

## HISTORY OF PARISH OF THE HOLY FAMILY – THANET BEFORE THE ESTABLISHMENT OF PARISHES IN WESTGATE AND BIRCHINGTON

Both parishes, which now make up The Holy Family – Thanet, were formed just after the turn of the twentieth century: the 1905/1906 edition of Kelly's Directory (Guide to the Isle of Thanet) in its summary on Westgate-on-Sea states "The Catholic Church here, is dedicated to the Sacred Heart, in which services are held daily, is in connection with the Ursuline Convent".

Prior to that an earlier edition of Kelly's Directory (1884) shows that Catholic Mass was said on Sundays at 9 am in the Assembly Rooms, part of the St Mildred's Hotel, facing the sea at St Mildred's Bay; the following year this is listed as occasionally in the summer.

The Catholic faith in Thanet owes its re-establishment in the nineteenth century to two factors. Firstly a member of the Gillows furniture making company from Lancashire. Richard Gillows was a 'visitor' to Margate as the resort became a fashionable and expanding resort. He had his own house in Prospect Place (later to be renamed Victoria Road), to here he bought his own chaplain Fr Michael Grundy with Mass being said from about 1797. Six years later, 1803, a



100 seater chapel was open on the current site of Ss Austin & Gregory, Margate. The establishment of this Catholic parish in Margate would be the sixth parish church in the diocese of Southwark following the passing of the Papists Act of 1778 (18 George III c. 60) also known as the first Catholic Relief Act. Dockhead-Bermonsey (1773), Greenwich East (1792), Greenwich (1793), Richmond (1793) and Chatham (1795) all pre-date Margate. However, the parish stretched from the Isle of Sheppy to Hasting!

The second factor was both the Benedictines arrival from Italy to Ramsgate in 1856 and the problems which the Catholic Church faced in France as the Third Republic (1870 - 1914) gradually began to implement *laïcité* (separation of State and Religion) laws originating from the days for the French Revolution (1789-1799). The election of French Prime-minister Emil Combes as part of an anti-clerical coalition in 1902 accelerated the problems for religious orders and Catholic schools in France, forcing many orders and community to seek refuge in other countries. England, which was becoming a more religiously tolerant country, was an easy escape route and so an exodus to Thanet began, two communities of sisters established their new homes in Westgate.

The Ursulines arrived first, about 1904, and opened a convent school in the properties 21 to 25 Adrian Square, Westgate; their chaplain, Canon Billot, lived close by at 14 Adrian Square. The Ursulines erected an Iron Chapel at the side of their Adrian Square convent in Ethelbert Square, this took the name of The Sacred Heart (which had been the name of their chapel in Bolougne from where the sisters had been forced to leave). This iron building would be moved in 1906 to their new premises on Canterbury Road (the current location of the Ursuline Convent).

The Canonesses of St Augustine (Les Oiseaux) from Paris followed a year later in 1905, purchasing Tower House on Canterbury Road. They too erected an Iron Chapel, confusing also dedicating their chapel to The Sacred Heart. This became the place where Westgate residents and visiting Catholics would attend Mass. The Benedictines serviced the church from Ramsgate. In 1907 Fr Athanasius Avignon OSB is shown as parish priest and Fr Peter Corndon OSB as chaplain. Towards the end of the decade grand plans for a large convent and convent chapel came to fruition culminating with the opening of the conventual church of The Sacred Heart by Bishop Amigo on 13 July 1910. This had a screened transept seating 200 people for the public to attend worship in the new church.

## **BIRCHINGTON – Our Lady and Saint Benedict**

The first public Mass in Birchington was celebrated at The Institute Hall' (a public hall in The Square where Brills hardware shop now stands) by Father Erkenwald Egan OSB on the Feast of the Assumption, 15th August, 1908. Just weeks later the Monks of Ramsgate purchased some land next to the Old Malthouse in Minnis Road and adapted the old wagon shed building on the site to become a church. The first Mass was held there on the Feast of the Immaculate Conception, 8th December, 1908. A presbytery was built in front of the church and in May 1909 Fr John Percival Augustine Golding-Bird OSB became the first resident priest-in-charge of the Mission Church of Our Lady and St Benedict.

During the war years 1939-46 the church, together with St Peter's Westgate, ceased to function with Mass being said at Ss Austin and Gregory, Margate. Following the war years both churches reopened.

The mid-1950s saw the present parish church building take shape; the old church had become dilapidated and in 1954 the newly appoint priest, Fr Wilfred Emery OSB, was ordered by the Abbot of Ramsgate to "go and build a new church in Birchington". The first part of the new building was completed in 1957, a second



phase of extending the nave and erecting a new porch and tower was begun and finally the church and its new altar were consecrated by Bishop Cyril Cowderoy on 14th July 1964.

The present parish hall was built under Father Cyril Williams in 1974; the presbytery survived until 1986 when Father Denis Barry built a new presbytery to a much higher standard, detached from the church. In 1996 the church's problematic flat roof was replaced by a tiled pitched roof. In the church, Canon Bill Clements added central heating and a new wooden floor and it was carpeted throughout; in 1996 the church's problematic flat roof was replaced by a tiled pitched roof. The last major construction was the re-ordering of the sanctuary in 2003: the high altar and temporary wooden 'altar' were removed and a cubic altar made from stone quarried at Caen was installed. The same stone was used for the new ambo and plinth for the tabernacle. The tabernacle was dignified

with a small alcove created by bringing the ritual-east panelling forward, making the consecration crosses invisible as they were left in situ. New lighting allows emphasis to be placed on the tabernacle or on the altar. The altar was consecrated by Archbishop Michael Bowen on 17th April 2003; the relics of Saints Urbicus and Florentinus were cemented in the altar, watched by a sanctuary full of priests and a church full of people.



## WESTGATE – St Peter’s

From 1904 the Canonesses of St. Augustine were at Tower House (now St. Augustine’s Conference Centre), the Catholics living in Westgate were allowed the privilege of attending Mass at the sisters beautiful chapel, instead of going to either the parish church of Ss Austin & Gregory in Margate or Our Lady & St Benedict in Birchington. By 1935 the numbers attending mass at the convent – swelled in summer months by the many visitor – was so great that it was clear, as Bishop Peter Amigo stated in his canonical visitations, that the people of Westgate needed their own church and parish.

In 1937 the new parish acquired Westgate House (*aka Doon House*) with its five acres of land, sited on the main Canterbury Road and in the centre of the parish. Work began on adapting the main house for use as a temporary church. Seven rooms were made into one large open space giving a two-storey sanctuary, a transept, and two galleries, with seating for one hundred and fifty people. On Sunday, 14 July, the Right Reverend Adrian Taylor, Abbot of St. Augustine’s Abbey, Ramsgate, opened the church with a celebration of Pontifical Mass.



In 1958 when an end to the mortgage and its interest payments could, all be it vaguely, be seen. A generous donor paid off the remaining debt and the way was now clear to start a fund for a desperately needed new church. At times there was over three hundred people using the church; adding to the problems caused by the deteriorating fabric of the building.

Another act of providence – when the need was greatest – was the sale of two acres of the land in which the church stood. The price gained was almost half the cost of a new church.

An architect, Mr. John Clague, of Canterbury, was appointed. The parish priest was consulted and stated his requirements for a church in which the services and sacraments could be performed with reverence. Special attention was to be paid to making the building weather-proof, especially regarding the problems of sea air oxidising metal surfaces and to the chill winds which can frustrate attempts to heat a large building. The nave of the new church building was to be 90 ft long by 42 ft wide. A Lady Chapel and sacristy rooms were sited either side of the nave with a baptistry and repository each side of the main entrance, above these was a gallery where the organ is now located.

Construction of the new building began in February 1963 and advanced at a smooth pace. On 7 July, 1963, the structure was advanced enough for Right Reverend David Parry, Abbot of St. Augustine’s Abbey to lay the Foundation Stone.

The Church of St. Peter was formally opened for worship on 11 May, 1964, by His Lordship Cyril Cowderoy, Bishop of Southwark. The total cost of the building, including site work was, according to contemporary records, £44,000.

The parish in 1964 was still served, like all the Thanet parishes, by Benedictine priests who, while living in the parish, were part of the Benedictine community of Ramsgate Abbey. Reverend Father L. Dunstan Prangell, OSB, was parish priest at the time the new church was opened. He was still at St Peter’s when the new presbytery was built in 1981.

The parish was handed over to the Diocese in 1984 and Fr. James Hurley succeeded Fr. Aidan McArdle OSB. On 1 January, 1988, Fr. Michael Chapman became Parish Priest and he retired in 1994. Fr. Joe Feeley followed during 1994 and was at St Peter's until 1996. Fr. John Slater was appointed to the parish and began his appointment on 1 October, 1996. Fr. John retired in August 2010.

St Peter’s ceased to function as a church following the final Sunday Mass on the 6th July 2014 – one day short of 51 years since its fountain stone was laid, and six days short of 77 years since the old St Peter’s (Doon House) was opened.