

# A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE CATHOLIC PARISH OF TOWCESTER

The first known church in Towcester was Saint Lawrence's. William Nandri was the first parish priest. He took office shortly before 1258. His most famous successor was Cardinal Benedetto Caetani who was *Rector in Commendam*. He was elected Pope on Christmas Eve in 1294. He took the name Pope Boniface VIII and was inaugurated on 23 January 1295. He reigned until 11 October 1303. He is known for his many contributions to the Church, including his classification of the principles which underpin the Church's law.

During the Reformation Saint Lawrence's Church was confiscated from the Catholic Church. The practice of the Faith became illegal, with severe penalties for anyone who attempted to do so.

In his book 'The Returning Tide: Northampton Diocese 1850-2000' (Printed by Gemini Print Ltd. for the Roman Catholic Diocese of Northampton, 2000, pages 2-3, 38-39), Rev. Derek Lance explains the resurgence of Catholicism in England and, in particular, in Northamptonshire and the adjoining counties. In 1791 the building of public chapels was legalized. In 1829 the Catholic Emancipation Act removed many of the laws which criminalized the practice of the Catholic Faith. Then on 29 September 1850 Pope Pius IX declared that the English Hierarchy was restored. The apostolic vicariates which had secretly co-ordinated the work of the Church since 1685 were now replaced by dioceses - one of which was the Diocese of Northampton. One of the earliest Catholic missions in Northamptonshire was at Weedon, a small town seven miles from Towcester. The military barracks at Weedon contained a number of Catholic soldiers, many of whom were Irish. In 1851 a wooden building erected in the early 1820s was rebuilt and opened as a Catholic chapel dedicated to Our Lady of Victories. In 1880 a Father Keane lived in Weedon for a short time and celebrated Mass in the chapel. During the Second World War a Mill Hill Missioner lived there.

It was during the War, on 9 February 1941, that Winston Churchill made an important speech on the wireless. He was anxious for the United States of America to provide material support for Great Britain in its fight against Nazi Germany. Churchill proclaimed, 'Give us the tools and we will finish the job'. Very soon posters were produced showing Churchill with these words printed below him. It was in

the mid-1940s that a Father James Galvin, curate at Northampton Cathedral, celebrated Mass in the Town Hall at Towcester under such a poster. Father Galvin declared, 'Give us a church and we will finish the job!' Consequently, Lord Frederick Hesketh gave a converted Nissen hut to the Diocese. It was in an excellent position, being on the A5 Watling Street and very close to the town centre. Mass was celebrated there by priests from Stony Stratford and Buckingham. Then on 20 February 1949 it was formally opened as a church, being dedicated to Saint George. Canon James Galvin, as he now is, celebrated his ninetieth birthday in 2004.

From 1949 to 1954 Saint George's Church was served by priests from Buckingham and Northampton. Meanwhile, Our Lady of Victories in Weedon was served from Daventry. Then in 1954 the Catholic Parish of Our Lady of Victories, Weedon was established. Saint George's Church, Towcester fell within this parish. The first parish priest was Father Alfred Bull who lived in Weedon. In 1971 Our Lady of Victories Church was rebuilt.

Initially, the focus of the parish was Weedon. However, emphasis gradually shifted onto Towcester. This was for two reasons. First, Towcester gradually increased in size. Second, Daventry and the Duston area of Northampton grew and became very strong parishes very close to Weedon. Thus in 1976 the parish priest began to live in Towcester. He did so in Meeting Lane next to a church that had just been bought by the Diocese of Northampton.

This church had originally been a Congregational chapel. It was built in the mid-1800s and had been empty for a few years before it was bought by the Diocese. It was given the new name of Saint Thomas More Church. It replaced Saint George's which became the A5 Rangers Club. The new church had the advantages of being able to hold more people and of being even more central to the town. It has a fine organ - built in 1865 by J.W.Walker of London. Its chairs were carried in procession from Saint George's by parishioners. The triptych at the rear of the church and the statues of the Sacred Heart and Our Lady also came from Saint George's. A small statue of Saint George was also transferred between the two churches. The altar was donated by Lord Frederick Hesketh's widow. The tabernacle came from the chapel of the Sisters of Notre Dame in Northampton. Before their convent was unfortunately demolished they ran a successful school in Northampton. Some of the sisters had given catechism classes in Weedon and then Towcester. Saint Thomas More Church was blessed by Bishop Charles Grant on 16 June 1976.

In 1992 the church at Weedon was closed. It was sold the following year. It became a needlework shop. The parish was now known as the Parish of Saint Thomas More, Towcester. The church itself is most beautiful. In the garden there is a statue of Saint Francis of Assisi given in memory of Jack

McGuinness who died in 1978. The font was given in memory of Adriano Pizzoni, who died in 1990, and his daughter Elisabetta who died seven months later in January 1991. The garden conservatory was donated in the early 1990s by Heinz and Hetty Lombard. Heinz died in 2002 and his wife Hetty died in 2004. After the Easter Vigil of 2001 the new Meeting Room was formally opened. This had been two small rooms which were converted into a single larger room. In 2003 a statue of Saint John Fisher was donated to the church to accompany the existing statue of Saint Thomas More. The statue of Saint John Fisher was given in memory of Norah Parkinson, who died in 1997, and her husband Bernard who died in 2002.

The list of parish priests since the establishment of the Diocese of Northampton is as follows:

Rev. Alfred Bull	1954-1956
Rev. Maurice Hignett	1956-1962
Rev. Valentine Elwes	1962-1963
Rev. Michael Foley	1963-1968
Rev. Hugh Capper O.S.B.	1968-1975
Rev. Patrick Crowe	1975
Rev. Gerald Moorcraft	1975-1979
Rev. William Hughes	1979-1984
Rev. Dr. Thomas Cooper	1984-1992
Rev. Michael Griffiths	1992-1995
Rev. John Danford	1995-1999
Rev. Dr. Brendan Killeen	1999-

In 2000 the parish priest of Saint Thomas More, Towcester was also given charge of Saints Francis and Therese Parish, East Hunsbury in Northampton. In December 2002 he became parish priest of that parish while remaining parish priest of Saint Thomas More.

*May God give us the spiritual tools so that, through us, He may finish the job. Amen.*

Father Brendan Killeen  
Easter 2005