

TALK TO PRESTWICH & WHITEFIELD HERITAGE SOCIETY

16 MARCH 2016

“OUR LADY OF GRACE PARISH AND CHURCH”

Background

We have a long heritage. Prestwich–cum–Oldham was an ancient parish in the county of Lancashire, in the Hundred of Salford. The parish covered a large area. It was divided into two non–contiguous sections: the townships of Great Heaton, Little Heaton, Pilkington, Radcliffe and Prestwich on the west; Alkrington, Tonge, Chadderton, Crompton, Oldham, Shaw and Royton on the east. The parish of Middleton divided these two portions of Prestwich–cum–Oldham from north to south. Oldham had an obligation to provide bread and candles for the parish church in Prestwich as well as money.

At the centre was the parish church of St Mary the Virgin. That was a familiar dedication. England was once known as the 'Dowry of Mary' and it's reckoned that over half of the churches in England were dedicated to her before the change of religion.

Prestwich-cum-Oldham was of course in communion with Rome. It was a parish, then in the diocese of Lichfield, within the Catholic Church. Slightly off the subject, I remember seeing (I think in the Vatican Archives) a document deciding on a dispute between Manchester Parish Church and Kersal Cell sometime in the 14th or 15th century. The monks were burying the dead from the parish and undercutting the fee due to the parish. The parish church took the case to Rome and won.

Then came Henry VIII and the change in religion. How did the priest and people of Prestwich react? All I know is that the authors Farrer and Brownbill in the Victoria County History record this: that the Rector of Prestwich "was at first reluctantly compliant and then an avowed opponent" to

Queen Elizabeth's religious settlement of 1559. Down the road at the Collegiate Church in Manchester the Warden was Lawrence Vaux, a good and holy priest who hailed from Blackrod. He too opposed the settlement and went into exile on the continent. There he published a famous Catechism which was widely used, especially by the children of Catholic exiles. Eventually he returned to England, was arrested and died in prison in London.

The Penal laws against Catholics together with imprisonment and heavy fines took their toll in very many places. I'm not aware of any records of Catholics in Prestwich during the 17th century. But in 1767 the Anglican bishops were openly criticised in the newspapers for not restraining the spread of Catholicism in their dioceses. So the House of Lords set up an enquiry into the number of Papists in every parish in England and Wales. The 'returns of Papists for the diocese of Chester' were published in 1980. They show that there were 3 Catholics in Prestwich: *John Chapman, weaver, aged 40 years, resident 17 years; James Chapman his son, weaver, aged 15 years; Jane Shipley,*

widow, aged 56 years, resident 20 years. Oldham numbered 21 Catholics, Shaw just one. There were none in Radcliffe, Unsworth and Royton. There were 287 in Manchester, 64 in Salford, one in Bury, none in Heywood.

So what about Our Lady of Grace parish? It's time to see *why* the parish was formed; *when* it was formed; and *how*?

Why?

St Marie's parish in Bury began in 1825, St Mary's, Radcliffe, in 1863 and St Thomas of Canterbury, Hr Broughton, in 1878. For Catholics in Prestwich and Whitefield those were the nearest churches. No cars then to cover the distances!

The railway had reached Prestwich by 1880 and the village was growing. There were houses round the Longfield and Gardner Road and the roads off it would soon be built.

The Prestwich Asylum had opened in 1851 with 500 patients. It was extended in 1863 to take 560 more. In 1884 the Annexe was built for 1100 more. (By 1903 it housed over 3000 patients, the largest asylum in Europe.) It became the largest employer in Prestwich, attracting workers and nurses, including many from Ireland.

The 1851 census revealed that in the Diocese of Salford there were 32 churches and chapels served by 37 priests. 33,029 Catholics attended Mass on 30th March 1851.

The rapid growth of the diocese during the second half of the nineteenth century mirrored the growth of Lancashire as an industrial centre. Immigration continued from the English countryside as well as from Ireland. Salford's first Bishop, William Turner (1851 - 1872), more than doubled the number of churches in the diocese before his death. He founded the Salford Catholic Grammar School, brought the Xaverian Brothers into a school for boys, and laid the beginnings of Loreto College and Adelphi House, as well as setting up schools in various parishes.

Bishop Herbert Vaughan (1872 - 1892) built on Turner's achievements in the field of education. Vaughan founded St Bede's College in Manchester, began the Catholic Protection and Rescue Society for orphans and homeless children, organised the Catholic Truth Society, and founded more than 40 new missions, or parishes, including this one of Our Lady of Grace.

The Catholic population continued to grow. The next bishop, John Bilsborrow (1892 - 1903), wrote in his Advent pastoral letter of 1901 that Catholics in the Diocese of Salford had increased from 217,000 in 1891 to 270,000 in 1901. He opened twelve new missions.

Question: Why? Answer: The number of Catholics was growing.

When?

The parish Log Book gives the answer. Page 1: *"In the early part of Lent 1889 the Bishop Dr Vaughan appointed the Rev David Walshe St Alban's Blackburn to the charge of the District around Prestwich. May 7 Formally took charge of Prestwich on that day (Synod Day) May 7th 1889. Succeeded Fr Daniel as chaplain to the Asylum."* The writer was Fr David Walshe who came here from St Alban's, Blackburn. He was born in Ireland, in Park, Waterford. After nine years here he went to St Marie's, Bury, as PP and Dean. He died in 1906 aged 48. So he was 31 when he was given the job of starting this parish. What a daunting prospect for a young Irish priest, starting with nothing!

At first he lived at St Thomas's in Salford. The Log Book again: *"May 26. On the invitation of Rev. I. K. O'Doherty St Thomas Higher Broughton came to live with him and worked Prestwich from there at the beginning."*

The Log Book records for 9th June: *“Mass for the first time in the Cooperative Store Hall, Warwick St, Prestwich. Attendance: Morning 82. Sunday School 28. Evening 47. Rent of hall 7/6d per Sunday. A crowd watched us dispersing after Evening Service, there being an excitement in the village about the Catholics having service.”* The following Sunday attendances had grown to 95, 31 and 68 respectively, and on the Sunday after that to 102, 31 and 71. The entry under June 23 reads: *“Many non-Catholics subscribed to our Funds.”* [The building of the Co-operative Store in Warwick Street was destroyed by fire a few years ago and has been replaced by a row of town houses.]

The Catholic Herald newspaper reported: *“Prestwich once more vindicates its name. The home or dwelling of the priests (preost-wic) in Saxon times, it once more after the long desolation is the home of a Catholic priest. On Sunday last the first Mass was said in the village since the ‘Reformation’”.*

Fr Walshe stayed only a few weeks at St Thomas's. *July 3 Rented 2 Devonshire Place Prestwich for the Residence of the Priest at £26 per annum. A great difficulty in getting a house, many not wanting to let their house to a Priest. July 6 Came to live at the above address. Blackburn supplied a number of the house things. July 12 Rev Thomas Byrne St Michael's Manchester presented the Mission with 4 large candlesticks. Rev I. K. O'Doherty £5. July 28 Holy Benediction in the Cooperative Hall for the 1st time. Preached myself. Very wet. The hall packed, people coming great distances in order to be present. Fr Formby, Bury, assisted. Admission £1.4s.2d. Offertory £1.18s.4d. July 29 Mass each morning in 2 Devonshire Place at 8 o'clock and confessions also. Dr Vaughan came to inspect the house and appointed the front room to be used as a temporary chapel. The Brothers, St Joseph's Industrial school presented a tabernacle for the chapel."*

The Log Book reveals how hard Fr Walshe worked both in his pastoral care of the people and in raising money for a church. Within a year he already had plans. *May 15 Land*

was taken in Fairfax Road on May 15th 1890, Feast of Our Lady of Grace. The children and friends assembled there for the Whitweek procession and sang Faith of our Fathers. Band St Joseph's Industrial School Manchester. Plans are being got ready for a school chapel by Oswald Hill Esq.

May 28 Plans refused by the Finance Board [of the Salford Diocese] as being too expensive. Expressed my desire to build a two-storey building which many of the members opposed but ultimately at the suggestion of the Bishop agreed and lesser plans ordered. James Whittam Esq £100. H. Rooke Lees Esq £25."

But they still didn't have enough to start building. That is, until August. *July £50 required before Building will start. August Dean Woods £1. Patrick Butler 10/- and many others. Contract for Building school chapel let to Robert Neild & Sons Manchester for £1650. Amount in hand £750 collected from various sources."*

Work on the new building began in September 1890 and the foundation stone was laid on 8 November 1890. (My mother

was born that same month, two weeks later.) We might have expected the bishop or some other prominent ecclesiastic to lay the stone. But Bishop Vaughan was on his way to Rome. So Fr Walshe got the local MP to lay the stone, Mr William Mather, a non-Catholic. Ecumenism is nothing new!

“November 8 Foundation Stone laid by William Mather Esq MP. Canon Beesley blessed the stone. Mrs Whittam helped most generously. I was ill all through the preparations which was exceedingly awkward; but it passed off exceedingly well. See the account on the opposite page [of the Log Book] taken from the Prestwich or Middleton Guardian of Nov 16 1890. Mr Mather gave £25. Total net £72.10s.0d. The Priests were most generous.” The Prestwich (or Middleton) Guardian gave a blow by blow account of the foundation stone laying. There was a lot of good-natured banter and much appreciation expressed both by Fr Walshe and by Mr Mather of the work done by the Churches in the field of education. Clearly the two men had a high regard for one another.

The long winter of 1890–1891 was terrible. Frost and heavy snowfalls paralysed the country. (It was too bad to take my mother to the church to be baptised. Born in Darwen, Lancashire, on 23 November 1890 she was baptised when two months old – almost unheard of in those days.) Work on the Manchester Ship Canal was seriously interrupted. So too here in Prestwich, heavy snow and frost held up the building work. *“1891 Feb The Building proceeds very slowly. The Foundations gave infinite trouble in consequence of a quick-sand running through the land and some that was built had to be pulled down until it should begin on solid ground ... The north side and apse was terrible in consequence of inflow of water and a continuance of frost. It took 10 weeks to put down the foundations of the north side and apse. A man working the pumps was employed all this time both day and night and the work was made more difficult by the work not being part of the contract. The architect and I several times contemplated putting in piles as we were almost in despair.”*

But the work went on and finally the building was blessed and opened on 15 August 1891, with an official opening the following day by Bishop Vaughan. It was a most joyous occasion. There was a packed congregation and the choir of St Marie's, Bury, sang. The evening service that day was overcrowded. Many people could not get in and stood outside. Cost of the school-chapel? £2,437.6s.61/2d. Good value – and still giving excellent service after 125 years.

How?

How was it all achieved? By hard work on the part of Fr Walshe and his helpers and by the generous support of many benefactors, especially Mrs Whittam, a Catholic lady from Prestwich Park. She gave generously of her time and money and was the principal benefactor for the building of the presbytery, completed in 1894. Her name appears on the stone by the front door. Sadly, the first Requiem Mass in the completed school-chapel was for her husband, James Whittam.

But why a two-storey building with school underneath and church on top? The Church has always viewed education as vital to the formation and development of the whole person. In an early Westminster Synod (1852) the Catholic Bishops decided that the education of the poor was to be the Catholic community's first priority. They therefore put the setting up of Catholic schools for the Catholic community ahead of building Churches, often using its schools in those early days as the place for worship for the parish. All around the Salford diocese dual-purpose buildings - school underneath, church on top - sprang up everywhere. The famous Fr Robert Smith oversaw a number of such buildings.

The chapel was furnished with the help of many benefactors.

“Oct 14 1891 Mrs Whittam provided all the altar furniture.

The tabernacle was kindly given by the Brother Director St Joseph's Ind school, Longsight. The altar itself was brought from Rome and erected in St John's Cathedral as a temperance altar by the Bishop Dr Vaughan. After many

years it was replaced by the present St Peter's Chains altar and the Bishop gave it to this Mission. The picture Our Lady of Grace was painted for this Mission through the kindness and generosity of Dr Vaughan who happened to be in Rome while the building was being erected and I wrote asking him for this favour. The original is in the church St Andrea delle Fratte Rome and is a wonderful shrine and resorted to by pilgrims in large numbers. Some of the vestments were given by the nuns of Perpetual Adoration Alexandra Park, some were given to myself by the people of St Alban's Blackburn and others were given to the Mission by Mrs Whittam. The Harmonium was bought on the Hire system £36, Mrs Whittam paying £3 monthly."

The picture in the church of Sant'Andrea delle Fratte in Rome is in the third chapel on the left hand side as one enters the church. In this chapel Alphonse Ratisbonne, son of a prominent French Jewish family, experienced a vision of the Virgin Mary. This experience led to his conversion to Catholicism. In 1847 he founded the Congregation of Our Lady of Sion. The Sion Sisters now have a convent in this

parish. I wonder if they know about the painting from Sant'Andrea, a church so dear to their founder, which used to hang in the first church of Our Lady of Grace?



The Log Book gives a precise account of how the parish grew. There was a succession of Parish Priests. The second

was Fr Joseph Hayes, the only English born PP here apart from me. He came from Preston and was educated at the English College in Lisbon, Portugal. He was here for 12 years before moving to Osbaldeston where he died aged 58. Notice how so many of the priests here have died young.

Next came Fr James Corkery, a Cork man. He was here for 16 years before moving to Mt Carmel, Blackley. He died there at the age of 59.

And then came the builder of this church, Fr William Browne. He came from County Kerry and was a curate here for four years before returning as PP in 1926. He was to remain here for 22 years, the longest serving PP until now. He retired to Ireland in 1948 at the age of 64 and died the following year.

The foundation stone of this church was blessed and laid by Bishop Henry Hanlon on 24 May 1930. Bishop Hanlon is a very interesting and important character. He was born in 1862 in Manchester. Prior to joining the priesthood he

trained as a cabinet maker. He was ordained Priest in 1889 for the Mill Hill Missionaries and travelled to Northern India, where he served for five years until he was appointed the first Vicar Apostolic of the Upper Nile District.

He was then sent to lead the first band of four Mill Hill missionaries into the African interior; they arrived in Kampala in September 1895 after walking from Mombasa. In 1903 he brought some Franciscan Sisters of St Joseph from Manchester to Kampala where they established a school and a hospital for the local district. He continued in Uganda until 1911 when he resigned and returned to England and began Parish work in his native Diocese of Salford. He took on many episcopal duties in the diocese to assist Bishop Louis Casartelli. He died in 1937 at the age of 75. You can see his name on the foundation stone from the car park at the rear of the church.

Visitors to this church are surprised to find the church dates only from 1931. Nicholas Pevsner gives a brief four-line description of the church in his series on 'The Buildings of

England' ('Lancashire: Manchester and the South-East', page 568). He writes: *"OUR LADY OF GRACE (RC), Fairfax Road. Presbytery, 1894. Church/school, 1889. Church, anachronistically Gothic in Portland stone and red brick, 1931, by Greenhalgh & Williams of Bolton."*

I have always wondered why the church was built in this 'anachronistically Gothic' style as late as 1931. The 1930s saw some magnificent churches built in the Salford Diocese, such as All Souls, Weaste – Romanesque (but now alas demolished), St Patrick's, Collyhurst – pure Roman basilica style, St Dunstan's, Moston – Romanesque, St Willibrord's, Clayton – Byzantine. Why build in 1931 in this late Victorian style? Was it because Fr William Browne had fond memories of the church where he grew up? That would be St Gertrude's, Firies, built in 1868.

I looked up St Gertrude's and found it to be remarkably like Our Lady of Grace. St Gertrude's was designed by James Joseph McCarthy, often referred to as "the Irish Pugin". It is a Gothic Revival church with a double height nave and lean-to

aisles. The interior has pointed arched arcades on limestone columns. To one side of the entrance is a hexagonal spire. The description could well fit Our Lady of Grace church, except that we have such a spire on either side of the entrance. Perhaps all this explains why Our Lady of Grace took the form it did?

Pevsner called it 'anachronistically Gothic'. Look around. So it is. A long nave, with an apse, and a pitched roof. It has a clerestory. The arcades along the nave have pointed arches on stone columns with Romanesque capitals. The church is built with red brick - I think Accrington brick - with dressings of Portland stone and roofed in Welsh slate. The front façade is flanked by two twin towers. It houses a very large five-light pointed window with Perpendicular tracery.

The windows are well worth examining. A lot of thought obviously went into their planning. The window in the façade contains lilies, a symbol of Our Lady. The back windows in the sanctuary nearest the tabernacle contain symbols of the Eucharist. The four front windows in the sanctuary nearest

the lectern contain the emblems of the four evangelists. The windows over the confessionals are symbolic of the power to forgive sins. They show the crossed keys. They also recall Our Lord's words to Peter: "I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven. Whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven. Whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven." The windows nearest to Our Lady's altar show symbols of Our Lady. Those in the former baptistery have symbols of baptism and the new life Christ has gained for us, while round the walls are various symbols of the Persons of the Blessed Trinity and of the Eucharist. People sometimes ask about the 'Star of David' window on the upper floor of the hall next door. That window was part of the chapel building from 1891 and again is a symbol of Our Lady. The six-pointed Star of David is a sign of the royal Judaic lineage of Mary in the House of David. It highlights Mary's role in our salvation.

And what of the woodwork? (Someone said it was very good apart from the dry rot in the pulpit!) The carved timber is the work of Ferdinand Stuflesser of Ortisei in the Italian Dolomites. That region is famous for its woodcarvers and

the Stuflessers are the kings of the carvers. This church isn't unique in housing their work. You'll find it in many churches in this diocese. A good example of a huge reredos is in the church of Christ the King, Newton Heath, transferred there from the now-demolished St Edmund's, Miles Platting. All Stuflessers' work is top quality. You see the carved reredos and the painted Rood here in the sanctuary. You see the robust altar rails with the two carvings of 'Martha and Mary' and the 'Roman centurion'. You see the elaborate carving in the side chapels of the Sacred Heart and Our Lady, with panels of the Sacred Heart and the Nativity. You see the Stations of the Cross with their exquisite details. You see the benches, and the carved bench ends, every one of which is different. You see the beautiful carving of the screen in the porch and the ceiling there.

What did it all cost? It's all carefully itemised in the Log Book pages 100-104. I'll just give the summary here:

Contractor £15,180. Architect £750. Clerk of Works £289.18.0. Stuflessers £2,970.19.0. Hayes & Finch etc £694.5s.6d. Total £19,885.2s.6d.

Some things came later. The organ for example was erected in memory of Fr Browne who was PP when the church was built. It was rebuilt from a concert organ and installed here in 1952.

The baptismal font, made in 1882, is also new to this church. It came here in 2003 from the church of the Sacred Heart, Accrington, now demolished, and has been restored by the firm of Alberti Lupton of Moston. The font is carved of Caen stone from Normandy, with dark marble pillars also probably from France and a grey marble top of Bardiglio, from Carrara in Italy. The font is octagonal in the traditional shape of baptisteries, representing the eight beatitudes. The statue of Our Lady placed on the front of the school-chapel building on Fairfax Road when it opened in 1891 is also carved of Caen stone.

The monument to Pope St John Paul II, erected here in the Lady Chapel in 2015, commemorates his visit to Britain in 1982, and specifically his saying Mass and ordaining priests

here within this parish – in Heaton Park. The hall and park had belonged for centuries to the Egerton family. What that family would have made of the Pope coming to their park I wouldn't like to think! The Egertons were an extended family, not known for their Catholic sympathies. In fact Thomas Egerton gave up his Catholic faith and became a favourite of Elizabeth I. He became Chancellor of England and was complicit in the death of some of the priest martyrs. Wilbraham Egerton from Tatton was MP for Cheshire for many years. He became known as “an anti-Catholic Tory” and he voted against, among other things, Catholic relief, the Catholic Association and Catholic Emancipation. Let's hope they've made it up with St John Paul since! May they all live happily together in heaven!

After Fr Browne retired Fr Denis O'Brien was appointed PP in 1949. He was a Limerick man but at the age of 65 he retired to Tralee, County Kerry, in 1961. He was succeeded by Fr Denis Gleeson, a Kerry man. Fr Gleeson had been at Our Lady of Grace as a curate 1938–1945 (and so during the 2nd World War). He served as PP 1961–1979. He died suddenly

in the presbytery aged 72. Fr John O'Sullivan then came. He too had been a curate at Our Lady's (1964–1972). He was PP 1979–1996. He also died suddenly in the presbytery aged only 66.

When this present church was opened in 1931 the school took over the whole of the building next door and remained there until the present school was opened at the top of Highfield Road in 1975. Fr Gleeson recorded in the Log Book: *“The removal to the new school building will take place tomorrow and Tuesday, 23rd and 24th June [1975]. The children will not be in school on these days. On Wednesday the Infant classes will transfer to the new school on Highfield Road and the remaining classes in two easy stages. This week marks the end of an era in the life of the Parish, and while we look forward to working in our beautiful new school, there will be some who think sadly of Fairfax Road building as a place of learning.*

“For more than 80 years the children of this parish have been prepared for life and have gone out to do great things

for God and their neighbour in the world. And so we look back with profound gratitude to God for the many blessings we have received, and we thank the many people – parents, priests, teachers and friends – for the generous help and support given throughout the years. We ask for your prayers to continue the good work, and as in the past, we commend ourselves and our children to the loving care of Our Lady of Grace.”

That is a good note on which to end. Immigration has brought new faces to the Church in this country. The parish caters now for people of over 20 nationalities. Our long heritage from Prestwich–cum–Oldham carries on.

