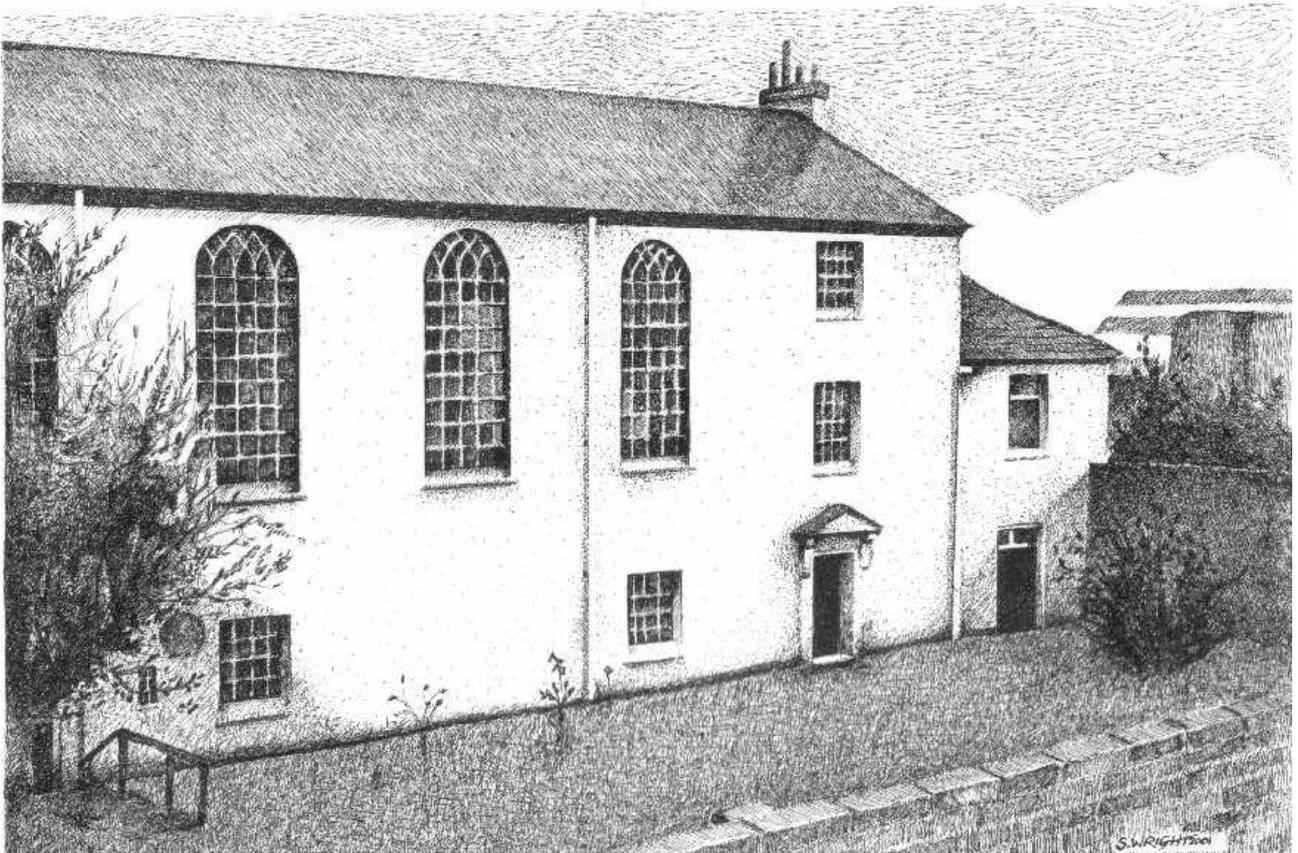


THE CATHOLIC CHURCH
IN
PONTEFRACT



INTRODUCTION

The first mass recorded in this area was in 625 A.D. The Princess Ethelburga (the sister of the King of Kent), married King Edwin of Northumbria and was given a Manor by her husband which she called Taddeneseylf. She attended mass in her house offered by 'Paulinus' a Bishop and four monks who came with her from Kent. Edwin was a pagan but did not object to the practice of Christianity and became a Christian himself in 627. Little else is known about Queen Ethelburga, except she founded St. Nicholas Hospital but there was a flourishing catholic life here right through the Norman conquest to the Reformation. Dominican monks came from Cluny in France and were established in St. John's Monastery from 1250. The Carmelites were also here, in fact there were eight churches in the district.

During the Reformation everything was destroyed, a Jesuit, Father Peter Hamerton, came to Pontefract and hid in a house in Monkrood, about a mile from Pontefract. In 1683 Father Peter's brother, who was also a Jesuit, came to Pontefract and built a Chapel to accommodate 200 people and a School. During the next four years people began to come back to the church and in 1687 230 people were confirmed.

When William of Orange came to England mob violence and persecution broke out again and in 1688 the church and school were destroyed. The faithful Catholics went to mass in a barn in Carleton until 1700, after that date about 30 to 40 went to a house in Horsefair. The priest then was Fr. James Meyneil. He died in 1746 and was followed by Fr. Richard Barrow.

Little else is known until about 1800 when the mass centre was moved to where St. Joseph's is now. In 1804 a gift from Mr. Ambrose Eyles and Fr. Edward Howard, enabled the land to be bought from the Duchy of Lancaster and the present Church and Presbytery built on the rock of Tanshelf. The church was without windows on the street side and had strong doors covered with sheet iron. Additional windows were added later and a Lady Altar of carved oak. In 1866 improvements were made and two statues of Our Lady and St. Joseph were placed on either side of the sanctuary. The school opened in 1866 and had a hundred boys and girls attending. Until 1888 the parish was served by Jesuits, the most well

known was Fr. William Lomax who enlarged the church. He died in 1856 and is buried in the Presbytery garden. In 1890 the church was handed over to the secular clergy.



Inside St Joseph's Church, Pontefract

Circa 1950

THE REVEREND MARTIN MARY BREY.

(1854 - 1926)

Father Martin Mary Brey was born on 15th April 1854 at Nederhorst den Berg in the Diocese of Haarlem, in Holland. After his early schooling at Hagefeld near to his home, he entered the major seminary at Bruges in Belgium to train for the priesthood. In June 1881 he came to St. Joseph's Seminary in Leeds and was ordained priest for the Diocese of Leeds by Bishop Robert Cornthwaite of Leeds in the seminary chapel on 19th November 1882 together with a fellow student from Belgium, Father Cyril de Cuypers. Father Brey was first appointed curate at St. Mary's Batley where he stayed for eight years until in November 1890 he came to St. Joseph's, Pontefract to replace Father James Maguire, S.J. when the Jesuit priests left the parish.

Father Brey seems to have had poor health and after only six years he was forced to take sick leave at Ginneken in his native Holland and his place at Pontefract was taken by his old seminary friend Father de Cuypers. From time to time Father Brey came back to help out his friend at St. Joseph's. However after a further time recuperating at Weert in Holland, it was thought that he was unable to return to the busy parish of Pontefract and so he was appointed as chaplain to the Maxwell Stuart family at Scarthingwell Hall, near Tadcaster and with the care of the church of the Immaculate Conception there.

In 1917 he was invited to visit Pontefract to preach at the dedication of the new altar in the church. Despite recurring spells of ill-health he continued to serve at Scarthingwell and remained in these somewhat idyllic settings until 1922. By this time he was aged 68 and as his health continued to deteriorate he retired once more to Weert and it was there he died four years later, on 26th December 1926 aged 72.

THE REVEREND CYRIL DE CUYPERS.

(1856 - 1909)

As has been noted Father De Cuypers came to take charge of St. Joseph's when Father Brey was taken ill in February 1894. Father De Cuypers was a Belgian, and was born at Beveren in the Diocese of Bruges on 5th April 1856. As a boy he had gone to the junior seminary (Le Petit Seminaire) at Roulers not far from Beveren and then advanced to the Grand Seminary at Bruges.

When he was twenty six came to St. Joseph's Seminary in Leeds and was ordained priest in the seminary chapel there, by Bishop Cornthwaite on 19th November 1882.

He was first sent as curate to Canon Samuel Walshaw at St. Marie's Sheffield and then after five years, to assist Canon Collingwood at St. Patrick's, Leeds, another large parish. It was after almost six years there having as it were completed his apprenticeship, he came as parish priest to Pontefract in succession to Father Brey. One of Father De Cuypers' undertakings during his time in the parish was the building of the separate infant department for the school which the Jesuit Fathers had earlier built near to the church. After thirteen years faithful service in Pontefract, Father De Cuypers' health, like that of his predecessor began to give cause for concern and in 1907 he was moved to the easier parish at Allerton Park near Knaresborough, the home of Lord Stourton.

However his health failed to improve and after less than two years he retired to Belgium where he died on 1st May 1909 at the early age of 53.

A window in his memory was later placed in St. Joseph's Church.

THE REVEREND FRANCIS CREEDAN.

(1875 - 1961)

In 1907 Father Francis Creedan, a curate at St. Anne's Cathedral, Leeds, came in an emergency to take over at St. Joseph's when Father De Cuypers was taken ill and then moved to Allerton Park.

Father Creedan was born in the small village of Clanrohid, near Macroom, Co. Cork in the Diocese of Cloyne, Ireland on 26th May 1875. At the age of eighteen he went to St. Patrick's College, Carlow to prepare for the priesthood under the presidency of the famous Monsignor John Foley and was ordained there for the Diocese of Leeds on 9th June 1900; one of 39 priests from Carlow to be ordained for the Leeds Diocese over the years.

His first appointment was to the staff of the old Leeds Cathedral under Canon Croskell, and it was whilst he was there that the new Cathedral was built and opened in 1904. After only seven years the bishop sent him to Pontefract to take the place of Father De Cuypers. His coming coincided with the new education act which granted free secondary education to all, and so one of Father Creedan's tasks was to obtain an additional teacher in the parish school to provide for the increased numbers. It would seem, however, that the bishop was really looking for a more experienced priest for the growing parish of St. Joseph's and so after less than two years he exchanged Father Creedan with Father Honore Fové who was then parish priest of Bingley.

Father Creedan stayed at Bingley a further six years before he was made parish priest of the new parish of St. Joseph's, Goole. In 1919 he became chaplain to the Little Sisters of the Poor at St. Elizabeth's Home in Sheffield. After ten years serving the sisters and old people there he spent two years at St. Boniface's parish at Benthams, until he moved finally to the country parish of St. Edward's, Clifford where he served for thirteen years until he retired in 1944 in his seventieth year.

He first lived in North Wales but after only a short time, returned to Cork, where he resided in various places until he at length moved to St. Paul's

retirement home conducted by the Sisters of Charity of St. Paul at Clonakilty. He died there on 12th August 1961 aged 86.

A year before his death, on the occasion of the Diamond Jubilee of his ordination he was made Honorary Canon of the Diocese of Leeds.

THE REVEREND HONORE FOVÉ.

(1868 - 1939)

The year 1909 saw the arrival of Father Fové at St. Joseph's who remained as parish priest in Pontefract for over nineteen years.

Father Honore Fové was, like Father De Cuypers, a Belgian. He was born at Ghistelles in the Diocese of Bruges on 10th April 1868. Also like his predecessor he was educated at the minor seminary at Roulers and then came to St. Joseph's Seminary, Leeds in 1890 where he was ordained by Bishop Gordon on 22nd November 1891. He was immediately appointed as curate to St. Mary's Halifax, and then after four years he moved to St. Patrick's, Huddersfield. Both these were large urban parishes, but in 1899 he seems to have been put in charge of the smaller parish of St. Joseph's at Brighouse which had opened a school chapel in 1878. Then in 1903 he went to the Sacred Heart at Bingley; so that when he exchanged places with Father Creedon and came to Pontefract in 1909, he had a wide experience of pastoral work in the Diocese.

When he arrived he was aged forty-one. His portrait shows a distinguished figure with rounded features and spectacles and immaculate in the full clerical dress of the time, and still it is said, with a slight Belgian accent.

Father Fové had been in the parish scarcely five years when on 4th August 1914 the First World War began and within a few weeks Father Fové's homeland was overrun by the German armies. His anxieties for the safety of his own family must have been increased with the arrival in England of a hundred thousand Belgian refugees who were gradually dispersed throughout the country some, arriving before long in the Pontefract area. These unfortunate victims of war must have been consoled when they found a Belgian priest here.

In 1915 a baby of one of these families called Verburg, living at Vale Head, Knottingley died and Father Fové performed the funeral for them.

The war also brought losses and casualties to the parish, and forty young men were killed between 1914 and 1918, so Father Fové had often to minister to the bereaved families. Despite war-time difficulties, in 1917 Father Fové provided a new high altar for the church and at the same time inserted two small windows in the blank north wall. With the sinking of new pits around the town the numbers of parishioners at St. Joseph's continued to grow and to alleviate this in 1910 Father Fové opened a Mass centre in George Street, Featherstone and then in 1913 the Bishop sent Father Wilfrid Fitzgibbon to be assistant curate. For the next fifteen years they worked together for the people of Pontefract until in 1928, at the age of sixty, Father Fové retired to his home town of Ghistelles in Belgium. He lived there for a further eleven years, only to sadly witness the start of the Second World War, dying on 28th November 1939.

THE VERY REVEREND WILFRID FITZGIBBON, V.F. (1887 - 1965)

There are few priests who spend the whole of their ministry in only one parish, yet such was the case of Father Fitzgibbon who came to St. Joseph's, Pontefract as curate in 1913 and retired as parish priest in 1956, a total of forty-three years.

Wilfrid Fitzgibbon was the son of Gerald and Henrietta Fitzgibbon of Blenheim Mount in St. Anne's Cathedral parish in Leeds and was born on 5th May 1887. At the age of twelve he entered St. Cuthbert's College, Ushaw as a church student and was placed in the Third Class of Rudiments. After completing the full college course, he was at length ordained a priest by Bishop Cowgill in Leeds Cathedral on 25th July 1913 and, as we have seen, was immediately appointed as curate to Father Fové at Pontefract. Father Fitzgibbon also had a brother Basil who became a Jesuit priest of the English Province and was to become a familiar visitor to St. Joseph's over the years.

After working with Father Fové for fifteen years Father Fitzgibbon succeeded as parish priest in 1928. In 1936 he became Dean of the Pontefract Deanery and the following year was elected to the Pontefract Borough Education Committee.

One of his first tasks as parish priest was the provision of a Church in Featherstone. The building used for Mass in the former Salvation Army Citadel in Lord Street was by now totally inadequate and so he commissioned the architect, Charles Fox of Dewsbury to build St. Gerard's Church, adjoining the Ackton Hall Colliery in Station Lane, and this was opened by Bishop Poskitt on 22nd October 1936. In addition to the Mass at St. Gerard's, since the Death of Father Brennan in 1930, St. Joseph's had been providing services at the Ackworth Grange Chapel and about the time of the start of the second World War, Father Fitzgibbon also opened another Mass centre at Knottingley.

No doubt because of this expansion, it was about this time St. Joseph's acquired a second curate. In July, Father Fitzgibbon celebrated his Silver Jubilee of ordination and a photograph of the time shows him

with his two curates Father Connery and Father Hickey. For the next eighteen years he continued his service to the people of Pontefract until his retirement in August 1956 at the age of sixty-nine.

On the occasion of his Golden Jubilee, in 1963, in the following February, he was made an Honorary Freeman of Pontefract at an impressive ceremony in the Town Hall.

Father Fitzgibbon spent his retirement in Scarborough living there until his death on 14th January 1965 aged seventy-seven. His funeral took place at St. Joseph's and his burial, in Pontefract Cemetery.

THE REVEREND DONALD FRANCIS BACKHOUSE

(1912 – 1967)

When Father Fitzgibbon retired in 1956, his place at St-Joseph's was taken by Father Donald Backhouse who had been parish priest of Brighthouse.



He was born in Selby on 14th August 1912, the son of Joseph and Elizabeth Backhouse, of a well known local family. Two of his older brothers, William and Herbert were also destined to be priests of the Diocese. Donald was educated by the Jesuits at St. Michael's College, Leeds and then followed his two brothers to Ushaw to prepare for the priesthood. He was ordained at St. Anne's Cathedral by Bishop Poskitt on 2nd April 1938 and was appointed curate

to Ss. Joseph's and Teresa's, Woodlands, Doncaster. Father Backhouse, however, seems to have suffered from an asthmatic condition for most of his life and as a consequence was moved to various parishes, never staying long in one place. So he served in Halifax, Horsforth, Harrogate, Sheffield, Cudworth and a second time in Sheffield before becoming parish priest at Brighthouse in 1953 until in 1956 he energetically took charge at Pontefract.

Despite his poor health in a short time he had opened a Mass Centre at Chequerfield and within a year had built the priest's house and church-hall of the Holy Family, which was then made an independent parish in September 1957.

At St. Joseph's he made a new west entrance to the church which was imaginatively connected to the school grounds by a bridge and he also

began negotiations to obtain land for a presbytery at Featherstone.

Sadly his health did not improve and after only three years he left for Settle, hoping that the country air of the Dales would be more beneficial. After six years there he went to St. Edward's, Clifford but after a short time he became ill again and was advised to try the climate of South Africa, but sadly he became worse and died at Durban on 22nd April 1967 aged only 54.

His body was brought back to St. Edward's, Clifford where his funeral and burial took place.

THE VERY REVEREND CANON JOHN JOSEPH BURNS.

(1914 - 1996)

When Father John Burns came as parish priest to St. Joseph's in June 1959 he was aged 45 and had been parish priest at Edlington near Doncaster for the past five years. He was born at Sneem on the River Kenmare in Co. Kerry, Ireland on 25th March 1914 and was educated at St. John's College, Waterford before his ordination in Waterford Cathedral for the Diocese of Leeds on 18th June 1939.

His first appointment had been as curate to Father Peter McBride at St. Mary's, Batley where he stayed for six years. He then spent three years at the Holy Family, Leeds and a further four years at St. Patrick's, Bradford until his appointment to Edlington in 1954.

Father Burns was not long in Pontefract before Featherstone was detached from St. Joseph's. Father Philip Moran was made the first parish priest there and he resided with Father Burns at St. Joseph's until his new presbytery was ready.



Meanwhile Father Burns turned his attention to Knottingley and in 1962 built St. Michael's church-hall at Hill Top which in turn also became a parish two years later when Father Edward Horkin was appointed there. It was also during Father Burns time at St. Joseph's that work began on St. Wilfrid's joint high-school for the parishes of the area and this was first opened in the autumn of 1963. These were busy days for St. Joseph's, for it was at this time the parish hall was built near the

church.

After eleven years Father Burns was asked by the bishop to take charge of St. Clare's, Bradford and he left Pontefract in January 1970. He remained in Bradford for seven years until he moved to Heckmondwike in 1977.

In 1979 he was made an Honorary Canon of the Diocese. In 1989, aged 75, he retired to his home town of Sneem in Ireland where he spent seven peaceful years until his death there on 19th May 1996. He was aged 82 years.

THE REVEREND BERNARD JOSEPH McCOURT, B.A.

(1921 - 1979)

Father Bernard McCourt came as parish priest to St. Joseph's in January 1970 in succession to Father Burns. He had been parish priest at St. Aiden's, Baildon for the previous four years. Father McCourt was born at Castlebellingham near Dundalk in Co. Louth, Ireland on 21st December 1921. He was first educated at St. Patricks College, Armagh where one of his contemporaries, who was to be a life long friend, was Cardinal Thomas O'Fiaich Archbishop of Armagh. He then graduated in philosophy at University College, Dublin, before completing his studies in theology at All Hallows' College, Drumcondra, Dublin. On 22nd June 1947 he was one of five priests ordained for the Diocese of Leeds in the college chapel. On his arrival in Leeds, his first appointment was as curate at the Sacred Heart, Burley Road, Leeds, but after six years his health broke down and for a number of months he went on sick leave. When he returned he spent two years at St. Mary's, Rotherham and four more years at St. Peter's, Bradford. Then in 1960 he became chaplain to the Little Sisters of the Poor home in Belle Vue Road, Leeds. It was from there in 1968 that he went to be parish priest at Baildon.

His arrival at Pontefract coincided with the many changes following the Second Vatican Council. In 1970 the new Roman Missal was published and the following year Father McCourt undertook the re-ordering of the sanctuary at St. Joseph's for the new liturgical needs, including the new high altar which he put in place in October 1971. In the previous May the parish became one of only two in England to have a Permanent Deacon appointed when the Reverend Anthony Winn was ordained by Bishop Wheeler at Leeds Cathedral on 2nd May 1971. These were but two of the many changes which took place under Father McCourt's guidance over the next nine years. In the summer of 1979 however he was taken ill and went home to Ireland in the hope of recovery, but whilst there he was admitted to the Louth County Hospital, Dundalk where he died on 13th November 1979 aged 57. His funeral and burial took place in Ireland.

THE REVEREND MICHAEL NEALON

Following the death of Father McCourt in November 1979 his place at St. Joseph's was taken by Father Michael Nealon. Father Nealon was born in 1938 in St. Joseph's Parish Leeds and in 1952 entered St. Cuthbert's College, Ushaw and was placed in the First Class of Rudiments. Like his predecessor, Father Fitzgibbon, he followed the full seminary course and during those thirteen years held a number of offices in the college. He was ordained priest on the 12th June 1965, amongst the last group of priests to be ordained by Bishop George Patrick Dwyer before he left to become Archbishop of Birmingham.

Father Nealon's first appointment was to the staff of St. Marie's Sheffield under Canon George Collins but shortly after the Bishop's departure he was transferred to St. Joseph's, Bradford, where he served six years with Canon Michael Dunleavy. He then spent a further eight years at St. Patrick's, Huddersfield, so it was his first appointment as Parish Priest when he came to St. Joseph's, Pontefract in November 1979. These were to be eventful years, for following the centenary of the Diocese, in 1980 the Holy See set up the new Diocese of Hallam for the parishes of South Yorkshire. Then in 1982 came the Pope's visit to England and the memorable ceremony at York for this part of the country. All these different occasions meant much organising for the parish. In 1985 Bishop Wheeler retired to be replaced by Bishop Konstant, and one of the first set of clergy moves made, the new bishop included Father Nealon, who after seven years at St. Joseph's was transferred to St. William's parish in Bradford. There he ministered for eight years, until in 1994, he moved to St. Theresa's, Queensbury.