

*The following account appeared in The Retford Times on 19th June 1970.
It was written by the late Fr George Tutto who was parish priest of St Joseph's Retford at that time.*

The Catholic Church in Retford

1820 - 1895 - 1970

On Wednesday, June 24th, 1970, the Right Reverend Dr. Edward Ellis, Bishop of Nottingham, will consecrate St Joseph's Church on Babworth Road, and its new altar, in a solemn ceremony which marks the end of a period of about 150 years, during which the emergence and growth, trials and achievements of Roman Catholicism in Retford were taking place, following the Relief Act of 1778 permitting Catholic priests to exercise their ministry.

I wish to express my gratitude to 'Retford Times' for giving me the opportunity of publishing a short historical account of the Catholic Church in Retford, and I hope that readers interested in local history may find it useful.

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The forthcoming Consecration of the new church coincides with the 75th anniversary of the opening of the first Catholic Church in Retford, that is, after the Reformation, situated in Queen Street, nicknamed the "Tin Tabernacle," on account of its corrugated iron structure. It is now the Parish Hall.

The site was purchased by Father Michael O'Reilly, of Gainsborough, in 1894 for the sum of £400. The building itself was a gift from the Dowager Duchess of Newcastle, a Roman Catholic, the mother of the Seventh Duke of Newcastle, of Clumber Park. The Duke's wife, Kathleen Florence May, was a grand-daughter of Josephine Julia Ellen, Dowager Lady Rossmore, who lived at Ranby Hall and was a regular member of St Joseph's Church until her death in 1912. She is buried in the Retford cemetery.

The construction of the first church, however, did not go very smoothly. Originally, a much larger and permanent site, the foundations of which were already laid, when early in 1895, a High Court injunction, asked for by Mr. Samuel Baker, owner of one of the houses on the Westfields Estate, prevented the continuation of the work on grounds of restrictive covenants affecting the property, including the fixing of the building line at 36 feet from Pelham Road and 13 feet from Queen Street. Consequently, the plans had to be altered and a smaller church was built instead, with a seating capacity of about 150. In spite of this misfortune, the church was ready for the opening and blessing on June 20th, 1895 by the Rt. Rev. Dr. Edward Bagshawe, Bishop of Nottingham.

A detailed reporting of the occasion by "Retford Times" reveals some interesting features of how the Retford Catholic Mission began some 75 years earlier.

Early attempts to build a Chapel in Retford

For three years prior to the building of the church in Queen Street, Father O'Reilly came from Gainsborough to say Mass for the Catholics in Retford in the upper room of a shop at 15 Spital Hill, owned since 1884 by a family called Broadberry. This house has an interesting background. The principal speaker at the opening of the church was a Jesuit priest from Bristol, Father Greenan, who was born in that house. He told his audiences that his father, John Greenan, came to Retford about the year 1800. His father told him about the first attempt by a Catholic priest to say Mass for the Catholics in Retford, *“but such was the peculiar condition of the town at that time that he found it was dangerous; and as he returned he was met by a crowd, his hat was battered in, his clothes were torn from his back and he had to take refuge in a house in Churchgate.”*

Having no Mass centre of their own, Catholics from Retford used to go to Worksop Manor where the Duke of Norfolk, after the Relief Act of 1778, had built a public Catholic chapel. In 1839 it was replaced by St Mary's R.C. Church built by the 14th Duke in Park Street. Looking into the Baptismal Register of St Mary's Church, I found that earliest recorded baptism of a Retfordian Catholic was that of Anne Darby, on July 31st 1792, daughter of George and Sarah Darby. The next was Anne Brown, 1798, daughter of Edward and Mary Brown, then Anne Burbage, 1798, daughter of Joseph and Elizabeth Burbage, her brother John, 1801, followed by three Campbell children, Elizabeth Sarah, 1810, Frances Isabel Amelia, 1811, and William Duncan Stuart, 1812. One may assume that Catholic families were existent in Retford even during the era of the Penal Law, although no definite evidence is available apart from these early baptisms.

Father Greenan also remembered that later on a priest from Worksop used to come regularly to say Mass in his father's house, and checking other sources I was able to follow up the various attempts by priests to establish a Mission in Retford, beginning about 1820.

The first regular Mission was established in 1822 by Father Thomas Michael McDonnell, who became chaplain to the Duke of Norfolk at Worksop Manor in 1818. He said Mass in Retford every Sunday until 1824 when he was appointed Rector to St. Peter's Church in Birmingham by Bishop Milner, the Vicar-Apostolic for the Midland District. The Catholic Hierarchy with twelve Bishops was restored only in 1850. Father McDonnell's successor, Father O'Gorman, continued the Retford Mission. He started to raise funds for a chapel and within three years he collected £400. He became the first resident priest in Retford in 1826, but only for a year. In 1827 he left for America. A curious thing happened. When Father O'Gorman left, he gave the money to a certain Dr. Walsh for safe-keeping, who in turn lent it to a Reverend T. C. Husenbeth of Cossey for investment by his father. He became bankrupt and when he died years later, nothing was left. All this is stated in a letter from the Bishop's house at Birmingham dated March 30th 1849, addressed to Father James Jones of Worksop, who continued to say Mass for the Retford Catholics and made the enquiries about the money in the hope that he might build a chapel in Retford. Result: no money, therefore no chapel in Retford.

Early attempts to build a Chapel in Retford (continued)

A second attempt to build a chapel was made in 1861, the circumstances of which are not clear. A letter by a Rev. F. Cheadle of Hainton, Wragby, to the Provost Jones of Worksop on May 9th, 1861, makes reference to money being collected for a chapel at Retford and about vestments being given from Louth, but still no sign of any chapel being erected until 1875 when, according to Bishop Bagshawe's diary "*some sort of building styled a 'church' was bought at Retford on 20th December 1875.*" This building in fact was the Mission Hall in Albert Road, opened as a Catholic Chapel in 1876. However, a few years later, it was acquired by Ordsall Church, and later, in 1895, it became a Methodist Chapel which it is today. Seemingly another venture went wrong. The 'Retford Times', on April 27th, 1878, reported an incident headed "A Roman Catholic Priest in Trouble in Retford," which might throw some light on the situation. The reported incident sounds like a story from the wild west: "*Michael O'Farrell, a Roman Catholic priest of Nottingham, but who has recently been located at Retford since the opening of a chapel in the town, was taken before the Mayor, Mr. J. Curtis, on Tuesday, 16th inst., charged with having been drunk and disorderly at four o'clock that morning, in the Market Square. Police-constable Kirk and Police-constable Bartram apprehended the prisoner, who now pleaded guilty. The Mayor expressed his regret that a man of the prisoner's position should have conducted himself in such a manner in the public square. He characterised it as a most disgraceful act, and gave him 35 minutes to leave the town, and in default of his doing so he would be committed to gaol for seven days. The prisoner left the town by train.*"

In the following years the Catholic Mission in Retford consisted of occasional visits by priests from Gainsborough, Woksop and Lincoln. A certain Father Cafferata tried to reside in Retford, but perhaps he could not maintain himself, and so he moved to Gainsborough and from there he came to say Mass until 1880. Canon Croft of Lincoln also came occasionally to give catechism and to say Mass in the house of Father Greenan's parents. He made a census of the Catholics of that period and found their number was between 60 and 70.

From 1885 to 1890 Retford had a weekly Mass only once a month, said by a priest from Worksop, in a cottage belonging to a greengrocer, Joseph Sandy, of Spring Gardens, West Street (just behind the 'Times' Printing Works), but since demolished. Mrs Hanah Holland nee Marsh, tells me that she was baptised in that cottage in 1885. She is the only surviving member of the former parishioners who attended the opening of the church in 1895. She is now living in Halifax, but will come to the consecration of the new church to see how things have developed during the past 75 years.

In 1890 the Mission was handed back to Gainsborough and Mass was said every Sunday first in West Street, then, in 1892 when Fr O'Reilly came on the scene, at 15 Spital Hill. His zeal and enthusiasm brought new life into the Catholic community of Retford and within three years a permanent Mission centre was established. The trials, failures and disappointments, hopes and perseverances of a period of 75 years have finally produced the fruit: a Catholic Church in Retford.

1895 - 1970: Development towards a permanent Catholic Church in Retford

Since the erection of the first Catholic Church in Retford another 75 years have passed. This period started with great hopes of development. Father O'Reilly moved to Retford from Gainsborough in 1897 and within three years he built the Presbytery on Pelham Road where he served the parish until 1916. A Convent of the Apostoline Sisters was established in 1918 and they opened a school in a house on London Road, now the Flats, but in 1920(?) they left. Long years of slow development followed, in fact, the number of Catholics decreased, the parish was poor, the priests lived in great austerity. Canon Gryce, formerly of Worksop, now parish priest in Stamford, spent his boyhood in Retford, and he tells me that the parish was so poor that the priest, Father Richard de Maltos (1918 - 1919) used to live in the kitchen, mostly on bread and milk, week by week, so long as his weekly collection, made up of coppers, lasted. The financial accounts of Canon Quin who was parish priest in Retford from 1934 to 1937, show that he had to live on a weekly income of about 35 shillings, the average Sunday collection of which the housekeeper's wage was 15 shillings, the house and the church having to be maintained as well. The only cheerful notes from this period come from the time of an eccentric parish priest, Father Frederick A. Ingle (1919 - 1934), about whom delightful stories, true or untrue, are still remembered by some of the older parishioners. Catholics of Retford, however, should also remember with gratitude that due to his efforts and the generosity of Major E. Milner, of West Retford House, a piece of land was given to form a Catholic burial ground adjacent to the Retford cemetery, consecrated on April 5th, 1923. The Calvary in the burial ground was donated by the Catholics of Retford who numbered less than 150. The number of Catholics in Retford increased very slowly. Father Quin made a census in 1935 which shows a figure of 280 Catholics in the parish at large and another 100 at Woodbeck and Rampton Hospital where he established a branch of the Catholic Nurses Guild. Father Quin was followed by Father James Coyne (1937 - 1942) and then Fr John Kenny (1942 - 1948), who looked after the parishioners faithfully in spite of the great difficulties of the war years.

The arrival of Father Joseph Finneran in 1948, the influx of more Catholics into the area, and also the emergence of the new spirit of revival and rebuilding following the destructions of the war created a new and hopeful situation in the life of the Catholics in Retford. Through the tireless efforts of the parish priest, assisted by an excellent team of parish workers, the idea of a new church soon became a reality. After four years of negotiations, a one acre site, part of the cemetery land on Babworth Road, was finally purchased from the Corporation of East Retford in 1954. The Catholics of Retford were favoured once again with a great benefactor, in the person of Dr. K. Want, a non - Catholic G.P., who donated £725, the price of the land. Four years later the new church was built at a cost of about £22,000. The church can comfortably hold 250 to 300 people. It was opened in January, 1959. Years of hard work followed and within a relatively short period the church was paid for.

When I succeeded Father Finneran in 1966, I realised that I was fortunate to be in charge of such a parish. I am ever so grateful to my predecessor for laying the foundation on which this parish of St Joseph can develop further and can participate in the life of the town. The help of a generous legacy by the late Michael McCaffrey and continued fund raising efforts of the good parishioners have enabled me to put the finishing touches to the church by completing the Sanctuary and installing a nearly new organ so that it is now ready for the crowning act - the Consecration.

The Future

The past 150 years of Retford Catholicism had one main objective: to establish a worshipping community rallied round a place of worship, the Church. This has been achieved. Now a new dimension is coming to it: a Catholic Primary School in Retford, the building of which is commencing shortly on the site near the church, we purchased two years ago. We hope that with the aid of an educational establishment for our young children and with a dignified edifice to worship in, the present and future generations of Retford Catholics numbering about one thousand will be in the position to build a church not of bricks but of people. In the face of the many challenges of the modern age on one hand, and in an atmosphere of good will and most friendly co-operation from all sections of the town's community on the other, there is every hope to become a Church of good Christians working out not only their own salvation, but also contributing more effectively to the well-being of Retford in the next 75 years.

FATHER GEORGE TUTTO, PARISH PRIEST.

Acknowledgements - I wish to thank Father G. Kitchin for lending me the relating documents and notes from the archives of St Mary's, Worksop; to Mr Jack Bastow for his useful notes on the Retford Catholic Mission; and to Miss E. Hadfield for enabling me to look up the early copies of 'Retford, Worksop and Gainsborough Times' at Denman Library.

Other references: Canon G. D. Sweeney's Centenary Book of a Short History of the Diocese of Nottingham and Gillow's Bibliographical Dictionary of the English Catholics.

The Original as it appeared in the Retford Times in 1970

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The construction of the first church, however, did not go very smoothly. Originally, a much larger and permanent building was planned on the site, the foundations of which were already laid, when early in 1885, a High Court injunction, asked for by Mr. Samuel Baker, owner of one of the houses on the Westfields Estate, prevented the continuation of the work on grounds of restrictive covenants affecting the property, including the fixing of the building on line at 36 feet from Pelham Road and 13 feet from Queen Street. Consequently, the plans had to be altered and a smaller church was built instead, with a seating capacity of about 150. In spite of this misfortune, the church was ready for the opening and blessing on June 29th, 1895 by the Rt. Rev. Dr. Edward Bagshaw, Bishop of Nottingham.

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