

St Mary's, Browndedge, Bamber Bridge - A Brief History

The Early Years

Although Benedictines had been active in this area since the late 1600s, primarily in Brindle, it was not until 1780 that they established themselves in Bamber Bridge. One of the earliest references to Browndedge was in a grant of land dating from 1306 which referred to the land known as "Brown egge". The parish itself has its origins in two 18th century Benedictine chapels at Little Mosna in Walton-le-dale and at Cuerden, both nearby. A map of 1848 shows the site of what is described as an "R.C. Chapel" in Chapel House Wood, part of the Cuerden Hall demesne through which ran the main drive from the lodge on what is now Wigan Road, to the hall itself. Mass was said here from 1718 onwards although the chapel itself was not built until 1746, interestingly on the doorstep of the Parker family, Protestant landowners who were later closely associated with St Saviour's Church. Evidence that the local magistrates were nervous about the strength of Catholicism in the area at this time is shown by the following public notice issued by H Hoghton, R Molyneux and E N Longworth:

"We whose names are hereunto subscribed, three of his Majesty's Justices of the Peace and Quoram; in and for the said County aforesaid, do hereby give this public notice that if any person or persons whatsoever shall presume or dare to exercise the Office of Popish Priest or any other ecclesiastical function of the Church of Rome within the township of Cuerden in the said County, shall be prosecuted in such manner as the law directs. As this likewise give further notice to all persons to forbear to assemble or meet together in any place of Worship within the said township set apart or otherwise to hear Mass or other Office or service performed belonging to the Church of Rome under the like penalties of being prosecuted aforesaid given under our hands the 20th day of August 1740".

At around the time the chapel was built in 1746, the owner of Cuerden Hall, Robert Parker, had married Anne Townley, daughter and heiress of Thomas Townley, a member of the well known Catholic family of Townley Hall, Burnley. Was the building of the chapel coincidence, or did the Parker family have Catholic sympathies? Little Mosna was established in 1724 and is believed to have stood near the bridge over the River Darwen known as Cann Bridge. Fr Oswald Eaves OSB, who served both Little Mosna and Cuerden, bought three acres of land at Browndedge in 1780 from a Richard Goodshaw, building a chapel and a house on the site. Fr Eaves, therefore, was the first Rector of the Browndedge Mission and recorded the events leading up to the opening of the new church in his account book - "Laid the first stone at Browndedge June 5th 1780. Came to dwell there the October following, and on the 23rd December 1780 said the first Mass". Due to the continuing hostility towards Catholics at this time, the Chapel itself was discreetly hidden from view behind the house. The following year a further four acres of land, together with four cottages, were purchased. The accounts kept by Fr Eaves show that the chapels at Little Mosna

and Cuerden were, following the establishment of Brownedge, rented out - "1782 April 28 received from Mr Hall for my tenement at Mosna ½ year's rent due last Candlemas - 12-10-0", "1784 May 16 received from Richard Cooper the rent on Cuerden-green Chapel - 2-15-0". Sometime later, both chapels had disappeared. Fr Eaves remained as Rector until his death in 1793 when he was succeeded by Fr John Atkinson OSB, Rector between 1793 and 1822.

Expansion

The chapel built by Fr Eaves remained in use until 1826 when Fr Anselm Brewer OSB, Rector between 1822 and 1846, having purchased a parcel of adjoining land, built a new chapel with a small tower at a cost of £1,652. The Brownedge Journal of December 1961 records "There is an almost certain tradition that the tower was built with the private family money of one of the Parish Priests and it was not built from parochial offerings at all". This chapel opened for divine service on 21 January 1827. Fr Brewer also built a school in 1842 at a cost of £294, having, between 1832 and 1840, built a number of other houses, a cottage and a stable, thus building up a substantial property portfolio in the area for the Benedictines. Mannex's *Directory* of 1854 described the church as "a beautiful Catholic chapel, in a most delightful and picturesque location". Between 1847 and 1883, Fr Anselm Walker OSB served as Rector and it was he who converted the original chapel into a house and built a cloister, at a cost of £80, connecting it to the new chapel. In 1861 new schools were built in Brownedge Lane and Duddle Lane and in 1866 a 120ft high spire was built, holding a peal of six bells. 1864 had seen the arrival of the Sisters of Charity in the parish, the order remaining in the parish until the 1960s. A newspaper report of July 1870 describes a number of alterations which Fr Walker had recently undertaken to the Sanctuary of the church (still referred to as a chapel) as follows - "Several excellent improvements have been just made in the sanctuary of St Mary's Chapel, Brownedge. Prior to their accomplishment the chapel had a very pretty appearance. Since they have been carried out, it has a particularly beautiful appearance". These alterations included "a new door of very handsome design" for the Tabernacle, a new carpet for the Sanctuary and the re-varnishing of the "fine picture" of Our Lady (after Murillo) which hung over the High Altar. During 1877 Cardinal Henry Manning, Archbishop of Westminster, paid a visit to the parish. In 1880 the school in Brownedge Lane was rebuilt and a Parish Room was built on part of the site of what is now St Mary's and St Benedict's Primary School. In his *Country Churches and Chapels* of 1872, Hewitson describes the church as follows: "There is not a country church, whether Protestant or Catholic, we have yet visited which can be at all compared to this in decorative effect, in richness of tone, in elaborateness of detail, in the many hued colours and rare beauty of its sanctuary, and in the fullness and perfection of its artistic treatment throughout".

To the Glory of God

In 1891 enlargements and alterations were commissioned by Fr Bernard Pozzi OSB, Rector between 1883 and 1900, the result being the church which stands today. The architect, Peter Paul Pugin, son of the better known Augustus Welby Pugin, and younger brother of Edward Welby Pugin, was asked to largely rebuild the church in the gothic style, although it appears that the original tower and spire were left untouched. The work involved adding the Apse, together with both Transepts, the Sacred Heart Chapel and Lady Chapel, lifting the roof of the Nave and adding the rose windows. The church was extended in length by some 100ft, giving a total length of some 192ft, including the chancel and porch. The work was largely complete by August 1892 at a cost of £13,000. For those with an eye for detail, the original roofline can still be seen in the stonework on the graveyard side of the church, just below the level of the rose windows

The Early 20th Century

Between 1906 and 1907 the present Priory was built under the direction of Fr Basil Clarkson OSB, Rector between 1900 and 1912. In 1912 a new Parish Hall was opened at a cost of £2,600 and a new Lady Altar was unveiled. On his departure from Brownedge, Fr Clarkson was presented with a beautiful chalice by the parish and, following his death in 1913, he was buried at Brownedge. 1912 also saw the arrival of Fr Anselm Turner OSB as Rector. In 1915 it was discovered that poor foundations had caused subsidence and that dry rot was causing a problem. Remedial work costing £1,600 had been completed by June 1916 and involved the construction of flying buttresses to the external walls and the removal of a number of coffins so that a dry area could be created which encompassed the entire church.

Until 1918, the parish had, strictly speaking, been a 'Mission' in the care of a Rector. However, in that year St Mary's, Brownedge formally became a parish in the care of a parish priest. Of course, in practice little, if anything, actually changed.

In 1918 ten stained glass windows were fitted to the Nave, a number of which commemorate Benedictines who have served the area, and, in 1920, five fitted to the upper level of the Sanctuary. In 1919 the present Stations of the Cross were unveiled at a cost of £260, having been paid for by fourteen members of the parish. Following the end of the Great War in November 1918 in which a member of the parish, Corporal John McNamara of School Lane, Bamber Bridge had been awarded the Victoria Cross and subsequently killed in action, it was decided to erect a fitting War Memorial. This was unveiled and blessed on 4 September 1921 on Brownedge Green, land which was donated for the purpose by the de Hoghton family of Hoghton Tower. In 1926 a new Code of Canon Law made it necessary to define the boundaries of the parish, a requirement which

also applied to the neighbouring parishes. The boundaries, which still stand to the present day, are:

“.....from the Tram Road by a bee line to Duddle Lane end, thence by a bee line to the point in Charnley Fold Lane where it turns North Easterly, from this point Southwards along Charnley Fold Lane, then Easterly by School Lane to Prospect Hill; then by the Lane Southerly to where it turned round the East side of a Pond, from this by a beehive to the Road from Rimmer House where it turns Westerly; by this road past Hospital Inn to the diocesan boundary; by this back to Moss Lane and Todd Lane to the Old Tram Road”.

In 1927 the peal of six bells were replaced by a peal of eight smaller bells and at the same time a new clock was installed in the tower. This clock, which remains to the present day, has the distinction of being, in all but size, exactly the same as the better known Big Ben at Westminster. The new bells were blessed on the High Altar by Abbot Edmund Matthews OSB on 5 February and rang out for the first time on 4 March. On 16 June 1935, Trinity Sunday, five stained glass windows depicting ten English Martyrs were unveiled in the Ambulatory behind the Sanctuary. In 1940 Fr Dominic Wilson OSB succeeded his brother Fr Philip Wilson OSB as Parish Priest. These were two of four brothers, all priests, all of whom served at Browndedge during the first half of the 20th century.

The Post War Years

During 1949 the spire was re-pointed, the clock faces re-painted and the grounds improved. In 1953 an organ from a Preston Congregational Church was purchased to replace the old pipe organ which was believed to date, in part, from 1688. In 1954, Father Gabriel McNally OSB, who had become Parish Priest in 1950, oversaw the installation of the present Sacred Heart Altar which replaced a wooden altar which had previously been used as the High Altar prior to the Pugin restoration, and had originally been at St Joseph's, Brindle. Fr McNally was also responsible for the installation, in 1958, of stained glass windows in the Sacred Heart Chapel which had previously been part of the old Abbey Church at Ampleforth. Dry rot was once again discovered and remedial work was undertaken during the 1960s in an attempt to cure the problem. In 1959 the secondary school, St Mary's, was opened at Fourfields and in 1967 work began on a new building for the primary school in Browndedge Lane, together with the construction of the Catholic Club. In 1970 the steps behind the High Altar were removed, allowing the Priest to face the congregation and in the same year the church was completely re-wired. During the 1970s, further changes were made to the interior of the church by Fr Leonard Jackson OSB, Parish Priest between 1976 and 1986, and included the erection of a partition to separate the Sacred Heart Chapel from the main body of the church. In the period between 1994 and 1996, Fr Alban Crossley, Parish Priest between 1992 and 1996, also undertook several changes. These involved the extension of the Sanctuary out into the main body of the church, bringing the Altar further forward and necessitating the

removal of several rows of pews. A new Baptistry and Ambo were also formed. The next major period of works took place between 1999 and 2000 during the tenure of Fr Bede Leach OSB as Parish Priest, when treatment for dry rot had again to be undertaken, together with much internal restoration, re-modelling and re-decoration. A new heating system was installed and the Sacred Heart Chapel partition was also removed. The Stations of the Cross were refurbished and the Tabernacle, moved to the Ambulatory in 1996, was restored to its former position.

Some Parish Groups and Activities

With the exception of the altar servers, who have been in existence in one form or another since 1780, perhaps the oldest group in the parish is the choir, which has been in existence in various forms since at least 1887. Between 1889 and 1953 Richard Billington, also headmaster of the boys' school in Browndge Lane, was organist for a staggering sixty four years before being succeeded by the present organist, Raymund Livesey, who has now surpassed that record! For many years the choir had been an all male affair but following Richard Billington's death became an all female choir, before eventually becoming the mixed choir which continues to sing primarily at the 11am Sunday Mass. A group provides the music at the 9.30am Sunday Mass which is popular among those with young families. Another group which was in existence some forty years before the choir was St Mary's Altar Society, a committee meeting of which was held on 26 September 1847. An original pamphlet from this date exists and records that the object of the society was "to furnish the Altar with Linen, Vestments, etc suitable for the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass, and to provide other ornaments for the Sacristy". Among the six rules of the society listed, was that the committee would meet on the second Sunday in each month. While this society no longer exists, its work is carried on by, among others, the Sacristans. During his tenure as Rector between 1900 and 1912, Fr Basil Clarkson OSB established the Sacred Heart Guild and the Guild of St Agnes. In May 1929 a Council of the Knights of St Columba was founded and this continues to thrive to this day. 1935 saw the establishment of the St Anne's Guild for Married Ladies and a Conference of St Vincent de Paul which still exists today. Today, many other groups flourish, including CAFOD, the Knights of St Columba and the Browndge Christians Together Food Bank, whilst St Mary's Charity Shop in Bamber Bridge, has raised much needed funds for the maintenance of the Church whilst providing a service in the community at large.

The Parish and Community Festival, held during late April/early May, is an annual occasion involving a whole week of concerts and events, together with well patronised art and photography competitions, designed to appeal to a wide audience and involving members of other denominations and the community at large. First held in 2000 to mark the completion of the refurbishment of the church, Festival celebrated its 20th anniversary in 2019

A New Dawn

Perhaps the biggest change for the parish in the most recent years was the announcement, in May 2016, that the Benedictines would be withdrawing and handing over the care of the parish to the Diocese of Salford. On 31 August 2016, Fr George Corrie OSB stepped down as the last Benedictine Parish Priest after 236 years of a Benedictine presence in the parish. After a brief interregnum, during which the parish was administered by Assistant Priest, Fr Colin Battell OSB, and Fr Bernard McNulty OSB, the parish welcomed its first Diocesan Parish Priest in November 2016 in the person of Fr Mark Harold. Fr Mark had recently returned to the Diocese from Rome where he had been Vice-Rector at the Venerable English College. Providing some continuity, Fr Colin has remained in the parish as Assistant Priest.

In June 2018, on the Feast of Corpus Christi, a Blessed Sacrament Procession, followed by Benediction, took place in the grounds of the church, the first such procession to have been held in the parish since 1996. The Feast of Corpus Christi was again celebrated with a Blessed Sacrament Procession and Benediction in June 2019, the procession taking a longer route than it had done the previous year.

Following the decision, in late 2018, by the Benedictines to withdraw from the neighbouring parish of Our Lady of Lourdes and St Gerard Majella, Lostock Hall, Fr Mark was also appointed Parish Priest there with effect from 1 January 2019, albeit with Fr Joe Gee being resident in Lostock Hall and administering the parish on a day to day basis. The two parishes, whilst still separate entities, now work in closer partnership with each other developing opportunities and strengthening links. Within this framework, the parish of St Mary's, Brownedge continues to thrive as it looks to the future, embracing, in its stride, the challenges and opportunities presented by these recent fundamental changes.

A further and unprecedented challenge soon arrived in the form of the global Covid-19 pandemic which led to the closure, in late March 2020, of the church for several months and, at other times, restrictions which allowed only limited opening for private prayer. It was therefore fortunate that, during 2017, a live-streaming facility had been installed in the church, allowing Masses, services and other events to be watched live online or played back at a later time. This allowed Masses to be broadcast from the church during periods of closure, together with other 'lockdown' initiatives such as a weekly Songs of Praise and daily recitation of the Holy Rosary.

Whilst benefitting parishioners, it soon became apparent that people from across the globe were joining St Mary's for Mass and other services. On a practical level, whilst the church has re-opened it has meant many changes to ensure that the safety of all those in the church is ensured with many parishioners

volunteering to act as stewards to ensure the church can open safely and to undertake cleaning and sanitising in time for the next Mass or service.

As the parish continues to move forward through 2021 and beyond, there is much to be thankful for as an end to restrictions, and a return to more normal times, looks possible later in the year. We have a beautiful and well maintained church, a vibrant and dedicated congregation of all ages and backgrounds, many of whom contribute to the numerous groups, organisations and, most importantly, ministries within the Parish, and without which the parish could not function - drawn together in the House of God to serve Him.

The following observation by Hewitson of Browndedge, again from his *Country Churches and Chapels* of 1872, may be almost 150 years old, but continues to hold true today - "The inhabitants are homely and kind hearted Humble hard working people live in it, but they make you welcome".

David Gorman
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