

## History of the Parish and its Priests

The first Catholic Chapel in Stamford was completed in 1826 in the yard behind No.19 All Saints Street; a building which had been erected by the community with the assistance of Dr Joseph Michael, a local benefactor. Prior to this, Mass had been said once a month by visiting priests from Grantham and Kings Cliffe.

### **Fr William Wareing (1833 - 38)**

Fr Waring became Stamford's first resident priest since the Reformation, and presided over the official opening of a new extended Chapel in 1834. The presbytery was next door, at No 20 All Saints Street. The chapel appears to have had no specific dedication at the time and was simply referred to as 'the Catholic Chapel'

### **Fr Anthony McDermott (1839 - 42)**

The community [no dioceses yet] continued to expand not least on account of increasing numbers of Irish who came to the area seeking work as agricultural labourers, and Stamford parish extended at that time as far as Ely and Wisbech, but it struggled from a shortage of funds and was heavily dependent for its survival on the patronage of local individuals.

### **Fr Thomas O'Connor (1842 - 61)**

Stamford now came under the newly-created Diocese of Nottingham and the Catholic population in the parish increased to 400 during Fr O'Connor's time, partly as a result of his missionary zeal within the Community. He also established a parish Sunday School.

### **Fr James Daly (1861 - 65)**

It was decided in 1861 to replace the existing chapel with a proper church due to the growing Catholic population, and the search began for a suitable site. In 1862, the Dolphin Inn in Broad Street came onto the market and was purchased on behalf of the parish by Charles Eaton of Tolethorpe Hall for £1,000.

Detailed plans were drawn up by George Goldie of London for a simple unified composition of Church, Presbytery and School. In May 1863 work began dismantling the Dolphin Inn and by the summer, work on the structure was sufficiently advanced to justify the laying of the foundation stone on 8th July, by Dr Roskill, Bishop of Nottingham, with local priests in attendance.

Because the financial cost of the work depended so heavily on the generosity of Charles Eaton the construction of the church proceeded in fits and starts. For instance there was delay before the addition of the campanile and of the Lady Chapel. The church was consecrated on Whit Tuesday, 6th June 1865, at a grand ceremony attended by four bishops, thirty clergy and fifty guests. During the project Fr Daly, who had been active in fundraising for the new building, died, on 4th June, aged 29 of pulmonary tuberculosis.

### **Fr William Browne (1864 - 80)**

Fr Browne took over the parish in 1865 on the premature death of Fr Daly, and continued with his work on the new church. The day before the consecration ceremony, the Lady Chapel received the fine, gilded and bejewelled statue of Our Lady with the Child Jesus, which had been purchased in Munich specifically for the church by a Mrs Lamb of Durham. Over the next few years other features were added. Charles Eaton donated the present organ, and Valentine Hibbins presented the font. In the spring of 1871 the campanile was built.

For some time a parish school had operated in a tenement behind the Olive Branch, a public house at 3 St Leonard's Street, which until bull running was outlawed, had been the headquarters of the Stamford 'Bullards'. Fr Browne decided that this was an unsuitable site and purchased another property, adjoining the presbytery, and a new purpose-built school was built. This school

opened on 28th November 1870 under the charge of Mary Anne Parker. By 1880 sixty children attended the school. This building is now used as the Parish Centre.

In 1874 further work was carried out on the Church. The whole of the sanctuary including the altar, reredos, and terracotta communion rails was treated with gold and richly coloured. The chancel roof was painted, and St Joseph's chapel, with its smaller altar, communion rail and statue, was finished. Also in 1873/4 two stained-glass windows were installed, by the distinguished firm of Wailes and Son of Newcastle-upon-Tyne.

#### **Fr Henry Allies (1880 – 1885)**

Fr Allies remained in the parish for three and a half years, but felt burdened with the debt incurred by all the building programmes and the distances he had to travel to cover the geographical area of the parish and eventually he left for the cloisters of Northampton Cathedral.

#### **Fr Emile Van Dale (1885 - 88)**

Fr Van Dale, a Belgian, enjoyed his tenure in the parish for three years until his appointment as professor of Theology and Scripture at Nottingham in 1888. Previously he had been chaplain to the Earl of Gainsborough at Exton.

#### **Fr John Wenham (1888-91)**

Fr Wenham was judged to be a man of wide reading, good taste and considerable musical ability, although he also suffered unfortunately from poor health and weak eyesight. His musical talents soon came to the fore as he made great efforts to enhance the lyrical output of the choir. In 1891 he was transferred to Derbyshire.

#### **Canon Joseph West (1891-1912, 1914 -1942)**

A man of great erudition and deep spirituality, and a convert to Catholicism. A lover of all sports and an accomplished horseman, and renowned as one of the most gifted and wittiest after-dinner speakers Stamford had known! Highly esteemed by the townspeople in general. One of his initiatives was to invite the Sisters of Mercy to set up a convent in Stamford, and they duly arrived in 1899, establishing themselves in a large house in St Mary's Place where in 1902 they opened a short-lived girls' school which operated until 1915, when the community left the town. The convent chapel was accessible to the public through a small door in the wall in the corner of St Mary's Place.

After the war of 1914-18 a memorial was set up in the Church to honour the dead of the parish. This comprised a series of marble tiles set into the floor of the Lady Chapel, in the form of a cross, each tile being decorated with the name and rank of the deceased. Unfortunately, very little now remains of this memorial.

Canon West died on 19<sup>th</sup> September 1942, aged 85, after serving over fifty years in the parish, apart from a short break of two years in the 1910s.

#### **Fr Hart (1912 - 14)**

An Australian from Brisbane, Fr Hart was only in the parish for a short period of time but seems to have made a favourable impression.

#### **Canon Charles Adams (1942-68)**

By the early 1940s the church, now 80 years old, was showing signs of wear. The building was damp and the roof leaked and it became Fr Adams ambition to clear the outstanding debt on the parish, put the Church into good order and finally organise its consecration, which had not yet taken place. In order to raise money for his programme he organised weekly 'Catholic Dances' which were enthusiastically supported by the community.

The first of his changes was the installation of a central heating system and the fine linen-fold panelling of the church walls over 1944-5.

Shortly after this he set about reordering the sanctuary area. Goldie's ornate reredos was removed and a new free-standing tabernacle placed on the altar. Four hexagonal posts supporting side curtains and surmounted with candles were erected at each of the altar's four corners and painted with chevron design in black and gold leaf. A new crucifix was commissioned, and the totality was surrounded by a wooden canopy suspended from the roof, on the underside of which was painted a sunburst with the Dove of the Paraclete carved in low relief at its centre. The terracotta communion rail was painted over, the wall paintings and star-spangled ceiling of the Lady Chapel were whitewashed, and the three Victorian stained-glass windows to the left of the altar were replaced by clear glass. The war memorial on the floor of the Lady Chapel was also removed.

In 1952 the remaining debt on the church was finally cleared - after 90 years - and the formal ceremony of consecration was held on 5th July, celebrated by Bishop Ellis.

Canon Adams last and most costly piece of work was the refurbishment of St Joseph's Chapel. It was completely rebuilt in linen-fold oak to match the rest of the church, seating was provided, the ceiling was decorated and a small statue of St Joseph was commissioned. A set of large electric candelabra lights, carved in oak and painted and gilded, replaced the original gasoliers.

Throughout all this activity, a primary school on a new site was being planned by Canon Adams, who purchased a site on Kesteven Road. The school was completed in 1955. Miss Boole continued initially as headmistress, and was succeeded on her retirement in 1957 by Roy Cooper.

In 1968, after 26 years as parish priest, Canon Adams retired from St Augustine's and went to live in Exton where he served as parish priest of St Thomas for three years.

#### **Canon Cyril Gryce (1968 - 1977)**

Canon Gryce, who came from Nottingham Cathedral where he had been secretary to the Bishop, saw through the final stages of the transfer of the school from Broad Street to a new site on Kesteven Road. He was parish priest for nine years, but suffered much ill health, which was finally diagnosed as cancer and forced him into retirement in 1977.

#### **Canon Paul Klee (1977 - 1983)**

In 1982, in accordance with the recommendations of the 2nd Vatican Council, Canon Klee instituted work to re-order the Sanctuary, removing the wooden canopy and the terracotta communion rails, and creating an altar facing the people. The tiled sanctuary floor was also carpeted over. The Lady Chapel restored to its former star-spangled glory and the stencilling on the sanctuary roof was cleaned. Bishop James McGuinness formally consecrated the new altar in a ceremony of thanksgiving on 21<sup>st</sup> January 1983.

Canon Klee died from a stroke on 2<sup>nd</sup> June 1983, the feast of Corpus Christi. He was 67. The stained-glass windows on the sanctuary were installed as his memorial at the initiative of the Catholic Women's League.

#### **Fr William Saunders (1983 - 98)**

One of the first changes he initiated was the removal of the large, Victorian Crucifix from the back of the church and its suspension above the altar, providing the sanctuary with an additional point of focus. After 15 years of service, in February 1998, the much-loved Fr Saunders was transferred to Oadby in Leicester. He died on 26<sup>th</sup> October 2013.

**Fr Malachy Brett (1998 - 2000)**

Fr Brett's first priority was the restoration of parish finances to the levels they had been in Canon Adams' day. He undertook repairs to the fabric of the church and presbytery. He established the initial Parish Council. Fr Brett was transferred to Leicester in 2000.

**Fr Pdraig Flanagan (2000 - 2003)**

Fr Flanagan, a member of the Kiltegan Order, became Priest in Charge of the parish in 2003. Fr Flanagan ran a day-centre for the homeless in Peterborough, St Theresa's. He started prison visiting by a team of parishioners and developed the parish pastoral council to its present form. He returned to his Order in Ireland in 2003.

**Fr Stephen Dye (2003 - 2010)**

In September 2003, Fr Stephen Dye (a professional organist) was transferred to the parish and there commenced a period of refurbishment of the church and hall. The hall was developed into a parish centre and a new kitchen installed. Disability access to the church and parish centre and facilities were provided as well as the introduction of a Hearing Loop in the church.

A great deal of detailed restoration work sympathetic to the Victorian building was carried out throughout the church and Lady Chapel. An addition was the gold lettering above the altar, *Deliciae meae esse cum filiis hominum (It is my delight to be with the sons of men)* which had been placed at the back of Goldie's original altar. Our Lady's statue was cleaned and restored and a statue of the Sacred Heart was donated. New lighting was installed. The exterior of the building and campanile were cleaned and repaired. The organ was refurbished & restored. The priests' graves in Stamford Cemetery, the responsibility of the parish, were repaired & cleaned. Fr Stephen was transferred to St Joseph's Oakham in January 2010

**Fr Christopher O'Connor (2010)**

Further reading: Simon Stanley *A History of the Roman Catholic Community of Stamford (2000)*  
Copies may be obtained from St Augustine's, £5 donation to Church Funds