for a time after her separation from Henry. There were no local monasteries that were dissolved although a group of Bridgettine nuns

from the great monastery of Syon (Isleworth) found sanctuary for a time in Denham. If you go to the village church, you can admire the brass of the last Abbess, Agnes Jordan. If the truth be told, the English were used to battles between the King and the Church; wise men hoped that things would one day sort themselves out.

Harefield was the birthplace of one of the first to lay down their lives because of their opposition to the King's divorce: Blessed Sebastian Newdigate. His family were fervently Catholic – of his sixteen siblings two brothers were Knights of St John and two sisters became nuns. The tomb of his parents can be seen in the old church at Harefield. Sebastian was educated at Cambridge and became a favourite of Henry VIII, joining his Privy Chamber. Around this time, he married and had two daughters, but after being widowed young his life changed. He became a Carthusian – the strictest of the monastic orders – at the London Charterhouse. His community were one of the staunchest opponents of the King's divorce. Sebastian, along with many of his confreres, was arrested and taken to the Marshalsea prison, where they were chained to upright pillars for fourteen days 'with iron rings about their necks, hands and feet'. Even the King paid them a visit but when he saw his former courtier refusing to yield, he departed 'in a great rage threatening and cursing'. They were removed to the Tower, where the King interviewed Sebastian again. The monk told his former Master: 'in matters that belong to the Faith and the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ to the doctrine of the Catholic Church and the salvation of my poor soul, your Majesty must be pleased to excuse me'.

On 19 June 1535 he was dragged on a wooden hurdle to Tyburn, with two other monks. Sebastian was the first to suffer. Standing on the cart, with the noose around his neck, he 'intimated his own innocence both to the King and all the world, and that his death was only for the testimony and defence of the Catholic Faith.'

Catholicism was gradually driven underground and kept alive by priests, discreetly travelling from one safe house to another celebrating the sacraments, as well as by ordinary men and women, who passed on the Faith to successive generations and took great risks in sheltering priests. Strict laws were passed against Catholics, partly because of a fear of their links with England's enemies (most notably Spain) and because of the various Catholic conspiracies that were discovered

(remember Guy Fawkes). It became treason to be a Catholic priest on English soil and felony to shelter one.

This area had a number of safe houses. Thomas Paget, for example, lived at West Drayton Manor and was a well-known 'papist'. In 1581 a government agent alleged that the great composer, William Byrd – himself a secret Catholic and a resident of nearby Harlington – could often be found there. The following year spies reported that Lady Paget was giving money for the relief of priests in prison and that a priest lived at West Drayton as a steward. Lord Paget himself had to escape to France in 1583 because of his support for Mary, Queen of Scots.

'Southlands', the house of William Griffiths on the Denham road, was used for the famous meeting of English Jesuits in October 1580. The Jesuits had been founded by St Ignatius Loyola nearly fifty years previously and quickly became the shock troops of the Catholic Reformation. The Jesuits had arrived in England in 1579 and soon wanted men, especially after the recent publication of *Campion's Brag*, a bold defense of Catholicism by one of their number, St Edmund Campion.

Southlands seemed an appropriate venue for the secret meeting since it was a safe distance from London. The Fathers made reports of their progress and a number of decisions were made for their future strategy. Campion, for example, would go to Lancashire, a traditional stronghold of Catholicism, and would also write a polemical work in Latin directed at the Universities of Oxford and Cambridge - the celebrated *Rationes Decem* (Ten Reasons). Another consequence was the establishment of clandestine printing presses to more easily distribute Catholic literature – as much as anything, the Reformation involved wars of the printed word.

Another centre of Elizabethan Catholicism was Morecrofts or Moorcroft, a name still found locally ('Moorcroft Lane', 'Moorcroft Park'), which belonged to Sir William Catesby and then his son Robert (one of the gunpowder plotters). It was briefly used as the headquarters of Fr Henry Garnet, the Jesuit superior in England. According to Jesuit historian Philip Caraman, 'it was sufficiently near the city to provide a convenient refuge for incoming priests, yet remote enough to escape organized searches that were confined to the capital'.

In March 1598, for example, the Jesuit Oswald Tesimond arrived in England with Ralph Ashley and visited Morecrofts where 'we were received with the warmest welcome and the greatest charity imaginable.' Several days after word arrived from London that 'the Privy Council had had notice of that house and that without doubt the Queen's officers would come to search it that very night.' Tesimond was impressed by Fr Garnet's great calm, proving himself 'to be an old soldier and experienced captain, accustomed to such assaults.' Garnet 'gave orders to hide in the hiding-places which had long since been prepared for such an occurrence, everything that could show that the house belonged to Catholics: as books, altar vestments, pictures and everything of the sort; and then stowed away all things of greater value.' Tesimond and Ashley were then sent away and told to await Garnet at Brentford, to be taken to 'another house he had in London, which he kept on purpose to be able to retire to it in similar emergencies'. According to the historian of Hillingdon, Rachel de Salis, 'there is a fairly well authenticated tradition that ten priests were hidden for four days in a secret place in the house, the floor of which was several inches deep in water'.

Jesuits were also active in Denham, just outside Uxbridge, in the mid-1580s. Under the leadership of Fr William Weston, a group of priests (including several future martyrs) celebrated a number of public exorcisms to prove to the people the power of the Catholic Faith. Denham was the epicentre of this rather unusual form of evangelisation, but another location was the house in Uxbridge of a certain 'Hughes'. The exorcisms were sensationally reported in a book by the anti-Catholic Samuel Harsnett and the various names given for the devil inspired Shakespeare for a scene in *King Lear*, where Edgar says:

Five fiends have been in poor Tom at once; of lust, as Obidicut; Hobbididance, prince of dumbness; Mahu, of stealing; Modo, of murder; Flibbertigibbet, of mobbing and mowing; who since possesses chambermaids and waiting-women (IV, i).

Moving on in time, there is little evidence regarding Catholics in this area in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. We know that two Ruislip recusants were presented at sessions in 1625; in 1706 there were none, though Uxbridge boasted two.

The eighteenth century is often seen as a period of decline, when English Catholics were small in number and almost completely cut off from the mainstream of society. True, they were still being fined and (on occasion) imprisoned; well-born Catholics were unable to follow a political or military career, and an education at Oxbridge was made difficult by the religious oaths students had to make. However, things were gradually improving. New chapels were being secretly opened, especially in the growing towns, and from the 1680s onwards the Catholic community was led by bishops, after a long period of ecclesiastical chaos. These bishops did not have dioceses as such but were in charge of one of four districts (London, Midlands, Northern and Western) and were known as the Vicars Apostolic. They lived discreetly and rarely dressed in a way that bishops did across the Channel in Catholic Europe; yet they had a key role to play and (interestingly) the Vicar Apostolic of London had nominal responsibility for the Catholics in the colonies, though they never visited these distant lands and simply resolved disputes, granted faculties and (whenever they could) sent out priests. Sometimes the colonies proved to be a useful 'dumping ground' for troublesome priests.

Conditions were indeed improving and several acts were passed to give more freedom to Catholics. From 1791, for example, they were able to open chapels and schools. Then in 1850, Blessed Pius IX restored the Catholic Hierarchy in England and Wales, creating dioceses with bishops and replacing the by now rather tired system of Vicars Apostolic. This was seen as a direct threat to the Anglican Church – surely the new Catholic bishops, in using territorial titles, were setting up opposition to the Anglican bishops? And, perhaps most aggressive-sounding of the new dioceses, was Westminster. It wouldn't have sounded so threatening had it been Kensington or Marylebone – but Westminster, the very seat of the British government, the place where the monarch was crowned, the heart of the Protestant constitution. And now there was to be a Catholic archbishop there!

The Victorian Church was made up of three basic groups: those who came from overseas (especially the Irish immigrants), the converts and the old Catholic families. These three groups are neatly represented by our first three Archbishops. The first Archbishop of Westminster was Nicholas Wiseman, born of Irish parents who had moved to Seville as merchants – he represents the immigrant tradition. Wiseman was not

(perhaps) a great administrator and his time as Archbishop was clouded by controversies but he had a bold and ambitious vision which did much to consolidate the English Church. He was succeeded by Henry Edward Manning, a prominent convert from the Church of England and former Archdeacon of Chichester who had been influenced by the Oxford Movement. As Archbishop, he showed a great concern for the working classes. Finally, there was Herbert Vaughan, of an old Catholic family, who (amongst other things) built Westminster Cathedral. But what about this part of the diocese? The modern Catholic history only starts with the foundation of a Catholic 'mission' at West Drayton in 1862. A cottage was at first used but it quickly became apparent that a more permanent church was urgently needed. The little chapel had room for forty people but already in August 1867 the priest reported that one Sunday '130 Catholics were counted as obliged to kneel outside,' which led him to wonder 'what are the poor Catholics to do in the depth of winter if no chapel able to shelter them be created?'

The man responsible for building a more permanent church, St Catherine's, which was opened in 1869, was Fr Michael Aloysius Wren. *The Tablet* later reported that his 'congregation was numerous but scattered, and consisted entirely of poor [Irish] immigrants who could give no material help. In the face, however, of many difficulties and under the pressure of many hardships he laboured with a zeal that never flagged and a courage that never failed.'

Fr Wren went on to establish a church at Uxbridge - Our Lady of Lourdes and St Michael. This was announced just after the death of Cardinal Manning and Fr Wren told his flock that 'one of the last official acts of his Eminence was to sanction the opening of a new mission at Uxbridge, and that when he first spoke of the necessity of this work to the Cardinal, he expressed his great sympathy with the project, saying with emphasis: "I rejoice to hear it, Uxbridge and Hillingdon have been in my mind for many years."'

The new mission grew quickly; perhaps rather unusually, the day-to-day work was initially entrusted to Fr Wren's nephew, Fr John Wren. The first baptismal register gives an indication of the range of his labours, for candidates came not only from Uxbridge but from Hillingdon, Ruislip, Hayes, Denham and Gerrards Cross (where there were no Catholic churches). Their backgrounds also varied enormously, from four members of the Donovan family christened in September

1909, whose address is stated as the 'Uxbridge Union Workhouse' to members of the well-connected Gilbey family of Denham, who found godparents from the English and Spanish aristocracy.

The Gilbey family were great benefactors of the parish and belonged to a well-known family of wine merchants. William Crosbie Gilbey was a partner of the firm but was more keenly interested in his hatchery at Denham where he lovingly reared trout. In his history of the House of Gilbey, Alec Waugh recounts how

his most ambitious venture was an attempt to stock the Thames with salmon. Having heard that Danube salmon did not have to go down to the sea, he felt that this was the fish with which to stock the Thames, where pollution in the lower reaches was such, even then, that no salmon could get through it to spawn. He imported ova from the Danube, hatched them in his Denham hatchery, and put them in the Thames. There is no evidence of success. William's efforts were mocked by *Punch*, with verses including the lines:

Down beyond Barking Reach,
Foul beyond power of speech,
Went the six hundred!

Two of the Gilbey babies baptised in Uxbridge are of particular interest because they later became respectively the Ninth and Tenth Baron Vaux. One of them, in fact, Peter Hubert Gilbey, was a Benedictine monk at Ampleforth at the time he succeeded to the title and became the first monk to sit in the House of Lords since the Reformation!

Having mentioned Fr Wren, I should also pay tribute to another local pioneer, who lived for a time in Rickmansworth: Fr Henry Hardy founded five parishes and, as soon as one mission was established, would move on to found another. At his ordination in 1878, Fr Hardy had asked Manning to send him to the obscurest part of the diocese – and so he was duly sent to Harrow-on-the Hill. From Harrow he founded a church in Rickmansworth; moving to Rickmansworth, he was able to open a chapel at Boxmoor; when he eventually moved there, he started Berkhamstead and, finally, turned his attention to Tring. As his *Tablet* obituary noted 'Thus, single-handedly and depending mainly upon his own resources, most carefully husbanded, and by living in

unusual simplicity and abnegation, he exercised an apostolate in western Hertfordshire in which he has diffused the beauty of the Catholic faith'.

It's remarkable to think that a hundred years ago the only churches in the present Borough of Hillingdon were Hayes, West Drayton and Uxbridge. There was much parish extension, though, in the inter-war period and a key catalyst here was the building of the railways and the creation of Metroland. The growth of suburbia naturally demanded more Catholic parishes, schools and other institutions. Parishes were founded following a common pattern – Mass was often said in a private property, then a temporary church was erected until a more permanent structure could be built. In Uxbridge, a temporary corrugated iron church was used until the present building was completed in 1931. Before this church was opened in 1924, Mass was celebrated 'in premises originally used as stables.' At Harefield, Mass was first said in the hospital chapel and a British Legion hut.

Alongside parishes, other Catholic institutions were also appearing in the area. A Special School at Pield Heath founded by a religious order of women, the Sisters of the Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary, in 1901. In 1912 St Vincent's Orthopaedic Hospital was set up at Eastcote, moving there from its original site at Clapham Park. In 1928 the Sisters of Charity of St Jeanne Antide established a convent and a school in Green Lane, Northwood.

One final thing: as we celebrate the on-going centenary of the First World War, it's good to take note of how this conflict affected the Catholic community. The German invasion of Belgium in 1914 (with its associated atrocities) led to an ever-widening stream of (mostly Catholic) refugees, a quarter of million crossing the Channel to England, where they were welcomed with open arms and deep sympathy. Some – about 100 – found refuge in Uxbridge. During a bored moment recently, I looked at our baptism and marriage registers for 1914 and 1915 and was struck by the number of Flemish names. They attended Mass at our church and, for a time, a Belgian priest was stationed here alongside the parish priest.

Like many towns up and down the country, the refugees from 'brave little Belgium' were welcomed warmly. Properties were offered for their use, furnishings and clothing donated and an Uxbridge and District

Belgian Refugee Fund set up. Two properties were set up for the refugees on Park Road – the former Cottage Hospital (now Clare House) was renamed 'Albert House,' after the King of the Belgians, and the Uxbridge and West Middlesex Athletics Club became 'Elizabeth House', after the Queen. Miss Butt of Rockingham House, an independent Catholic school in Uxbridge, also did her bit. Two Belgian ladies lodged with her and she was zealous in collecting 'cast-off garments' which were sent off every week to the Catholic Women's League.

It is interesting that those involved in the Belgian Relief often belonged to other denominations: committee meetings were held at the Providence Chapel, St Margaret's Church Working Party made garments for the refugees and accommodation was provided at St Peter's Mission Rooms and the Church Army Labour Home. The war did, in fact, have the effect of drawing people together from different denominations and Catholics began to be more widely respected, thanks in part to the heroism of many of the army chaplains. The War also helped 'catholicise' British culture. For many soldiers, it was their first experience of a Catholic country and a Catholic landscape with churches and convents, shrines and statues. The mass casualties inspired the Church of England to adopt some sort of prayer for the dead, which originally had been one of the more noticeable differences between Catholics and Protestants. The war memorials, the Remembrance Services and the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier were all inspired to some extent by Catholic practice.

It's good to take inspiration from those who have gone before us and to realise that we stand on the shoulders of giants. As we discern our future path, we acknowledge that we are links in a long chain, a bridge between yesterday and tomorrow, and like those who have gone before us, centred in everything we do and are on the Lord.

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