

Aspects of the History of St Mary's Parish in Brigg

There is a Penal Chapel at Osgodby, near Market Rasen, built in 1792. It was an important centre for catholic worship in the area, in a remote rural area, built to not look like a place of worship. Roman Catholic priests living there served people in Brigg and elsewhere in Lincolnshire.

The first place of post-reformation Catholic worship, is understood to be, a little chapel annexed to a cottage "Silversides" Scawby Road. There is a tombstone for one of two French priests served from this small chapel, he died on 9 May 1822, is in St Mary's Brigg grounds. It is not clear how long this small chapel was in use perhaps between 1820 and 1850's, it is now demolished.

In 1860 to 1875 the Bishop amalgamated Brigg with Gainsborough, some 20 miles away and people could travel by train for services there. Change happened, following the conversion of Valentine Cary Elwes and his family in 1874. They allowed a former coach house adjacent to their Manor House in Brigg, to become a chapel, opened in July 1875, in Bigby Street, and this was the place for Catholic worship for 90 years.

A fine reproduction of the picture of our Blessed Lady of Perpetual Succour was placed over the high altar this is believed to have been brought to Brigg in 1879 by the priest in charge of the Mission.

Fr J Naughton was Priest in Brigg when the National religious census was taken in 1851. He recorded 45 people at Mass, 112 Catholics living in the town and 30 others living within a 7 miles radius. Many Irish people had settled in Brigg, refugees from the great famine of 1847-8 in Ireland. An unofficial census taken in 1886 gave the attendance at Mass at 175, presumably at the Manor House Chapel opened in July 1875 and provided by the Elwes family, off Bigby Street in central Brigg. At this time a Catholic primary school started in the Town Hall, and later moved to a building in one of the "Courts", perhaps Corey Court in a disused warehouse, these schools were also supported by the Elwes family. In 1896 the school moved to what is now Bigby Street.

Fr Kirby was an outstanding priest of the late 19th cent. and in addition to looking after the Brigg mission, played a prominent part in establishing a mission in Scunthorpe which grew quickly after ironstone was found and the steel works established. By 1891 Scunthorpe had a population of 7,554 and no place of Catholic worship. Fr Kirby conducted the first R Catholic service there in the home of Mr E Field. The connection with Brigg continued the Elwes family and other supported fund-raising efforts and in 1911 a Church, Holy Souls was opened in Scunthorpe. Fr Grime's came to Brigg just as WW1 in 1918 was ending. Whilst there was peace there was no prosperity and men returning from the war found jobs hard to come by- in agriculture and industry.

In 1949 after the Second World War, Father P. J. O'Hanlon, "a human dynamo" made more impact on the parish. A civil servant in Dublin, served with the General Allenby's troops when he marched into Jerusalem. At 56 years of age he studied for the priesthood, ordained 4 years later and came to Brigg. He immediately began raising funds for the new Church... In 9 years over £ 15,000 was raised a large amount he wrote hundreds of letters ran large garden parties with national celebrities and also large St Patrick's Day Balls in the Brigg Corn Exchange with over 800 attending and shamrock flown in from Ireland! On his semi-retirement in 1959, the Town Council in Brigg decided to name a new street near the site of the planned Church after him and gave him a street sign O'Hanlon Avenue. He kept in touch with plans for the new Church and returned for the laying of the foundation stone in 1964 and later for the dedication of the fine New Church in October 1965 by the Bishop of Nottingham, Rt Rev Edward Ellis. On his last visit to Brigg, he visited every household in his street, and introduced himself. "I thought you might like to know what this fellow O'Hanlon looked like!" He died, aged 90, in his native Dublin, Ireland.

Fr David Bradbury was appointed Parish Priest of Brigg in 1959. Another late vocation and professionally qualified quantity surveyor and dedicated to the task in hand from digging the foundations to the last roof tile. The new Church, opened in 1965, was dedicated to the Immaculate Heart of Mary, known as "St Mary's". The largest Church in Brigg, was designed by Reynolds & Scott and built by local firm R M Phillips & Son. The New Church was regarded as one of the best architectural features of Brigg. The fine crucifix erected over the High Altar, from Italy, was erected in memory of Fr Bradbury who died suddenly in 1966. He was remembered as a popular priest whose dedication and humility were infectious.

More building continued and the official opening of St Mary's Primary School in 1966 in Westmoor Road, on the edge of Brigg, with space for 160 pupils was soon extended for 240 pupils.

Mr John Berry, in 1968, was 37 years old, the youngest priest ever appointed to Brigg and was a talented organist. The organ built by Walkers of London was donated by his parents. Over the years he raised the Church's music to far higher standards showing to advantage the glorious acoustics with many sung Masses, orchestral concerts and choral concerts. Adrian Hopkins, was persuaded to become organist at St Mary's for Christmas 1969 and played there until after 1990. He was also firmly ecumenical, on his first day in Brigg visiting the parish Church of St John's. He was faced with a debt of £ 75,000 with only 700 Catholics, he said thanks to the generosity of our people and our non-Catholic friends 2/3 of this debt had been repaid by 1973.

In 1974 Canon Bernard Mooney arrived from a very large Church of the Good Shepherd, Arnold, Nottingham, where he had a congregation of over 2,000 at Mass every Sunday and was also chaplain at Nottingham Prison. The Brigg parishioners were fond of this elderly priest who had a gift of reducing everything to simple terms. His main concern was pastoral work but he was also convinced of the need for a hall. Fr Shaw stayed only for a year and then Fr Stephen Lennon, young & enthusiastic priest for a few years.

In 1986 Fr Bernard Needham, ordained in 1960 and for 13 years Bishop Ellis's secretary and later Rector of St Hugh's Tollerton. He settled into the parish, and after consulting with the parish decided to build, a Church Hall adjacent to the Church, on Barnard Avenue in central Brigg. This would cost almost £ 100,000; £ 35,000 had already been raised and a loan from the diocese was obtained. The Hall was opened on 8 May 1990 with a mass and dance in the new Hall. It has been an attractive functional hall and as asset to the Parish and the Town of Brigg. Fr Needham, later to become Canon, was an energetic and considerate priest looking after the spiritual needs of a large and scattered parish spread over 140 square miles, Dean of South Humberside, member of several diocesan committees and also chaplain to the Army base at Kirton Lindsey. Canon Mahar followed him.

A beautiful Flower Festival was held in October 1989 to mark 25 years of worship in the new St Mary's Church. Dozens of floral arrangements enhanced the beauty of this modern impressive Church and Hall. During this time Fr Dominic O'Connor was Parish Priest and worked, for all especially the young and old and had a special respect for our liturgy and music. Afterward Fr Benedict Abuo settled in Brigg, from Nigeria bringing he own ideas and alongside his studies looked after Brigg and Barton parishes as Fr Dominic O'Connor had done from October 2007. God is with us as we re-open our Church for worship and face the future challenges of 2020 and beyond.

Information drawn from The Story of Catholicism in Brigg and District by Edward Dodd in November 1990. Edited highlights by Ursula Vickerton 19 July 2020.