

*The History of The Most Holy Sacrament  
and St. Osburg's, Coventry*



## **Introduction**

*This History is in two parts 1845 to 1945 and 1945 to present day 2007.*

*Much of the information in the first part is taken from a booklet produced by Dom Sebastian Simpson O.S.B called "A Centenary Memorial of Saint Osburg's Coventry 1845-1945"*

*The second part has been written by Canon Gary Byrne*

*This history is intended to capture the parish history and be available for all to access.*

*This will be updated as additional more information becomes available with time. If you have any information or photographs please email to [con.mchugh@gmail.com](mailto:con.mchugh@gmail.com).*

## **Part 1 "A Centenary Memorial of Saint Osburg's Coventry 1845-1945"**

*"Fair is our lot ... O goodly our heritage" Rudyard Kipling.*

*This publication is intended for Catholics in Coventry and especially for past and present members of the Congregation of the Mother Church. Officially this is styled "The Church of the Most Holy Sacrament," but it is usually called by the secondary title "St. Osburg's," a name long enshrined in the history of Coventry. The writing of these pages is explained by the near approach of the Centenary of the Consecration of this beloved church, September 9th, 1945.*

*Something more than the mere marking of this historic event is, however, aimed at. The writer cherishes the hope that, when others have read these pages, they will share his desire to pay tribute to and perpetuate the memory of all the good priests and lay folk of bye gone days, whose steadfastness in the Faith accounts for our present goodly heritage. With undaunted courage and tenacity of purpose, they made the venture and marked out the road, which others have only had to follow. Their story, as it will be told, is not likely to arouse the interest of a casual reader into whose hands it may perchance fall, for it is but a record of the building up of Catholic life in Coventry from beginnings as small as the mustard seed. In some respects, it may be regarded as a contribution to the history of Catholic endeavour and progress in these parts during the past two centuries, and serve to stimulate the faith of the lukewarm. It is offered in appreciation to all who have during the past ten years, and more especially in the long period of war, so generously co-operated with their priests in the work of restoration.*

*The sources of information that make this humble work possible, are chiefly, St. Osburg's parochial registers and records. Fortunately, these escaped the destruction which Church, Priory, New Schools and Hall suffered in the raid of November, 1940. Some use has been made of an article written by a former Rector, Dom Clement Fowler, O.S.B. — afterwards Titular Abbot of St. Albans — which appeared in the Downside Review. It is entitled, "Notes on the earlier days of the Coventry Mission," and has been a helpful guide. Several items of interest which the compiler of these "Notes" left in obscurity have been brought to light by painstaking research. Fragments of information have been found in Father Allanson's Benedictine manuscript, and in the archives of Douai Abbey. Finally, the Downside Records, the Necrologies of the English Benedictine Congregation, the Franciscan volume of the Catholic Record Society and "The Franciscans in England 1600 — 1850" by Father Thaddeus, O.S.F. have been informative.*

*Disappointment is expected, for some matters have been only half dealt with; others not at all. The writer can but state that this is due to lack of information in the material to hand. There are many deficiencies in the parochial records, not an uncommon occurrence and not confined to St. Osburg's. This is explained by the fact that incumbents are sometimes reluctant to chronicle events in which they themselves have figured. Not all are blessed with the childlike simplicity of Dom Bernard Ullathorne who caused his own initials, still existing, to appear on the tower of the church he built in Coventry. Some might regard this as a little self advertisement, others the act of a simple-minded or vainglorious man. Simple-minded, in the religious sense of the word, he undoubtedly was, but few would*

*attribute vain glory to the future Archbishop, even though he commended, so it is said, his book on Humility as "the best thing written on the subject." While regretting the silence or neglect of past incumbents in making careful records, it is to be hoped that this mistake will not deter some scholar from carrying research beyond the year 1745, which is as far back as the writer has ventured.*

## **WAPPENBURY**

*No history of ours would be complete without some knowledge of Wappenbury which is- closely associated with St. Osburg's. It is mentioned in the earliest of our records, and this delightful but hidden hamlet might well be a place of pilgrimage, not only for our own congregation but for many of the neighbouring parishes also, since Wappenbury is the cradle of them all. Tradition has it that since the Reformation, and all through penal times, Holy Mass has been said there without a break. Unhappily the records there go no further than 174/, and so much interesting information lies buried in the past. It is difficult to account for this. Perhaps it was deemed unsafe to keep records in those dark days, prior to this date. If made, have they been destroyed or removed? Whatever the explanation, there is a tradition too well established to be lightly dismissed that, in penal times whenever a priest was about to visit the place, word was passed round the scattered flock—perhaps even to Coventry—and the Faithful would then stealthily gather for the Holy Mysteries in an attic of a farmstead on Learn Bank. This hallowed Mass-centre was destroyed by fire towards the end of the 18th century. In our rejoicing over the Centenary of St. Osburg's, we should be mindful of those staunch Catholics who in the face of persecution braved all dangers, held on to their Faith and handed it on to posterity. Such fidelity and courage should remove from our minds all self pity when we feel, as we do to-day, that we are suffering from a measure of injustice regarding our schools. Our lot cannot be compared with theirs.*

*From Dugdale, the noted historian, it is ascertained that Wappenbury was part of the estate of the Saunders family of Weston, the Warwick seat of the Sheldons. One, Sir Edward Saunders, whose mutilated monument in Weston parish church is proof of Reformation perfidy, was Recorder of Coventry and Baron of the Exchequer in Queen Mary's reign. He it was who persuaded the Mayor of Coventry to proclaim Mary as Queen of England and not Lady Jane Grey, as Northumberland had ordered. This Saunders was also indirectly associated with another queen, the ill-fated Mary of Scots, who was a prisoner in Coventry from November 25<sup>th</sup> 1569, to January, 1570, for she was lodged in a house of his which stood between Grey Friars and the Bablake Gates. Curiously enough, Sir Edward was brother to the Protestant "martyr" Lawrence Saunders who perished at the stake in Coventry and after whom a local street is named.*

*In the fourth or fifth year of Mary's reign, Sir Edward Saunders acquired from the Crown the estates of Weston and Wappenbury. After Shelley of Wolston fell in the Babington Plot, these were the only estates in these parts left in Catholic hands. Edward had an only daughter, Mary, who wedded his chief clerk, Thomas Morgan, and through this alliance the estates eventually passed to the Morgans of Monmouthshire who were also Catholics. There as no issue from this marriage, and desiring to preserve the memory of his name, Morgan entailed the properties upon Bridget, the only child of his brother Anthony and "the heirs male of her body bearing the surname Morgan" The said Bridget took to husband Anthony Morgan—probably her cousin—of Mitchell Town in Monmouthshire. Their son Thomas Morgan was possessed of the*

estates in 1640, but in 1674 they had passed to the Preston Family. How this came about it was difficult to discover. The Victoria County History of Warwickshire however, threw light on the subject. There, it is stated that Sir Thomas Preston entered the Society of Jesus in 1674, and that his daughter brought the Wappenbury estate to the second Lord Clifford by marriage. This information about Sir Thomas Preston led to a discovery in Dugdale, under Calluden, which was "originally a Member of Coventry." It appears that when Thomas Morgan of Weston died—without issue—the estates then passed to one, Colonel Morgan. His only daughter and heiress married Sir John Preston of Furness in Lancashire, and they too were childless. Later, Sir John's brother inherited, namely Sir Thomas Preston who had two daughters. One of these married the Duke of Powis and the other, Thomas, Lord Clifford, Baron of Chudleigh, in Devon. His daughters married, it would appear that Sir Thomas Preston then entered the Society of Jesus. His estate was then divided and Weston and Wappenbury were in 1795 allotted to Lord Clifford—the second of that line. One of the Cliffords, with whom the Franciscans were associated, built a small chapel at Wappenbury and set up a house for a priest. To the gift was added an adjoining plot of land. The Clifford chapel existed until 1840. It was then that the present small, but well proportioned church was built by Dom Richard Austin Marsh, O.S.B., a monk of St. Edmund's Monastery, then at Douai in France but now established at Woolhampton, near Reading. Through this monk, Wappenbury and St. Osburg's are closely linked, for he had served as parish priest, at the first chapel in Hill Street, Coventry, from 1827 to 1830. He went to Wappenbury in 1831, and remained there until 1856. It has been generally accepted that Dom Austin Marsh was buried in the vault alongside the south wall of St. Anne's. There are no traces of that vault to-day, but hard by, in a newer part of the burial ground there is a grave, the tombstone of which gives incorrect information. It states that below lie Miss M. Marsh and her brother Dom Austin. In all probability it is their brother whose remains seem to have been transferred from the vault to a new grave. It is not difficult to understand how the mistake was made. Dom Edmund Marsh, O.S.B., also a monk of St. Edmund's, was stationed at Ormskirk while his brother was parish priest at Wappenbury. He came on a visit to St. Anne's and shortly after his arrival was taken ill and died there on February 8th, 1852. He was buried at Wappenbury. Four years later Dom Austin left in broken health and retired to his birthplace, Hindley, near Wigan. Soon after he died, on December 15<sup>th</sup> 1856, and was buried there.

Bishop Wiseman dedicated the church to St. Anne, and from it Catholic life has flowed abundantly, for it is the proud parent of an illustrious progeny of missions, viz., Coventry, Leamington, Rugby, Warwick, Princethorpe, Southam and Kenilworth, to which last place Father Austin Marsh used to go on Saturdays to say Mass. The difficulties of the times may be suggested as a possible explanation of the absence of records or registers at Wappenbury between the years 1745 and 1840, but the same can hardly be urged for the scarcity of them from the latter date onwards. From such as do exist, it appears that Catholics were never numerous at Wappenbury itself, but that there were more in neighbouring districts which depended on Wappenbury. An interesting question then arises. Were the Faithful in these scattered areas descendants of those who had kept the Faith throughout penal times, or converts or the children of such? From the Baptismal register at Wappenbury and from the earliest of St. Osburg's, if names are conclusive, there can be little doubt about the origin of such as Terence Brandon, Bridget Ireland, Charles O'Brien, John Murphy, Mary Hayes, Norah O'Connor, Patrick Gibbins, Margaret Fitzpatrick and Daniel, all of which surnames keep recurring. Long before any chapel was established in Coventry, children were taken from this city to Wappenbury for Baptism. It seems then that the

*influx of the Irish, driven by famine from their native land, helped to keep alive the Faith in these parts and affected Catholic life here as elsewhere. Small colonies of the exiles settled down and married; hence the repetition of so many Irish names.*

*An informative statement left by Father Dawber, O.S.B., establishes beyond doubt the connection between Wappenbury and Coventry. He was the first Benedictine to serve in this city after the Reformation. In his own handwriting we have his "Brief account of the Catholic Congregation of Coventry" it reads as follows :—"Between the year 1757 and 1760 the Rev. Mr. Walmsley, O.S.F. began the Catholic congregation of Coventry. At that time, there were, I am informed, four Catholics in the whole city, Mrs. Bruckfield, Ann Short, Mr. and Mrs. Lane, all of whom had no other conveniency of assisting at Divine service than Wappenbury, a chapel eight miles distant from Coventry. At length, Messrs. Bruckfield and Whittingham being converted to the Catholic Faith (about 1757—58) the Rev. Henry Bishop was persuaded to come from Baddesley one Sunday in every month to say prayers at Mr. Bruckfield's in St. Michael's Churchyard. The congregation increasing, in A.D. 1764, or thereabouts Mr. Diconson, O.S.F., was sent to reside at Mr. Brack\* field's as resident pastor of the congregation The Revd. Mr. Diconson died in the latter end of 1766 and was succeeded by the Revd. Mr. Whalley, who was removed in the October of the year 1769, and had for his successor the Revd. G. A. Baynham. He was called away in September 1776, and was succeeded by the Revd. J. B. Fleet. This latter being also removed in 1779 and was succeeded by the Revd. J. B. Pilling, who in 1785 (during four months) was removed to Lord Dormer's (Grove Park), and was succeeded by the Revd. Joseph Howse. This latter being removed to Solihull after a short stay, of a Mr. Fagmore, Mr. Pilling returned to Coventry where he remained to the 29<sup>th</sup> September, 1794. Mr. Pilling was succeeded by Mr. Millward who left January 12<sup>th</sup>, 1795, when the Chapel (through a misunderstanding between Mrs. Smith and the congregation) was shut up. After this a temporary scission ensued in the congregation. The Revd. Mr. Angiers came to Coventry May 23<sup>rd</sup> 1795, to Mrs. Smith's, Little Park Street and left August 27<sup>th</sup>, 1795. He had for his immediate successor Mr. Sharp, O.P., who at length effected a reunion of the congregation in Little Park Street Chapel. During the scission of the congregation the greatest part of it attended Divine Service at Mr. Whittingham's, Much Park Street, where first Mr. Maltherd and after his departure, Mr. Collingridge officiated. April 23<sup>rd</sup>, 1797, the congregation united again at the chapel in Little Park Street. February 28<sup>th</sup>, 1801, died Mr. Sharp. He was succeeded by the Revd. Richard Sumner, O.S.F. This latter was removed September 29<sup>th</sup>, 1801, and was succeeded by the Revd. Mr. Theysemore, who stopped two months and then by the brother of the former Mr. Sumner, who served the congregation till December 10<sup>th</sup> 1803. Then I, John Dawber, O.S.B., was sent here by my Superiors. I lived one year at Miss Latham's, in Little Park Street, after which I began to keep house for myself in Much Park Street. April 29<sup>th</sup>, 1806, died Miss Mary Latham in whose house (situate in Little Park Street), the chapel had been since the 5<sup>th</sup> November, 1775. Miss Latham having left by her last Will and Testament the above mentioned house to her nephew, Joseph Davis (who immediately sold it to Mr. John Crockitt), the very precarious situation of our holy religion in this city imperiously required that, without any loss of time, proper and efficient precautions should be taken to ensure for the future a convenient and decent chapel. In consequence of this urgent necessity, I went in person to London to confer with my Superiors on the subject. My representations made them consent to allow me out of Provincial Fund, a sum of £200 in order to enable me to make a beginning. By means of this advance from the Province, I purchased June 2<sup>nd</sup> (and paid July 31<sup>st</sup>), a close of Freehold several land, situate in Hill Street, parish of St. John the Baptist, in this city, for which I paid £155j beside the expense of conveyance. This brief account*

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*of the Catholic congregation of Coventry is as exact as my information would enable me to give it."*

*"Signed, John Dawber, O.S.B., July 8th, 1806."*

*It is clear then, that Coventry received its first ministrations since the Reformation, from Wappenbury in the person of Father Walmsley, O.S.F. A list or "Memorandum" of the priests who served there is headed by his name. There is no other record at Wappenbury about incumbents of the mission. If, as the current Catholic Directory suggests the mission dates back to 1734, there must have been other resident priests, but of them there is no account at St. Anne's. The "Memorandum" as found at Wappenbury is given here as it may serve some future purpose. Some of the names in it will appear again in these pages.*

<i>Revd. Wm. Walmsley</i>	<i>April 10<sup>th</sup> 1774 to July 1<sup>st</sup> 1778</i>
<i>Revd. J. Lewis, S.J.</i>	<i>Oct. 9<sup>th</sup> 1778 to Mar. 18<sup>th</sup> 1781</i>
<i>Revd. _Pilling</i>	<i>July 9<sup>th</sup> 1781 to Feb. 27<sup>th</sup> 1782 or 1792</i>
<i>Revd. _Planquette</i>	<i>July 27<sup>th</sup> 1794, to April 12<sup>th</sup> 1807</i>
<i>Revd. R. J. MorillanD</i>	<i>Jan. 22<sup>nd</sup> 1808, to Aug 3<sup>rd</sup> 1817</i>
<i>Revd. W. Purcell, O.S.F</i>	<i>Sept. 2<sup>nd</sup> 1817, to ? 1818</i>
<i>Revd. _Levigne</i>	<i>Nov. 3<sup>rd</sup> 1818 to Dec. 1818</i>
<i>Revd. _Freand</i>	<i>Sept. 9<sup>th</sup> 1819 to ?</i>
<i>Revd. R. Plowden, S.J.</i>	<i>Mar. 21<sup>st</sup> 1821, to Mar. 9<sup>th</sup> 1824</i>
<i>Revd. B. Crosbie</i>	<i>Dec. 18<sup>th</sup> 1825 to Aug. 16<sup>th</sup> 1830</i>
<i>Revd. J. McDonnell</i>	<i>1830</i>
<i>Revd. R. A. Marsh, O.S.B</i>	<i>Oct. 25<sup>th</sup> 1831 to Dec. 3<sup>rd</sup> 1856</i>
<i>Revd. W. B. Scarisbrick, O.S.B</i>	<i>Dec. 8<sup>th</sup> 1836, to April 12<sup>th</sup> 1837</i>
<i>afterwards Archbishop)</i>	
<i>Revd. C. Price, O.S.B</i>	<i>June 11<sup>th</sup> 1857</i>
<i>Revd H. I. Sutton, O.S.B</i>	<i>Oct., 1857, to ?</i>
<i>Revd. J. Millward O.S.F</i>	<i>Sept 10<sup>th</sup> 1857 to Oct 10<sup>th</sup> 1868</i>

*Father Dawber's use of the title "Mr" when referring to priests may cause surprise. This style of address prevails today in some of our Catholic colleges. It is a relic of penal times. Many of the priests whose names appear in this account were not far removed from evil times, for in 1729 a priest died in prison after thirty years of incarceration. Instead of our familiar "Father" people used "Mr" as a precautionary measure, for it was death not only for a man to be a priest, but to anyone who harboured or even gave him to eat or drink when he was perishing from want. It was likewise death to hear Mass. To refuse to attend heretical worship, or even to possess any sacred object meant, at the very least, ruin and confiscation of property. Priests had therefore, to move about cautiously and disguised. They assumed names not only for their own safety but for that of the faithful who received and housed them. There were not wanting sinister creatures known as "priest hunters" ; many of them, sad to relate, were apostate Catholics and traitors. These were ever ready to hand over priest victims to the civil authorities, for the price put on the head of God's anointed ministers.*

*That there were only four Catholics known in Coventry in 1757to 1760 shows how thoroughly the Reformation with its accompanying persecution and intolerance had done its evil work in this city. It is well to glance back to the days of the Faith and see Coventry, by way of contrast as the historian Mary Dormer Harris has described it. She wrote, "The townsfolk having built the churches, made provision for continual prayers and supplications to be held therein. With a touching belief in the efficacy of prayer, even vicarious, these worthy men devoted large sums to the support of chantry priests who, while their patrons were engaged in secular business prayed for the souls of the faithful departed and for the living members of the town guilds and brotherhoods. In*

*the Lady Chapel of St. Michael's the priests of the Trinity Guild chanted daily the Antiphones of the Virgin and the psalm De Profundis on behalf of the Founders of the Confraternity. "*

*All signs of this lively and practical faith had long disappeared when the first steps were taken for the restoration of the Catholic Faith in Coventry. The priests who undertook the work were men of strong faith and superhuman courage, for none other would have made the venture. What confidence they must have had in that small faithful band and what demands must have been made on the resources of those four Catholics. Admiration for and appreciation of the loyalty and generosity of the laity of those days cannot therefore be less than that we would manifest for their pastors. It is to be regretted that there is no record telling us more of the four mentioned by Father Dawber.*

*We cannot even state that they were Coventry born ; but the fact of their existence leads one to think that, it is more correct to speak of the survival of, rather than of the revival of the Faith in Coventry. Father Walmsley's name should be ever held in benediction as the pioneer who started the great work of restoration, for great indeed it was, as its fruits have abundantly shown. It is gratifying to know that such work was entrusted by God to and undertaken by a member of a Religious Order, which, if not as widely, was certainly as closely associated with the spiritual life of this city in the ages of Faith as the sons of St. Benedict. Fanciful though it may be, nevertheless one entertains the thought that the Almighty was mindful of the praise that rose from Monastic choirs, of the tender care of the poor and their education in pre-Reformation days, and that He deigned to confer as a recompense on the descendants of those ancient monasteries, the privilege of delving, planting and watering anew this portion of His Vineyard, once so fair. None was more fertile ; none so notable among great towns and cities where the Catholic Faith was esteemed, than this part of "Merrie England." St. Osburg's city was then the centre of all the religious and social life of the whole of Warwickshire. The Cathedral Priory of the Black Monks of St. Benedict was the only monastery of first-rate importance and its magnificent church, of which Lichfield was but a small and poor copy, was one of the wonders of England. How changed the position in 1757 to 1760. Four Catholics and not even a small permanent church. How changed the position is today ! Father Walmsley and his co-operators were the instruments in God's hands that made all this possible and it should never be forgotten. The conversions of two laymen, one a man of substance, evidently helped to set in motion the wheels of progress. The advent of Father Walmsley marks the commencement of the Franciscan "modern" connection with Coventry, which lasted for well nigh fifty years.*

*Father Henry Bishop, O.S.F., who came to England from Douai in 1756, and succeeded Father Walmsley, founded the Franciscan house at Baddesley in Warwickshire. There he died on the 19th June, 1811, at the age of 86. He came to Coventry only at intervals and had no fixed abode here. His successor was the first resident priest, and though his name in our register is spelled Diconson, he was without doubt Father Mathew Dickinson the Guardian of St. Bonaventure's at Douai from 1761 to 1764 in which year he came to Coventry. Death ended his labours in 1776.*

*The next priest, Father Alexius Whalley, O.S.F., arrived in England, so he himself has recorded, on December 24th, 1766. He too, lived at Mr. Bruckfield's and was in charge of the mission until 1769, when he left. He died forty-three years later in 1812, at the age of 73.*



Early in October 1769, Father (George) Athanasius Baynham commenced his administrations and remained nearly seven years, during which period Mr. Bruckfield—or his widow— moved from St. Michael's Churchyard to reside in Little Park Street, which was then a distinguished locality. There, Father Baynham informs us, "a chapel was opened at Mrs. Bruckfield's on November 5<sup>th</sup>, 1775" this is the first mention of a place definitely called a chapel, and probably explains the removal of the Bruckfield household, for they evidently took over a more commodious house to make provision for the chapel. The last of Father Baynham's entries is in the Baptismal Register on August 31<sup>st</sup> 1776. He left, and died at Ufton Court near Woolhampton, in 1802. Then came Father (Joseph) Bernadine Fleet, O.S.F. He arrived in England in 1770. The earliest mention of his ministry in Coventry is October 24<sup>th</sup> 1776, and his last, a list of fifteen persons confirmed by Bishop Talbot on July 19<sup>th</sup> 1779, bears his name. After leaving Coventry, Father Fleet became novice\*master at Douai and his life, full of years, ended in 1815.

Father (John) Bonaventure Pilling succeeded him before October, 1779, and as Father Dawber states, with the exception of four months absence, he lived here for fifteen years. During the last three of these he held the office of Provincial of the English Franciscans. He left on the 29<sup>th</sup> September, 1794, so Father Sharp has recorded. At the close of his life, Father Pilling was at the Portuguese Chapel in London. He died on June 12<sup>th</sup> 1800, at the Franciscan residence of Osmotherley, Yorkshire. The Wappenbury Memorandum of priests resident there, shows that a Father Pilling, whose Christian or religious name is not given, went there on July 9<sup>th</sup> 1781.

There is some uncertainty when he left for the memorandum puts "February 27<sup>th</sup> 1782 or 1792." It has not been possible to identify this priest. He may have been related to Father Bonaventure mentioned above. Of the latter, Father Sharp, whose name appears in the Baptismal Register for the first time on March 2<sup>nd</sup>, 1796, says, "Mr. Pilling left Coventry September 2<sup>nd</sup>, 1794, and was succeeded by Mr. Millward."

Two Friars "supplied" during Father Pilling's four months' absence. The first was Father (Joseph) James Howes, a name not found in our registers but which does appear in "The Franciscans in England 1600 -1850." He was approved for the mission in 1773 ; worked in Birmingham and other parts of Warwickshire for many years and was Provincial from 1803 - 1806. From Coventry, he went to Solihull and died at the age of 76 in 1882.

The second "supply" whose name Abbot Fowler was not able to decipher in Father Dawber's manuscript—was Father Fagmore, O.S.F. This name is absent from both Father Thaddeus' book and our registers, but it has been identified from other reliable sources.

Father Anselm Millward, O.S.F., next came in 1794 from Monmouth where he had been Superior. His name too is missing from our Registers but he is mentioned by Father Thaddeus.

As "the scission" occurred in Father Millward's term of office here, this may account for the absence of his name. He left on January 12<sup>th</sup> 1795, and died in 1813.

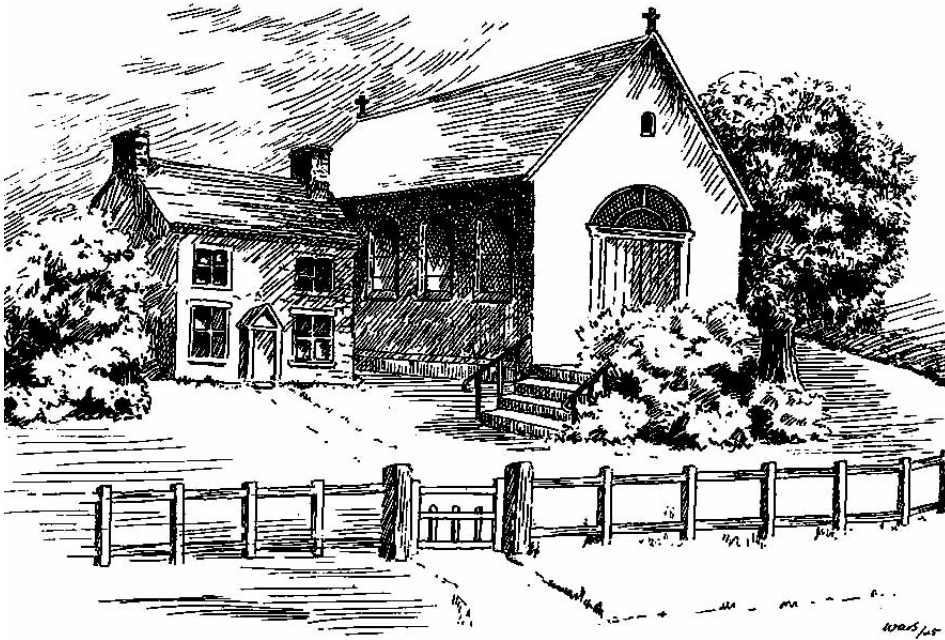
## **THE SCISSION.**

*It is difficult to state what was the real cause of this unhappy division in the mission, for so little has been recorded about it. Perhaps it is better so. Father Sharp gives his account of the trouble and states that "the chapel in Little Park Street was shut up on account of the faithful not subscribing in a proper manner. Part of them erected a temporary chapel in Mitford Street, but before this the Revd. Mr. Angiers, Ord. Praed., came to Coventry, to wit, May 22<sup>nd</sup> 1795, and left August 27<sup>th</sup> 1795, on which day I came. This chapel was opened January 1<sup>st</sup> 1796, but the other in Mitford Street was continued on by Mr. Collingridge at Mr. Whittingham's, seedsman, till April 23<sup>rd</sup> 1797, Low Sunday, when both congregations united again at this chapel by order of the Bishop" There is no evidence that the second chapel was sanctioned by any ecclesiastical authority. Someone had evidently "taken the law into his own hands."*

*This may explain why the Bishop stepped in, but how he settled the distressing affair we have no means of finding out. It may be dismissed as a domestic squabble and not a division on matters of Faith. We have no information, and Father Thaddeus offers none, about Father Maltherd who was the first to officiate in Whittingham's chapel. A distinguished Franciscan succeeded Father Maltherd, namely, Father (Peter) Bernadine Collingridge. Later on he was chosen by Bishop Sharrock, O.S.B., as his Auxiliary. Ultimately Bishop Collingridge succeeded his chief and became Vicar Apostolic of the Western District. It is a remarkable fact that Gillow's Dictionary of English Catholics does not mention Father Collingridge's connection with Coventry. It looks as though someone, because of the scission and the part that Father Collingridge had in it, sought to keep his name out of it. Gillow states that Father Collingridge was President of the Franciscan Academy at Baddesley Green, Knowle, from 1794 to 1798. This establishment had just been removed from Edgbaston and continued, says Gillow, till about 1839, when the Province came to an end. Father Thaddeus would have us believe that, at the very time of the Coventry scission Father Collingridge was at Baddesley, but our records show that both he and Gillow are incorrect. Bishop Collingridge was buried at Downside. His remains were, years afterwards, at the request of the late Bishop Burton of Clifton, transferred to the Abbey Church where they now rest in a magnificent tomb close to that of Cardinal Gasquet, O.S.B.*

*"Mitford Street," mentioned above, is of course Smithford Street, in connection with which there are no registers at St. Osburg's—and consequently no particulars of the work done at that chapel are available. About the Whittingham's house, there is some disagreement between Father Dawber and Father Sharp. The former locates it in Much Park Street ; the latter in Smithford Street. Since Father Sharp was directly concerned with the business of the reunion, his assertion carries the greater weight. It has to be remembered that Father Dawber had no personal knowledge of these events and his information was only second-hand. The scission presents a peculiar situation of a Franciscan and a Dominican officiating for a house divided against itself and one of them apparently without the necessary approval of the Bishop. Such a state of affairs must have had, for a time at least, a detrimental effect on the life of the parish both spiritually and temporally. The Dominican, Father Angiers, who came to Coventry on May 22<sup>nd</sup> 1795 August 27<sup>th</sup> of that year. "Mr" Sharp, whose record has been quoted is no other than Father James Vincent Sharp, O.P. If he did nothing more than "effect a reunion" as Father Dawber says, he should be remembered with gratitude, for the continuance of the division might have had disastrous results. Father Sharp was shepherd of the flock thus united until his death on February 28<sup>th</sup>, 1811. There was*

then an interval of four months before another priest came into residence. One supposes that some priest supplied meantime. During this period a French priest supplied in the city. Father Dawber calls him Mr. Messinge. The Baptismal Register reveals that one of that name baptized an infant on the day of its birth, June 10<sup>th</sup> 1801. However, it is quite certain that Father Richard Anthony Sumner, O.S.F., came on June 20<sup>th</sup> 1801, for after recording the death of Father Sharp, he enters the date of his own arrival. After a month or two, Father Anthony left. His place was taken by Father Theyesmore—whose name also Abbot Fowler was unable to decipher in Father's Dawber's manuscript. The new incumbent is not mentioned by Father Thaddeus, probably because he did not remain long in Coventry. The twin brother of the aforesaid Father Sumner then took charge here, namely, Father James Leo Sumner, and he was the last of the Franciscan line in Coventry. He left on December 10<sup>th</sup> 1803.



*Chapel of St Mary and St Laurence. Hill Street 1807*

*Winston Churchill, in Great Contemporaries, wrote and applied to Joseph Chamberlain, these two sentences : "One mark of a great man is the power of making a lasting impression upon the people he meets. Another is so to have handled matters during his life that the course of events is continuously affected by what he did."*

*Both statements may be aptly applied to the heroic priests whose records are now disclosed. Viewed in our time, it is obvious that they not only influenced, but moulded the future of Catholicity in these parts and won many souls to God. Their lives were devoted to a single purpose, the restoration of the Faith. Their achievements have, by the Grace of God, and their own endeavour, extended far beyond their utmost dreams, for they helped in no small way to swell the tide of religious revival in their own day. They were the leaders, not only marking the way, but making it possible for others to follow. To one and all we offer now our tribute of praise and thanks.*

*The Franciscans who served Coventry were known as the "English Friars Minor or Recollects." In days of persecution when James I was reigning, the Recollects had established their convent at Douai in France. They had no other houses, were never numerous, but did good work in many parts of England, supplying chiefly in the South.*

*For some time previous to the French Revolution, new laws had hampered religious professions and consequently, like other religious houses, the Franciscans suffered to such an extent that, in 1790, lists of these Friars ordered to be made by the civil authorities, show but 48 members all told. Then came the catastrophe of the Revolution in France and war with England. The Franciscan house at Douai with other religious establishments was then confiscated. Finally the Holy See declared the Franciscan Province at an end and authority over what remained was entrusted to Bishop Brown, O.S.B. The Franciscan students who were then at Douai, transferred, for most part, to St. Edmund's and became Benedictines, but only after their own Superiors had informed them that there was no longer any hope of their becoming Friars Minor. It is, therefore, reasonable to conclude from these facts that lack of manpower led the Franciscans to relinquish their Coventry Mission. There is no other reason or indication why they should have thus retired from this part of the vineyard where they had laboured so well. The second English Province was then merged into another branch of the Order, the English Franciscans who flourish today.*

*The names of the four Catholics with whom the Franciscans started afresh, appear frequently in the Register of Baptisms, as god-parents, until 1776, but those of the Lanes cease in 1770. The date of Mrs. Bruckfield's death is unknown. Her house in Little Park Street passed into the hands of the Smiths from whom the Lathams possessed it. The Whittinghams, Sumners, Smiths, and Lathams were the chief benefactors of the mission, and for these masses are annually offered at St. Osburg's. A Miss Whittingham, undoubtedly a member of the family aforesaid, in 1807 presented a small marble statue of Our Lady to the chapel in Hill Street. About this more will be said later. Two of these families were merged together by the marriage of Dorothy and Ann Latham with the brothers William and Robert Sumner respectively. They were married on the same day, January 7<sup>th</sup> 1807, and stood as witnesses for each other.*

*It is to be regretted that our records do not give more information about progress made between the years 1757 and 1801. From four Catholics in 1757-1760, a list made by Father Whalley in 1767 puts the Easter Communions at 71. In 1770 they have mounted to 107, so it seems that early progress was fairly rapid. For many years no details have been given, which may be due to the "scission." From the statistics of marriages, baptisms, communions and deaths that are available it is not possible to make a positive statement about the numbers of Catholics in Coventry in the last century.*

### **THE MISSION IS TRANSFERRED TO THE BENEDICTINES.**

*No longer able to serve Coventry, the Franciscans turned to the English Benedictines and handed over the mission to them in 1803. The two Orders had always been cordially united. Benedictines of the Cluniac Reform had bequeathed to St. Francis the chapel near Assisi, the famous Portiuncula which the Holy Founder rebuilt and made the cradle of his Order. Because of this, and as a token of gratitude, the Friars have extended to the principal churches of the Benedictines, the gaining of the Portiuncula Indulgence, a privilege shared by other Orders. The Friars and Black Monks were still more closely united as companions in adversity, and shared the same fate of persecution and exile. There can be little doubt that those who had joined the Benedictines, for reasons already stated, would naturally influence the choice of successors to Coventry. In the person of Father John Dawber, then, we find the Order of St. Benedict turning to the city it had once glorified and from which, at the*

*suppression of the monasteries, it had been so ruthlessly driven.*

### **THE ENGLISH BENEDICTINE CONGREGATION.**

*The history of the Congregation and how its members became engaged in the Apostolic work of the Mission is of absorbing interest. When Henry VIII turned against the Church in England, his first victims were the sons of St. Benedict. Their Priories and lesser Abbeys were pillaged, and soon after the greater Abbeys of Glastonbury, Westminster, St. Albans, St. Edmundsbury, Reading and Evesham shared a similar fate, and the monks driven forth in thousands were left to die as outcasts. Many languished in prisons and others won the martyr's' crown. When Queen Mary came to the throne, an attempt was made to revive and reconstruct the Benedictine Congregation under one who is never likely to be forgotten by English Benedictines, namely, Dom John Howman of Feckenham, monk of Evesham and last Abbot of Westminster. He was nominated Rector of Solihull in 1544, but refusing to conform to the newly established heresy and schism, was lodged in the Tower of London. His rule at Solihull was marked by extensive restorations to the noble and spacious parish church of St. Alphege where he was incumbent for ten years. A deed of gift of his, a curious document made on behalf of the poor, is still preserved at Solihull. He was also Dean of St. Paul's and is commonly called Abbot Feckenham. When Elizabeth succeeded Queen Mary, the Community brought together under Abbot Feckenham was again dispersed, and there was no longer a Benedictine centre in England. There were, however, monasteries of the Order existing abroad, in Italy and Spain, to which aspirants to Benedictine life went, and in them eventually made their religious profession. Many young men inspired with zeal for the return of the old Faith, sought admission into the Order through these establishments in foreign lands, with the hope that they might one day come back to their own country and help to reclaim their inheritance. On December 5<sup>th</sup> 1602, the English monks who had joined the Casinese and Valladolid Congregations, were granted permission by Pope Clement VIII to undertake missionary work in England, and the following year saw the arrival of the first Benedictine Missionaries.*

*In the year 1603 there was living, then in his 85<sup>th</sup> year, Dom Sigebert Buckley, who had been professed at Westminster under Abbot Feckenham, and was the last of the Benedictines. He had been imprisoned for forty years for refusing the oath of Supremacy. One day two young men arrived at his house at Cisson, in Norfolk. They were priests, named Dom. Anselm Beech and Dom Thomas Preston and were Englishmen—newly come from a Benedictine monastery in Italy. They came with a mission from the Pope—to re-establish the Benedictines in England. Of the meeting between them and Dom Sigebert, Abbot Snow has written: "It was a touching one; on the one hand the speechless delight and gratification of the venerable monk at this answer to his lifedong prayer, his long deferred hope, his waiting for the dawn of a new day, the opening of a new spring ; and on the other the elation and enthusiasm of the young men who at the very threshold of their career were guided by Providence to the feet of the last survivor of a glorious past."*

*Their deliberations ended, the young monks returned to Italy and made known to their Superiors all that had transpired. Arrangements were made for the next novices due for profession, to be sent to Father Buckley; they would be professed by him and in this way the connection with the old congregation would remain unbroken. Unfortunately the Gunpowder Plot occurred and Father Buckley, despite his great age, was cast into prison with those suspected of complicity. Meantime, two secular priests who had sought admission into the Order had been clothed in the habit and had*

*completed their noviceship. They were Father Robert Sadler and Edward Mainhew. Coventrians will be particularly interested in the latter, for he was born at Colliers Oak, Fillongly, and was ordained at Rome by Pope Paul V. These two novices were secretly admitted to Father Buckley's cell in the Gatehouse Prison and professed by him on November 21<sup>st</sup> 1607. He received their vows, gave them the kiss of peace and then the sight left his eyes and he became stone blind. The venerable patriarch was then in his 91<sup>st</sup> year. "Never perhaps in the history of the Church," writes Abbot Snow, "is there recorded an act of similar significance, for by that profession were communicated all the rights and privileges of the old Benedictines in England, to his disciples in that rough, cell in "the Gatehouse."*

*In 1606 a monastery was established at Douai, in France, by Father Bradshaw, O.S.B., under the Patronage of St. Gregory. Soon afterwards another, St. Laurence's, was opened at Dieulouard in 1608. These are the birthplaces of the present Downside, near Bath, and Ampleforth in Yorkshire respectively. A third monastery was founded in Paris in 1614 and is now established at Woolhampton near Reading, and known as Douai Abbey. From these three monasteries, St. Gregory's, St. Laurence's and St. Edmund's monks have come and served Coventry since 1805.*

*The first of these, Father John Dawber, was born at Standish in 1769 and was professed for St. Laurence's at Dieulouard in 1791. He was therefore an Ampleforth monk and at the age of 34 was sent on the mission in the South Province. That he was a man of action and true to Benedictine tradition, is evident from the record of his work here. He soon found himself, as he has stated, "faced with very precarious situation of our Holy Religion in this city." After a year, he set up house for himself in Much Park Street. From the time when Miss Latham's house in Little Park Street ceased to be used for Mass until the chapel in Hill Street was built, there is no information where Catholics assembled for worship. Abbot Fowler has suggested that possibly, they did so at Bond's Hospital, but in view of the spirit of intolerance that prevailed, it is hardly likely that the public authorities would countenance this. The obvious place, especially as numbers were then so small, would be the house of the priest.*

*Until the raid of November, 1940, there stood in Little Park Street what was designated "the Mass house," i.e., Miss Latham's house. On its front exterior wall, above the doorway, some tenant had in more recent times fixed a large cross. Without giving any authority, Abbot Fowler asserted that it was a mistake to identify this house with Miss Latham's. He stated that she lived in the house next door and that the room used for Mass lay at the back. Local experts in such matters reject this theory and maintain that the "cross marked the Mass house." However this may be, all the houses in this particular area were reduced to rubble in the raid and so all traces of those early days have vanished. Miss Latham's death brought about a situation for Father Dawber and his flock, similar to that in which the priests of St. Osburg's found themselves after the raid in November, 1940—they were literally "out on the streets" but Father Dawber had the advantage of a house where he could say Mass. His adversity spurred him on and soon he had secured a site in Hill Street for a chapel. This, it should be noted, was well outside the city, for the civil authorities did not view with favour the building of a permanent chapel within the city. The land was bought, so Father Dawber states, on June 2nd and paid for on July 31<sup>st</sup> 1806. The Deed of Conveyance, however, is found dated July 8<sup>th</sup> 1806, and his accounts of the mission are signed by him on July 8<sup>th</sup> 1806. Over and above the £200 which he had received from his Superiors, Father Allanson's manuscript reveals that they advanced*

another sum of £800 to enable him to complete the buildings. In addition he borrowed £105 from one John Loxley on October 14<sup>th</sup> 1806, and another sum of £600 from William Sumner of Foleshill for which he mortgaged to him by Deed dated June 24<sup>th</sup> 1808, "the land with the dwelling house and chapel buildings." This William Sumner it was who married Dorothy Latham, but there is no information to show that he was related to the priests of that name who had served Coventry; yet at the "double marriage" mentioned previously, a Father James Sumner assisted Father Dawber at the ceremony. It will be recalled that there was a Father James (Leo) Sumner, O.S.F.—the last of the Franciscans here—who left in 1803. If a relationship existed between all these Sumners, it may account for the loan from William. He died in 1825, his executors being his brothers Edward and James. The mortgage was paid off on November 24<sup>th</sup> 1828, and Loxley's £105 on March 25<sup>th</sup> of the same year. A public appeal for funds was made for the new chapel and there is an interesting and lengthy list of names of subscribers in an old account book. Among them appears those of certain congregations such as Birmingham, Coughton, Brindle, Wootton Wawen, Mawley and Bromsgrove. Many distinguished persons were donors, Bishop Milner (£10); Edward Standish (£50); the Hon. Mr. Clifford (£10); Sir John Throckmorton (£10); and smaller sums were given by Mrs. Simpson (10s. 6d.); Mrs. Ainsley (25. 6d.) Mr. Law (1s). The total sum raised by rich and poor was £453.

With such limited means at his disposal, Father Dawber built a small red brick chapel and priests' house adjoining. According to Pocle, the former was a structure "without any of the graces of architecture" though there were, he says, "two handsome windows of stained glass over the altar representing figures of St. Laurence and St. Denis. On the altar were two small marble sculptures of the same saints which, some years previously had been found in the grounds adjoining the Charterhouse, close to the city, and the site of the ancient Carthusian Monastery to which in all probability these sculptures belonged."

Dom Ambrose Feraud, O.S.B. (Coventry, 1812-1824), wrote certain "Observations" about these statues. The document in Stanbrook archives is dated 1834 and was written at Downside. It was found clipped into a letter, dated 1834, from Dom Ambrose to Lady Abbess Christina Chare—probably because it was the only other document of his in possession of Stanbrook. There is nothing to indicate who asked for the "observations" about the statues. It may have been, either directly or indirectly, Lady Abbess Gertrude Westhead, who was Abbess in 1834. Dom Ambrose states that the two statues of St. Laurence and St. Denis were presented by the late Miss Whittingham to the chapel in Hill Street, and were found in the gardens of the Charterhouse, Coventry, when Mr. Whittingham was proprietor of the same. The other statue of the Blessed Virgin was the gift of an individual in whose family it had been preserved. He added a postscript: "N.B. If the above named statues have been removed from the chapel at Coventry, I think they ought to be returned as they were left to the chapel."

There is another interesting document at Stanbrook, part of a leaf from an old Directory (?) headed "The Chapels" with "Coventry" written on the top in a hand which seems older than that of Dom Ambrose. The date of this is somewhere between 1821 and 1824, since there is part of a sentence alluding to a Dissenting Chapel built in 1821. This leaf gives the information about the chapel in Hill Street that, "on the Altar piece are two small marble sculptures representing St. Laurence and St. Denis which were, some years since, found buried in the grounds adjoining the Charterhouse, near the city. The painting at the Altar is the Descent from the Cross

*copied from Le Brun. In the chapel are two other paintings of the Crucifixion and the Last Supper ; the latter one is most deserving attention." The leaf ends with the name of the incumbent—the Revd. C. Feraud.*

*All of these paintings were at some time removed from the Chapel after Father Feraud had left and cannot now be traced. The statues shared a similar fate. Regarding the latter, one is inclined to the view that their removal was effected by Father Cockshoot, O.S.B., and that he—without any authorization—for none can be found—gave them to the Benedictine Nuns then at Abbots Salford (now Stanbrook), for he was a great friend of the community.*

*About these historic statues our records are silent. They were completely lost sight of and none at Coventry knew of their existence, still less of their whereabouts. After months of seemingly hopeless searching, perseverance was rewarded and the writer discovered them at Stanbrook. He wishes to record that Lady Abbess Laurentia McLachlan, now happily ruling at Stanbrook, most willingly handed over these treasures to him, and that after more than 100 years' absence they were restored to St. Osburg's on the Feast of Our Lady's Presenta\* tion, November list, 1944. They have been placed in a simple shrine designed by Mr. Norbert Smith and are to be seen over the temporary Lady Altar. Their removal from Coventry may now be regarded as an act of Providence for had they been in St. Osburg's when this was bombed, they might have been lost for all time. It is worth recording for the sake of posterity that the Director and Secretary of the Victoria and Albert Museum, London, Eric Maclagan, Esq., in a letter dated 19<sup>th</sup> May 1930, to Stanbrook Abbey, gives his expert opinion about the three statues as follows : "The figures of St. Laurence and St. Denis are evidently of the fifteenth century date of normal type, although the subjects are rare. I think that you are very likely correct in considering the other figure (which probably represents the Blessed Virgin) as of later date ; it may, however, well have been made in the sixteenth century." One day it is hoped that the pictures mentioned by Father Feraud may be traced, and that they will find their rightful place, alongside these statues—relics of Catholic England.*

*Father Dawber's chapel was dedicated to St. Mary and St. Laurence the Martyr, and consecrated by Bishop Milner, Vicar Apostolic of the Midland District, on December 8th, 1807. A small presbytery was built near the chapel and both served their purpose until replaced by St. Osburg's Church and Priory. There is evidence of this in the Laity's Directory 1843-1845 which contains a notice which was never intended to be amusing but which is so, at least in parts. It reads: "St. Mary's Hill Street, Coventry. Clergy, Revd. W. B. Ullathorne and J. A. Clarkson. Mass on Sundays at halfpast 8 and at 10.30. Vespers at 3.0. In the evening the Rosary is recited in the schoolroom, a familiar conversational entertainment, interspersed with anecdotes follows for the edification of the young and the Litany is sung. Mass on week-days at 8.30 and a lecture on each Tuesday evening. An instruction will be given at Foleshill one day in each week, in a room lent for the purpose."*

*Father Charles Ambrose Feraud, O.S.B., who came to Coventry in 1812, two years after the death of Father Dawber, has left a memorial to him—" It is nothing less than a small tribute of gratitude due to the memory of the Revd. John Dawber here to insert that after a long confinement in a French prison having at length obtained his releasement during a short peace of 1802, he came to England, his native country and presenting himself to his Superiors, was sent by them on the mission to this city of Coventry.*



*"During his imprisonment he had chiefly employed himself in the composition of sermons which he afterwards delivered to his flock with great unction and much fruit of souls. On his arrival in this city, finding that the Catholics were deprived of a place of worship by the death of their chief benefactor, he with great zeal applied himself to collecting charitable donations towards the erection of a new chapel and house for the missioner. In which he so far succeeded as to be able to raise the shell of the building in question, and at length, with the assistance of other friends, completed the establishment he had begun. He did not long survive this pious work, but sunk under the complaint he had contracted from the damp of the prison in which he had been confined. He quietly resigned his soul into his Redeemer's hands on June 7<sup>th</sup> 1810, and was interred in the chapel he had erected, under the pulpit on the north side." There is no record of what became of Father Dawber's remains, but, in all probability they would be removed to the small cemetery alongside St. Osburg's.*

*The only reference to a school during Father Dawber's time is in his handwriting; "a few months before I had my school I was obliged to pay the interest of the mortgage, £15."*

*This school seems to have stood on the site now occupied by the present school canteen, for such a building is partly shown in an early print of St. Osburg's before the spire was built. The sketch of the chapel and presbytery kindly supplied by Mr. A. Gooney of Hill Street does not help in locating the exact spot on which they stood. Bearing in mind that the mission in those days possessed very little land, it would appear that both were built on the space on which the Priory stood until the raid of November, 1940. The present schoolground was not acquired until 1872, and a further 415 square yards alongside the present boundary wall, Barras Lane, were purchased in 1875-. There is abundant proof in our records that Dr. Ullathorne occupied the old presbytery until 1845 and when he decided to build his Priory the old house had to be demolished to make room for the new. He then rented and lived in a house in Spon Street, where exactly is not known, until the Priory was finished. All of Father Dawber's building therefore disappeared, but his spiritual work lived on. Let us hope such work will never be forgotten and that the memory of this zealous Benedictine to whom Coventry owes so much, may never be dimmed by time ; but for his courage and enterprise, the work done by the Franciscans might have perished, with what results, who can tell ?*

### **1810—1846**

*The numerical strength of Catholics in Coventry when Father Dawber began his work in Hill Street can only be a matter of conjecture, for there are no statistics given in records or registers. During the whole of his seven years as parish priest there were 21 Baptisms ; in 1807 Bishop Milner confirmed 52 candidates on December 8th. There were only 5 marriages. The first list of Easter Communions appears in 1813 when the number is given as 59. Then in 1816 there is an appreciable increase for the number is given as 90. Numbers remained fairly static until 1829 when they have risen to 200. From Father Cockshoot's loose papers we gather that the average Easter Communions between 1833 and 1838 is about 250. It may be safely estimated from all of these facts that there were not more than three or four hundreds of souls in the parish. Of these about a dozen were converts. It would seem that a conversion became a matter of public interest for the Coventry Herald dated April 5<sup>th</sup> 1827, published the following: "Two Protestant Dissenters, a man and a woman, we understand have been*

converted at the Catholic chapel in Hill Street." Progress was not then remarkable. An explanation may be found for this if we recall that Catholics were only just coming into the light of day from darkness of religious suppression. It is true that the Relief Act of 1791 had removed many restrictions imposed on Catholic worship and gave formal permission for the establishment of Catholic schools. It had, moreover, repealed various oppressive Acts which had fallen into complete disuse. Nevertheless, Catholics were still at this time somewhat timorous of attracting attention to the practice of their religion. Bigotry and hostility were not altogether dead and the faithful did as little as possible to provoke attack. Apart from London, Liverpool, and a few other cities, Catholics existed only in small groups, more often around, the ancestral homes of Catholic aristocracy who had their private chapels and maintained a priest. Coventry had emerged from such a position and with a small congregation of the poorer class; it is thus easily understood why progress was slow. Some of the oldest present-day members of the congregation repeat what has been handed down from their grandparents, that Catholics were hooted and laughed at and even stoned as they came to Mass in Hill Street, which was then open country. But in spite of all opposition and adversity, priests and people alike, struggled on and shared poverty and hardship. It was not until Father Cockshoot's time (1830-1838) that a school could be raised to replace such as existed when Father Dawber was priest in charge. Dr. Ullathorne, who came in 1841, declared that the school built by Father Cockshoot was the "only good thing about the place"

We should note well that in those remote days the Catholics of this parish, as elsewhere, had to make great sacrifices for their schools and it explains too why other material things were of necessity neglected. During the whole of the period from 1803 to 1846 the mission was served by a priest single-handed. The priests who so served were as follows ;—

Dom John Dawber, O.S.B. (L)	1803 to 1810, died at Coventry
Dom Ambrose Allam, O.S.B (G)	1810 to 1812, left Coventry
Dom Ambrose Feraud, O.S.B (G)	1812 to 1824, left Coventry
Dom Basil Bretherton, O.S.B. (L)	1824 to 1827, left Coventry
Dom Austin Marsh, O.S.B. (E)	1827 to 1830, left Coventry
Dom Anselm Cockshoot, O.S.B. (L)	1830 to 1838, left Coventry
Dom Bede Day, O.S.B. (L)	1838 to 1840, left Coventry
Dom Ephrem Pratt, O.S.B. (G)	1838 to 1840, left Coventry.
Dom Alexius Pope, O.S.B. (G)	1840 to 1841, died at Coventry
Dom Stephen Barber O.S.B. (G)	1841 to 1841, left Coventry
Dom Bernard Ullathorne, O.S.B (G)	1841 to 1846, left Coventry

The capital letter in brackets after each name designates to which of the Monasteries each monk belonged, thus : Downside, St. Gregory's (G) ; Ampleforth, St. Laurence's (L) ; Douai, St. Edmund's (E).

It will be noticed that these monks did not all come from one particular monastery as is the custom today. Some explanation is therefore necessary. When Benedictine monks were sent "on the Mission" they came under the jurisdiction of a Provincial of whom there were two : one in the Southern Province (Canterbury) ; and the other in the Northern (York). Missions were not then, as now, attached to a particular Monastery. It was not until 1891 that the Benedictine missions were divided between the monasteries which then became responsible for the manning of them. Under this rearrangement Coventry was assigned to Downside.

Of the monks who were in charge of the chapel in-Hill Street, apart from Father Cockshoot, there is little to mention. This does not imply that work of importance was not done. Considering the smallness of the flock and the difficulties of the times, it

*was something of an achievement to have maintained their existence. When Father Cockshoot came, the old school had apparently become so dilapidated that he had to undertake the building of another. The raising of the money was no small burden for a poor congregation. It is to the credit of both priest and people that the work was so well done that Dr. Ullathorne did not begrudge them praise.*

*These schools lasted until 1875 and stood on the site of the modern Hall; otherwise there is no explanation of the brick foundations unearthed when workmen were preparing the ground for the new Hall, 1938.*

*An interesting memorandum in Father Cockshoot's writing discloses that in his day the building of a new church was contemplated. It reads : "Whereas William Kerril Amherst, Esq., who died in Kenilworth on Thursday the eighth of January, 1835, was buried in a leaden coffin in the centre aisle of the Catholic chapel belonging to the English Congregation of Benedictines at Coventry, in Warwickshire, now I, the incumbent at this chapel do declare that it is understood and agreed to by me that in case the said chapel shall be disused as a Catholic Chapel, the body of the said W. K. Amherst shall be removed and deposited in the new Catholic Chapel at Coventry, in front of the Altar with the same stone which now covers it and in all respects in the same situation in regard to the Altar and rails in front of the Altar as it now occupies, and I further agree to procure from the proper and competent authority a written memorandum or agreement to the above effect. T. A. Cockshoot"*

*This was written on the day of the interment. The body was removed to St. Osburg's and the conditions set forth in the memorandum fulfilled but later on another removal took place, viz., to Kenilworth in 1871.*

*One other priest of this period must be mentioned, not so much for what he did or did not do, but because of the prominence given him in Dr. Ullathorne's autobiography, From Cabin Boy to Archbishop. The priest in question is Dom Stephen Barber. Dom Bernard. Ullathorne came to Coventry in November, 1841, but not as the first choice of Superiors for they had appointed a newly ordained monk, Dom. Bernard Paillet to succeed Dom Stephen. The thought of the responsibility that he must face, appears to have completely broken down the newly appointed. On his way to Coventry he stayed with his Benedictine brethren at St. Gregory's, Cheltenham, but never got beyond it. The nervous condition which affected him became worse and through it he lost his sight. Ullathorne was then told to fill the vacancy. He was not favourably impressed with what he found. His description leaves little unsaid and cannot be passed over without comment. In "the little bit of a house," writes Dr. Ullathorne, "there was scarcely space in its rooms but for myself and a small table. One of the bedrooms, the one afterwards assigned to Mother Margaret, was cracked in the wall from top to bottom."*

*Of the chapel he wrote : "I found the chapel very small, in a very naked condition, and though not so many years built, the walls were cracked through and exhibited considerable rents." Again he found the mission "in a most desolate condition," but this is not all.*

*He speaks of his predecessor in a passage that is both arresting and disturbing. It may not have been intended, but it sounds like an indictment not only against Dom Stephen but, at least indirectly against the Provincial also. To save the reader referring to the autobiography, the passage is given here without any omissions :*

*"The mission had been for some time under the care of Father Stephen Barber, who had been repeatedly in an asylum, and he, a good weak man, did nothing but say his prayers on which he was engaged continuously. He was utterly incapable of looking after the people or doing anything for them beyond saying Mass. Father Pope, who had been there before him during the time of his infirmities before he died, had exerted himself to the utmost, had infused a spirit of piety into the little flock, but the administration, if it can be called administration, of Father Barber had left the people to scatter and many souls had gone from the Church altogether. Those who remained faithful, had got into bad odour with the Provincial who told me they were constantly writing complaints to Bishop Walsh, which were forwarded to him. I found them, however, to be a good simple people only anxious to have the mission restored and I did my best to put them right with my Superior."*

*There is no reason for doubting Dr. Ullathorne's description of the chapel and house. The statements are supported by those of Mother Margaret, but some of the allegations against Father Barber are quite contrary to fact and ought never to have been uttered. They are unjust and exaggerated. Some of the blame for the condition which we are asked to believe existed, may be attributed to the unfortunate priest but not all of it. True, Father Barber spent part of a year in a mental home, but long before he came to Coventry; and as far as can be ascertained, he returned to such a place before his death, but not for a considerable time after he had left this city.*

*The words "had been frequently in an asylum" are therefore contrary to fact, and give the impression that Father Barber was more or less constantly "deranged." Whatever his mental state prior to his appointment here, his Superior at least must be credited with a conscience and some sense of responsibility. Yet, it seems, he could send a priest to take charge of a parish who was "utterly incapable of looking after the people or doing anything for them beyond saying Mass." The complexion of Dr. Ullathorne's account would have been changed had he added that Father Barber was incumbent for five months only. Deterioration is a gradual process in normal conditions, why then confine the whole of the dilapidation to those five months? The bad state of the property may well be explained by the smallness of the flock and its poverty, but if blame has to be put on any, then Father Barber's predecessors were not without fault. In fairness, it is due to the priest who has been singled out and condemned, to hear what the Provincial thought of him.*

*In proposing him for a Chaplaincy the Provincial wrote of Father Barber : "I do not know of one more proper than Mr. Barber. His character is such in my opinion as will afford them everything they wish." The nuns of the distinguished convent to which he was sent after leaving Coventry, did all in their power to retain Father Barber when he was later appointed elsewhere. Comparisons may be odious but they have brought to light that during the five months that Father Barber was at Coventry, he did 19 baptisms. In a like period Dr. Ullathorne himself did 17, so it appears that the "condemned" priest did more than say Mass. Father Barber's "administration" is ridiculed but like his predecessors he had little to administer, if Dr. Ullathorne's own statement be accepted, that the people were very poor. A few words from Dr. Ullathorne's "indictment" ought to have been inscribed as an epitaph on Dom Stephen Barber's tombstone at Downside—"He did nothing but say his prayers." Perhaps those prayers so constantly said account for many of the blessings which have come upon Coventry. Father Barber after leaving here went to Abbots Salfbrd (now Stanbrook), where his saintliness and spiritual direction were fully appreciated. Later he served at*

*Spettisbury and Bonham. He died in 1847.*

*The year 1841 will ever be regarded as one of the most outstanding in the history of St. Osburg's since it marks the advent of her most illustrious pastor, Dom Bernard Ullathorne. His name was, even then, well known throughout England. His missionary career in Australia and subsequent activity on behalf of the unfortunate convicts of the penal settlements there, had brought him prominently before the British public. At this time many remarkable men were influencing the religious outlook in this country—Wiseman, Father Ignatius Spencer, Father Mathew the social reformer, Father Dominic the saintly Passionist, but not the least in this galaxy, Ullathorne himself. The renowned Rosminian Father Gentili had returned to England in May, 1841, and Father Dominic came in October of the same year. The former was a well known figure at St. Osburg's in those early days ; so too was Wiseman, who was appointed Co-adjutor to Bishop Walsh in 1840. Wiseman longed to see restored to England all that had been so pitifully lost at the Reformation, He felt that this would be achieved by the Blessed Sacrament and through devotion to the Mother of God by the Holy Rosary. His aspirations were shared by Ullathorne and this accounts for the title of our church—"The Most Holy Sacrament"—and for the establishment of the Sodality of the Holy Rosary in 1843. The public recital of the Rosary had been started twelve months before this date by Margaret Hallahan with Ullathorne's full approval. The Rosary Sodality here is then one of the oldest in England.*

*Shortly after Dr. Ullathorne's arrival there was need for an assistant priest. Father Clarkson, O.S.B., was therefore appointed. Soon after came the remarkable laywoman, Margaret Hallahan, who was to play so important a part in the building up of this mission and indeed of Catholic life in England. The loyalty, zeal and cooperation of these two enabled Ullathorne to press on with his schemes for the building of the new church. He realized that his parishioners could not meet the cost of this and decided to go abroad to solicit alms. Accordingly he went to Belgium and Germany taking with him a young and unknown architect, Hansom, so that they might study the architecture of some of the finest churches in those countries. They came back with many ideas about the size and style of the proposed church and financially richer, for the appeal had been successful. It was decided that the church should be a restoration of the thirteenth century churches, with walls of Marston granite, in rubble work. For the interior stonework, the columns, arches, string-courses and other decorations, a light stone from a quarry at Exhall was selected.*

*The plans were eventually completed and the date for the commencement of the work was fixed. Our records state that "The foundation Stone of the New Church of the Most Holy Sacrament was blessed and laid with considerable solemnity on Monday the 29<sup>th</sup> May, 1843. At half past ten in the forenoon the doors of the old chapel were opened, but only a small number of the throng who came for the ceremony could find accommodation. Among this number were many prominent people of other denominations. The Mass was celebrated by the Very Revd. Luke Barber, O.S.B., the President General of the English Benedictine Congregation who was to bless the new Foundation. The Assistant Priest was the Revd. C. MacDonald ; the Deacon the Revd. Fr. Ilsley ; the Subdeacon the Revd. Fr. Aylward. The music was Mazzinghi's Mass, except for the Agnus Dei which was from Mozart's No.1. Zingarelli's 'Laudate Pueri' was sung at the Offertory."*

*The record makes a point of mentioning that on this occasion Dr. Ullathorne wore the Habit of his Order. It was not customary in those days to wear this outside the*

Monastery. He preached and took his text from the Second Book of Kings, chapter vii. This sets forth David's resolve to build a Temple and God's promise of great blessings to follow.

*The Mass ended at a quarter to one o'clock and a procession proceeded to the site of the new church. A model of this—which would seem to have found its way into the museum at the bottom of Hill Street—was borne on the shoulders of boys. Mr. Hansom, the architect, “adorned in professional cloak and a cap of velvet of ancient design, followed bearing in his hands the plans.”*

*The record goes on : “The site of the foundation stone was the South pier of the Chancel arch ; carpets had been spread, platforms erected and the upper stone suspended by pulleys. Although the collected multitude behaved with good order, much exertion was required by the orderlies and police to keep back the human tide in their eager curiosity from rolling in upon the precincts of the ceremony.” Finally, “the Antiphons, psalms, litanies and prayers prescribed in the Pontifical were chanted, but before the stone was lowered, Dr. Ullathorne ascended the platform, and read in a loud voice the following : (which is a translation of the Latin text) ‘The Foundation Stone of this church dedicated to God, in honour of the Most Holy Sacrament was laid by the Very Revd, Luke Barber, President General of the English Benedictines, according to the Rites of the Holy Roman Church in the year of Salvation, 1843, but on the 29th of May. Gregory the XVI<sup>th</sup> then held the Chair of Peter ; Victoria was reigning in this land. The Most Illustrious and Right Revd. Lord, Thomas, Bishop of Cambysopolis, governed the Central District with Vicarial power from the Holy See. Father William Bernard Ullathorne, monk of the same Order of the English Benedictines, subject in obedience to the Very Revd. Father Provincial of Canterbury, William Duncan Scott, exercised the pastoral care of this city. The structure of this edifice was designed by Charles Hansom, Catholic architect. Thirty thousand souls now dwell in this city of which only one thousand are Catholic. May the-Lord have mercy and look down ; may He bless and increase His people. The Temple now begun may God perfect and when perfected may He deign to dwell within, and to all who enter in, may it be the gate of the Kingdom of Heaven, through Christ Our Lord.”*

*The parchment with this inscription was then enclosed in a casket of copper and put into the cavity in the lower stone. The upper stone was then lowered and fixed. The service having ended, the procession reformed and returned to the old chapel. This memorable day finished with evening service at which the Provincial of the Dominicans preached. Despite the fact that experienced builders were practically unobtainable and that those who carried out the work had to be instructed in their task by both priest and architect, the Nave of the Church was completed within fifteen months. Apparently there were no local sculptors either, for the designs of the stone carvings were entrusted to the son of a farm labourer who showed some talent in this craft. He copied, reasonably well, casts that had been borrowed and which were used in the restoration of York Minster. Though much of his work was destroyed in the November raid of 1940, a fair portion still adorns the arches in the nave at the present time. Many problems had to be solved, not least among them that of finance. A Church Building Fund had been in existence for many years. To this the poor parishioners had contributed weekly the pence they could ill afford. In 1841 the Fund amounted to £200 but as soon as the work had started the congregation fired with enthusiasm, redoubled their efforts to raise money. Father Clarkson and Mother Margaret organized the girls as outdoor collectors and the sums collected were handed in weekly at the schoolroom meetings. Dr. Ullathorne launched a public appeal and*

*began the arduous task of preaching for funds. He concentrated on districts where Irish labourers had congregated. They, mindful no doubt of his efforts on behalf of their banished countrymen in the Australian penal settlements, responded with generosity. Sufficient money was not, however, raised by all these means to meet the cost of both church and house. When, therefore, Dr. Ullathorne left the mission there was a heavy debt on the buildings. Abbot Butler has defended Ullathorne against those who complained that others had to shoulder the burden of this debt. "Ullathorne," says Abbot Butler, "has been criticized for leaving a considerable debt behind him on church and house ; but he was removed from Coventry to become Bishop within a year of completion of the building. Seeing the money he did raise by begging, it cannot be doubted that, had he remained in Coventry, he would have cleared the debt in no long time." It is commonly accepted that no church can be consecrated until it is free from debt. How this was got over one cannot say. It may be that the money had been borrowed from an ecclesiastical source and that there was in consequence no danger of the buildings being claimed by a secular power.*

*Because of the dilapidated condition of the small chapel and the growth of the congregation, Dr. Ullathorne decided to put into use the nave of the new church as soon as it was finished. The chancel arch was then bricked up and a temporary altar was set against the wall. History has repeated itself strangely, for the church to-day is practically the same as it was 100 years ago. On the 10<sup>th</sup> August, 1844, Bishop Wiseman solemnly blessed and formally opened the building for public worship. On that day there were no side chapels and no sanctuary proper.*

*It was in this "unfinished" St. Osburg's that Father Gentili preached for the first time in Coventry, 1844. In the month of May of the following year he returned to give a mission which has become memorable. There was at this time a movement afoot which determined not only the giving of the mission but the date on which it should commence. Most people are aware that the Godiva processions originated in Coventry, but few may know that these usually took place during the Octave of the Feast of Corpus Christi and that they were meant as a substitute for the magnificent processions of the Blessed Sacrament which, in the days of Faith, was carried in state through the streets of the city. Local historians maintain that the Godiva festivities only date as far back as the licentious reign of King Charles II. The celebrations, formerly, were not marked by the propriety of recent years and they certainly offended the public sense of decency. On this account, in 1845, both Catholic and Protestant authorities took definite steps to counteract the evil.*

*On behalf of the latter, the Bishop of Worcester addressed a letter on the subject to the city magistrates, but Ullathorne adopted a different method which, as results proved, did more to destroy the sordid character of the unseemly display. He arranged to have a "Mission" —something unheard of then—and Father Gentili conducted it. During the first few days not many Catholics attended for they were too intent on preparing their houses and the streets for the Godiva "show." On the Sunday following the opening of the Mission, so we gather from the life of Father Gentili, when he had the flock before him in the church, he poured out so great a torrent of reproof that tears of shame were shed and sobs were heard in all parts of the church. He urged all who had attended the services and in particular the children, to pray that rain would pour down from heaven and spoil the shameful Godiva spectacle.*

*From what Dr. Ullathorne has related, their prayers were heard. In one of his later discourses Father Gentili announced, "You have had your procession of your lady, now*

*we shall have one of Our Lady." Accordingly, a statue of the Blessed Virgin—about which more later—was fixed on a bier and befittingly adorned with flowers. Then on three successive evenings this was carried in triumph around the church to the singing of hymns in Mary's honour. These processions, it is claimed, were the first since the Reformation to be publicly carried out. They caused no small wonderment for crowds thronged the church each night. Dr. Ullathorne has recorded that "as the procession advanced round the church, Father Gentili had to conduct another kind of procession. Under his direction the people flowed on in one continuous stream from the south, through the north door in order that these multitudes might have a glimpse of those ancient Rites which had thus returned to triumph over the profane and modern substitute."*

*The Sanctuary and side Chapels were completed about the end of August, 184<sup>^</sup>. The temporary wall in the Chancel arch was removed and all was in readiness for the Solemn Consecration of the Church. Some of the details in the original plans were not carried out, nor was the spire added to the tower. The building of the house and sacristies seems to have interfered with the construction of confessionals which were planned to be, one off the Lady Chapel and the other off St. Benedict's. These unfortunate omissions will be rectified it is hoped when the church is restored.*

*A lengthy description of St. Osburg's as it was at the time of the consecration has been found among old papers and is given in full for many of the features have long ago disappeared. "The Church consists of a Nave with Clerestory, North and South Aisles, Chancel, Lady Chapel, Tower, South Porch and Sacristies. The Nave and Aisles form an area of 80 feet long by 50 wide ; the Chancel is 3j feet long by 20 wide, thus giving a total length of 115 feet. The Tower at the West end of the South Aisle is 17½ feet square. A great quantity of earth had been removed from the site and this being of a sandy nature the Foundations have been carried to a great depth and consist of blocks of sandstone on a bed of concrete. The Porch is of the decorated period in the Gable of which is an ornamental niche containing the statue of the Blessed Virgin. A little below this is seen on the right and carved in relief, the Angel Gabriel alighting and presenting the heavenly salutation on a scroll, whilst on the left kneels a monk of the Congregation of the English Benedictines clothed in the Habit of the Order. The Cornices of the Porch are sculptured in grotesque. The Aisle walls are strengthened with buttresses and pierced with narrow lancets, the plinth and string-course bold, the cornice enlivened and supported by heads and scrolls alternately. The Clerestory is lighted by double ogee headed lights. The Roof is of high pitch, and the gables surmounted with sculptured crosses encircled with glories. The Tower is well buttressed, its bell chamber lighted by four double light windows with quatre foiled heads. The Lady Chapel groups beautifully with the Chancel, whilst these features of the building are more enriched with ornament.*

*"Entering by the Western door which is deeply moulded and shafted, with sculptured capitals and heads sustaining the arch and label mouldings—the exquisitely proportioned columns—the lofty arches—springing from moulded capitals—the high and graceful open roof—the solemn disposition of light—the deep Chancel receding beyond a noble Chancel arch, terminating with the Altar and the richly emblazoned Eastern window, rendered mysterious, but not concealed by the screen and Rood loft, give a solemn and exalting impression, and assist us to comprehend what must have been the effect of our fine old churches before their spoliation. A range of five acutely pointed and moulded arches of stone sustain on each side the Clerestory walls, and rest on circular shafts of two feet diameter with capital and base of chaste but*



*bold designs, the former ornamented with the 'nail head.' A label moulding runs over the arches and rests on sculptured heads projecting above each capital. A well projected string-course runs under the windows of the Clerestory, breaking out in every spandril over large corbels of stone sculptured in the form of angels, each bearing an azure coloured shield with some device or symbol in gold and having reference to the Holy Sacrament of the Body of Our Lord. From the corbels spring triple shafts with bases and capitals supporting the lower portion of an open roof, consisting of six arched principals. The Clerestory windows are deeply recessed and splayed and covered with a segmental hood.*

*"The Aisles are lighted by narrow lancets a foot in breadth and nine feet in height. Of these, four appear on the South and five on the North side ; they are deeply recessed and covered with segmental hood. These windows are filled with stained glass of simple design, the gift of various members of the congregation. In the centre of each is a vesica containing the figure of the patron saint of the donor, with an inscription in old characters round the border, while in the upper and lower portions are circles containing monograms of the Holy Name, of the Blessed Virgin, etc., a narrow border of blue runs round the light, finished by one still more- narrow of clear glass which defines the window and adds a charm to the general design which is more of a sombre character.*

*"The lower portion of the Tower forms the Baptistry. Turning into the South Aisle, we enter it on the East by a massive and widely splayed arch of stone which sustains the Eastern wall of the Tower above. An early English Font of beautiful design executed in Caen stone, stands in the centre, raised on two steps and surmounted by a graceful carved canopy suspended from the ceiling. In the South wall is a Recess or Aumbry for the reservation of the consecrated Oils for the administration of the Sacrament of Baptism.*

*"On the West is a narrow lancet window filled with rich stained glass, in three subjects; the centre, which is the principal, represents the Baptism of Our Lord by St. John. In the lower part is the donor kneeling, whilst in the upper is a quatrefoil containing the figure of St. Theresa, the patron of the donor. The North side not being open to the Nave, the only direct light is from the West window just described, which gives a subdued tone to this part of the building. A spiral staircase of stone communicating with the upper chambers of the Tower, commences at the North«West corner of this Baptistry.*

*"At the West end of the Nave is a large triplet filled with stained glass of chaste early English design, in various patterns, the chief feature in each of the three lights being a series of quatrefoils containing medallion heads of various Saints, the patrons of the several donors. Above this, and giving light to the roof, is a rich wheel window, consisting of eight lights, radiating from one centre light. At the North West end of the church is a very good and powerful organ made by Messrs. Bevington of London.*

*"The East end of the Nave and Aisles communicates by three noble stone arches with the Chancel and Chapels. Across the centre arch is the Rood Loft, ascended by a spiral staircase in the North East pier, and supported by a light screen of carved oak, which separates the Choir from the Nave. Above this is the Rood or Cross with the figures of the Blessed Virgin and St. John.*

*"Proceeding through the screen by an ascent of two steps, we come into the Chancel,*

*on each side of which are deeply moulded stone arches, the clustered capitals of which resting on light shafts, and sustaining the arches on the South side, being mingled with a number of sculptured heads, are particularly remarkable. These open into the Chapels, and have screens of carved oak. The first portion of the spacious Chancel is fitted up as an ecclesiastical Choir with stalls of carved oak. The East window is five light broad, the head being filled with beautiful early tracery ; in the centre light is a full length figure of Our Saviour ; on either side are the figures of St. Peter and St. Paul, whilst in the extreme lights appear the figures of St. Gregory and St. Augustine. The subject of the Last Supper occupies a large foliated circle in the head of the window, whilst two smaller circles contain the mysteries of the Resurrection and the Ascension, the smaller form of tracery are filled with angels. The five principal figures occupying the lower portion of the window, are each surmounted by richly»diapered backgrounds. On the South side is a figure of St. Benedict, in the lower portion of which appear the Arms of the Blount family, the donors of the window. Raised by steps above the floor of the Chancel, at the Eastern extremity, but detached from the wall, stands the High Altar with its suitable ornaments, having frontals of various colours with devices to suit the seasons and festivals. Behind it and reaching to the window sill, is a reredos of carved stone with diapered panels in gold and colours. On the South side are stone Sedilia and Sacramentarium of chaste design. On the opposite side of the Chancel is a Recess or Aumbry enriched with sculptures, for the reservation of the Sacramentalia.*

*“On the South side of the Chancel is the Lady Chapel which is entered under a stone arch, from the South aisle, and separated from the Chancel by a carved oak screen. The East window beyond the altar of this Chapel is three lights, surmounted with three foliated circles ; in the centre light is the figure of Our Blessed Lady crowned, and having the Divine Child, under a rich canopy. On the left is the figure of St. Anne with the young Virgin, whilst on the right is represented St. Elizabeth with the Infant St. John the Baptist. In the circles and fillings of the heads of the window are represented Angelic Choirs. On the South side is a window very richly stained, which is the gift of the architect. A little to the Eastward is a low arched recess, to serve as a covering for a monumental effigy.*

*“On the North side of the Chancel is a Chapel of St. Benedict which is lighted by a curve sided triangular window over the roof of the vestry, filled with stained glass representing St. Osburg, Abbess, the patroness of Coventry, of which city this Saint was an inhabitant. Adjoining the Chapel are spacious vestries communicating with the Cloister which leads to the Presbytery. The Church is served by members of the Congregation of the English Benedictine Monks who are the same Congregation that, under St. Augustin, brought Christianity to our Saxon forefathers, who planted the famous Convent of Coventry, who served the Cathedral up to the time of the Reformation, and which exists to this day in an unbroken succession from the Monks of Westminster Abbey. The present incumbent is the Revd. Dr. Ullathorne, aided by the Revd. J. A. Clarkson.”*

*It may reasonably be concluded from the professional terminology of the foregoing description that it was written by the architect. Whoever the author, he has certainly given a picture of what the church was at the time of its consecration. This took place on September the 9<sup>th</sup> 1845. There is unfortunately very little information available about the ceremony. The Sacred Rite was carried out by Bishop Wiseman with the assistance of eight other Bishops. He sang the Solemn Mass at which Bishop Sharpies preached. The Choir of the Cathedral Church of Birmingham rendered the music. At*

*five in the evening, Vespers were sung. Then the Vicar Apostolic of Wales, Bishop Brown, O.S.B., preached and Pontifical Benediction followed the sermon. There were special evening services throughout the week. On the Sunday following Bishop Wiseman preached.*

*To-day we are looking back to that great event of one hundred years ago, when this beloved church was consecrated to the Service of God. Here we recall with grateful hearts the manifold graces and blessings which Almighty God has poured out in this His Temple. Here the Mass has been renewed each day for well nigh a century. There was unhappily a period of war years when the Holy Sacrifice could no longer be offered in the shattered Church. Here the prayers of generations of priests and people, of adoration, of petition, and of contrition, went up perpetually ; here saving Grace has radiated from the Blessed Sacrament and for countless souls, this House of God has been, in the words that Dr. Ullathorne inscribed on the Foundation parchment, "the gate of the Kingdom of Heaven."*

*In September 1945, God so willing, we shall commemorate all this, but the ravages of war will prevent befitting celebrations. If the occasion be stripped of much of the external solemnity, our gratitude for all graces and blessings will be none the less sincere. All may take legitimate pride in the thought that St. Osburg's has fulfilled her mission, for although in the lifetime of the Universal Church, one hundred years is not a long span, nevertheless, in view of the struggle for existence of the Church in this country, it is a remarkable achievement for an individual church to have given a century of service—such as St. Osburg's has given to Coventry. This has been brought about by those valiant souls who have "gone before signed with the seal of Faith" and for whom we pray that God has given them their even lasting reward.*

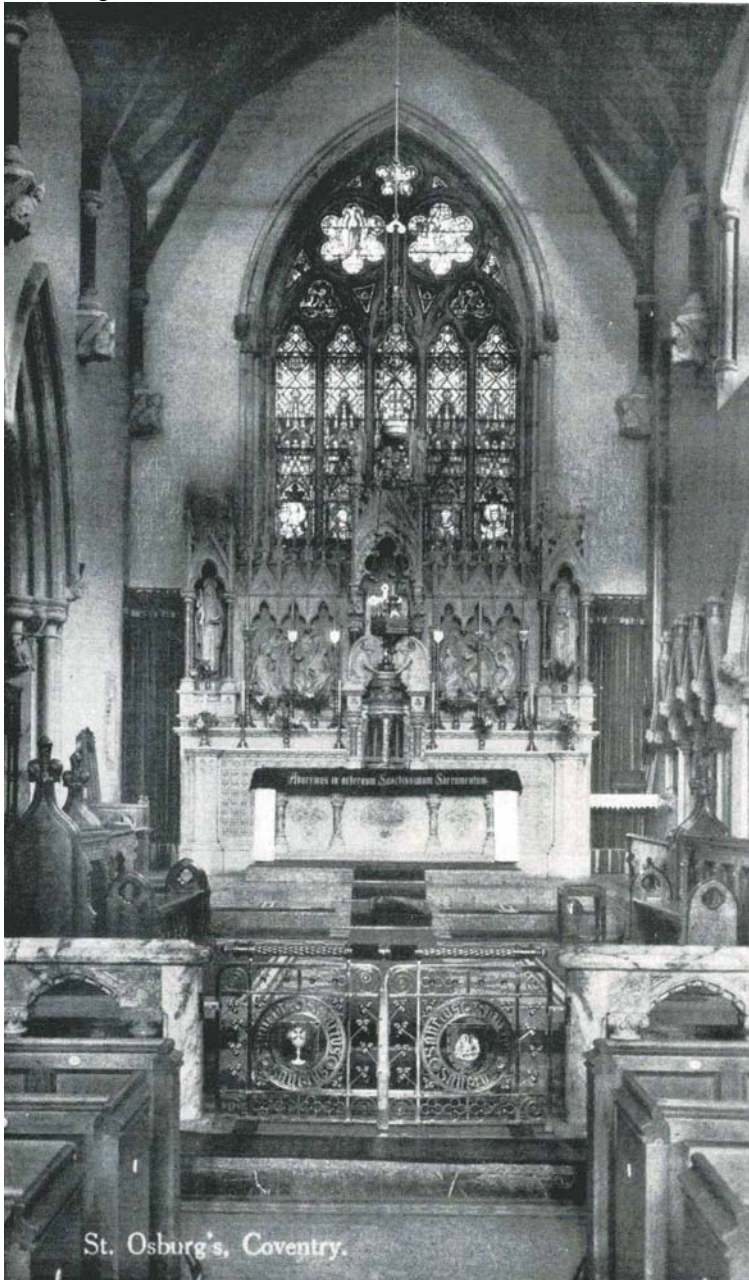
*Dr. Ullathorne was severely criticized for attempting the building of a church of such dimensions. The fact that the congregation was then both small and poor may have accounted for opposition, for some went so far as to say "there is not a respectable person in the parish." Respectability was evidently estimated in terms of cash. It was this murmuring which drew from Mother Margaret the silencing rejoinder that "Coventry Church has been built, not for man, but for God, and He is always respectable." Dr. Ullathorne did not, like his critics, fix his eyes on the poor flock, nor on the conditions of the day. Generations who have come after him have blessed his name and admired his vision and the boldness of his conceptions. The building of a church like St. Osburg's brought Catholicity into prominence and was an evidence that the old Faith was emerging from the obscurity into which it had been driven by persecution and intolerance. The united efforts and zeal of the priests and Mother Margaret soon produced abundant fruit, for lapsed catholics came back to the fold, and many converts were made. Industrial development brought many people into Coventry and the Congregation rapidly increased. The new church was soon filled to capacity and Ullathorne's foresight was then applauded.*

*Within twelve months of the completion of the Priory and Church, Dr. Ullathorne had to yield to the persuasion of his Superior and others and signified his acceptance of the Episcopate which he had already twice declined. His Consecration took place in St. Osburg's on June 21<sup>st</sup> , 1846, on which day Pope Pius IX was crowned in Rome. It was a day of mingled joy and sorrow for his flock and the good Nuns who were then but newly established under Mother Margaret. The ceremony was carried out by Bishop Wiseman in the presence of all the Bishops then present in England and the sermon was preached by Wiseman. As a token of their gratitude and affection, the*

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*congregation presented the new Bishop with a magnificent chalice. In five short years Dr. Ullathorne had accomplished the seemingly impossible for the mission was now flourishing, spiritually and materially through his wise administration. The splendid church he had built for the Honour and Glory of God, will stand as a monument to his untiring labour and zeal.*



## **MOTHER MARGARET HALLAHAN**

*It will not detract from the measure of Bishop Ullathorne's success in Coventry to state that much of it was due to the loyalty and whole-hearted co-operation of a remarkable and saintly woman—Margaret Hallahan. Both were intended by Divine Providence to play an important part in the religious revival of their times and Coventry was singularly fortunate in having both at one and the same time when she needed them. most. Within the scope of these pages it is not possible to do more than outline the work of this great woman. It is all the more remarkable in view of her early life.*

*She was born in London, of good Irish parents, on January 2<sup>nd</sup>, 1803, the year when, it will be recalled, the Benedictines returned to Coventry. Her father's death abruptly ended her school-days when she was nine years old. Six months later, her mother died and Margaret, an only child, was put into an Orphanage. At the age of eleven she became a domestic servant and continued in that capacity until she came to Coventry, in her fortieth year. She left Belgium for England on April 30<sup>th</sup> 1842, and stayed for a few days with Mrs. Amherst, at Kenilworth. She came to be interviewed by Dr. Ullathorne at his Presbytery in Hill Street—in the early days of May—Our Lady's Month. None, least of all herself, then suspected, the great designs of God in her regard, for she spoke of herself as "a poor, helpless, friendless, homeless, penniless, woman." He certainly "regarded the humility of His handmaiden" who came to work not for money, but for God and souls. Of such a one, Dr. Ullathorne had need in the building up of the mission. She accepted what was offered without complaint—the sharing of a tiny kitchen with a bad tempered old housekeeper—and a dilapidated attic with a bed and one chair, for bedroom. Such conditions would have deterred many a brave heart, but not this valiant woman.*

*Soon after her arrival, Dr. Ullathorne was absent for two months on a visit to Rome. On his return he found to his amazement that Margaret had gathered together some 200 girls of school age, and with the help of a few monitors was teaching them in the small school. She was not concerned about the boys for they had been provided for and had a master to teach them, but apparently no provision had been made for the girls. This self imposed task would have proved too much for an experienced teacher but Margaret herself had had little schooling. She did her best and left the issue in the hands of God. To this exacting work was added that of assisting in the housework and she was Sacristan. In this latter capacity she insisted on having a lamp lit before the Blessed Sacrament, a thing unheard of then. This was probably the first lamp to be so lit, in a public chapel, since the Reformation. Her other activities included the instruction of First Communicants and converts ; visiting the bedridden and nursing them in their own homes ; begging for and helping the poor ; conducting evening devotions in the schoolroom. Factory girls, both catholic and non-catholic alike came under the spell of this simple woman who Continued to dress like a Belgian peasant, and they came regularly to her schoolroom evenings. She afterwards saw them safely to their homes, singing en route, hymns to Our Lady. No account was taken of the fatigue she felt at the end of her full day and still less of the excruciating pain she constantly endured from a spine injured in her childhood. To this painful condition was added the discomfort of a rough "hairshirt" —after the manner of the Saints. Little wonder her undertakings were singularly blessed. But one outstanding event will ever be remembered in Coventry. She it was who introduced the First May Devotions to be held in England since the Reformation—before the Altar she had set up in the*

little schoolroom in Hill Street. There too she taught and inspired the people to recite the Holy Rosary long before the Sodality was formally established, in 1843. Dr. Ullathorne at once recognized that this was no ordinary woman but a soul already well-advanced in the spiritual life and fostered and directed her accordingly. She walked in the way of the Saints actuated in all she did by one motive— "For God Alone."

Margaret had long cherished the idea of entering the Religious state and of consecrating herself to God. She was attracted to one and only one Order, that of St. Dominic. In this she may have been influenced by the fact that one of her uncles, Father John O'Connor, was a Dominican at Cork. Her wish was soon to be fulfilled. All arrangements were made, and together with three other devout kindred souls, she took over the house in Spon Street which Dr. Ullathorne had occupied until the Priory in Hill Street was completed. A room in the house was converted into a chapel and the Blessed Sacrament was reserved. There the little band recited together the Office of Our Lady every day, at first in English and later on in Latin. They followed a Rule of Life and were carefully trained by Dr. Ullathorne for what was soon to follow—the establishment of the Third Order of St. Dominic. They lived a life of Poverty for their only means of support was a small pension of one of them. On June 11<sup>th</sup> 1844, Margaret and her companions received the Habit of St. Dominic at the hands of Dr. Ullathorne, in the presence of the Provincial of the Dominicans. Sister Margaret Mary, as she then became, in Religion, was entrusted with the new Foundation. After the customary period of the Novitiate had expired, preparations were then made for admission to Vows. Sister Margaret made her Profession in St. Osburg's at five o'clock in the morning of December 8th, 184<sup>^</sup>. Later, that same morning, the other Sisters took their Vows, "in the hands" of their Superioress, Mother Margaret, according to the custom of their Order. The Third Order was thus truly Founded at St. Osburg's.

Before the end of that month, the Community left Spon Street and took up residence at the Priory in Hill Street. This was probably done because of their poverty and that they might have the constant guidance and care of their spiritual Director Dr. Ullathorne. A small room was assigned to each of the nuns in the part of the house that was "cut off" from the rest, but Mother Margaret selected an attic, a miserable place at the top of the house which was intended for a store room. This was reached by a narrow and steep staircase. There was no means of heating. The Sisters had reasonable comfort but Mother Margaret could have none under the sloping roof of that attic.

In 1936 this "cell" of the saintly Mother Margaret was converted into a chapel, and there, it is claimed, favours asked for through the intercession of the Servant of God, were received. Unfortunately the chapel was destroyed with the rest of the house in the raid of November, 1940. However, another relic of the Community remains in St. Osburg's to remind us of those days, namely, the diamond shaped stone slab that lies before the Lady Chapel. This marks the last resting place of Maria Roby, in Religion Sister Catherine, O.P., who was the first of Mother Margaret's spiritual daughters to die. She was helping to make a funeral pall when she was suddenly seized with an illness. As she lay dying on the floor of the Community room, the dining room of recent times, she made her Profession and gave up her soul to God ; soon after, on the Feast of St. Sylvester, 1845. R.I.P.

Dr. Ullathorne's departure from Coventry was a stunning blow for the Sisters and Mother Margaret. They had depended on him as Father, Counsellor, and Friend to such an extent that to continue without him seemed impossible. The Benedictine Superiors

*did all in their power to reassure the Sisters and settle their future. They offered to rent any house in Coventry they might choose, for they were most anxious to retain the Community. Mother Margaret was determined however, that they should continue under the guidance and care of their Spiritual Father, Bishop Ullathorne. He having been assigned to the Western District, the Community therefore chose Bristol. There a Convent was established. Mother Margaret left Coventry, the scene of so many fruitful labours, on July 11<sup>th</sup> 1846. Thus in one year St. Osburg's suffered a double loss.*

### **THE STATUE OF OUR LADY**

*There is treasured at St. Osburg's a statue of the Blessed Virgin which is and has always been known as "Mother Margaret's." Briefly, the tradition about this is that it was set up on the Altar in the schoolroom when the devotions of Our Lady were first introduced by Mother Margaret. Later on, so it is claimed, this statue was carried in the processions arranged by Father Gentili. However much these claims may conflict with other traditions, they cannot be ignored. The oldest of parishioners cling to the tradition here and had the support of the late Bishop of Lancaster, Dr. Pearson, O.S.B., himself a Coventrian. His Lordship informed the writer that Abbot Fowler had studied the question thoroughly and was convinced that the statue at St. Osburg's is the original one. In height it is about 3 ft. and many have regarded it, as did Abbot Fowler, as "ugly." When the good Abbot so described it, he had not, so the Bishop stated, any idea that when Mother Margaret showed a statue to Dr. Ullathorne and the architect, Hansom, the latter called it "rude" and the former warned her against exhibiting it in public.*





*The old priests at St. Osburg's in Bishop Pearson's boyhood days, always referred to the statue as "Mother Margaret's" and revered it because of its history and connection with the first devotions here. There was no other statue of Our Lady, for it will be remembered that the one in the old chapel had been removed to Abbots Salford. An expert has declared that the statue is over 100 years old and that it is definitely of Flemish make and material. When the Lady Altar was erected in the schoolroom, Mother Margaret incurred a debt of £8 for candlesticks. If the statue there had been "loaned" and was meant to be removed, the obvious purchase would have been, not candlesticks, but a statue. Moreover, it has been argued the one desire of Mother Margaret's was to cultivate devotion to Our Lady, but to remove that which had been the centre of such devotion would frustrate this.*

*This statue had been redecorated in 1938 and was placed in the priests' sacristy. Bishop Pearson made a visit to St. Osburg's shortly after, and when he saw it expressed his delight "that Mother Margaret's Statue had been restored to its old place." So much for the tradition of St. Osburg's.*

*Mother Margaret is buried at Stone Convent, and there the Community treasure another statue of Our Lady which, it is said, was the one used for the May Devotions and first Procession, at Coventry. This statue is not much more than 18 in. in height and it is hard to imagine this mounted on a bier and carried shoulder high round the church. It would be "lost" among flowers, whereas one 3 ft. high would be conspicuous. The statue at Stone is rather conventional ; that at St. Osburg's is "unique"—Abbot Fowler's word was "ugly" and one can well imagine Hansom's "rude" being applied to it. And so the case is an interesting study. The writer does nothing more than present the facts as he has received them. "Mother Margaret's Statue" will remain as an object of special interest and reverence at St. Osburg's together with the one that once was venerated in the old chapel, and which has recently been recovered. This latter being a link with Pre Reformation Coventry will naturally have priority of place.*

*The years 1841 and 1846 mark the beginning and close of one of the most remarkable periods in the life of the parish. Before proceeding with its history, some facts about St. Osburg—the Patroness of the Mission—may well be introduced here. The Nocturn Lesson appointed for the Office of her Feast—March 30th—reads as follows : "The Virgin Osburg was the first Abbess of the Coventry monastery (convent) which King Canute built. Though this convent was destroyed after her death, her relics were held in great veneration by the people and God made her tomb illustrious by many striking miracles. The Earl of Mercia, Leofric, and his spouse Godiva, having restored the convent, assigned it to the monks and dedicated the Abbey Church to God, in honour of the Blessed Virgin Mary, St. Peter, St. Osburg the Virgin, and all Saints. Pope Alexander II afterwards confirmed these deeds by Bull. Finally, Ketteric the Bishop of Lichfield and Coventry named the Holy Virgin as Patroness of the Archdeaconry of Coventry." (Rom. Breviary.)*

*The historian, Mary Dormer Harris, who is not too well disposed to catholics, in her "Story of Coventry" writing about Pool Meadow remarks that "it was formerly covered by a sheet of water known as St. Osburg's Pool. This is a bare place running East and West of Priory Street, to the North of the site of the ancient monastery. By daylight the surroundings of Pool Meadow are unbeautiful enough, yet it is in some respects the most interesting spot in Coventry, since it is connected with the earliest name*



*that occurs in Coventry History. What connection there was between the Saint whose Nunnery the Danes destroyed, and this Pool, we know not."*

*Again she writes "At her shrine in the Priory were miracles wrought and her head seems to have appeared among the relics treasured by the religious house at the Dissolution."*

*Of pilgrimages to St. Osburg's Shrine, the same writer states : "nor did the pilgrims who might be seen flocking to the shrine of St. Osburg or to the image of Our Lady in the Lady Tower on the London Road, hard by the White Friars'—to pay their devotions—invariably set about their task in a religious spirit."*

*There can be no doubt about the head of St. Osburg being one of Coventry's treasured relics, if the distinguished historian Poole—who quotes Dugdale—is not discredited. The latter writes : "Among the miscellaneous documents in the Charter House at Westminster, there is a paper containing an inventory of the reliques preserved in the*

*Monastery. It is entitled "The Inventorie of all manner of reliques conteyned in the Cathedral Church of Coventry. First a Shrine of Saynt Osborne, of copper ; Saynt Osborn's hedde closed in copper and gylte." Poole again observes : "the memory of the Holy Virgin St. Osburg, patroness of the original convent, seems to have retained its charm for the clergy and the people, through all fortunes and to the last ; for upon an appeal made by them to the Bishop of the Diocese, setting forth that many miracles had occurred in the restoration to health of sick and infirm people who visited her tomb in the Priory Church and implored her prayers, and thereupon petitioning the said Bishop that St. Osburg's birthday might be solemnized and her name revered by hymns and psalms, with devout suffrages ; a Synod of the clergy of the Archdeaconry was convened in the church on the 13<sup>th</sup> October, 1410, when it was determined that her ' said birthday ' should be solemnized and kept as a Festival throughout the Archdeaconry forever. With so much honour done to St. Osburg and even her birthday named, it is singularly unfortunate that no record is to be found of the year when, nor the place where, she was born."*

*The author of The Churches of Coventry, F. W. Woodhouse, relates that "the house of nuns at Coventry was Founded by the Virgin St. Osburg in the year 670 and ruled over by her." Pool designates Coventry as "the Convent town," and others have maintained that it was due to the presence of St. Osburg's convent that Coventry had been variously called "Conventria" and "Coventre" (tre signifying a town) but these explanations have long been rejected. Scant as this information is, it is extremely interesting, but still the date and place of the Saint's birth are left in obscurity. However, it is evident that our Catholic forefathers honoured and had great devotion to St. Osburg and on this account she was chosen as the Patroness of our church. We need not hesitate to honour one whom the Church has listed among her saints.*

*The building and Consecration of St. Osburg's took place during a memorable period known as "The Second Spring" (1818-1852). The church was first opened for Services within twelve years of the passing of the Catholic Emancipation Act (1819) and seventeen before another outstanding event—the first Synod of the restored hierarchy (1852). The Consecration ceremony was performed in 1845—the year of the potato famine in Ireland which drove thousands of Irish Catholics to this country and elsewhere, in October that same year John Henry Newman, afterwards Cardinal, was received into the Church. A great religious revival was in full swing, and through the*

*collapse of the Oxford movement, numerous converts, many of distinction, followed Newman's example.*



*Catholic churches sprang up everywhere, a sure sign of advance, and hopes for the Conversion of England were running high in some quarters. Dr. Ullathorne figured among the great Catholic leaders of those days, and his stay in Coventry wove the beginnings of the pattern of Catholic life here. It has, thanks to those who took up the threads after him, run colourfully through all the years to the present day. Catholics had, prior to Ullathorne's arrival, practised their Faith in comparative obscurity. Under his bold leadership they emerged from the catacombs into the light of day. His preaching attracted crowds to St. Osburg's and resulted in many conversions. His learning and zeal won for him the respect of non-catholics, and by degrees the barriers of prejudice were broken down. His elevation to the Episcopacy rejoiced his people but they were dismayed by their loss. Some who had questioned the wisdom of building a church like St. Osburg's which was regarded as too ambitious an undertaking, now felt that their judgement would prove right. Who could fill his place or wish to shoulder the burden of debt that was still on the mission? Who, if he had the zeal, would have the energy and drive so essential for carrying on his work? Such thoughts made little of the workings of Divine Providence.*

*The mission had been well established and the spirit animating the flock stood the test of the change and loss. A noble line of Shepherds came; many of them ruled long and well and to this day are remembered with affection by many in the congregation. They had not, perhaps, the brilliance of Ullathorne but possessed sterling qualities. They were men of mettle trained in the hard school of monastic observance. They were true to Benedictine missionary tradition in their devotion to duty and solicitude for the flock. There was nothing spectacular about their work; it was the sort that made for steady progress. The history of the mission is, therefore, from 1846, one of spiritual and material prosperity. Conscious of the labours of those who had gone before, these good pastors preserved all that had been handed on. Nevertheless, with an eye on the future, they introduced whatever tended to unite the people more closely in the exercise of good works. Therefore, in accordance with the decree of the first Provincial Synod of 1852, the Sodality of the Blessed Sacrament was established in January, 1854. The decree stated that "in order to promote devotion towards the Blessed Sacrament, it is fitting and desirable that the Sodality of the Blessed*

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*Sacrament be established in all Congregations where it can be done. The members will have under their especial care, the Altar and everything connected with it. The Sodality ought to be established in every congregation in preference to every other." The Holy Rosary Sodality had been started in 1845 and was<sup>s</sup> carefully fostered. Its weekly meetings were a bulwark of strength in uniting the people, and year by year membership increased.*

*The Society of St. Vincent de Paul was introduced in 1854 and has continued vigorously ever since. Then followed the Sodality of the Children of Mary in 1867. This does not seem to have fared so well until in 1887 it was reinvigorated by Father Paul McCabe. From that time the spirit and zeal of the members reached a high standard and is still maintained. It is not known when the Young Men's Society first started, but that it did exist is evident from the record about the laying of the foundation stones of the schools in 1875. Members of the Society, it states, took part in the procession from the church to the site where the ceremony was performed.*

*An equally good record stands on the material side. In April, 1854, the Spire was added to the Tower during Father Pratt's rectorship. The work was executed by a local builder, Mr. Taylor. Rising to a height of 130 ft., the Spire is seen from a great distance as Coventry is approached on the Birmingham road, and though not one of the "Three Spires," it is admired for its graceful lines and proportions. Harrington Tubular Chimes were installed in the Tower for the marriage of Sir Henry Tichborne which was solemnized at St. Osburg's on September 8th, 1887. This was fourteen years after the famous cause celebre. Never since the marriage of the late Duke of Norfolk did any social event excite so much interest as this marriage. Whitley Abbey was then the seat of the Petre family of which the bride was a member. The ceremony was performed by Monsignor Virtue, Bishop of Portsmouth, in the presence of a distinguished gathering of notable people. The mise en scene was worthy of the occasion and every available corner of St. Osburg's was decked with lilies, orchids and palms. The record states that although Gayarre and Hollman were detained elsewhere (the latter by Royal command), Lorraine came expressly from Paris to sing at the Mass. For the delectation of readers of the fair sex, the writer may be pardoned by the less interested for mentioning that the bridegroom presented the bride with a splendid Brussels lace veil and five strings of large pearls ; that nothing could be prettier than the bridesmaids' dresses of white and pale blue, with straw hats trimmed with blue ribbon and cornflowers ; that Lady Gwendoline Petre wore dahliai coloured velvet and pale pink. Lady Dormer wore grey and silver, Lady Denbigh heliotrope silk and. velvet, Lady Herbert of Lea was in black, and Lady Clara Fielding in silver grey silk. The Lords and bridegroom wore, we know not what. There was an amusing incident at the wedding. Admission to the church on this occasion was by ticket A well-dressed young man was refused entrance as he had not one. The consternation of the vergers may be imagined when he remarked that if they did not admit him there would be "no fun" for he was the bridegroom. The chimes mentioned above were in use and played hymn tunes before the Sunday Services until Father Finch unfortunately removed them between 1909 and 1911. He considered the weight of the chimes was damaging the Tower.*

*As Benedictines are particularly interested in and trained to the education, of the young, the priests took under their wing a Private Preparatory School about which something must be recorded in this publication. In the late fifties of the last century a private school was conducted at Walsall by a Mr. Richards. From it boys were sent on to Oscott and to Jesuit and Benedictine Colleges. The school was passed on to the*

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*three daughters of Mr. Richards and moved to Coventry. At first it was situated at the "Mount" directly opposite St. Mary's. When, in 1868, the site of the school was purchased for the foundation of a hospital, the Misses Richards moved to Primrose Hill, and the school was conducted in a large roomy house. It had its own chapel where priests from St. Osburg's said Mass for the boys on weekdays. East of the house was a farmyard and beyond this a field broken by two deep depressions running north and south for a hundred yards or more. North of the house was a fair sized level play ground where there was ample room for cricket and football in which games the boys had the encouragement of the priests. A drill sergeant from the local military gave regular drill instruction*



*The boys passed through East Street, which ran beside the playing field, to St. Osburg's which they attended on Sundays, On their return Miss Richards searchingly questioned them about the points of the sermon. Oftentimes Father Pereira would give them the points— after Mass—so that they might not incur punishment for dreaming during the sermon. The standard of education was evidently good, for an old student, Father Hiliary Wilson, O.S.B., of Ampleforth, states that when the boys went to other schools they were grateful for the excellent grounding" in Latin and French they had had at Primrose Hill. Boys came to the school from near and far, even from Malta, for the late Gerald, Lord Strickland and his brother Paul were students here. From Primrose Hill the school moved to Radford House and was then conducted by Miss Ruth Houghton, an assistant of Miss Richards. The latter then retired to Edgbaston where she died at a ripe old age. After a few years Miss Houghton transferred the school to Weston super Mare, where not many years after it was closed down for good,*

*A convent of the Sisters of Mercy was founded in Raglan Street in 1861 and was known as St. Mary's. The Nuns were settled in a small house and at first did some teaching at Foleshill. Later on a school was started in Raglan Street, and much good work was done by the Sisters among the poor. From this humble beginning sprang St. Joseph's Convent and more recently the new foundations at Offchurch and Crackley Hall where the Nuns are now well established.*

*It will be recalled that Father Cockshoot (1830-8) had built a school to replace Father Dawber's. With the growth of the congregation, the problem of accommodation for children of school age again arose. Land was therefore purchased adjoining the church in 1871 and plans were drawn up for a school for girls and infants with a second for boys. The Foundation Stones for these were blessed and laid on Thursday, April 8th, 1875, by Bishop Collier, O.S.B., and Abbot Smith, O.S.B., the Provincial of Canterbury. The ceremony took place after Mass and his Lordship addressed the people. The buildings were completed in what must have been record time for they were opened on October 5<sup>th</sup> 1875. These schools met the requirements of the Board of Education until 1938 when they had to be replaced. To mark continuity the old Foundation Stones were incorporated in the schools built 1938-40. Many of the present day parishioners remember the aged Bishop Collier who lived in retirement here from 1873-90. He was Prior of St. Edmund's Monastery, Douai (1833-40) and was consecrated Bishop of Mauritius on May 3rd, 1840. The small chapel at the end of the sacristy corridor of St. Osburg's was built for him and was known as the Collier Chapel. Some of the good Bishop's vestments are still in use. He died at Coventry on November 21st, 1890. A former parishioner, Mr. E. J. Pollard, has informed the writer that Father Norbert Birt told him he had found among the Bishop's books, after his death, a copy of the Breeches Bible. This too, we hope, will find its way back to St. Osburg's and be placed with other recovered treasures.*

*It has not been possible to discover any accurate figures about the number of Catholics in Coventry in 1875, but statistics obtained from Downside show that there were 2500 in 1881. For the years 1887-8-9 the number given is 3,000. The increase is accounted for by the rapid development in industrial life which brought many to Coventry. The church finance rose accordingly and many improvements in the sacred edifice were made. For the comfort of worshippers a Renton Gibbs heating system was installed. This seems to have been something of a novelty judging by the description which the local press gave of it. The old wooden pulpit was replaced by one of Caen stone with traceried open panels, columns of Devonshire marble and cornice of Alabaster. Both panels and cornice were destroyed during the November raid of 1940. In the recorded list of "improvements" the chancel floor is next mentioned. This was relaid with encaustic tiles and grey fossil marble divided into panels. In 1884 the original High Altar with its detached Reredos, a perfect example of a liturgical altar was replaced by another of fourteenth century style. It was the gift of Miss Campbell and a memorial to her mother who had been a benefactress of St. Osburg's. The new altar with a towering stone canopy blocked out a great part of the ancient and beautiful stained glass east window. Both altar and window were destroyed when the church was bombed.*

*In 1891, the year when the Benedictine Missions were divided between the Monasteries and Coventry was assigned to Downside, the number of Catholics under the care of St. Osburg's had so increased that another church became necessary. Catholics living in the Hill Fields district were numerous and had to hear Mass at St. Osburg's or in the school chapel attached to St. Mary's Convent in Raglan Street. With apostolic zeal the priests set themselves to the task of establishing another mission. A plot of land adjoining the convent was therefore bought and Father Placid Rea, O.S.B., was appointed priest in charge. A four days' bazaar was held in the Corn Exchange in October, 1891, and realized £763. The foundation stone of what is now the Church of St. Mary and St. Benedict was blessed and laid by Bishop Ilsley on Thursday, February 9th, 1893. The church was opened on Tuesday, November 21<sup>st</sup> 1893. Pontifical Mass was sung by Bishop Ilsley in the presence of His Eminence Cardinal Vaughan, and the Most Revd. Archbishop Scarisbrick, O.S.B. — a former Parish Priest at Wappenbury. The*

*Cardinal preached at the Mass and St. Osburg's choir rendered the music.*

*The establishment of St. Mary's parish reduced the number of souls at St. Osburg's from 3,000 to 2,200. There was a gradual reduction during the next few years so that in 1895 the mission numbered 1,700. The decrease went on, and it was not until 1907 that the 2,000 mark was again reached. From that date on to 1918 the number rose to 2,300. Then it fell again and in 1926, when Downside handed St. Osburg's over to Douai, there were 1,600 souls all told.*

### **JUBILEE, SEPTEMBER, 1895**

*The celebrations for this happy event were characterized by a solemnity and heartiness befitting the occasion. Masses commenced at half past five in the morning and continued every half hour till 9.30. The interior of the church was decorated in every part with flowers and plants. The candles in front of the Consecration crosses round the walls were decorated with shields bearing the names of the rectors of the church during the past fifty years. At 11.00am. Pontifical Mass was sung by Bishop Ilsley, the assistant priest being the Very Revd. H. Edmund Ford, O.S.B., Prior of Downside. The Deacons at the Throne were Dom Benedict Weld Blundell and Dom Aldhelm Burton, O.S.B. The Deacons at the Mass were Dom Placid Turner, O.S.B., and Brother Wulstan Pearson, O.S.B. (later Bishop). The Master of Ceremonies was Dom Norbert Birt, O.S.B., assisted by Mr. James Kelly. Other Benedictines present were Fathers Pereira, Paul McCabe, Abbot Moore, Placid Rae, and the Very Revd. Wulstan Richards, who had been present at the Consecration of the Church in 1845. The sermon was preached by Bishop Hedley, O.S.B., who was attended by Father Beech, chaplain to St. Joseph's Convent, Coventry. In the afternoon the Bishop of Birmingham confirmed about 100 persons. Pontifical Vespers were sung in the evening by Bishop and Clergy. The singing of Vespers was accompanied on the organ by Prior Ford, O.S.B. Dom Wulstan Richards preached. The collections for the day amounted to £70.*

*The foundation of the Parish of St. Elizabeth and St. Helen marks the advent of the Secular Clergy into Coventry. From 1912 to 1913 Sunday Mass was offered in a hired room in Highfield Street, and from November 1913, to October 1915, in a cinema. The foundation stones of the Church and Schools were laid by Bishop Ilsley on October 3rd, 1914. The school was used for Holy Mass and other services until the Church was opened in June, 1916. The Presbytery was added in 1926-7. The Parish was founded by the present Rt. Revd. L. S. Emery, President of Oscott. St. Mary's was transferred by Downside to the Archbishop of Birmingham in 1918.*

*The Church of All Souls, situated in Earlsdon, was founded from St. Osburg's by Dom Michael Caffrey, O.S.B., to provide facilities for this evergrowing district and to afford a fitting memorial to those who lost their lives in the Great War. The foundation was laid by Archbishop McIntyre on September 29<sup>th</sup> 1923, the first Mass being celebrated at midnight, Christmas, December 25<sup>th</sup> 1924. The Church was formally opened by Bishop Pearson, O.S.B., on May 28<sup>th</sup> 1923-. A large gathering of priests and laity assisted at the Pontifical Mass which followed the Blessing of the Church. The sermon was preached by Abbot Ramsey, O.S.B., of Downside. His words are so applicable to our own times that a resume of his sermon is now included. He said "the great lesson of Christian responsibilities was driven home to them in a special way by the fact that that church was their War Memorial. There came to them the vision of all that their countrymen had done by way of sacrifice to save them, and their country, and the world, and they felt that if those men had given their lives that*

*others might live, they today should live their lives in such a way as showed in time of peace the heroism which they showed in time of war. There could be no more fitting War Memorial than the erection of a Catholic Church, because that building, like any other Christian Church, was a direct challenge to all materialistic principles of action, which made the war not only possible but inevitable."*

*"In the midst of the agony of war, when our losses were being felt in every corner of the country, bringing sorrow that was intermingled with pride, a great Statesman endeavoured to enhearten us by telling us the war was to end war. The appeal was a powerful one. Men were feeling more and more the insanity which brought the best of Europe face to face with the object of mutual annihilation ; that the noblest results of science were being applied for destruction ; and people felt that such a thing should never be again, and that any sacrifice at the moment would be well made. But no sooner was the war over than it became quite evident that the forces which brought it about were still active in the world, and men soon began to think of the next war as inevitable, and they drew sickening pictures of the horrors which were in store for those who would join in it. That appeal, as originally made, had been found to be void ; yet they were under an obligation to carry on war to end war."*

*"War at times was inevitable. Under certain conditions there was nothing for it but to fight it out, but it rested with those who recognized the true destiny of men, and those who had before them the true ideal of human life. It rested with those who lived their lives day by day with such intensity of high purpose that there might be no room for low motives and principles which lay at the bottom of all wars. They had to carry on the constant struggling against evil and error in their own lives, and they had to bring their Christian principles to bear on the problems of daily life and conduct."* Catholics in Earlsdon owe a lasting debt to the late Dom Bernard Ryan, O.S.B., the first priest in charge of All Souls. His activity on behalf of the Catholic Evidence Guild, his untiring energy and zeal for the good of his people marked him as a truly apostolic priest. His labours brought his young life to a close, for after a few days' illness he died at All Souls on June 17th, 1928. He is buried in London Road Cemetery. Three other Benedictines served this mission. The second of these, Dom Hildebrand Conrath, died in the Coventry and Warwickshire Hospital after an operation. He was buried at Douai Abbey, Woolhampton. During the rectorship of Dom Bernard Buggins, O.S.B.—now dead—the mission was transferred to the Archbishop of Birmingham in September, 1938.

*The Sacred Heart Parish was founded from St. Mary's in 1924 at Harefield Road, Stoke. It is thus a grandchild of St. Osburg's. A modern school was first built and there Mass was said until the church and presbytery were built. The church was solemnly opened on October 1<sup>st</sup> 1934.*

*In 1932 the Parish of Christ the King was created to meet the needs of a rapidly growing part of St. Osburg's, in the Radford area. This work was undertaken by the Secular Clergy. Mass was said for about six months in a local cinema. The present temporary church, opened on January 22nd, 1933, will be replaced by a permanent one worthy of this still growing district.*

*In 1944 a residence was purchased in Cheylesmore by the Diocesan Authorities for a secular priest. This district was formerly divided between St. Osburg's and St. Mary's. Land has been secured and plans prepared for the building of church and schools. Meantime Mass is said on Sundays in a Hall belonging to the Church of England, and in*

*one or other of the hostels where war workers are housed. This latest parish is therefore in the direct line of descent from St. Osburg's.*

*Like a proud mother, the old church now sees a vigorous and healthy offspring on all sides of her. To one and all she has donated her life's blood. In the giving she lost none of her vigour or strength. Her fond hope is that before many years her children will be as prolific as herself.*

### **THE LAST PHASE**

*Numerically, St. Osburg's reached the peak of her years of existence between 1935 and 1940 for there were more than 3,000 souls under her care. The founding of other missions considerably lessened parochial boundaries and there was a natural reduction in numbers but this was gradually compensated for by the constant influx of industrial workers. It was providential, for at this time the whole of the property demanded attention. An old enemy of former years reappeared, the death-watch beetle. It had ravaged the wooden screens and seats in the church, the vestment chests and cupboards in the sacristy. Fear for the roof led to the complete removal of all these. The church was therefore refurnished with English oak seating ; the sacristy was fitted up anew but the screens were not replaced. This was done at considerable cost (£1,000)*

*The heating system in the church, both antiquated and worn out, had to be replaced. This was done and both Presbytery and Church were then for the first time heated from one source : an up-to-date automatic stoker and boiler. These, with new pipes and radiators, cost well over £1,000. The money was raised in a comparatively short time, for the parishioners appreciated what had been done.*

*The most costly of all undertakings then confronted the mission, new schools and parish hall. No one could disagree with the findings of the Education Authority, for the schools were out of date, further repairs a waste of money, and the class-rooms were inadequate for the numbers of children. The congregation rose to the occasion and supported the priests who tried every means of raising money. An appeal for the first £1,000 was made to all workers. The sum was realized in six weeks. Plans were then made by the well-known architect, Mr. George Bernard Cox of Birmingham, submitted to and approved by the Board of Education. The estimated cost of Schools and Hall was £16,000. That all had bent their backs to the raising of the money may now be revealed, for when the buildings were completed all but £7,500 had been found.*

*The foundation stone of the new school was blessed and laid by His Grace, Dr. Williams, D.D., M.A., Archbishop of Birmingham, at 3 o'clock on Thursday, November 5<sup>th</sup> 1938. A great concourse of people was gathered there but no representative of the Local Education Authority was present. The non-acceptance of an invitation was a discourtesy ; a lack of appreciation of efforts being made for the better education of poor children in the best possible schools. It was the more discouraging to people who while having to pay rates and taxes out of which other schools are built, are penalized by having to find the money for schools where their children will receive religious as well as secular education. It is to be hoped that Catholics who have not shirked their duties in a war fought for Freedom and Liberty of Conscience, will receive a better measure of justice in post-war years.*



*The new schools and hall were completed in April, 1940. On the 28<sup>th</sup> of that month, after the last Mass on Sunday, the Right Revd. Lord Abbot of Douai Abbey, Dom Sylvester Mooney, O.S.B., M.A., solemnly blessed and opened the new buildings. The hall was formally opened on that Sunday evening with a Grand Concert given by the Orchestra of the New Hippodrome, Coventry.*

*With the completion of schools and hall, the mission was now in order in every part. Interiorly and exteriorly both Presbytery and Church were as perfect as could be desired. The schools and hall were recognized as among the best in Coventry. St. Osburg's had then one thing to concentrate on—the coming Centenary of the Consecration of the Church. But alas the inevitable evil of war fell upon the mission, and the work of a lifetime, the sacrifices of a people, and hopes for the future lay in the dust.*

### **DESTRUCTION AND RESURRECTION**

*The following account was not intended for publication, but at the request of the Abbot of Douai Abbey, is now included.*

*This narrative is confined to one aspect of the great raid on Coventry in November, 1940, for the writer's experience was limited to one locality. A more comprehensive description of the raid as a whole is therefore precluded, and in any case would be irrelevant in this brochure. The raid, as it affected St. Osburg's, can only be described as one has experienced it and felt it. Impressions are personal and are as varied as they are personal, but the writer is confident that whatever statements are made in this narrative will be endorsed by all who were at St. Osburg's on that awful night. No idea of the horrors of that ordeal can be formed without some knowledge of the prelude to it. This may be likened to the heavy barrage put up before some enemy position is stormed. It was the wearing down of endurance and resistance brought about by endless disturbed and sleepless nights that made the onslaught all the more terrible when it came. How rarely one lay down on a bed—and that in a coal cellar—before the early hours of the morning. The nightly sirens, the long tiring anxious hours of fire watching, a few hours of restless sleep and then the daily round of duties ! All these shattered or put nerves on edge. Then the constant strain and the anticipation and dread of sinister happenings created depression. There was ground enough for fear at St. Osburg's for already there had been unpleasant incidents in raids. Delayed action bombs had driven us from the house more than once. Buildings within a short distance had been wrecked. All these were like the gathering of a storm. When it finally broke with all its fury, little wonder resistance was at its lowest, and we suffered the more. Only those who remained in Coventry night after night (and how many did not) can appreciate this.*

*To describe the raid—as experienced—is like trying to disentangle and make a coherent story of the thousand and one hairbreadth escapes of some gruesome nightmare. Some details impressed themselves so indelibly on the mind that, after four years, they are still vivid realities. Comparisons have been made about the effect of the raid on one part of the city or another. Some have exaggerated ; others have minimized ; none can deny certain confronting evidence and few have failed to recognize that St. Osburg's was as bad a target as any in Coventry that night.*

*Certainly no community suffered a greater loss, but how carefully this was ignored by the powers that be, especially when distinguished visitors made a tour of the city.*

*If the raid had never happened, the night of November 14<sup>th</sup> -15<sup>th</sup> , 1940, would always be remembered as phenomenal for never was night more beautiful. How cloudless and clear the heavens, how still and invigorating the air. The moon at the full bathed the earth in such brightness that its borrowed glory seemed to vie with that of the midday sun. The heavens were telling the Glory of the Lord. Then, suddenly, it seemed that the powers of evil were leaping from hell itself to challenge and destroy this manifestation of God's might and majesty, for there fell on the ear the wailing as of lost souls in the bottomless pit, the all too frequent and familiar sirens, the warning of impending doom.*

*At seven o'clock the supper gong sounded and the priests went to the dining room. Grace was said but the meal was left untouched for the "alert" was sounding and already could be heard the drone of approaching planes. Housekeeper and maid were despatched to the cellar, our "dug-out" and the priests went to their posts. The planes were overhead when one of a group of young Irishmen arrived, who every night for months on end came to assist us in "fire watching." Their names should go down to posterity—Hugh Ferric, Joseph McCrudden, Gerald Kearns and Peter Rooney. So also their pious custom of going into the dark church, more often than not in the early hours of the morning after the "allclear" had sounded— to recite the Rosary in thanksgiving for the preservation of the schools, the church and its priests. To them the writer pays tribute for their loyalty and devotion.*

*It was not long before enemy planes had selected their targets and loads of incendiaries of exploding type were raining down. People were caught in the streets for none expected an onslaught so soon after the "warning." Some rushed for shelters, others for their homes. Many reached neither. It was obvious that the gas container opposite St. Osburg's school was a "selected target", for the incendiaries were lying all around it. Many of these fell near the priory and were dealt with until sand bags were exhausted. In previous raids though bombs had fallen in the garden, no damage was done to house or church, but it was all too evident that if the gas container was hit, St. Osburg's would be in imminent peril.*

*Hundreds of burning bombs lay about the streets and in gardens, for no one could deal with them. Some were kicked away from the house into the road until an order was shouted from the Wardens' post opposite the house to "take cover" and leave the deadly things alone. A hurried inspection of the church and schools was made. All so far was safe there, but for how long? Down in the cellar we recited the Rosary. Heavy bombs were now falling thick and fast. No one could distinguish sound from sound for the uproar from guns and bursting bombs seemed to have merged into a deafening peal of continuous thunder. We were startled by something that bumped heavily against the front door, and when opening it expected to find a delayed bomb there. Instead, crouching in the doorway were two young men who had run up Hill Street but could go no further and had dropped exhausted. They were got into the cellar and revived with hot tea which someone had managed to make. Before many minutes the doorbell rang and imagination conjured up the worst. Was the church on fire or the schools? Had a Warden come to warn us? It was the night watchman from the gasworks who had come to advise us to find a safer place. He pointed to the gas container. There was no need for words. It was ablaze. Anything might now happen with this menacing fire so close at hand. The flames had but to stretch across the*

*street and the Hall would be involved. Fortunately there was no wind and the flames soared into the heavens. The sight filled one with terror, for now church, house, schools stood out more clearly than ever. The brave old man who had disregarded his own for our safety, went back to his post, and we to the cellar to acquaint the rest of the situation. Whatever the danger, whatever the risk, the priests could not abandon their post. They were not insensible nor indifferent to the danger, and the writer was certainly not without fear. A sense of duty kept them there. Others who had no such obligation decided to remain, come what may, and are to be admired. To have gone out into the streets would in any case have meant instant death for the raid was now gaining in weight and speed. Squadron after squadron of planes swept in and swooped down releasing their deadly loads. Bombardment and barrage went on, but how futile seemed defences. The house shook and trembled and one expected it to tumble down from the constant shocks. Then came whistling bombs which, because of their penetrating and bloodcurdling screech, were the most disturbing of all. Each of these diabolical missiles created the impression that it was plunging into the cellar and one instinctively "ducked" to avoid disaster. While this lasted it was difficult for imagination not to run riot. The ordeal went on like an endless chain, planes, bombs, explosions, the crashing of buildings, till one almost wished death would come and quickly. We wondered how parishioners were faring, how many would survive this overwhelming fury. For them and ourselves we recited Rosary after Rosary. Some time about nine o'clock it was decided to leave the house for one had the uncanny feeling that something sinister was stealthily closing in on us. A premonition? We abandoned the cellar and went into the church. A few minutes after, the house was wrecked and its ceilings, floors and broken furniture filled the cellar. Providence was certainly guiding us and saved us all from an untimely death.*

*The church, though blacked out, was not in darkness for there poured through the unscreened clerestory windows the glow from fires near by and especially that of the gas container. From the side door could be seen the flames leaping high into the heavens like a volcano. Church and schools could not long escape, of this one felt sure. Then came the problem, where could we go? One retreat was left, the heating chamber under the school, at the top end of the church avenue, and there the reinforced floor of the schoolroom above would afford greater protection. But to reach the place meant crossing the avenue which was being constantly spattered with shrapnel and bomb fragments. We considered removing the Blessed Sacrament, but where? It would be safer in the strong tabernacle on the altar, and there it remained. We went down on our knees and examined our conscience, made an act of contrition and received general Absolution.*

*Then a few hurried instructions about crossing to the schools. As soon as bombs dropped and exploded, one at a time rushed across the avenue until all were safe below ground again. We were huddled together in a very confined space but we had both warmth and electric light. This had to be put out almost immediately for the coverings over the coke shoots were swept away by the blast of a heavy bomb. This fell into soft earth near the entrance to the church and did considerable damage to the porch and main entrance to the school. The explosion shook the buildings; blast rushed down the shoots and stirred up the coke dust which choked and blinded us. Some of the party sat on old boxes, the rest stood. Once again, we recited the Rosary. Then the thundering planes were over us again and we waited as so often before for the bomb that would destroy us. Suddenly there came an explosion, which lifted the school, and we were deafened by the crashing of some building. A few minutes later we knew that this was the church. A mine had struck the Lady Chapel and Sanctuary.*

*It was about ten o'clock. We had not recovered from this appalling shock when the schools were hit. The noise of the falling walls was terrifying for it seemed we were going to be buried under them.*

*The upheaval subsided and there was a lull. It was then that we heard Mr. and Mrs. Brennan who were in charge of the Club, rushing along the space at the back of the schools. They had been bombed out, for the Club had had two direct hits while they were in it. They were very badly shaken but in spite of their dreadful ordeal were full of pluck. Like ourselves they had escaped one danger for another. Within a few minutes the bombing started again. It was then that Mrs. Brennan produced a whiskey bottle. In the dim light of a torch its contents looked pale and one concluded it was gin. Mrs. Brennan banded it to someone with the remark, "Now all of you take a drop of this, it will do you good." When asked "What is it?" perhaps some were disappointed with the answer. "It is Lourdes water. Thank God I managed to save it!" The bottle was passed round and if parched throats received physical comfort we were not without spiritual solace and felt that our Lady was watching over us. With confidence we again invoked Her—"O Mary conceived without sin, pray for us who have recourse to thee"*

*The next few minutes were perhaps the most terrifying of all that night. A load of incendiaries fell on to the main building of the school and before long several fires had started. Then a heavy bomb exploded in the lobby almost over our heads. Walls subsided and crashed down on the cellar. Water pipes were burst and before many minutes we were ankle deep in water. It was obvious we must find some other place of retreat, but where? In vain we tried to raise the escape hatch into the school corridor for this was weighed down with debris. Our only way of escape was the steps that led into the cellar. Across these, flames were already leaping for the schools had now become an inferno.*

*The tower of the church still stood and it was decided to make for this. Somehow all reached the church with nothing worse than a few bruises and scratches. A ghastly spectacle confronted us. Save for the Baptistry, the whole interior of the church was an appalling melee. The roof on the Gospel side had gone completely ; windows had been blown out ; all of the new oak seating was shattered and piled up in heaps ; the organ was smashed to atoms ; the sanctuary—nothing of the altar could be seen for tons of masonry. Stones and timbers were still falling so we retreated into the Baptistry. Through the gap in the roof the blue sky of a few hours ago was no longer seen but only the glare of fires and thick black clouds of smoke. Suffocating hot air and smoke from the blazing school filled the church, more and more bombs were being hurled into the fire, and this, one felt sure, would soon spread to the church. The crackling of burning wood and the roar of the terrific fire within a few yards of us sounded like demoniacal voices chiding us with the hopelessness of our position.*

*For the first time it was evident that nerves were giving way and who could blame those who wanted to rush out? Feelings so long pent up were in the grip of blank despair but fortunately a few reasoned words restored the balance. To leave the protecting thickness of the church walls, to enter the streets now strewn with dead and dying, for such was the case, meant death from machine guns, shrapnel or blast. Bidding all remain in the Baptistry, the priests and Hugh Ferric decided to inspect the house. Climbing over and creeping under obstacles of all kinds, at length the door of the sacristy corridor was reached but the corridor itself was blocked up with debris to a height of twelve feet or more. We got into the house. What a sight! The place had*

*been gutted. Parts of walls still stood ; some wobbled and fell ; windows and doors had been blasted away ; that heavy oak front door of a hundred years lay in the street; furniture smashed to bits lay on all sides ; the figure of the Crucified hung by one arm. The ground floor was full of wreckage but the stairs to the cellar were almost clear. We went down. A small portion of the vaulted brick ceiling remained over part of the passage. Into this "hole" below a tumbled down house we brought the rest of the party. It was now close on midnight ; all sat down on the floor with backs to the wall. Indifferent to the water in which we had to sit, utterly indifferent to everything, even to prayer, for now we were too exhausted to pray. No one spoke ; no one wanted to ; some even dozed but were jolted back to the reality of the danger by further bombs. Then there was a definite lull ; the deafening noises ceased. The two young men brought into the house at the beginning of the raid, got up. They decided against all advice to make for home. Persuasion was in vain. Who were they? What their names? Where were their homes? None knew, but they were not Catholics. They set off down Hill Street but could not have reached Bangor Street before more heavy bombs fell in the vicinity. Whether they reached home none ever heard. If they live, they may recall that St. Osburg's for part of that night shielded them from harm. The rest of the party stayed on until round about six or halfpast in the morning, regardless that at any moment the ruins might fall in and bury all alive. Towards six o'clock the last of the bombs in this locality fell. One of small calibre dropped at the top of the stairs. When it exploded one of the party had his head badly knocked against the wall and suffered concussion. His inability to answer the "roll call" somewhat alarmed the rest. However he lived to write this tale. There was a long silence; no more bombs ; no siren to sound the "all clear" Voices were heard in the street. Someone was saying "Yes it is finished." That ghastly night of crucifixion was ended. We crawled, so cramped were limbs, up the stairs and into the street. Looking towards the city there was no semblance of anything formerly known.*

*A vast sea of fire surged everywhere ; buildings swayed and toppled into the flames of fires that leapt up to the heavens ; delayed bombs exploded, some none too far distant. St. Osburg's new schools still smouldered and clouds of choking smoke hung like a funeral pall over all. Houses all around lay in ruins; the streets were torn up and bestrewn with broken railings, bricks and glass. And the Church? Fortunately the fire which had started there was put out by the blast of the mine which wrecked the Sanctuary. An inspection of the Church revealed that nothing could be done about the Tabernacle for great masses of masonry would have to be removed. Near the sanctuary lay the great driving shaft and cogwheels of some machinery which had been hurled into the church from a factory not far away. The statues of the Sacred Heart, Our Lady, St. Benedict, and St. Joseph stood unharmed in their accustomed places. The Lourdes Grotto was destroyed. St. Peter's statue hard by had not been disturbed on its pedestal, but some weeks later a heartless vandal went into the ruins and broke the statue to atoms. The walls of the nave though badly damaged exteriorly seemed sound enough within. At that time it seemed that St. Osburg's would have to be completely rebuilt. With heavy hearts we made our way to Radford. There if the priests' house still stood, we might rest for a while and plan for the removal of the Blessed Sacrament. People were now appearing in the church avenue ; many heard what had befallen their church and that both priests had been killed. So the begrimed and bedraggled party trudged on to Radford. At last the Presbytery was reached, but so full was it of women and children from the school shelter that we made our way to the house of Mr. and Mrs. Branney. Their kindness and sympathy can never be forgotten, never fully repaid.*

## The History of The Most Holy Sacrament and St. Osburg's, Coventry

About 8.30 the parish priest returned to St. Osburg's, gathered together some stalwart young Irishmen and set about the task of reaching the Tabernacle. With nothing but their bare hands, these men tore away and heaved aside great massive stones until the priest was able to open the Tabernacle door. The Sacred Species were found intact. The lid of one ciborium with its silken veil lay near its base, but not a single Host had been disturbed. Then came the saddest moment of all. On the morning before, the last Mass had been offered at the Altar and the Presence before which it had been offered was now to be removed. Our Lord must leave His Temple in which for nearly 100 years He had been adored and where He had fed with His own Body the souls of countless men. Did the thousands of Faithful Departed who once worshipped here, the good priests of days of long ago, the pious nun resting in her grave near by and her sainted Mother Margaret, witness this departure of His ? One imagined all of them uttering the lamentation of the Magdalen of old—"They have taken away my Lord" and hoped that their prayers would help to bring Him back again. St. Osburg's became an empty tomb on November 15th 1940. As we bore Him away we prayed that by Him, and in Him and through Him, all might be soon restored.

Early that same day His Grace, Archbishop Williams and his Coadjutor, Dr. Griffin, now Archbishop of Westminster, came to Coventry to express their sympathy and show their solicitude for all of us. We recall this with deep gratitude for it meant much to us in that dark day of trial. Such of the Sacred Vessels and vestments that were salvaged Dr. Griffin took in his car to Coleshill. There our belongings received the attention of the Nuns, especially Sister Veronica, who repaired and cleaned our treasures. These were safeguarded at Coleshill until we were able to use them again. May the people of St. Osburg's ever remember these kindnesses and in return repay the good Nuns at Coleshill by helping them in their great work of mercy.

A report was made to the Abbot of Douai Abbey in view of which it was deemed impossible to do anything about the parish until after the war. The priests were advised to return to their monastery. Parishioners had to find houses where they could, for hundreds like the priests themselves, were homeless. So the flock scattered the flock which but a few hours ago numbered some 3,000 dwindled down to about 300 souls. There was no longer a church, a presbytery, a hall, a school. The priests sought in vain for a house where for the time being the Mass could be retained.

Father Rooney, the Parish Priest at Christ the King, kindly consented to St. Osburg's priests residing at his presbytery as paying guests and they took up residence there. After some weeks the assistant priest was transferred to Studley.

After the raid until the following Christmas most of our flock who remained attended Mass at Radford. During this period Mr. John Kirby, the caretaker of St. Osburg's, and the parish priest salvaged whatever could be reached in the ruins of the house and church. Mother Margaret's statue was among the few things thus saved. The only place left for storage was the damaged hall. In a later raid most of the recovered goods were destroyed by fire bombs. About the middle of October, Mr. May joined this small "working party" and rendered invaluable service. More often than not the work went on by the dim light of candles. Eventually the corridor of the school was partitioned off at the foot of the stairs near the main entrance. The only material available was scrap timber from the blitzed buildings. At the further end of the corridor, an Altar—if such it could be called—was set up in a small recess. The only window, crudely improvised, was near the Altar. Three small oil lamps were placed in the corridor and when lit hardly dispelled the gloom. Heating of any kind was out of the question.

*Alongside the walls a few salvaged chairs were ranged. The Headmaster's room, without door and windows, served as a sacristy. In this was set up a confessional—the type that would never be “passed” at an Episcopal Visitation “Approval” was presumed.*

*The work of preparation for Christmas was done and all was in readiness. An announcement then appeared in the local press. “Mass will be celebrated on Christmas Day in St. Osburg's School Corridor at 8.0, 9.0, and 10 o'clock. Benediction after the last Mass” They who attended any of those Masses had probably never experienced such cold and discomfort. In days to come when the church is restored to its pristine splendour, worshippers will feel elated that they lived to be present at so great an event. The greatest event in the history of St. Osburg's during the past 100 years, is not the restoration of bricks and mortar, but of the Holy Mass. “IT IS THE MASS THAT MATTERS.” To that Corridor Chapel with all the poverty and bleakness of the first Bethlehem Our Lord came. “The Word was made Flesh and dwelt amongst us” The gladness of our hearts at His coming resembled, in some small way, we hope, that of His Blessed Mother when she first gazed on Him, and made up for the absence of all we desired but were unable to offer.*

*So the Mass was restored and has continued to be offered in the parish ever since. Gradually improvements were made. Electric light was installed, together with an anthracite stove, but nothing could be done to prevent melting snow or rain from seeping through the cracked ceiling. With all the ingenuity in the world, the “Chapel” remained a dreary makeshift. As such, Hugh Ferric and his bride will remember it, for there on January 4<sup>th</sup> 1941, was celebrated their Nuptial Mass after their marriage in the ruined church which he had so often helped the priests to safeguard. It was not possible to have daily Mass until a priests' residence was secured in the parish. Early in January No. 21 Meriden Street became vacant and was rented for a presbytery. Holy Mass was said there for the first time on January 23<sup>d</sup> 1941. A conservatory at the back of the house was converted into a small chapel. There was accommodation for about a dozen people only. Meantime Sunday Masses continued to be said in the school corridor. Conditions there were almost unbearable. Every effort made to have either the Hall or Club repaired was rejected by officials and so it became a question of how long priest and people could endure the extreme cold and discomfort of the Corridor. At a time when everything looked blackest a good Samaritan came along in the person of the Vicar of St. John's Church, the Revd. Mr. Clayton. He offered to rent to St. Osburg's a small chapel in Spon Street. This had been blitzed but had been repaired. The offer was accepted with gratitude. On the 23<sup>d</sup> of March—Laetare Sunday—1941, four Masses were said at St. Saviour's, for so the chapel was called. The return of the assistant priest made possible all customary services. Meantime another house, 29 Barras Lane, became the priests' residence from April 21<sup>st</sup> 1941, to November 21<sup>st</sup> 1942.*

*Keeping in view the possibility of the restoration of St. Osburg's, No. 29 Meriden Street was bought by the Abbot of Douai for a presbytery. As events have turned out it was a wise speculation.*

*From March 23<sup>d</sup> 1941, until April 7<sup>th</sup> 1944 (Good Friday) St. Osburg's Congregation had the sole use of St. Saviour's. Those who fill our places in years to come may never realize the full significance of this. It is well to make it perfectly clear, but for the generosity of the Revd. R. Clayton and his flock, it is absolutely certain that St. Osburg's Congregation as such could not have survived. St. Saviour's enabled the*

*priests to remnite the scattered flock and afforded our people opportunities of practising their Faith. These statements are made with one express purpose. It is that St. Osburg's of the future may never be unmindful that she owes her very existence to those who are not one with her in Faith and practice. At a time when our schools were destroyed St. John's schools were opened to us. There our Catholic children were taught by their own Catholic teachers from November 225<sup>th</sup> 1940, until April 5<sup>th</sup> 1944. The writer seizes upon this opportunity of expressing on behalf of St. Osburg's of today the most profound and sincere thanks to all our benefactors at St. John's. May God bless and reward them all.*

*A thousand and one interesting details could be added to this account of St. Osburg's during the long years of the war. They cannot be dealt with now. Another must take up the story where this one finishes. The writer wishes to record that of all impressions he has had one stands out more than any other. It is the deep affection for and attachment to this Mother Church, which Catholics and non Catholics alike have manifested. This has encouraged and inspired him throughout a difficult period. What crowds gathered in the ruins whenever a Service was held there. The May Processions in honour of Our Lady with all the customary devotion, dignity and colourfulness of bygone happier days; the great concourse of 1,5000 that assembled in the roofless and seatless church for the first High Mass of Dom Peter Lye, O.S.B., on Easter Sunday, 1942, all revealed the longing of the exiled for the return of this revered House of God. When at length the message was given that St. Osburg's was to be repaired, all gloom and sense of frustration vanished.*

*No one who saw the havoc which bombs had wrought ever dreamt that the church would be used again. For nearly three years the ruins were exposed to all weather conditions. The work of repairing was therefore difficult.*

*Operations started in October 1943, but before this, men of the parish had cleared tons of debris from the church. When the builders finished their task in March 1944, men and women voluntarily undertook the cleaning of the church. For days and days and night after night they toiled with right goodwill. When they had completed this self\*appointed task, the interior of St. Osburg's looked as though it had never been wrecked.*

*The immediate preparations for the reopening now commenced. An Altar was set up in the temporary apse which was to serve as a Sanctuary ; statues were redecorated and set into place ;500 chairs were arranged in rows ; an organ, the gift of an anonymous donor was put into the choir gallery and all being now ready the date for the reopening was fixed— Easter, 1944.*

*Our occupation of St. Saviour's ended with Stations of the Cross on Good Friday evening, 1944. The whole of the Ceremonies for Holy Saturday were carried out in St. Osburg's after which Mass was sung. So Our Lord came back to abide with us. In His glorious Resurrection St. Osburg's rejoiced in her own.*

*The formal Reopening took place on Easter Sunday, 1944, with a Solemn High Mass of Thanksgiving. In their hundreds the people had received Our Lord in Holy Communion that day and returned for this great event, so that the church was filled in every part. After the Gospel, letters received from the Apostolic Delegate, from the Archbishop of the Diocese and from Canon Clayton the Vicar of St. John's, were read. The Papal Blessing was granted to all who had' assisted in the restoration of the church. In the evening Compline was sung ; the Rt. Revd. Mgr. L. Emery, V.G., preached ; Solemn*



*Benediction was given, and so ended one of the most historic days in the history of St. Osburg's.*

*On Sunday, September 9th, 1945, St. Osburg's will attain the Centenary of its Consecration to God. The present war scarred condition in which the church stands will prevent celebrations befitting the occasion. When complete restoration has been effected, this can be remedied.*

*The writer wishes to end this story on the note with which it began—gratitude to those who have gone before signed with the Seal of Faith, who fulfilled their duty whether as priests or layfolk, who handed on the rich legacy of Faith to future generations. Be ours the endeavour to merit the gratitude of generations to come for what may have been and has yet to be achieved. Great undertakings yet lie ahead.*

*The complete restoration of the church and the rebuilding of schools will make heavy demands. With Faith and God's continued help, let all press on and remember that though the workman shall pass away, the Master-builder will carry on the undertakings. It is for us to build our portion well, no matter at what cost, so that they who come after may be thankful for our thoroughness and be inspired by our example.*

## **EPILOGUE**

1845—1945.

*This Church has stood for nigh one hundred years  
A symbol of his Faith whom Margaret helped.  
They built that in the Holy Sacrifice  
With Calvary one, all men might find their Lord  
And Him in Mystery concealed, adore.  
Foundation Stone good Father Barber blessed  
To Benedictine chant of ancient mode.  
Then art of mason piled the virgin stone  
In massive buttressed wall and gothic arch  
Till crowned their task the sturdy belfried Tower  
Defying still dread bombs' destructive blast.  
Praised be His Name. The noble fane's complete.  
Invite the Sacred Fire of Mystic Dove  
The Paraclete, and wide the portal fling :  
The King of Glory waits this Regal Seat.  
At quest of Benet's son eight Prelates sped.  
Mitred and vestment clad they consecrate  
With Roman Rite, as Saxon Bishops did  
When sacring Michael's Church of great renown.  
What time St. Osburg healed by Meadow's Pool.  
Their service done, from Eucharistic Lord  
Flowed grace to suplicants in the Latin tongue.  
Lost sheep the while, heard shepherd Bernard call  
And dark night left for light of Christ's One Fold.  
In Mary's praise, so long forgot, they sang  
Through zeal of her who lived by Dominic's Rule.  
From Umbria's shore Gentili came. He lent  
His aid, denounced Godiva's sordid Fair  
And strove 'gainst pagan pomp and show to raise  
The Standard of his Queen, until he saw  
Her image crowned and borne along, first time  
'Tis said since Reformation shrines destroyed.  
O Benet Blessed! didst hear torrential rain  
By prayer invoked, as once, by sister's plea  
Undone, God piteous bent thy will to hers ?  
Didst smile approvingly when prayer was heard  
At honours ta'en from palfreyed dame in nude  
Displayed, and spied by crowds like Peeping Tom ?  
The Ruby Lamp for years extinct was lit  
And shed the roseate hues of wakening mom  
Before High Altar, Throne of Christ the King,  
To mark the Presence of the Incarnate Word.  
In solemn hour of Sacrifice sublime,  
Like panting hart athirst— "For God Alone"  
The handmaid Margaret her Oblation made;  
Third Order of St. Dominic thus began.  
Short lived the Founder's care and shepherding*

*For ere twelve months, by Peter's See decreed,  
The mitre, twice reject'd, adorned his brow.  
While Bishops Wiseman, Griffiths, Wareing, Briggs  
The Sacred Rite performed, same day in Rome  
Pius the Ninth was Supreme Pontiff crowned.  
The flock of tender pastor now bereft,  
Of bitter cup a deeper draught did drink  
When Mother Margaret her departure made  
To spread the Order raised in Coventry.  
Black Monks descendants of Augustine's line  
From cloistered Downside, Douai, Ampleforth  
Sole pastors were for myriad days, until  
With sixfold birth God blessed thy womb  
And crowned thy years with joy of Motherhood.  
O Mother Church! revered and loved you stood  
Dispensing grace by Word and Sacrament  
Till that fell night, by radiant moon turned day,  
When Evil soared in winged chariot  
And in thy Holy Court destruction wrought.  
With gaping wounds like mangled Lord enshrined  
In death, you lie till Resurrection Morn,  
When bells of joy the longed-for tidings tell,  
"ST. OSBURG'S IS RESTORED AND LIVES AGAIN"  
With grateful hearts we bow before Thy Throne.  
Lord Jesus come and reign, Thou King of Peace.  
May Nations all Thy sceptred sway obey ;  
Then wars and strife for evermore shall cease.*

TSS (Easter , 1944-)

*This list of Benedictines who have served in Coventry is compiled from the Parochial Registers. Some of the priests were at St. Osburg's for more than one period.*

#### **RECTORS AT THE CHURCH OP ST. MARY AND ST. LAURENCE**

<i>Dom John Dawber* (L)</i>	<i>1803-1810</i>
<i>Dom Ambrose Allam* (G)</i>	<i>1810-1812</i>
<i>Dom Ambrose Feraud (G)</i>	<i>1812-1824</i>
<i>Dom Basil Bretherton (L)</i>	<i>1824-1827</i>
<i>Dom Austin Marsh (E)</i>	<i>1827-1830</i>
<i>Dom Anselm Cockshoot (L)</i>	<i>1830-1838</i>
<i>Dom Bede Day (L)</i>	<i>1838-1840</i>
<i>Dom Ephrem Pratt (G)</i>	<i>1840, May, June</i>
<i>Dom Alexius Pope* (L)</i>	<i>1840-1841</i>
<i>Dom Stephen Barber (G)</i>	<i>1841, July to November</i>
<i>Dom Bernard Ullathorne (G)</i>	<i>1841-1844</i>

*\* died at Coventry*

**RECTORS AT ST. OSBURG'S CHURCH**

<i>Dom Bernard Ullathorn</i> (G)	1844-1846
<i>Dom Athanasius Clarkson</i> (E)	1846-1830
<i>Dom Ephrem Pratt</i> (G)	1830-1870
<i>Dom Edmund Moor</i> (G)	1870-1891
<i>Dom Ambrose Pereira</i> (G)	1891-1896
<i>Dom Clement Fowler</i> (G)	1896-1903
<i>Dom Julian O'Hare</i> (G)	1903-1909
<i>Dom Benedict Finch</i> (G)	1909-1914
<i>Dom Michael Caffrey</i> (G)	1914-1926
<i>Dom Clement Green</i> (E)	1926-1933
<i>Dom Sebastian Simpson</i> (E)	1935-

**ASSISTANT PRIESTS AT THE CHURCH OF ST. MARY AND ST. LAURENCE**

*Dora Athanasius Clarkson.*

**AT ST. OSBURG'S.**

<i>Dom Athanasius Clarkson</i>	(E)	1844-1846
<i>Dom Ignatius Sutton</i>	(L)	1846-47; 1850-51; 1854-56
<i>Dom Placid Sinnott</i>	(G)	1847-1850
<i>Dom Wilfrid Price</i>	(G)	1852, April, June: 1856-1857
<i>Dom Placid O'Brien</i>	(L)	1852-1854
<i>Dom Cuthbert Smith</i>	(G)	1856-1859
<i>Dom Edmund Moore</i>	(G)	1859-1870
<i>Dom Ambrose Pereira</i>	(G)	1870-1884
<i>Dom Julian O'Hare</i>	(G)	1879-1879
<i>Dom Placid Rea</i>	(G)	1880-1889
<i>Dom Willibrord van Volckzom</i>	(G)	1884-1884
<i>Dom Paul McCabe</i>	(E)	1886-1891
<i>Dom Edmund Tunny</i>	(E)	1888-1889
<i>Dom Adrian Beauvoisin</i>	(L)	1890-1891
<i>Dom Gabriel Geary</i>	(L)	1892-1892
<i>Dom Norbert Birt</i>	(G)	1893-1893
<i>Dom Benedict Weld Blundell</i>	(G)	1893-1895
<i>Dom Richard O'Hare</i>	(G)	1896-1896
<i>Dom Vincent Corney</i>	(G)	1897-1897
<i>Dom Adrian Hewlett</i>	(G)	1898-1900
<i>Dom Martin Campbell</i>	(G)	1901-1908
<i>Dom Walter Mackey</i>	(G)	1910-1910
<i>Dom Stanislaus Chatterton</i>	(G)	1910-1911
<i>Dom Augustine Desimpel</i>	(G)	1912-1923
<i>Dom Anthony Robison**</i>	(M)	1920-1920
<i>Dom Aldhelm Burton</i>	(G)	1924-1926
<i>Dom Ambrose Buisseret**</i>	(M)	1924-1926
<i>Dom Maurus Chisnall</i>	(E)	1926-1933
<i>Dom Bernard Ryan</i>	(E)	1927.
<i>Dom Basil Griffin</i>	(E)	1933-1944
<i>Dom Bruno Teeley</i>	(E)	1938-1939
<i>Dom Benedict Crook</i>	(E)	1944

\*\**(M—)St. Michael's, Belmont*

**Part 1 1945 to today**

To be written