

The Weymouth Mission

This story of Christian witness in Dorset is based on an account drawn up in 1991, using documents and photographs from the Parish archives, at the request of Fr Patrick Mulvaney, and Fr Joseph Phelan who were at that time Parish Priests at St Augustine's and St Joseph's Churches respectively.

The original archive is now believed lost.

The account also includes a contribution from the late Gwen Greenslade OPL who researched the history of the Dominican Order in Weymouth.

In the Beginning...



Christianity in South Dorset goes back to Roman times. Constantine the Great allowed toleration to Christians in 313 AD and Christianity became the State Religion of the Empire in 324 AD.

The mosaic floor at Hinton St Mary depicts Christ and the chi-rho sign. Many of the burials at Poundbury indicate Christians. Perhaps the Roman settlement at Radipole had Christians in its population during the 4th Century.

When the Saxons broke through to Dorset in the 7th century they were mainly Christians, as St Augustine and friends had done their work well in the South East. By the 13th century, Weymouth on the west bank of the harbour, and Melcombe on the east side were fully fledged towns.

The Church at Radipole is said to be the oldest building in the Weymouth area and dates from about 1250. It was originally dedicated to St Mary, and served Melcombe Regis. All Saints Church at Wyke served Weymouth. The French had a nasty habit of raiding the towns when the inhabitants were away attending Mass at the two churches.

The Black Death came to Melcombe in 1348, and two priests at St Mary's (Radipole) were two of the first to die of this plague.

By 1455, in the time of Henry VI, the church at Wyke needed a larger building. A visit today to that church shows vandalism of the holy water stoops probably attributable to Henry VIII's time or more probably the Civil War.



St Ann's Church Radipole
(formerly St Mary's)

In 1605 a new St Mary's Church was built in Weymouth in 1605. The Radipole Church was rededicated to St Ann at Radipole in 1927

The Dominicans come to Melcombe and Weymouth

The year 1418 saw the Dominicans, or Black Friars building a friary in Melcombe. This was on the initiative of Hugh Deverell, Knight and John Rogers of Bryanston with the support of the Master General of the Order. On 17th August, Pope Martin V gave the necessary leave for erecting a convent here with Church, Belfry, Churchyard and Cloister, and all things necessary for a religious house. The Friary was the last Dominican house established in England and was situated in Maiden Street. At the time when it was built, the sea washed its eastern walls. The site is now further inland as a large area of the sea bed was reclaimed and built upon.

The Dominicans, besides catering for the spiritual welfare of the inhabitants also contributed to the defence of the town and the expansion of the port, by building a jetty and a tower. The jetty was also to serve the pilgrims embarking in Melcombe and Weymouth ships for the shrine of St James of Compostella in Spain. The Friary was closed in 1538 on the dissolution of the monasteries by Henry VIII.

The remains of the Friary were thought to have been an old doorway, which remained standing until the site was cleared to form a car park in the 1960's. It is still a car park today.

The Dorset County Records office holds the Deeds of the Friary Lands with a great seal attached. It is a very fragile document, in English and the seal is black with age. It is quite a thrill to be able to read the deeds and hold the seal, thus keeping in touch with the Friars after almost 600 years.

Penal Times



The sculpture of The Martyrs at Dorchester by Dame Elisabeth Frink was erected in 1986 at the cross roads of Icen Way and South Walks, Dorchester. The three figures and the stainless steel plaque commemorate those who kept the Faith alive despite harsh laws, one of which made it High Treason for a Catholic Priest to be on English soil (1570). Locally, Blessed John Cornelius was taken prisoner at Chideock with three laymen and put to death in Dorchester in 1594. Also commemorated are the names of many other men and women, priests and laity executed at this spot including that of Saint Alexander Briant, executed at Tyburn in 1581.

The Names of the Martyrs, and the years in which they were executed, died or sentenced are inscribed on the plaque at South Walks Dorchester. Alexander Briant and John Cornelius were Jesuits.

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| St Alexander Briant SJ | 1581 | William Pike, Carpenter | 1591 |
| John Slade, Schoolmaster | 1583 | St Eustace White, Priest | 1591 |
| Fr Thomas Hemerford | 1584 | — Morecock, Artisan | 1591 |
| Fr John Munden | 1584 | Fr William Patterson | 1592 |
| Fr William Warmington | 1585 | Blessed John Cornelius SJ | 1594 |
| Fr John Adams | 1586 | Thomas Bosgrave Esq | 1594 |
| Fr Thomas Pilcher | 1587 | John Carey, Serving Man | 1594 |
| Fr John Hamblin | 1587 | Patrick Salmon | 1594 |
| John Jessop, Gentleman | 1588 | Fr Hugh Green | 1642 |
| Helen Tremain (wife of Samson Tremain) | 1588 | | |

Of these, Fr Pilcher, Fr Cornelius, Fr Green, William Pike, Thomas Bosgrave, John Carey, Patrick Salmon and — Morecock were hanged, drawn and quartered here; Fr Warmington was banished and John Jessop and Helen Tremain died in Dorchester gaol. The others commemorated on this plaque were executed at Tyburn or Salisbury. Alexander Briant was executed at Tyburn on 1 December 1581 alongside fellow Jesuit Edmund Campion. Eustace White followed them to Tyburn just over 10 years later on 10 December 1591. All were canonised by Paul VI in 1970.

At the foot of the plaque is a poem by Saint Robert Southwell executed at Tyburn in 1595.

Not where I breathe, but where I love, I live;
 Not where I love, but where I am, I die;
 The life I wish, must future glory give,
 The deaths I feele in present daungers lye.

Omnes Sancti Martyres, orate pro nobis!

Toleration

By the reign of George III (1760-1820) Catholics began to be tolerated, as can be seen by the foundation of a mission in Weymouth in 1820, 9 years before the Catholic Emancipation Act of 1829. A French émigré priest, Abbé Simon had rooms at 63 St Mary Street in 1820: "There is my lodging and my chapel".

Two months later the elderly Abbé Dubuisson took over the mission. The Abbé's congregation comprised 15 people from the town and 42 Catholics from the town's

barracks near Radipole Terrace today. This congregation was swelled by the Catholic visitors to this fashionable spa town that George III had loved.

In 1822 Father McDonnell came to the Weymouth Mission. A year later he was followed by Bishop Baines, a persuasive orator and writer. The Bishop began looking at possible sites for a permanent church.

A site for a new Church

In 1831, soon after the Catholic Emancipation Bill, Father Peter Hartley and Bishop Baines bought a large site on the Turnpike Road out of Weymouth to Dorchester. It had a frontage of 126 feet and a depth of 155 feet. It was subdivided into plots, which were then sold, leaving a narrow strip of land for the Church and presbytery in one building.

The new Church was 56 feet long and 27 feet wide, and the Presbytery was at the back of the church occupying what we now know as the sanctuary. The original church sanctuary can be picked out in the ceiling of the present church. The church was opened on October 1835, and dedicated to St Augustine of Canterbury. The Grand Mass in D by Novello was sung, with Mr Foy at the organ and an orchestra comprised of Mrs Angel, Mr Collins and Mr Tullidge.

The Dorset Chronicle entitled its article about the dedication – "Increase of Popery"!



After Father Hartley left the parish, there followed five different parish priests in as many years, including the brief return of Father Hartley. Then Father Tilbury came and remained for fifteen years. During this time **Ann Odber** acted as godmother and marriage witness on many occasions.

Her memorial stone is at the back of St Augustine's Church, on the Gospel side. She was buried within the church at the foot of the old sanctuary.

The photograph shows the Mass celebrated on 21st October 1935 to mark the Centenary of the Founding of St Augustine's Church

The Portland Mass Centre

During Father Tilbury's time at St. Augustine's the Australian Government refused to take any more convicts from England. Thus a prison colony was built on Portland.

St Augustine's Mission on Portland was started to serve the island. Father Tilbury died in 1856 and was replaced by Father Martin Hoskins. Fr. Hoskins opened a Mass Centre on Portland at the home of Mr William Lyle Smith. Fifty people attended Mass there.

Father Hoskins rented a room in Horsford St near Red Barracks as a school for soldiers' children, but the soldiers left barracks four months later, so the school closed down again. Civilian children were transferred to the dining room of the presbytery for their education. Two years later the little school was discontinued and remained closed until 1864, when once again the children were back in the presbytery for education. By this time Father Charles was Priest-in-Charge at St Augustine's.

St Augustine's priests had been saying Mass at Dorchester since 1863, but in 1871 Dorchester became a separate mission, with Father O'Dwyer as its priest. The site for the Dorchester Church of Our Lady Queen of Martyrs (now the Tutankamun Exhibition) was bought by Arthur Coombe, who also provided the stained glass window in St Augustine's Church.

Plans for a School

Meanwhile plans had been made to build a school in the grounds at the back of the presbytery at Dorchester Road. It was built in 1870, and only one wall remains today of the little school. The wall is now incorporated into the Church Hall. The school functioned until 1891 when it closed for a few years, only to be re-opened in a building at Carlton Road with 15 pupils.

Canon O'Brien came as Parish Priest in 1893. While he was in charge the Sisters of the Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary came to the town. They acquired a villa in Carlton Road and opened a High School. In 1899 the Canon died and was succeeded by Father David Barry.

The fight for a School

Father Barry enlarged the Church by converting the Presbytery into the Sanctuary and buying 38 Dorchester Road as a Presbytery in its place. A new frontage was added to the Church replacing the simpler outlines of the twin columned front surmounted by a pediment. On 28th May 1901, Father Barry rented the Temperance Hall in Park Street as a school for 36 children. A year later, the school was transferred to Queen St where nuns from Carlton St taught the children in cramped premises. Father Barry wanted a new school, and what Father Barry wanted he usually got! In this case however he had a fight on his hands.

On 2nd November 1901, Mr McMahon's workrooms and building yard were bought. The site was not available for building until September 1903. The Education Act of 1902 afforded relief to denominational schools and Father Barry sought State Aid to which he was entitled for his proposed school. The Weymouth Educational Authority, however, opposed the school as being "neither necessary nor desirable". A copy of a similar resolution passed by the Managers of St John's Day School in the Park District

was forwarded to Father Barry. In his words "the resolutions were nothing less than a declaration of war".

The Southern Times newspaper ran an article: "The proposal to build a new Roman Catholic School – with its possible addition of expense to the ratepayers-bids fair to revive the dying embers of sectarian bitterness".

The battle was joined when the Free Churches opposed the school. The Board of Education at Whitehall set up a Public Enquiry, held on 31st May 1904. On the 10th June Mr Simpkinson submitted his report as Inspector and he supported the Roman Catholic School. Father Barry and the parents had won! To add insult to injury, the Local Education was required to foot the bill for the Enquiry. The school was opened on Sunday 4th October at Walpole Street to house 70 pupils. The parish must have been sad to see Father Barry leave the Parish in 1911

Catholic Men's Society

Father Sheehan followed him. He started the Catholic Men's Society whose headquarters became the little School House at the back of the church. The Catholic Men's Society enlarged the Hall at their own expense after the 1914-18 war. During this war the priest had to cater to the military camps at Littlemoor and Westham, as well as his parish. The Carlton Road Convent was used as a military hospital during this time.

St Joseph's Church

Father Sheehan left the parish in 1923 and a Belgian priest, Father Jules Ketele became priest at St Augustine's. He decided that Weymouth needed a more central church. Each year the Building Fund increased. The land on which the Catholic Church is built came onto the market in the early 30's. The site was desirable but seemingly unattainable as the owner was opposed to purchases by Roman Catholics, However two parishioners, Messrs



O'Halloran and Wilson approached the vendor and managed successfully to arrange for a sale. On 2nd January 1932 a site was secured. St Joseph's Church was on its way. The foundation stone was laid on 3rd May 1933, despite the protests from the residents of Stavordale Road. Two years later, on 19th March 1935, St. Joseph's was officially opened.

The now Canon Ketele left the presbytery at Dorchester Road for the one at St Joseph's.

The photograph shows the laying of the foundation stone for St Joseph's Church.

The Holy Family Chapel and St Charles' Church

Canon Ketele had opened a Mass Centre at Wyke Regis at the home of Mrs Druce at Sandsfoot House at the top of Rylands Lane. Later this became Thornlow School, a private school that has now closed.

From this beginning grew St Charles' Church at Sunnyside Road, twenty years later in 1956. The Holy Family Chapel of Ease at Upwey predated St Charles' by two years.

It seems fitting that Father McSweeney, formerly assistant priest to Canon Ketele at St Augustine's, should have spent his later years at St Charles' Church.

A new School in Hardy Avenue

By 1955 St Augustine's School at Walpole St was bursting at the seams and so a new school was built at Hardy Avenue. It opened on 16th December 1964, and Miss Sparrow was present. She had been the first Headmistress of the Walpole St School. A school opened and another Weymouth Catholic School closed.

At Wyke Road the Sisters of Mercy had opened a private primary school called St Philomena's and also a Catholic Secondary School of The Holy Child. The latter had been in existence since the end of the Second World War. Sadly it had been a financial headache, running at a loss of £2000 each year. In fact it relied on the salaries of the nuns teaching at Hardy Avenue. In July 1967, the Secondary School closed its doors.

The Holy Family Chapel at Upwey

The Chapel at Upwey was built at Chapel Lane in 1953 behind the Methodist Church. There was an early Sunday Mass up until the mid-2000's when it closed.

The Church of Our Lady at Preston

A church dedicated to Our Lady was built at Preston in Sevenacres Road after a bequest from a parishioner, the Cotton Trust. This Church supplied a vigil Mass on Saturday evenings for many years.

It was closed in in the 1990s

The closure of St Charles' Church at Wyke Regis

St Charles Church in Wyke Regis was closed in 2005 on the death of Canon Michael Walsh, the last incumbent.

Amalgamation

In 2008, the parishes of Weymouth and Portland were formally amalgamated into the single parish of Our Lady Star of the Sea. The Church of St Andrew had been closed a little earlier because of structural problems in the fabric of the building.

Achievements - looking to the future

Much has been achieved by the Catholic Community in Weymouth since the first Weymouth Mission in 1820.

This history shows that there have been ups and downs, successes and set-backs.

Christian Romano-Britons who gave witness to Christ in Dorset 1,700 years ago had to contend with the Anglo-Saxon invaders who became staunch defenders of the Faith against the onslaught of the Danes, who eventually became Christians themselves. While Alfred, our Greatest King, made England the Dowry of Our Lady, Henry VIII destroyed it for his own ends. Statues in Dorchester commemorate today St John Cornelius and his companions, martyred for the Faith during the time of the first Elizabeth.

From new beginnings in 1820, through years of suspicion and hostility, today, there is a thriving Catholic community, with excellent relationships with other faith groups in Dorset, working together as a Christian witness against modern threats of indifference and secularism.

"I will fall like dew on my people
They shall bloom like the lily
And thrust out roots like the Cedar"

Christus vincit ... Christus regnat Christus imperat!

Our Lady Star of the Sea, Weymouth 2009