

OUR LADY and St BENEDICT, Birchington:

19 April 2002

1821 Fr Thomas Costigan was appointed to Margate to serve the whole of East Kent, east of a line drawn from Sheerness to Hastings. He visited his scattered flock on horseback during his ministry here. He died in 1860, just before the advent of the railway in Birchington in 1863.

1865 The Benedictines came to Ramsgate and gradually established a number of parishes in Thanet, but not in Birchington at that time.

1908 The first mass was celebrated at Birchington on 15 August 1908 by **Abbot Egan** from St Augustine's Abbey. It was celebrated in a building at the rear of the north side of the Square, known as The Institute. This building had been acquired by the villagers, with the help of the first vicar of Birchington, the Revd. J. Alcock and several like-minded parishioners, for the use of the whole village. All kinds of meetings were held there and it was, in effect, the first Village Centre. By 1900, it was proving to be too small for the activities going on in the village, so funds were raised for the building of The Public Hall, the building where the Cornerstone Church is now housed. This was opened in 1902 by Mrs Gray of Birchington Hall.

From this date the Institute became a second hall, hence its use as a temporary church in August 1908. In September of that year, **Fr Golding Bird** was appointed as priest to the **Birchington Mission**. A few months later, a wagon shed was purchased in Minnis Road and converted into church, by adding a fourth side to the structure.

1912 Fr Bird left in 1912 and **Fr Athanasius Avignon**, OSB came for just one year. He was followed by **Fr Henry Aldersey**, OSB in 1913. Father Aldersey saw the community through the difficult years of the First World War, leaving in December 1919. **Fr Anselm Spencer** OSB came from December 1919 until the following March and **Fr Joseph Power**, OSB was here from March 1920 – February 1921.

Fr Urban Rouvière, OSB, (February 1921 – December 1925) was followed by **Fr Augustine Keniry**, OSB (December 1925 – January 1933). The next priest, **Fr Charles van Cauwenberghe**, OSB, (Jan. 1933 – 14 Nov. 1954) worked through the difficult years of the Second World War. During this period, strong connections were made with the American airmen who were based at Manston. By the time Fr Cauwenberghe left, the old wagon shed had changed externally to some degree, but internally it had been transformed beyond all recognition. It now had some beautiful panelling lining the old walls, but the external walling was in dire need of replacement.

1959 During **Fr Wilfred Emery's** time (14 Nov. 1954 – 19 Jan.), the friendships forged with the U. S. airmen during the war came to fruition. In 1959, they helped to **rebuild** the old wagon shed, transforming it into the lovely Italianate building we see today. This was very cleverly done by building it around the existing panelling. The origins of the building can still be detected in the long rather narrow shape we are aware of when we first enter

the church. In 1960 a new porch and tower were added and the church was finally consecrated by Bishop Cowderoy on 14 July 1964.

During **Fr Cyril Williams** time here (9 January 1969 – December 1975) a new parish hall was built adjoining the church, via the porch. The next priest to serve the community was **Fr Kevin St Aubyn** (December 1965 – February 1979). During his time here, in **1976**, the Birchington Mission was elevated to the **status of a parish**. He was followed by **Fr Denis Barry** (21 Feb. 1979 – 6 Dec. 1990). During Fr Barry's time, in **1986**, the rather dilapidated **Presbytery** was replaced by the lovely modern one we see today. There is an interesting Post card showing the old Presbytery before the First World War. During that war, it was used to house some soldiers for a while. The post card is dated 1917 and also shows the two malt houses that stood at the rear of the site until the 1950's. A small porch had already been added to the building by then, together with a small bell turret at the south end. On the reverse of the post card, a young man writes,

'This is a photo of our sleeping house it looks alright on the photo but its not what it is now. it's a rotten place all broke. Well this is all now. a letter as soon as possible. from your affectionate brother Arthur give my love to all'

On December 6th 1990, **Canon William (Bill) Clements** came to serve the congregation of Our Lady and St Benedict. He was born in Wandsworth on 13th September 1921 and ordained priest on the 30th May 1953. When he came to Birchington, there were those who felt he had come here to spend a quiet retirement. What a surprise they must have had! Through his dedicated ministry here, the congregation has grown in number, and the church building has continued to be beautified. Through his efforts, it now has a **new wooden floor**, which has now been fully **carpeted** and **central heating** has been installed.

2002 In 2002, the re-ordering of the **Sanctuary** was completed. On Wednesday, 17th April 2002, the new **Altar** and **Ambo** were consecrated by the Archbishop of Southwark, Michael Bowen, in a very moving and beautiful service. An average of 176 people attends Sunday Mass. There are 20 altar servers, 32 readers and 9 Eucharistic Ministers. As well as an elected Parish Pastoral Council, there is also a Junior Parish Council, which meets monthly and advises and helps Canon Clements in various ways. There are also a Ladies Circle and Social Committee that organises parish events.

[These notes have relied heavily on the booklet used at the consecration of the new Altar, for which the present writer acknowledges grateful thanks. Jennie Burgess]