

Our Lady and St Brigid's Parish
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The First Eighty Years

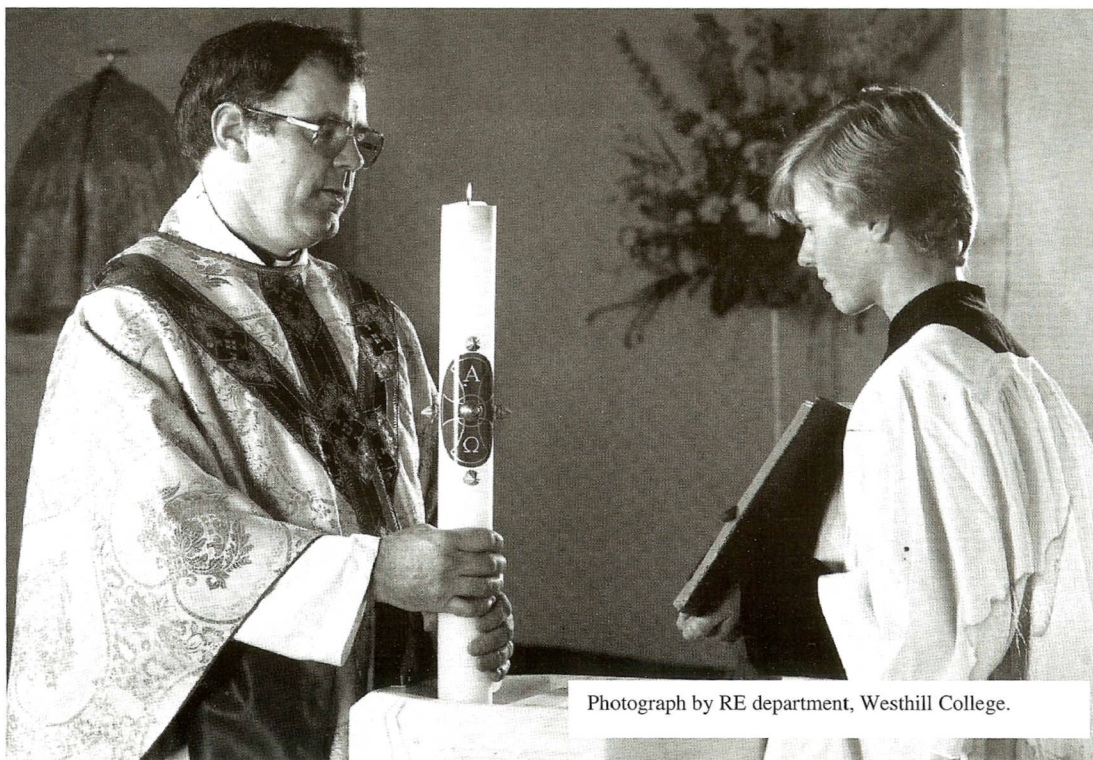


1919 - 2000 A.D.

**Northfield
Birmingham**

Our Lady and 5t Brigid's Parish

An inspired moment prompted the Wise One to suggest producing a history of the parish to celebrate the year of Jubilee. The idea was welcomed and well received. Archives were visited, attics searched, photographs recovered, memories recalled, stories told, notes compared and dates corrected. The outcome is these pages which are not only the story of what has happened in the past. They reflect the love of God alive in the



Photograph by RE department, Westhill College.

people who were inspired by faith, hope and love to build up God's kingdom in their own time and circumstances.

I am most grateful to all the people who contributed to this publication. Special words of thanks to Peter Hack who researched the Baptism statistics; to John Hussey who edited the graphics and layout; to Terry Battle who spent hours in research and made available his extensive collection of documents. Finally to Dr. Marie Rowlands who encouraged people to take part in the project and produced the final text.

Michael Neylon

Father Michael Neylon

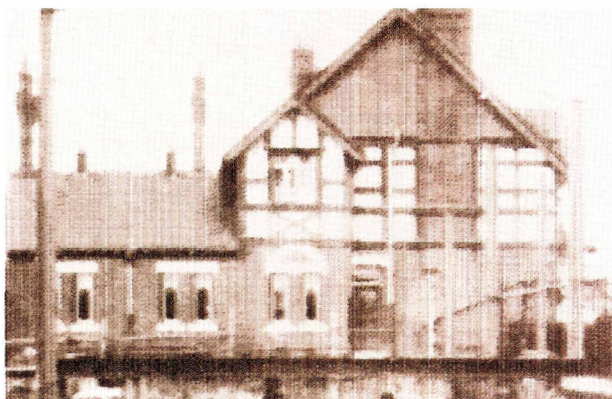


A Rural Parish in the Beginning

THE FOUNDATION OF THE PARISH.

In 1918 Northfield and Longbridge began to be considered as a future Catholic parish. Cardinal Newman knew and loved the Lickey Hills and the Oratorians had their rest house and burial place at the junction of Leach Green Rd and Lickey Rd. The sisters at Nazareth House convent had a chaplain and so did the local hospitals. However these were all private chapels and the one or two Catholics went to Kings Norton or St Edward's, Selly Park for Sunday Mass. It was known that as soon as the war was ended there would be large scale development in the area. During the war the Austin works brought in huge numbers of people making munitions and aeroplanes as well as armoured vehicles. About 3,000 Belgian refugees came with their own priest, Father Geer.

In September 1917 the Oratory Fathers at Rednal were asked by the Archbishop to provide a priest. They were unable to undertake the mission at Longbridge and Northfield on a permanent basis. They did agree to be responsible for a 6am Mass at Longbridge for three months. Sir Herbert Austin was approached and he offered the use of a recreation hut just inside the gate of the West Works. About the same time Mr Bernard Dewey, a Catholic from Wiltshire took over the Black Horse in Northfield village and Mass was said occasionally in the clubroom at the rear. Later romantic stories were told of making an altar out of beer crates and blocking the entrance with bottle boxes.



On January 2nd 1918 the Archbishop authorised Father W.B. Hannon to take charge of the Catholics of Longbridge and district. He made a list of the Catholics in Northfield. For a short time he lodged at 62 Norman Road and said Mass there for about 20 people.

Northfield Catholics

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MVf ~~~	6	26 Normct. #v'Rei-
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MvH-	5	37C-av'Rei-
MvyOcUv	2	15 c-av'Rei-
MvyStv~	1	42 c-av'Rei-
Mv'R-	3	2nd-Cott-bctclvofpdlce-Stet'tUWII
Mv Mcuid.e.vv	2	4 M~'Rei-
Mv Dewey'	8	13LacLv Hor1tV
MvyfowCVk	2	The-Gv~
Mv SUWJ	8	12 Whit"ym.ore-'Rei-Y, VStet'tUWII
MvyA~	2	88 W~'Rei-Y, VStet'tUWII
2 #iil-ctt13ue-t'LCI/V-cv		Soutlv'Rei- N-
Mv GVeet'll	4	13LacLv Hor1tV13v-of-'Rei-
W~ ~ ~ ~ chi'l-qi- Wily CO1't'Le'toe-av ~ ~ 'Rei-		

Mr. P. Shea of Small Heath Birmingham gave £150 and asked the archbishop to name the church "St Bridget's because I am an Irishman".

Dear Lor~13Wwp

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Dear Lor~13Wwp, youryt"ruly,

P. Shea

This proved prophetic for the parish was to be the home of many Irish families. They came from Ireland to find work, others moved out from the city centre parishes of St Peter and St Catherine as the inner city was redeveloped. Different ways of spelling the name of this fifth century saint were adopted by different priests; Father Hannon preferred the Scottish form St Bride. Mr Shea suggested the name St BridgettS'. We call it St Brigid.

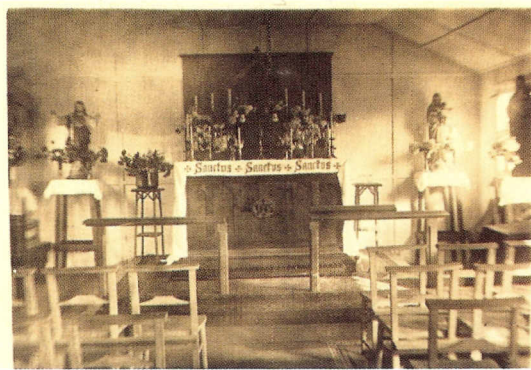
In March 1918 finding it impossible to keep the hut and land at Longbridge, the Archdiocese bought "Lansdowne" 26 Steel Road, with the co-operation of the Diocesan provost, Mr Dewey and Mr Shea. He named the house "St Bride' s". Having made such a good start, Father Hannon now realised the size of the undertaking. He felt he was too old to do all that was necessary and resigned in order to return to the United States.

"It was necessary for the priest here to use a cycle as the bus system is only temporary to suit the car workers"

Father George Mesher succeeded him in June 1918, and set to work to complete the furnishing of the house and altar. The two main rooms at Steel Rd were converted into a through room. Mass was said there at 8.30 a.m. on Sundays and there was Catechism at 3.p.m. and evening service at 6.30.p.m. Weekday Mass was at 8AS.a.m. The Belgian priest Father Geer continued to say two Masses

on a Sunday and some Catholics continued to go to Mass elsewhere. About fifty Catholics heard Mass at Steel Rd. The first entry in the Diocesan Directory was in 1919

Birmingham Our Lady and St Bride, Steel Rd. Northfield (1918) Rev. George Mesher
 M 8.30. at Steel Rd. 10.00 at Recreation hut Longbridge works Cat3 Ev.S 6.30 Holydays M
 6.30,8.45. Weekdays 8.45



In his first state of the mission report he was able to list three baptisms and three conversions. In his Mission Accounts he reported income for the year of £132, of which £78 was from Offertories. The new parish covered West Heath, Longbridge Rubery and Rednal. He employed a housekeeper.

In December 1918 the war workers were demobilised, the hut at Longbridge could not be obtained and the acre of land there was sold off. Father Mesher began to consider building a chapel in the garden at Steel Road, and a parishioner offered to build one in ferro-concrete. In the end a wooden hut was obtained which had a corrugated iron roof. About fifty people attended Mass there. It was painfully hot in summer and draughty in winter. It was erected by James and William Slim, parishioners. Father Mesher, always an invalid, left the mission in March 1922.

Father Benignus Hamill served from 1922 to 1928 and was a very old priest remembered by his long cloak and biretta. He was succeeded for a few months by Father Lawrence Killeen and then by **Father Francis Broome**. Father Broome had been ordained at Lisbon College which explains the directory entry for 1929.

Our Lady and St Bride.

26 Steel Road. Rev Francis Broome.
 Mass on Sundays 8.30.a.m. and
 10.30.a.m. Evening service. 6.30.p.m
 Holydays 7.00.a.m. and
 8.30.a.m. Evening service
 8.00.p.m. weekdays 7.30.a.m.
 confessions Saturdays 6.30.p.m. to
8.30.p.m. French and Portuguese.



With such a succession of short term appointments of sick and elderly priests it almost seems as if Northfield and Longbridge were regarded at Archbishop's house as a small rural area where priests could be placed temporarily.

TO FRANKLEY BEECHES ROAD.

Although he was only in the parish a year Father Broome decided its future. With Archbishop Williams he toured the area looking for a permanent place for a church. In 1930 two acres of land were bought in Cock Lane, (i.e. Frankley Beeches Rd. after 1932) at a cost of £1,500. As was usual at that time, a hall was built which could serve both as Church and as Parish Hall. The design was by Father Frederick Askew who lived in Edgbaston and was a known expert on antiques and architecture. His family built houses for rent including twelve houses on either side of what later became the site of the present church. They were mostly let to Catholics. The men of the parish helped with the building work. Archbishop Williams laid the foundation stone on Oct. 25, 1930. It was completed in March 1931, cost £2,500 and was dedicated to Our Lady and St Brigid. The 'hut' was brought from Steel Road and re-erected behind the brick hall church where it was also known as the 'Clubroom' or even the 'Pavilion'.



Father Broome was replaced in 1930 after only a year by Father Patrick Cassidy B.A., L.Ph., B.C.L. At last St Bridget's had a priest who was both experienced and vigorous. He made it clear that he preferred the spelling Our Lady and St Brigid for the parish name. He was to be parish priest until 1960. Houses were being built all over Northfield. There were new council estates of Allen's Cross and Tinker's farm. In the thirties there was also private development on both sides of the Bristol Road between Northfield and Longbridge. Similar developments were taking place at West Heath, Longbridge, Rubery and Rednal. The Austin factory was employing more and more men on its lines making cars. Kalamazoo was another major employer. Bournville and the huge hospitals, which were being built in the Rubery area, provided employment for women. Families from the centre of Birmingham and from further afield were moving in. Anglican, Methodist, Baptist and other churches were being built.

The Presbytery was built in 1932, and the foundation stone of the church that we use today was laid on the Feast of St Brigid 1936. The solemn opening took place only ten months later on St Andrew's Day 1936. The sermon was on the theme "this is the house of the Lord."

The church was designed by Bower-Norris of Stafford, and cost £7,500. Father Askew was again very supportive with advice and money and he underwrote the cost of the bell tower.

The church has changed very little in its structure since 1936. Like many of the Catholic churches built between the wars it impresses by its size, simple lines and coherent shape rather than by much ornamentation. The

crucifix and statue of Our Lady on the exterior wall of the apse confronted Frankley Beeches Rd, a sign to all who pass. The rose window of the Holy Spirit was transferred from the Hall. Mr Charles Dewey gave it in memory of his son who had been drowned aged 16 in 1926.

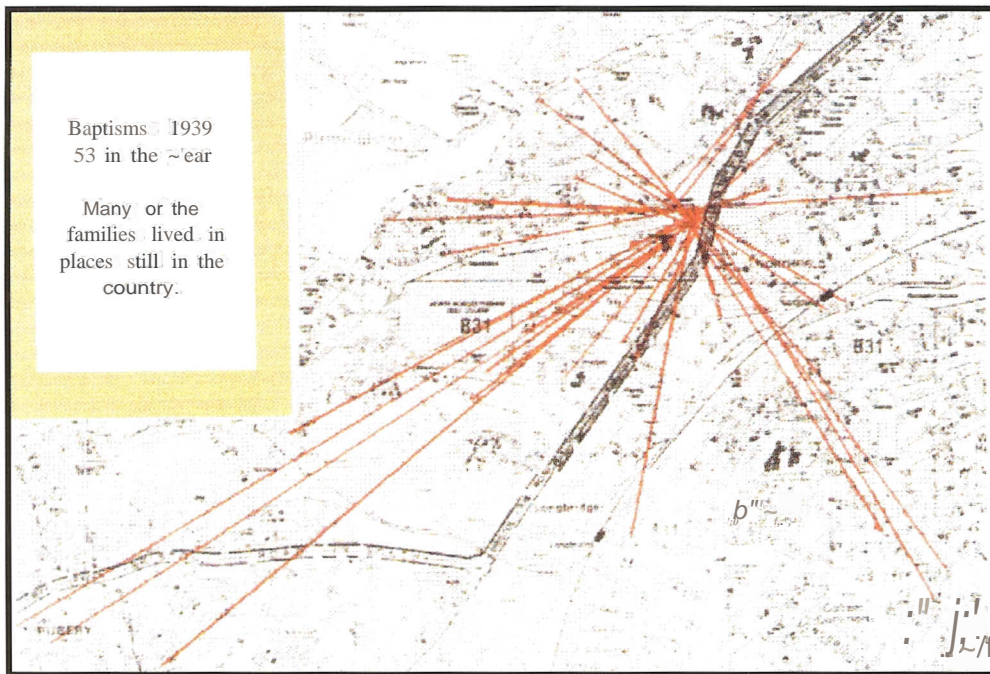
There was an attempt to introduce the old system of pew rents, with some parishioners paying a rent to sit in a particular place. Some of the benches still have the brass nameplates but the parishioners found this unacceptable and it was dropped. Mothers with young children were asked to sit in the back presumably so that they could take the babies out if they were noisy. The statues of St. Therese of the Child Jesus and St. Anthony were the first items to be presented to the new church. Stations of the Cross were formally instituted by the Archbishop. One of the stations was presented by the Irish apprentices at the Austin.



PRAYER AND GOOD WORKS

The pattern of parish religious life centred on morning Masses on Sundays and Holidays and weekday Masses before work. Some people went to communion before Mass and then had to leave. There was Catechism and Benediction for the children on Sunday afternoons and solemn Benediction and a sermon of Sunday evenings with another Benediction service on Thursdays. As working hours were reduced the time of weekday Masses gradually became later, moving from 6 a.m. to 7 a.m. to 9.15 and now to 10 a.m. The catechism class was carried out by the priest, Sisters from Selly Park and lay catechists.

As was usual in those days there were separate religious groups for men and for women. The two confraternities of the Blessed Sacrament encouraged people to regular communion and extra prayer. The Catholic Young Men's Society was started before the war in 1937 and then restarted in 1957. The Children of Mary started in the parish in 1931 to provide girls with regular spiritual formation. They wore pale blue cloaks as a sign of their dedication to Mary. The Legion of Mary was started in 1936. Both the Vincent de Paul society and the Union of Catholic Mothers started in 1932.



On the first Sunday of the month the confraternity of men sat at the front and went up to Communion first. On the second Sunday the women and

on the third Sunday the children of Mary and Sunday school children went first.

The parish social club met in a private room at the Bell Inn and St Brigid's hall was the scene of whist drives, dances, and occasional concerts and even plays for which tickets could be bought at the presbytery. The parish boxing team gained considerable success. For many years the Parish had its own monthly magazine.



The Bazaar was a major parish and local event from 1930 and by 1933 the priest could already say "we have a good reputation to keep up". In that year the Bazaar lasted for three days. The parish was always generous in the support of good causes including St Joseph's home and convent, Fr. Hudson's Homes, Nazareth House.

The moral issues of the modern world began to intrude upon the parish. There were lectures for the men of the parish on sterilisation and for women at the cathedral on contraception, and on a visit to St Brigid's, Archbishop Williams preached about the Church's teaching on war.

THE PARISH DURING THE WAR

By 1936 incomes were beginning to improve in the Midlands, but sadly it was because the government was already ordering more and more vehicles, aeroplanes and munitions to stockpile in the expectation of war. It finally "broke out" in autumn 1939, and members of the armed forces were billeted with families in the parish. There was an airfield at Barnes Hill. Relatively few men of the parish were in the armed forces since most of them were in reserved occupations making aeroplanes, motor vehicles, munitions and all the equipment required for total war. Single women too, were conscripted into war work. The works were greatly enlarged and production was non-stop.

Parishioners' occupations during the war

Aircraft engineers, fitters, inspectors,
optical glassmaker, triplex glass,
steel grinder, brass caster, capstan lathe
operator, millwright,

Munitions workers, draftsman, Post Office engineers
Makers of electrical parts, armature winder

Men and women worked very long hours indeed, and on top of this many were also in one of the voluntary services, the Home Guard, the ARP or a similar organisation. Children "did their bit" by collecting wastepaper. The factories, which made only goods essential for the war effort, were all camouflaged. A static water tank was built near the presbytery, there were searchlights in the park and a barrage balloon in Frankley Beeches Rd. There were eight rocket launchers next door to Nazareth House. Birmingham suffered severe bombing in 1940-1941 so one way and another Northfield people got very little sleep for four years.

Fasting and abstinence were abrogated in view of rationing. Catholic refugees came from Germany (Jan. 1939) from Belgium in 1940, from Poland and in 1943 from the Channel Islands. Some of the Belgians lived in the presbytery and at 65 Frankley Beeches Rd. After the war came displaced persons from Poland and the Ukraine. Despite the difficulties, the Mass Benediction and Children's Catechism classes were continued as usual. Prayers were said for the forces, for peace and for men killed in action. Sister Monica worked in the parish in 1941.

Parishioners who died in the forces in the second world war.

1940 Daniel Galloway
1942 William Tuttle, Eric Eglington, Edward Monaghan, James Patrick
McManus
1944 Edward Pinkton, Walter Andrews, Michael Joseph Dowling, Michael
O'Hanlon, William Sweeney
1945 William Sparkes, Wilfred Broggan
May they rest in peace. Amen

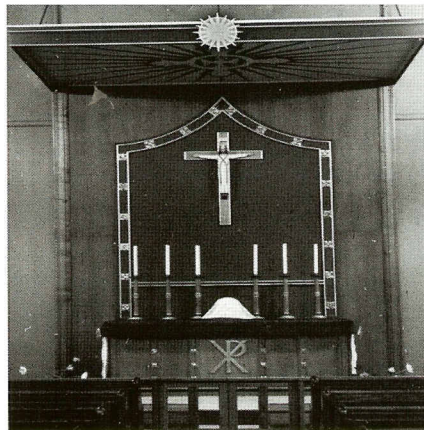
A great solid silver sanctuary lamp was bought at the end of the war in memory of the parishioners who had been killed.

BUSY YEARS AFTER THE WAR

The parish for thirty years had been under the leadership of one strong-minded and capable priest and this gave coherence to its development. Canon Cassidy kept a firm hand on the finances of the parish, always devising new ways of ensuring a sufficient and secure income from the parishioners whether in the bad times of the depression or the high wages of the war and post war years. There were football

pools and raffles. In 1934 Father Cassidy imperatively summoned every man in the parish to a meeting to 'save the Church'. The outcome was the Men's Guarantee Fund by which a regular income was guaranteed to St. Brigid's and he was still nursing this along in his last years when it was bringing in about £10 a week.

For much of the time there were three priests at every Sunday morning the other as those leaving the those who were arriving for responsible for Rubery and Woodlands Cripples Hospital Heath Sanatorium. Part of Hollymoor hospital was in 1961,



between 1950 and 1980 there work. There were five Masses people almost treading on each church were confronted with the next Mass. The parish was Hollymoor hospitals, the (as it was then called) and West the Anglican chapel at consecrated for Catholic worship

Activities multiplied. There were special Catechism Classes taken by the Sisters from Selly Park for over 100 children at non-Catholic schools, adults, converts and secondary school children as well. There was the Young Men's society; Children of Mary, U.C.M. and the Guild of the Blessed Sacrament. Father Cassidy was musical and the choir was a very important part of parish life Evening devotions were elaborate with choir and sermon.

Meeting socially continually reinforced a strong sense of community among Catholics. There were frequent dances and the whist drives continued. On Saturday nights there were dances which were



so popular that they continued for ten years. At their peak they were being held three times a week. The M.C. was Mr McPherson. Many parishioners met their life partners at these dances. Other parish initiatives did not last many years but were important in the lives of those who were involved - the Young Christian Workers group for example. The post war youth club was especially successful.

From 1942 Mass was also said in Rubery Council School. In 1956, two new parishes were carved out of Northfield, namely West Heath and Rednal/Rubery. Both of these are now large parishes each with a Church and a primary school.

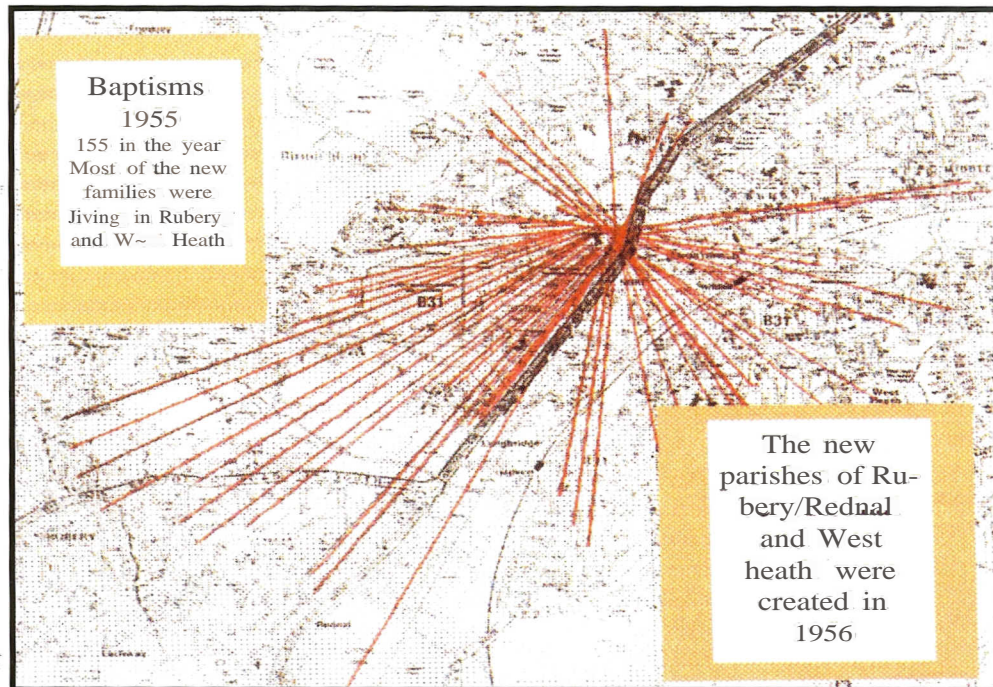
Men of the Parish who have been ordained

Michael Day Oratorian John Day Cistercian

Peter Rogers Joseph Mitchell

John Field Paul Falkener George Tarrant Leo Jordan

Pat Jordan Gerard Lennon



THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE LITURGY

Until 1964 the priest said Mass in Latin with his back to the people assisted by carefully trained altar boys under the supervision of the master of ceremonies.



The people read the words of the Mass silently in English from their Missals or said their own prayers or the Rosary during Mass. There was Benediction on Sundays and Thursdays, on all special feasts and for all special occasions. There were processions of the Blessed Sacrament at least twice a year and a procession of the Blessed Virgin Mary in May. In 1949 the sanctuary was richly decorated in red, blue and gold.

The font was at the back of the church in the recess under the organ loft. Baptisms and churchings were usually on Sunday afternoon, but adult converts were received privately on weekday evenings.

The fine two manual Harris organ was bought in 1949. It was not there to lead the congregation in singing, but to elevate the worship by classical church music, and to support the choir singing in the high choir loft. There was a "sung Mass" every Sunday when a choir sang the *Kyrie*, the *Gloria*, the Creed, the *Sanctus* the *Benedictus* and the *Agnus Dei* either in four parts or in plainsong. They also sang a Motet



during the offertory.

There were usually two assistant priests (curates as they were then called) and these young men played an important part in many initiatives in the parish

working with especially young people and the school children. They visited the sick and housebound and the hospitals. They took the lead on parish outings to Weston Super Mare and Llandudno and pilgrimages to Lourdes and Rome. Although they did not stay long, many are remembered with great affection, and some have gone on to hold high office in the church.

Curates

Bernard McGurk	1937-1938	Henry Wood	1938-1939
Cuthbert Brown	1940-1944	John McMorrow	1945-1950
Cornelius O'Healy	1950-1954	John Lane	1951-1953
Anthony Emery	1953	Peter Lees	1953-1959
Dennis Ryan	1954-1955	Hugh Griffiths	1955-1956
John Dewis	1956-1964	Joseph Lacey	1959-1962
Alan Smith	1962-1966	Terence McDonnell	1964-1966
Cyril Barlow	1966-1968	James Ward	1966-1971
Liam O'Connor	1971-1976	James Jennings	1976-1978
Anthony Donovan	1978-1984	Terry Loughran	1984-1986
Marcus Stock	1988-1991	Robert Murphy	1991-1993
Adrian MacNamara	1993-1994		

In the immediate post war period no less than five young men from the parish were training for the priesthood including two from the same family, and over the years the parish has produced ten priests-a remarkable record.

In 1963 the Archconfraternity of St Stephen was set up for the encouragement of the altar boys. No woman or girl was allowed on the chancel except for the Altar Society who were allowed to clean it; even

then no woman could touch the sacred vessels. No woman entered church who was not wearing a hat or a veil. Mrs and Miss Baines looked after the priests in the presbytery and defended them from intrusion.

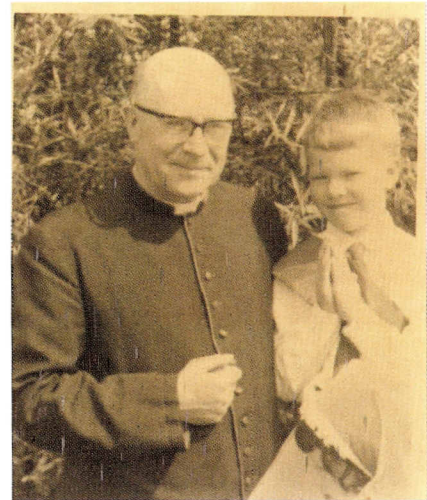
The Bazaars continued and handbills advertising it were distributed as far afield as Bromsgrove, and the attractions included Pat Collins Fair, and Jack Hood the boxer. There was also a garden fete lasting two days.

CHANGES AND CHALLENGES

The Church is a living body and so it is always growing and changing under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. In 1954 the priests, the altar servers the choir and the people found themselves learning a new liturgy for Holy Week. At first the blessing of the Fire and the Water, the creeping to the Cross, the long bidding prayers the Exultet and the Te Deum were formidable for both the priests to lead and for the congregation to follow and learn. The congregation bought Holy Week books from the piety stall for 2s6d and began to feel more at ease. They received communion in greatly increased numbers at all the Masses. English increasingly became the most usual language of the Mass and later of the sacraments; Mass was said facing the people. Father Cassidy made available a large supply of Simple Prayer books at the piety stall. Mass books were bought by the parish after a brief period with 'missalettes'.

Father Cassidy had been able to report to the Archbishop in 1948 that there were no debts outstanding in the parish - an achievement of which he was exceedingly proud. Three years later the new financial burden of the primary school was undertaken.

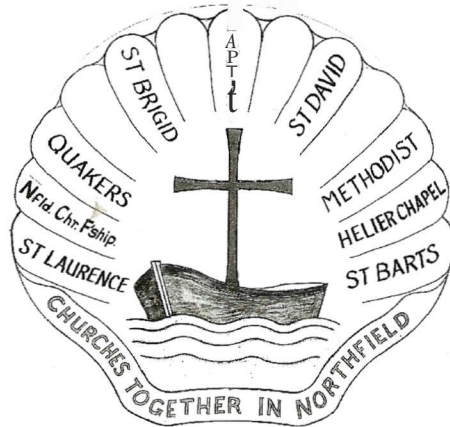
Father Cassidy (now Canon) retired in 1960 to be succeeded by Canon Gerald Hodgson (1960 - 1963). The sanctuary was rearranged and a new altar was bought. Lay men began to read the scriptures in the Mass in Easter Sunday 1964 and lay women in 1976. English became the normal language of the Mass in November 1964 though Latin Masses were still said from time to time. Occasional evening Masses had been said from 1954 mainly on Holydays and on the Marian feasts, but it was 1975 before they were introduced in the parish on Sundays. Canon Hodgson died suddenly on Easter Sunday 1963 on the steps of the altar after Mass at Hollymoor.



He was succeeded by Canon Robert Henry Nicholson (1963-1968) an enthusiast for the implementation of Vatican 2. He obtained permission to say Mass once on Sundays facing the people so a temporary forward altar was installed. He was anxious to promote the active role of the laity in the parish. He encouraged the married people to form Family Circle groups for mutual support and development of faith. At least one of these is still meeting after thirty-five years.

St. Brigid's Northfield Council of Churches - 1969

"Northfield Bridge" and the There are the regular unity Christian Aid, and the Community Christmas and Friday. Through the Selly established links with This was a new parish which given was named St. independent: with priests



Christian Action Group. services, the collection for Lenten discussion groups, the the walk of witness on Good Park sisters, the parish Modimong in South Africa. in recognition of the help Brigid's. It is now and sisters from the locality.

Canon Nicholson was parish priest at St. Brigid's for three years before failing health forced him to resign. He was succeeded by Father Michael O'Keeffe (1968-1976).

He set up a short lived Parish Council in 1969. In 1970 the Tridentine Rite was replaced by the present normative or Pauline Rite Mass. In 1972 the church was redecorated, after the pulpit, altar rails and the original high altar had been removed and the forward temporary wooden altar replaced by the present stone altar. The great crucifix was taken down, reduced in size and placed against the apse wall.



Father O'Keeffe retired in through ill health 1976 and was succeeded by Father John Danaher (1976-1985)

He was not a man for committees and organisations preferring to work with individuals within the parish. During his time the presbytery became open house to children, to those in need, to individuals looking for respite, and to parishioners in general. The pre-school occupied the sacristy and his study. The parish gradually adjusted to the changes introduced by the Vatican Council. The Masters of Ceremonies trained and organised the altar servers. Among them were Mr Jordan, Mr Beirne and Philip Bradley. Eucharistic ministers had been appointed in 1980, distributing communion at Mass and taking communion to the sick. The assistant priest Father Donovan is especially remembered for his work with young people.



It was during his time that Rome came to Coventry. Like all the parishes of the diocese St Brigid's sent a party to Coventry Airport to welcome the Pope at Pentecost 1982. It was a totally unprecedented event and the very early start, the walk from the coaches to the airport, shepherded by the police, and the long wait in roped off pens were all very bewildering. However uncertainty vanished when the Pope began his Mass and delivered his homily. In due course the priests and eucharistic ministers came round under the striped yellow and white umbrellas to distribute communion. St Brigid's provided the two Masters of Ceremonies who assisted at the papal Mass Peter Farndon and Cyril Hancock the latter now of Rednal parish. Among those who assisted at the distribution of communion were Mr Calnan and Mr Heaton.



The 200 club was founded in the parish to raise the levy for the expenses of the visit, but has continued to be a popular way of raising money for good causes ever since the national Lottery followed suit later!

A very important focus of parish life is the newspaper stall. There are those who can remember selling Catholic papers at the church door but this gave way to the substantial wooden kiosk built against the church wall on the initiative of Mr Rogers and by Mr Cookson and his family. In 1983 an easy access ramp was constructed at the top of the drive in memory of Margaret Holohan.

When the Archbishop moved both Father Danaher and the assistant priest Father Donovan many parishioners wrote to the Archbishop to express their concern.

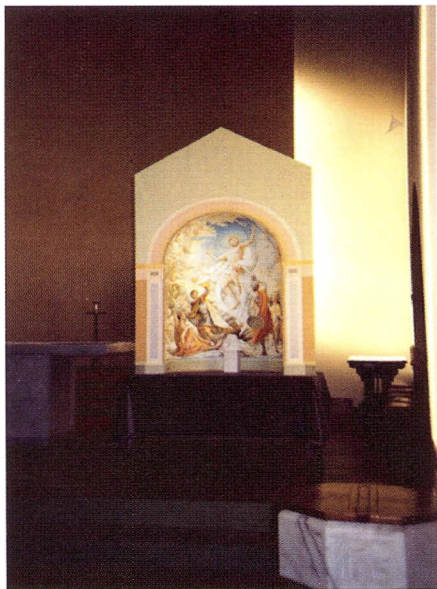
Father Michael Neylon succeeded him in 1985.

In 1986 the number of eucharistic ministers was increased. They began the practice of bringing Holy Communion to the sick from the Sunday morning Mass. Parish services of Reconciliation (confession) began in 1990. From 1996 we began to notice that some of the altar servers are girls; like the boys and men on the altar they carry out their duties with great dignity and devotion.

When the newest extension was built in 1990 the newspaper kiosk and the piety shop moved to warmth and comfort in the Lower Room. Here the newspapers (Catholic and Irish) are laid out, the dub moneys collected and many other bits of parish business done. More important is the warmth of the welcome, the exchange of friendly gossip and the support, which the newcomer and the solitary Catholic find there.



There was much work to be done to the fabric of the church. The sound and lighting system had to be replaced, the walls were re-plastered, and re-decorated, and the wooden floor and pews were cleaned and restored to look like new. A "Neo Baroque" style painting on the apse was undertaken by Neil Harvey in 1990 and completed in 2000. It depicts the moment of Christ's triumphant resurrection.



THE SCHOOLS AND THE PARISH

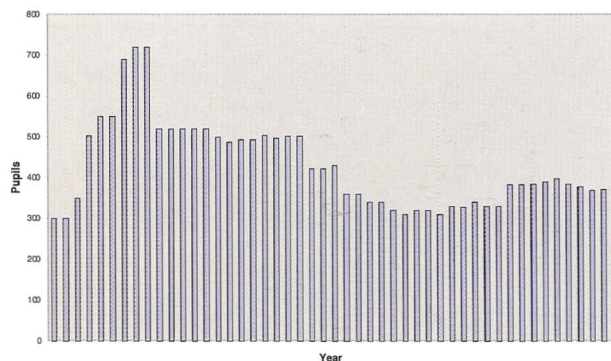
In 1934 application had been made for permission to build a Catholic school beside the Church but it was not until after the war and the 1944 Education Act that this could be done—indeed St Brigid's was the first new school to be opened in the Archdiocese after the war. The men of the parish were mobilised to do the painting and grounds of the school. On July 8th 1950 Archbishop Masterson laid the foundation stone of the parish school. On July 21st 1951 the school was blessed and formally opened. All the potential pupils attended, the girls

wearing white dresses and veils. The first term started on September 9th. From St Brigid's the children went to the new Catholic secondary schools Archbishop Masterson Boys or Archbishop Masterson Girls, or to the older established St Paul's Girls or St Philip's Grammar schools and later to St Thomas Aquinas Grammar School.



The close alliance between our Church and our Catholic School is one of the most enriching elements of our parish life. Unlike many other Catholic primary schools all the heads of the school to the present day have been religious sisters. The first head-teacher was Sister Malachy Joseph who was succeeded by Sister Clare in 1960. Sister Marjorie took up the post when Sister Clare retired in 1978. The Parent

St Brigid's J&I School Numbers 1951-2000



Teachers' Association since the beginning has played an important part in supporting the parish as well as the school, and the school Masses and family Masses are profoundly edifying.

From 1955 onwards there was further housing development in the area and the baby boom provided unprecedented numbers of children for the new school. Classes were being held in the dining room, on the stage of the hall, and in the entrance hall. Some were even being taught in an old military building at Hill Top Park. Class sizes exceeded the official maximum of 44 children. School numbers reached 720 in 1959.

Children had to be bussed daily to Woodgate Valley where there was an annexe and to Bartley Green. Classes were held in the Nazareth House Convent at Longbridge. It was clearly necessary to provide

another new primary school. This was called St Columba's and was accessible for Rednal West Heath and Northfield families who lived west of Tessall Lane. Desperately necessary though this remedy was it caused distress. Many St Brigid's families felt excluded and were unwilling to send their children to St Columba's. Parents felt that the huge numbers of people, and the traffic in and out of Longbridge Works was dangerous, and they missed the close ties with the mother church, especially at times of first communion and confirmation.



From 1973 the numbers of children and teachers dropped rapidly; so much so that by the eighties in many parts of the country it was difficult to keep Catholic schools going. However despite ever greater government pressures, St Brigid's and St. Columba's have both continued to flourish, as Catholic schools,

growing in faith and the formation of young children.

The pre school group started in the early 1980's and was so well run that it was one of the very few in Birmingham allowed to make the transition to fully established Nursery school status.



THE CONVENTS

Many references have already been made to the work in the parish of the Sisters of Charity of St Paul. Sister Hilda, Sister Barbara and then Sister Monica worked as what we would now call a parish sister. In 1951 a small community of five sisters moved to 24 Woodlands Road. In 1961 they moved to 65 Frankley Beeches Road, disconcerting the assistant priest by having their furniture delivered on Good Friday. They bought the adjoining house in 1962. For the Sisters of Charity of St Paul living in small groups in the community is more normal than great convents. Their influence and work in this parish has been very valuable.

The Sisters of Charity and Refuge carried out many works of caring for the sick and disadvantaged from the Priory convent near the Orthopaedic hospital.



Nazareth House was an orphanage run by The Poor Sisters of Nazareth. Later they provided a home for old people. They also provided an opportunity for Mass for some people from that end of the parish until it was closed about 1987.



THE PARISH TODAY.

The numbers of baptisms reached a peak of 110 in 1980, more than two per week, and remained high until 1986. Thereafter they declined in numbers until in 1998 there were only 26. Fewer children were being born, and families were smaller. The numbers at Mass began to decline from 1967 though much more slowly. Today 36% of the Northfield population is aged over 45. Local hospitals have closed, and super-markets replace traditional shopping centres. There had been three priests in 1965 but there was only one priest full time by 1997 though assisted when possible by Father Winder SJ. On the face of it this sounds like a story of **decline**.

In fact the reality is very different. Although population growth had halted, house building continued in Frankley and on the edges of the green belt. The mother parish is no ageing remnant but continues to be effective and vibrant, and the demands made on one priest are almost as great as those made on three not long ago.

The actual numbers though smaller than in the 1960' s are still greater than in the 1930' s. There are four Masses every weekend attended by about 800 people; at Christmas the number rises to over 1,250. and most importantly there is a goodly representation of the younger generation. There are congregations of about fifty people for daily Mass and more on Holydays and special feasts such as that of St Brigid and St Patrick. With some difficulty we have learned to say **the Daily Prayer of the Church** (the Divine Office) before Mass. This has by no means displaced **the Rosary**, which we faithfully recite after Mass. We have microphones and a loop system to help people to really hear the word of the Lord.

Add together the numbers of readers, eucharistic ministers, workers at the piety stall, the paper stall, the church cleaners, flower-arrangers those who produce the newsletter and the rotas, those who give out and put away the service books. There are those who keep us in touch with the other Christian churches in Northfield. Add to these the "money men " who look after the covenants and the collection and the "welcome team " who greet all comers to the church and keep an eye on security. There are those who help to maintain the buildings. Others again lead the congregational music at Sunday morning Mass. Altogether there must be well over a hundred lay women and men who work voluntarily week in week out in the service of the parish. Most of the sodalities and societies now include both men and women. The **Legion of Mary** and the **Union of Catholic Mothers** meet for prayer, mutual support in faith and love, and work with dedication for the parish and the Church. The **Youth Club** and the **Brownies** cater for young people. The more informal **John Paul society** has succeeded the Vincent de Paul society. It is a parish based group of men and women visiting the hospitals and the housebound and caring for all those in need. The photographs around the walls of the children making their first communion and about to be confirmed show our future.

This parish gives generously to others .Over the last ten years as well as supporting our own parish and diocese (as is our canonical duty) we give regularly and generously to **CAFOD** and to **The Fireside Centre**, **Father Hudson 's Homes**, and **The Little Sisters of the Poor**. The Bazaar held almost every year since 1930 (except during the war) had been an important source of income for parish and school but in these last years it has provided the means for generous donations to charities round the world. In 1996 for example, the Bazaar raised nearly £6,500 and further £5,000 was given in the course of the year to special collections.

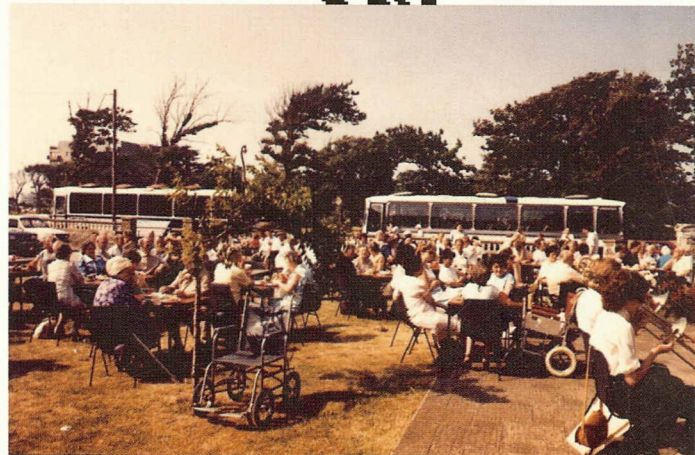
THE NEXT EIGHTY YEARS

As we consider where we stand and what lies ahead we are aware of many causes of anxiety for people in Northfield and Longbridge. Our story began with Mass for the war workers at the new Austin factory, and the enormous growth of that works and people moving to the area. Our story has now reached a stage when the survival of the Longbridge works is in doubt. The years ahead will also bring changes and difficulties to the church as a whole and to the church in Northfield. Despite this it will still be the same church today, yesterday and forever. The candles that we light will still be the light of Christ shining in the darkness. Our great painting in the apse makes us look up to the Resurrection.

Remembering those who have gone before us and celebrating the parish of today, we look towards the younger generation who will encounter the new challenges with faith, hope and love.

**Father, send your Holy Spirit to guide and help us
Bless our families and make our homes places of peace and
harmony
Give us courage to reach out to others with love and
understanding
Give us a new vision of your glory so that your love may grow
among us
Through Christ Our Lord. Amen**

The Prayer of the Parish (originally written for the Mission 1995) and now adopted as our parish prayer.



Parish Community Activities