

The Dawn of Catholicism in North Staffordshire

A Cistercian abbey of St Mary by the Trent at Hulton was founded by Henry de Audley in 1223 & soon after they established a grange (farm) at Rushton on the hillside below Cobridge. In 1538 during the Reformation Hulton Abbey was dissolved with its properties taken by the Crown & subsequently sold, but its grange at Rushton was the key to the survival & eventual revival of Catholicism in Stoke. Over the next few centuries the grange passed through many hands including the Biddulph & Bagnall families who were both Catholics. In 1688 the grange was ransacked by a Protestant mob as it had become well known as a Catholic centre

By the early 18th century Rushton Grange, Cobridge had become a Mass centre but only became a parish in 1760 when Fr Thomas Flynn came to the district as a resident priest, he probably lived in Burslem although said Mass in the Chapel at Rushton Grange that was part of an old Cistercian farm. In 1781 a new chapel was opened on the hill above the Grange, this was St Peter's Church, Cobridge.

Hard as it is for us to comprehend it was not until 1791 that saying Mass became legal & Catholic worship was once more recognised by the laws of England. Then it was not until 1829 following an Act Of Parliament that Catholics received back their civil rights & with it their right to vote. After a period of persecution of almost 300 years was an amazing journey through which all the Parishes in the North of Stoke can trace their roots, roots that go all the way back to St Mary by the Trent way back in 1223.

St Mary's school was built in Queen Street, now Brierley Street, Smallthorne on a plot of land purchased for £40 by Thomas Leith who was Parish Priest at St Peter's, Cobridge. The school opened on 14th August 1871 with 60 pupils. In 1875 a Mass centre served from St Peter's, Cobridge by Fr Phillip Hendren was opened in the school.

In 1895 the Mass centre was transferred to the care of the new Burslem Mission where the parish priest was Fr Joseph Hymers. In 1905 a new school with a chapel was built on the same site but was still served from Burslem by Fr William Browne & his curates

On 23rd April 1923 Mass was celebrated for the first time as St Mary's became an independent Parish. The presbytery was in High lane & our first Parish Priest was Jeremiah O'Connor. In 1934 the school/church building was enlarged. Fr O'Connor was parish priest until 1951, he is buried in Burslem Cemetery, he was succeeded by Fr John Griffith,

During our time in Brierley Street there were many public demonstrations of our faith with processions for Corpus Christi, First Holy Communion, etc & as we shared the same building our School/Parish link was invisible we were one

After 9 years of fundraising for a new School & church Fr Griffith was transferred to Birmingham leaving £10,000 in the new church fund, his replacement in 1960 was Fr Edmund Motherway. In June 1966 he produced a "Letter on Planned Giving" advising Parishioners that the cost of the new Church had increased from £38k to £50k & that the only way the money could be raised was directly from them by weekly giving. A group of Parishioners were commissioned to collect money from all Catholics in the Parish weekly, many current Parishioners can remember this effort & a few actually knocked on doors collecting the money. His words for everyone were, "Sacrifice at all times, & great sacrifice when God really needs it, is the real test of the actual strength of the faith of God's people"

The architects of the new church were Sandy & Norris & partners led by Mr C. Horsley & was built by H.J. Emery Builders & sons, work was completed in 1969

The Solemn Blessing of this church in Norton Le Moors took place on 17th Sept 1969 in a Mass celebrated by Archbishop Dwyer & Fr Edmund Motherway. Fr Motherway left us in 1970 his successor was Fr Peter Moore

Fr Peter Moore was a very forward thinking man who, always looking to see how the Church was developing elsewhere & bringing them to Norton le Moors, he often took his annual holidays in the USA where he found "new" ideas many of which he implemented here During our time under Fr Moore we held some wonderful social events & it was at this time that the famous "Pensioners Easter Party" was created. This was truly a Parish event, it was organised by the SVP, the Union of Catholic Mothers prepared the food & everyone helped in setting up the room, providing lifts to the housebound, serving food, entertaining or simply being there. Funds were raised during the year to cover all the necessary ingredients of a party. The PEP was always held on the Tuesday after Easter, it started early in the morning for the cooks with our VIP's (our pensioners) arriving early afternoon for Mass followed by a late lunch with all the trimmings, some entertainment plus a few cakes, this was followed by a whole Parish social with Norton Community Centre filled to the rafters. This became a fixture of Parish life for many years & was looked on by many as a real demonstration of togetherness in faith. Sadly as the organisers themselves became pensioners & the advent of H&S the PEP disappeared from our calendars.

The Parish provided several stewards, musicians & singers for the Papal Mass celebrated by Pope John Paul II at Bagginton Airport, Coventry on 28th May, 1982, they were joined by many Parishioners in the crowd of well over 300,000 people.

Fr Peter Moores's replacement Fr Arthur Warburton joined us in 1983 but due to illness was only with us for a few months before he sadly passed away later that year aged 58

Monsignor Pat Kilgariff began his Priestly ministry here in 1983 continuing/enhancing the Parish progress as a Spiritual outreaching community.

Our Stations of the Cross are the work of R.J. Lloyd of Bidecome, Devon & were originally commissioned by the Church of The Holy Cross, Much Hanham, Herefordshire. By God's providence after the closure of that church they were acquired from the artist for this Parish in 1986. Each Station was given in memory of parishioners & loved ones who had died please pray for them & all our benefactors. The stations were installed with great care by John Moran.

During the 1980's we had a Mass which was broadcast on TV & also featured in the local version of "songs of praise" on BBC Radio Stoke

The tapestry of "The Risen Lord" by our Sacristy door was created by Pearl Hope in 1991 in memory of her late husband Roy Hope, her "chick"

It took an offer of a post in Rome to persuade Monsignor Pat Kilgariff to leave us in 1988, he is now settled in Worcester, his successor was Fr Tony Jones.

Fr Tony Jones was director of the Lourdes Pilgrimage from 1986 to 1998 & Paul Mayland joined him as the Pilgrimage Doctor.

Towards the late 1980's we began the Stations Walk on Good Friday initially helping to carry a big cross, we continue this tradition today although not using a big cross as ironically "they are dangerous". At this time the Parish had many active groups- RCIA, SVP, Legion of Mary, Junior Legion of Mary, UCM, Youth Group, Music Group, Justice & Peace & an active Parish Council. In addition Masses were held in various homes around the Parish.

Our Churches Solemn consecration was celebrated on 7th May 1988 by Archbishop Maurice Couve de Murville & Fr Tony Jones during which relics of Venerable/St Bede (673 - 735) & St Jane Françoise de Chantal (1572 - 1641) deposited & sealed into our Altar. It was ordered that a Mass to celebrate the Dedication of the 29th May each year when the candles before the Consecration crosses are to be used. Mass was followed by a reception lunch & dancing at the Kings Hall, Stoke. Fr Tony Jones left the Parish in 1990 & is currently living in Birmingham, his successor was Fr Mervyn Smith.

In the 1990's an annual event was initiated at dawn on Pentecost Sunday in we walked up the hill at Chatterley Whitfield & over looking the Nature Reserve we celebrated Mass then cooked breakfast a very moving experience. On one occasion 3 Parishioners were walking down the hill at around 04:30am when they were stopped by the Police for behaving suspiciously.

Our Grotto was originally sited at St Augustines Home in Cobridge which had been run by the Little Sisters of the poor since 1892,. When the home was closed in 1993 Fr Mervyn Smith had permission for it to be picked up & re-built outside our Church by Dennis Collins, a pebble from Our Lady's Grotto in Lourdes was obtained by Sean Collins & inserted into the Grotto. Later In 2011 a bench was added in the memory of the late Chris Hannon

In the mid 1990's using donations from Fr Peter Moore's sister Margaret, the Parish converted the School caretakers house into a small Convent named Moore House from which Sisters, Elizabeth, Kashia & Celestine provided both Pastoral & Spiritual to the Parish Our first Deacon, Paul Mayland was ordained in 1996 & began a dedicated ministry until he retired in 2018

Ecumenical links & services with various neighbouring Churches were held. We use to meet up with St Saviours Church at the Nature Reserve Car Park on Palm Sunday to celebrate the first part of the Liturgy together before going our separate ways

Parish barbecues were held to raise money for CAFOD

In May 1996 the church was closed for nearly 6 months following a fire way up high above the Sanctuary. During renovation work the weekly Sunday Mass was celebrated in the School Hall by Fr Brian Wall, it was an experience reminiscent of those early days in Brierley Street. As part of the renovation the Sanctuary was re-ordered with a new Tabernacle created by Mr Mark Delf which is mounted on the Baptismal font from the Brierley Street Church which had been standing idle in the Presbytery garden.

Fr Mervin Smith was executive secretary to the National Council of Priests (NPC) in England & Wales. Sonja MaYland served as his secretary at the NPC for which she later received the Benemerenti medal in 2002.

During the 1990's we initiated the Children's Liturgy as part of our Sunday Mass, a tradition that continues today.

Naomi Hannon became one of the first, if not the first female Altar server in Stoke-on-Trent in the 1990's

Many Parish outings were arranged - Blackpool, Bruges, Theatres, Deacon Ordinations, etc.. to name just a few

The Justice & Peace group held a sponsored bed push around the Parish to raise funds & the group joined others at an anti-abortion rally in Westminster to lobby MP's.

Sculpture of the Risen Lord by Mr John Letts was commissioned by the Parish & erected in the porch in 1996 after the fire, it coincided with the reordering of our Stations of the Cross so that the 14th Station was by the door to the Porch. Fr Mervin Smith left the Parish in 1998 & is now working as a Solicitor, he was succeeded by Fr Chris Greaney.

The statue of the Sacred Heart is mounted on a plinth donated in 1999 by the McGough family in memory of Laurence McGough

To commemorate the start of the 2nd Millennium Fr Chris Greaney organised a firework & music extravaganza to which all the local community was invited, it was a very memorable & enjoyable occasion.

In 2001 Richard Pemberton became our second Deacon serving the Parish until he moved to St George & St Martins in 2003

Fr Chris Greaney, moved on from our Parish in 2004, he is now retired living in Leamington Spa, his successor was Fr Simon Stephens,

Our Book of Remembrance was donated to the Parish in 2007 by Charlie Pemberton in memory of his wife Phylis.

Parishioners, singers & musicians travelled to Crofton Park for the Papal Mass celebrated by Pope Benedict XVI on 19th September 2010, this time part of a 70,000 crowd.

In 2012 the copper Church roof began to leak, not helped by a number of thefts, Between 2013 & 2018 parishioners raised over £100k for its replacement without the need for any loans or overdraft with over £70K coming directly from generous Parishioners, thanks to the personal donations our biggest benefactor was the Inland Revenue with circa £15k Gift Aid, in essence the same process that Fr Edmund Motherway used back in 1966, "Sacrifice at all times, & great sacrifice when God really needs it, is the real test of the actual strength of the faith of God's people". A pledge from from one of our oldest Parishioners Lily Gething to raise £1k with Jam/book sales went on to raise vastly more over the 5 years. Additionally, an amazing £4,521 was raised by Ellie-Mae Mellor for a sponsored walk which she organised & completed, which was a fantastic achievement for a 7 year old girl who had lost her legs to Meningitis.

Fr Simon Stephens moved on from our Parish in 2014 & he now serves the Holy Trinity Parish in Newcastle Under Lyme & lives in Chesterton, he was succeeded by our current Priest Fr John Laybourn who is also the Chaplain at Keele University

On 16th September 2018 mass was celebrated by Bishop McGough & Fr John Laybourn on the 30th anniversary of the consecration.

Recently we have experienced a number of floods resulting in significant work on our heating system & drainage systems, additionally we have replaced lighting & carpeting to maintain a welcoming environment.

Our Parish Priests

Fr. Jeremiah O'Connor	1923-1951 (died 1951 aged 64 buried in Burslem Cemetery)
Fr. Vincent Griffith	1951-1960 (died 1969 aged 53 buried in Barnacarroll, nr Knock)
Fr. Edmund Motherway	1960-1970 (died 2018 aged 100 buried in Ladysbridge, Cork)
Fr. Peter Moore	1970-1983 (died 1989 aged 71 buried in Burslem Cemetery)
Fr. Arthur Warburton	1983-1983 (died 1984 aged 58)
Fr. Pat Kilgarriff	1983-1985 (retired living in Worcester)
Fr. Anthony Jones	1985-1990 (living in Great Barr, Birmingham)
Fr. Mervin Smith	1990-1998 (working as a Solicitor, living nr Lichfield)
Fr. Christopher Greaney	1998-2004 (retired living in Leamington Spa)
Fr. Simon Stephens	2004-2015 (serving Holy Trinity, Newcastle)
Fr. John Laybourn	2015 to date tb

Deacons

Deacon Paul Mayland 1996 - 2018

Deacon Richard Pemberton 2001 - 2003 (moved to Birches Head, Bucknall & Trent Vale)

Deacon Dave Pranauskus 2013 to date

Nuns

Elizabeth

Kashia

Celestine

Recipients of the Papal Benemerenti medal - Tom Davies & Sonja Mayland

Distinguished deceased Parishioners whose memories we hold dear include Ernie Smith, Graham Bell, Albert Wilcox, Bernard Potts, John Moran, Hilda & Jim Cox, Tom Davies, Terry Cuthbert, Chris Hassall, Sean & Magdelene Collins, Winnie Bould, Nellie Baddeley, Tom Caine, Terry Heath, Chris Hannon, Liam Dwyer, Angela Delicampagni & in addition to all those mentioned above there have been numerous Holy men/women who have served with great dedication our humble Parish with their own unique skills.

God Bless us all

From Mary & Derek Blunt

PARISH SPIRITUALITY AT ST. MARY'S, NORTON IN THE 1980'S

In the 1980's, the Parish of St. Mary's Norton was guided by two charismatic parish priests: Fr. Peter Moore and Monsignor Pat Kilgarriff, in their own unique way.

Fr. Peter Moore saw the occasion of Children's First Holy Communion as a means of parish renewal. The programme of a nine-month preparation for children and their families was introduced. Each month focussed on one aspect of the Eucharist: belonging, celebrating, making peace, listening, caring, giving thanks for creation, giving thanks for new life, sharing a meal, going forth to make a better world. Each month included a children's session, a parents' session, a non-Eucharistic Service open to all parishioners and a home visit made by the catechists, who were parents, parishioners and teachers. At the end of each year, following the celebration of First Holy Communion, a picnic outing was arranged for all those involved in the programme.

When Monsignor Pat Kilgarriff was appointed parish priest, he enthusiastically supported the First Holy Communion programme, but also introduced into the parish the newly devised "Rite of Christian Initiation for Adults" – now often known as "Journey into Faith" – mainly for those enquiring about the Catholic faith, but also welcoming parishioners who wanted to have a deeper understanding of their own faith. In order to make this work he encouraged and trained parishioners to lead some of the sessions.

In that decade the power of the work of the Holy Spirit was witnessed and experienced and it influenced the lives of many parishioners.

The Future

Looking back at the celebration of Mass at St. Mary's over the past fifty years has brought back many happy memories of our time in the parish. We think it would be worthwhile, after all the celebrations, to consider the next fifty years.

In the recent issues of the Diocesan quarterly magazine, "The Sower", Archbishop Bernard has written:

We need to move away from maintenance if we are to be truly a Missionary Church (i.e. Parish).

Our Diocesan Vision – "Unfolding God's Plan" – is continuing to take shape and we will soon be engaging with you all on this very important piece of work.

The five themes: Parish Renewal, Young people and Families, Evangelisation, Formation, Charity – will continue to be explored and developed.

It is vital we engage with you, the lay faithful, in order to respond to Jesus' command to all of us to "Go and make disciples of all nations."

We can look forward to even more exciting times ahead!

Mary & Derek Blunt

From Fr Tony Jones

St. Mary's Norton-le-Moors 1985-1990

Coming to St. Mary's Norton in September 1985 was like a homecoming for me. In the previous ten years I had been in a parish in Birmingham, then four rootless but challenging years as an army chaplain, and then three years working with the new Archbishop, Maurice Couve de Murville as his secretary. When that time was up Archbishop Maurice kindly asked me to take over from the inspirational Fr Pat Kilgarriff at St. Mary's because I am a North Staffs lad – from Newcastle – and my parents were becoming increasingly frail and were soon to go into the Little Sisters' home at Cobridge.

So I was back in the Potteries, I could understand the lingo, I enjoyed oatcakes, I knew what a fettler did and I even knew that Port Vale ground was in Burslem. There were many links between people in the parish and my family through schools or my mum's work as a nurse at the Orthopaedic hospital in Hartshill, I was immediately at home among friends and neighbours.

All my memories of St. Mary's are happy ones, because even at the times of sorrow and tragedy – like the sudden death of Bernard Potts senior while he prayed before Our Lady's statue just before Saturday evening Mass – there was such a profound sense of a caring, supportive Christian community, involved with each other in so many ways. I think that community spirit is founded on the hard life of the Potters in the past, and then the struggle of the Catholic faithful to establish and build their parish around the old Smallthorne school, and then the building of the present fine church, presbytery and school at the bottom Norton bank. Great achievements which bound people and families together in their shared service of Christ and His Church.

Community events were the key to developing the potential of this lively and faith-filled parish; all the usual annual round of feasts and celebrations, but some were distinct, blessing palms on Palm Sunday beside the lake with the Anglicans of Smallthorne and processing to the church from there; on Good Friday morning climbing to the top of the slag heap hill and planting our cross, RCIA candidates going to St. Chad's cathedral for the Rite of Election, and having several deacons and students for the priesthood on placement in the parish.

The highlight of my time at Norton has to be the Solemn Consecration of the church by Archbishop Maurice, so many people made such a memorable occasion; there was a year of parish events which 'consecrated' the people leading up to the day itself. I pray that the seeds that were sown in those days will bear a rich harvest for the Kingdom of God.

Tony Jones

From Mervin Smith

Fr Mervin Smith – time at St Mary's Norton le Moors (1990-98)

- This period in the life of the Parish witnessed the following:
- The re-locating and re-constructing of the Lourdes Grotto from the grounds of the Little Sisters of the Poor Care Home in Cobridge to the grounds of St Mary's following the closure of the Home, thanks to the generosity of Dennis Collins.
- The planting of the monkey puzzle tree next to the Grotto in memory of Matthew Lasota, one of the parish altar servers, who sadly died whilst a pupil at St Mary's school.
- The first parish in the city to introduce girl altar servers who together with the boys provided dignified and conscientious service at the Eucharist and other liturgical ceremonies.
- The extension and development of lay ministries, with expansion of Eucharistic ministers to assist at the Eucharist and with regular distribution of communion to the sick and housebound, and the introduction of children's liturgy.
- The ordination of Dr Paul Mayland to the Permanent Diaconate, the first Deacon to serve in the parish.
- The parish was blessed with the arrival of a religious community of Sisters - Sr Elizabeth, Sr Kasia and Sr Celestine - for a few years who provided pastoral and spiritual input including Days of Recollection, mini retreats, spirituality courses and spiritual direction.
- The introduction of a Passover Supper as a prelude each year to the Easter Triduum liturgies, and an annual celebration of Mass for Pentecost at dawn on top of Chatterley Whitfield hill.
- The introduction of additional annual social events: the Bonfire and Fireworks evening and the Auction.
- The acquisition of the former Caretaker's House from the Local Authority renamed Moore House in memory of Fr Peter Moore, former PP, thanks to the generosity of his sister, Margaret.
- The re-ordering of the church following a fire in the roof, with new tabernacle designed by local artist and sculptor Mark Delf and the life size sculpture of the Risen Christ in the church porch reaching out into the locality, inviting and welcoming all who come to the church of St Mary's.

From Fr Chris Greaney

Although from Cheshire I had never set foot in Stoke until just before coming to the Parish and my first actual experience was by narrow boat, en route to Froghall and mooring up near Endon.

It was all a bit of a surprise to be asked to go to St Marys as I had hardly got established at St Augustine's Handsworth previously, though it was beneficial to move north to be - nearer my family.

So, I arrived really quite inexperienced and a bit shell- shocked. I hardly knew a soul in the area.

Hence it was challenging to begin with, but from the start there were plenty of warm hearts to encourage and help. School was a great source of inspiration and resources too.

Of course I had to learn a different culture and even language- even how not to "sneep" someone, a completely new word!

Oatcakes and pikelets were a discovery too.

I catch myself now turning over plates etc. to see which Pottery made them.

I was glad to know something of that shrinking industry whilst in Norton.

It was clear to see and experience the genuine close sense of community in the Parish and a warm welcome in so many homes.

I don't want to name individuals, but there were some really great characters who were so generous in so many ways - and understanding, too.

I valued our deacons for their friendship and professional advice.

I felt blessed in our music ministry and was impressed with the selfless work of the SVP, always so much more vigorous in the north, and the delightful company of the Friends of Mary.

I remember our social events, from Italian meals in the Presbytery to a Laurel and Hardy pea and pie supper night in the School Hall. Raffles and Fetes revealed all sorts of talents.

Ecumenically our friends from other churches provided fellowship and drive a lot of the time.

I don't think I found that so well expressed and lived out in subsequent parishes.

I look forward to meeting with old friends again, to reminisce, to show gratitude and ask for understanding where I went wrong.

It is a lucky priest who is asked to serve at St Marys where there is a deep faith and loyal support.

My regret has been not returning apart from a couple of funerals over nearly 20 years.

I'm afraid that l'll health was a factor, which is why I am semi-retired but fully involved in the Parish where I was ordained. And I am pleased to say I am getting back to strength now, walking better (and losing weight).

So I am delighted with your invitation to celebrate the Golden Jubilee of the Church, where I can remember so many celebrations, both happy and sad, quietly prayerful and bulging at the seams.

Lots of memories coming back to me but above all the gratitude of having lived amongst such genuinely warm, good-hearted, spiritual folk.

Fr John, you are blessed. Thank you especially.

Fr Chris Greaney