

# A Short History of the Birchington Parish

Based on information in the service of Dedication for the new Altar in 2002  
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**1821** - Father Thomas Costigan was appointed to Margate in 1821, but he served the whole of Kent, east of an imaginary line drawn from Sheerness to Hastings. He visited all his scattered flock on horseback, covering hundreds of miles each year. He died in 1860.

**1865** - The Benedictines came to Ramsgate in 1865 and gradually established a number of parishes in Thanet.

**15 Aug. 1908** - Birchington was established as an Independent Mission in 1908, as the population in this tiny seaside village had increased rapidly once the railway line was opened in 1865. Their earliest services were held in the Institute, a building to the north of the Square, on part of what is now the Albion Road Car Park. In 1878, the building had been used as Birchington's first 'Village Centre', but a purpose-built new Public Hall was built in Station Road in 1902 (where the Cornerstone Church is now housed) thus releasing the Institute for other uses. The first Mass at Birchington was celebrated in the Institute by Abbot Egan on the 15<sup>th</sup> August 1908.

A few months later the congregation saw the potential in a wagon shed standing in Minnis Road and decided to buy it. The three-sided shed needed some 'tender loving care' lavished on it, including having its fourth side filled in, and by the end of the year, after much hard work, it was ready for occupation.

**8 Dec. 1908** - This little church was only seen initially as a temporary Church, but was opened and solemnly blessed on December 8<sup>th</sup> 1908. Its first priest was Fr. Golding Bird, who remained in the parish until 5<sup>th</sup> February 1912. He was followed by Fr Athanasius Avignon OSB for just a year and then Fr Henry Aldersey OSB in 1913. He held the little community of worshipers together until the year after the First World War ended.

Fr Anselm Spenser OSB was only here for a year from 1919 to 1920, followed by Fr Joseph Power OSB - again for just a year. Fr Urban Rouvière OSB served us from 1921 to 1925 and Fr Augustine

Keniry OSB stayed for 8 years from 1925 until 1933. During these years, the inside of the little church was slowly improved and beautified, including some elegant panelling which completely hid its very humble origins.

The next priest to serve Birchington was Fr Charles van Cauwenberghe OSB, who shepherded his flock from 1933 until 1954. He was responsible for nurturing them all through the trials and deprivations of the Second World War and the even more stringent economies of the early years of the so-called 'peace time'.

**1959** - With the arrival of Fr Wilfred Emery OSB in November 1954, a new era was begun. By this date there was a large contingent of American Airmen based at Manston aerodrome, and many of the Catholic servicemen were billeted in Birchington. With their help, both physical and financial, plus his already very faithful congregation, Fr Emery set about re-building his 'temporary' church. They very cleverly erected the new building around the original one, replacing the panelling in the greatly enlarged building. In late 1961 they began building a new porch with a tower above it.

**14 July 1964** - The re-constructed Church was consecrated by Bishop Cowderoy on the 14<sup>th</sup> July 1964. Our Lady and St Benedict was finally a place of real dignity - a far cry from its birth in the small wagon shed, which had probably first been erected in about 1870.

**1974** - When Fr Emery left in 1969, he was followed by Fr Cyril Williams who worked with us until 1975. The year before he left he was able to see the opening of the new Parish Hall, built just behind the church and linked to it by the lobby under the tower, a project he had worked hard to achieve.

**18 April 1976** - Fr Kevin St Aubyn served here from 1975 until 1979. It was during his time that the "Birchington Mission", as it had remained all those years, was elevated to the status of a Parish. Fr St Aubyn was followed by Fr Denis Barry in 1979.

**1986** - It was during Fr Barry's time that the decision was made to replace the now rather battered Presbytery with a new one, to be built on ground to the west of the church. This land had previously been a farmer's field, seen clearly in those early post cards of the church, but

the parish had acquired it and was now able to build the modern Presbytery and make a new car park for the congregation. Fr Barry left Birchington 6<sup>th</sup> December 1990 and was followed by Canon William Clements, who is still patiently shepherding his flock as this history is being written. During this time, he has overseen the insertion of a new wooden floor in the church and has had it carpeted throughout. He has also had central heating installed, much to the delight of the older members of his congregation.

**1996** - In 1996, the old roof was stripped off and a new tiled one installed and this was then followed by the re-ordering of the Sanctuary, a project very near to the Canon's heart.

**17 April 2002** - The old altar had served the congregation well for a good many years, but when the opportunity came to replace it, everyone was delighted. Consecration of the new Altar by Bishop Michael Bowen was achieved on the 17<sup>th</sup> April 2002 and the church was full to overflowing, with not only the usual congregation and their friends, but also with many fellow Christians from the other churches in Birchington, who felt privileged to join their brothers and sisters in Christ for this moving ceremony.

[This little synopsis was written by Canon Clements in 2002.]

An average of 176 people attend Sunday Mass. There are 20 Altar servers, 32 readers and 9 Eucharistic Ministers. As well as the elected Parish Pastoral Council, there is a Ladies' Circle and a Junior Parish Council, which meets monthly and advises and helps Canon Clements in various ways. A Social Committee organises parish events.