

HISTORY of the CATHOLIC CHURCH from notes by David Shufflebotham

1908 - 1933

On the 15th August 1908 the soon to be Abbot Egan OSB celebrated the first Mass in Birchington in the Institute, a building which lay where Albion Road car park now stands.

At this point Birchington was established as an Independent Mission. During September 1908 Fr Golding Bird OSB was appointed the first priest. It was decided to buy a wagon shed in Minnis Road near the Malt Houses. A fourth wall was added to the three-sided shed and further work was done to make it suitable as a church. This was opened and solemnly blessed on the 8th December 1908.

The earliest picture of the church is taken from where our car park now stands and shows the added wall, with its new windows and doorway. A small shed was added as an entrance porch. Soon after this work was done a presbytery was added to western end of the plot and a small bell turret added to the roof of the church.

Fr Bird stayed in the parish until February 1912 and was followed by Fr Athanasius Avignon OSB until January 1913, when Fr Henry Aldersey OSB came to the parish and saw the parishioners through the First World War, leaving in December 1919. There is a photo of Fr Aldersey by the church porch as well as views of the church and presbytery all taken in 1913 or 1914.

In the earliest church there were three skylights in the roof to supplement the limited windows on the new side. The lamps hanging from the ceiling were lit by gas. A post card of the church was bought by a soldier in 1917 and sent his sister in South Wales. He was billeted in the Presbytery and complained that he didn't think much of it because "all the windows is broke"! There is a photo taken inside the church in about 1920-25 which showing a statue of Our Lady on the left with a pulpit on the right hand side. There is also a close-up photo of a painting of Our Lady and Jesus above the altar which shows it more clearly.

Fr Anselm Spenser OSB came to the Mission in December 1919 and was followed by Fr Joseph Power OSB in March 1920. In February 1921 Fr Urban Rouvière OSB came to the Mission to be followed in 1925 by Fr Augustine Keniry OSB who stayed until January 1933. It was during Fr Urban's time that a wedding took place, with a delightful photo being taken by the church porch of the bride, groom, best man and three bridesmaids. There is also a photo showing the Christmas Crib which was taken in 1925.

1933 - 1958

Fr Charles van Cauwenberghe came to the Birchington Mission in January 1933. In his obituary after his death on 20th February 1960, we learn that he was born in Courtrai in Belgium on the 3rd June 1868. He joined the Ramsgate Abbey

about 1908-9 and served his brotherhood in Ramsgate as teacher and priest until 1933, when he was directed to care for the Mission at Birchington.

When WW2 broke out he was ordered - as a foreigner - to leave Birchington, by a youthful constable, who was reduced to blushful incoherence when Fr Charles said, "Foreigner? Young man, I have been in Thanet longer than you." But he was banished to an inland parish from 1940-1945. Fr Aelred OSB and Fr Dunstan OSB from SS Austin & St Gregory's moved to Salmestone Grange, from where they served Westgate, Birchington, Cliftonville and Margate. While Fr Charles was in the parish, he was able to see the installation of the panelling and the new side windows and the closing up of the roof lights. He also had shelves put around pillars on which statues were placed. Like so many of the older generations of Belgians, Fr Charles was of short stature and fairly rotund, as photos of him at a couple of baptisms show.

In 1954 he celebrated the 70th anniversary of his clothing as a novice in the order of St Benedict. However, on the 14th November 1954 at the age of 86 Fr Charles was told it was time to retire and with a rueful smile and nod of the head he went back to Ramsgate Abbey. In 1955 he celebrated the jubilee of 60 years as a priest. In Birchington he was replaced by Fr Wilfred Emery OSB. During his time here he designed a number of vestments, which added colour and pageantry to the Mass. When he was asked to come here, he was ordered by the Abbot to go and build a new church at Birchington. He read with considerable feeling the 68th chapter of St Benedict's Rule, entitled "If a monk is ordered to do the impossible - - - -"

During the winter of 1954-5 the presbytery was repaired and redecorated with money from Fr Abbot. Permission was also obtained to turn a room in the presbytery into a chapel for weekday Mass, which was always filled to capacity. In the spring of 1955 it was hoped to start restoring the Church. It was intended to improve the little old church in such a way that it would be an adequate temporary church and subsequently a satisfactory permanent parish hall. (Was this Plan 'A'?)

A new and enlarged porch was in use for Holy Week 1955 and the new Sanctuary was completed for the Solemnity of St Benedict. Father Abbot celebrated Pontifical Mass for the first time at Birchington. At this time there was a small pipe organ on the south side of the Sanctuary and the south door of the church was at the eastern end of the nave, as a photo of Fr Emery shows.

In the summer of 1955 Messrs Elliot & Son of Ramsgate donated a marble font and the 'Calvary' was also donated. At the same time the new end wall of the church was completed and the presbytery upgraded. In January 1956 the church was given the gift which funded oak pews to completely reseat the nave. Building work started in May 1956 on the new Sacristy and the Confessional which had been placed in a recess from the nave to make it more convenient. All this was in use for the Bishop's visit for the confirmation on July 5th that year. The oak panelling and the Miller Organ were also new additions around this period

By this time £2,000 had been spent on the church in two years, but a further £1,000 was not yet available to re-roof the church, which was giving

cause for concern. The rebuilding work had to be carried out without any debt. A new porch was fitted to the presbytery in 1957 and by the summer of that year "a large part of the new walls and roof of the nave" had been built. In December 1957 a photo of the inside of the church shows the improved lighting and gives the impression that the nave had been extended. However, this was not the case, as this was planned for the 50th anniversary in 1958.

In the spring of 1958 many of the American servicemen, who had helped financially and in many other ways went back to the States. The nave of the church was extended as planned in Autumn 1958 and the plans for a new porch to the church were still in hand.

1958 - 1983

During the winter of 1958-59 improvements were made to the entrance drive and the garden. In the Spring of 1959 the new porch which was to become the base of a tower, was started and was completed by the Autumn. Soon after this the first stage of the tower was begun, with the second stage and roof being completed by about the end of 1960.

In 1962 the porch had "handsome bronze doors designed by Mr J Francis Coats, MVO, the chief designer of Messrs Blunt & Wray of Clerkenwell, who made them, and whose work can be seen in the great metal screen in Westminster Cathedral".

Also by 1962 the mosaic above the porch door was fitted from a design by Miss Monica Cowell. It was then submitted to Signor F di Luca Vignanelli who adapted it for production into a mosaic in his studio in Rome. The mosaic depicts Our Lady of Montevergine and St Benedict. By the end of the year the new electric heating had been installed throughout the church, the temporary church hall and the presbytery. The other improvement that year was the new road and car park to the south of the church.

By the end of 1963 a new Portland stone high altar was installed and the covered way constructed between the porch and the hall. On the 14th July 1964 the church was consecrated by Bishop Cowderoy. Not long after this a new tabernacle was in place, new wall panelling had been fitted and a digital pipe organ had been installed. Work continued on the outside of the building, adding pillars between the windows, which helped to break up the long, uninterrupted nave wall.

Early in 1969 Fr Emery, who had spearheaded all these improvements and fulfilled the task set him by the Abbot when he came here in 1955, retired to Les Oiseaux Convent at Westgate as their Chaplain. He was replaced by Fr Williams, the first non-Benedictine priest in Birchington. In the latter half of 1969 an architect's report recommended that the church should be rebuilt, rather than spend more money repairing it. (Was this still Plan 'A'?).

In 1970 the Sisters of the Holy Family, who were leaving their Convent at Ramsgate, gave the church their statue of Our Lady of Lourdes, which now stand in the garden. After Vatican II a wooden altar was fixed in front of the main altar, as a photo of Fr Williams saying Mass behind it depicts. The two statues of Our

Lady and St Joseph, which stand either side of the east end of the nave, were donated by Mrs Patricia Elliott.

In 1974 the parish hall was built as we see it today and the following year a bar was added in the lobby between the porch and the hall. The church's Social Club was also formed that year.

At the end of 1975 Fr Williams was replaced by Fr Kevin St Aubyn who became the first Parish Priest the following year. This was because on the 18th April 1976 the Birchington Mission was granted the status of Parish for the first time. In that same year Fr St Aubyn abandoned the old Presbytery when the church bought No 8 Sussex Gardens from Mr and Mrs John Ballam. Fr Denis Finbar Barry then replaced Fr St Aubyn in February 1979.

1983 - 2008

When Fr Barry arrived, he realised that it would be wiser to have the Presbytery as near the church as possible, so he set about getting a new one built on the green beside the church. The building was completed shortly afterwards and has proved a very wise move. During Father Barry's time, Stan Brennan served the parish as Master of Ceremonies, which a photo of the two men together in the Sanctuary confirms.

After 11 years in the parish, Fr Barry suffered a heart attack and retired to Ireland. However he later returned to Birchington and acted as a supply priest all over Thanet until he retired to Sussex in May 2008.

Canon William F Clements (Canon Bill) replaced Fr Barry in December 1990. The following year proved a very busy one. Two informal Parish Council Meetings were held at the end of February. In April ten parishioners were commissioned as Special Ministers of the Holy Eucharist. In May the formal Parish Council and Liturgy Committee were formed. By June the Bible Study Group were meeting weekly.

By mid July it had been agreed to do major work on the church roof, the damp course, the floor and the central heating system for the church and hall. (This was the start of Plan 'B') The work was done during August and September followed by a new carpet in the nave and Sanctuary as the old one had been 'lost'. By then the inside of the church was looking really beautiful. The church was reoccupied on the 5th October and on the 18th October Bishop Jukes came to present the Benemerenti Medal to Dorothy Foster. During this year the altar servers had begun to wear white albs.

At Easter 1994, Gladys Birch, who had been the organist for some time, was received into Full Communion. In June 1995, with the help of a legacy, the parish hall was redecorated and new curtains obtained. A photo taken at a whist drive in 2000 shows them clearly. In 1995-6 the church roof was finally replaced, financed by fundraising and a number of interest-free loans from the parishioners. (Plan 'B' was finally achieved.)

During 1995 girl altar-servers were introduced for the first time. A photo taken in 2003 shows just how popular this idea was. At Christmas that year Mrs Peggy Mann directed the first children's silent Nativity play, repeating the event in

1996. On the 31st October 1997 the inaugural meeting of the Junior Parish council was held. This was open to children aged 9 - 15 years old and the contribution of their views on parish matters has been greatly appreciated by everyone. In 1998 they gave a concert at Minster Abbey and have continued to serve the parish ever since.

On Good Friday 2001 the crucifix on the front external wall of the church was smashed by vandals. It was eventually replaced in 2002 and on December 21st that year it was blessed by Bishop John Hine.

Canon Bill had wanted to re-order the sanctuary since he came to the parish and in 2002 this was achieved. On the 17th April Archbishop Michael Bowen consecrated a new altar. Invitations were sent to all the Christian churches in Birchington and representatives from each one attended the moving ceremony. In May 2003 Canon Bill celebrated 50 years as a priest and Bishop John Hine came to celebrate a Mass of Thanksgiving. The Junior Council gave him their own gift. In 2004 Bishop Hine came for the Confirmation Mass for a number of the young people of the parish.

In July 2005 Gladys Birch celebrated her 100th birthday and Bishop Hine presented her with a Papal blessing. She cut the cake and the Choir members planted a cherry tree to commemorate the event. Tim Attride and Ann Shufflebotham posed with Gladys for a photo of the three organists who have served the church in recent years.

At Easter in 2008 the children received their usual Easter Eggs, but as Canon Bill was in hospital, Fr Marco did the honours. When they came out of church to release the balloons with the Easter messages, everyone was surprised to find about 2 inches of snow had fallen during the Mass. In June 2008 there was a day of recollection at Faversham, to begin the Centenary Celebrations. Some of the participants, including Fr Marco, were caught on camera for posterity. Also in June there was a children's party.

In July David Shufflebotham put together a detailed exhibition of the "A History of the Church" which went on display from the 16th -18th July in the hall. Earlier in the week at the same venue, Jennie Burgess, the village archivist, gave a slide talk to parishioners and visitors on the Church's centenary.