

Father Jim, This is Your Life!

When a priest is appointed to a parish the parishioners know very little about him, especially if he is quiet, reserved, and happy to stay in the background. Even after some 13 years here, that could be said of Father Jim, well maybe.

But with a little digging an awful lot can come to light. So, with the help of your sister Maureen, Father Jim, this is your life!

You were born on Sunday the 4th of June 1944 in the Whittington hospital in Highgate, making you technically a Cockney. Who would have thought that?

The 4th of June was meant to be D-Day, but there was too much fog in the English Channel so that was postponed until the 6th of June. But it was the day the allied armies freed Rome, so great things were beginning to happen.

You were the first child of four children: yourself, Maureen, Michael, and Brian. Michael and Brian sadly have both since died.

You lived in a council house in Albert St in Camden Town and were often taken as a baby at night to the safety of the underground stations as the bombs were still falling. The parish of Camden Town had then a very large and busy Irish community and was to mean a lot in your life.

As you were growing up Albert St was partly a bomb site and rubbish dump, but this provided you with hours of play and adventure.

You loved tennis and had excellent eye to hand coordination which made you a natural, but there were no such things as tennis clubs or courts in those days. So, for you, it was hitting a ball against the garage wall using a frying pan as a racquet, until the neighbours chased you away. Wimbledon was only a dream.

The local parish priest taught you how to be an altar server at the age of 6, and it was your delight to travel each morning to the church about two streets away to serve at the 7:00 mass, much to the disapproval of your mother, but it was safe to do those things in those days.

It was here that the seeds of your vocation were probably planted.

You went to Saint Aloysius Infant School in Somers town in Euston. It was quite a walk for your mother, who would have to make that walk twice a day, initially with just yourself, but eventually with all four of you, rain, or shine. Who would have thought that you would later become parish priest there for 25 years? At school you were very good at whatever you undertook, whether it was in the classroom or outside.

You were from an Irish family, so you had to take up Irish dancing! You went to the Ryan school in Camden town. You travelled to all sorts of competitions, winning scores of medals, cups, and championships. However, you hated it, and you gave it all up when you went to grammar school at the age of 11.

You also learnt to play the violin, played in the school orchestra, and even played at the Royal Albert Hall.

Unfortunately, you also hated that and also gave it all up when you went to grammar school.

You made your first Holy Communion in Somers Town in 1951 aged 7 and was also confirmed there a year later, as was then the custom. In 1955 you passed your 11 plus examination and went to Saint Aloysius Grammar School in Highgate, which was next door to the hospital where you were born.

You had a beautiful singing voice, you could even have been called the Aled Jones of your day, and you sang in two separate church choirs and took the lead in all the school Gilbert and Sullivan operas.

It was here that you discovered the sport of badminton, the nearest thing you ever came to tennis, and you were a natural. In the years to

come you won lots of tournaments, played for Middlesex and then later Hertfordshire. You were Hertfordshire doubles champion, a London University champion, a London University blue, and a gold medallist at the British University Games held in Edinburgh in 1972.

But all that had to be given up after your ordination in 1974, as we will come to shortly.

After your A levels you decided not to go to university. You still wanted to be a priest, but three years study at university and a further six years study for the priesthood seemed a bit much, so you decided to give yourself a little break, to see a bit of the world, and get some savings behind you, before you embarked on the journey to become a priest. To enable this, you took a civil service job in Whitehall carrying out legal work in the Home Office.

By 1973 you had had enough, and the time had come to apply to the Diocese of Westminster. You were accepted and given the choice of studying in Rome or St. Edmunds College in Ware in Hertfordshire. To go to Rome would have meant having to learn Italian, then sit through lectures in Latin at the Gregorian University, then go back to the English college and do it all again in English! You thought that was crazy, plus the fact that with all of that pasta, sunshine, and vino it would have meant little studying would get done, so you turned down the glamour of Rome for the quiet green fields of Hertfordshire and loved it.

Again, you excelled, this time in Philosophy and Theology and after three years they once more wanted to send you to Rome. You turned it down again for the same sensible reasons. Nobody ever turned down Rome!

At this time, 1970, the Jesuits were moving from Oxford to become part of the University of London, where they established their campus, Heythrop College, in Cavendish Square, which is just behind the John Lewis store on Oxford St. It was all very experimental, with the most brilliant of lecturers, and a guinea pig was needed to see if it were possible for a three-year degree here could become part of the training

for the priesthood. So, off you went, but the Cardinal was suspicious that the Jesuits might poach you, so you were not allowed to live in any of their student houses in London but had to live in various parishes in the diocese. Such was the madness of the times that you were then required to commute back to Ware each weekend to catch up on what your year had studied that week so that you were to be qualified to be ordained with them.

You graduated with an honours degree in divinity in 1973, one of the first of year's graduates from the college, which went on to flourish as a School of Catholic Philosophy and Theology for clergy and lay people in the service of the Church.

After a short period as a Deacon in Saint Bernadette's parish in Hillingdon, you were ordained there as a priest on Saturday the 26th of January 1974.

Two days before that was to happen, Cardinal Heenan, who was to have ordained you, had a heart attack and so everything was thrown into confusion. Luckily Bishop Victor Guazelli was available and stepped in to do the job.

Your first mass was celebrated the next day in Stanmore Parish church.

Your first appointment as a curate was to Kingsbury Green Parish, a large and busy Irish congregation under Canon John O'Callaghan. You were very happy there, and as well as being chaplain to Edgware General and Colindale hospitals, you were also chaplain to St James's School in Burnt Oak.

Unfortunately, after about a year, the parish priest suffered a heart attack. You didn't precipitate it, but you were left there alone as a newly ordained priest for two years, until the Canon eventually decided he could not go back. In those two years, apart from your usual duties, you managed to redesign the altar and sanctuary of the church, as well as rebuilding the parish centre. All in all, a real baptism of fire.

Canon Peter Phillips was then appointed parish priest and the next four years were happy ones.

In 1980 you were having breakfast in the kitchen when the phone rang. You answered it in the larder! It was Cardinal Hume, and he wanted you to go on loan for five years to the Catholic Missionary Society. The CMS was a small group of about 8 priests drawn from all over England and Wales. Their job was to go into parishes for a period of two weeks to revive that parish by preaching special mission services and hear countless confessions. They also were expected to spend 9 hours a day, come rain or shine, knocking on doors to visit parishioners who might not have had contact with a priest for years. In those five years you lived and worked in about 90 parishes, gaining an enormous experience of the Church in England and Wales. It was doubly difficult for you because, just before your first mission, sadly your mother died suddenly in her sleep.

You really were thrown into the deep end, because your first Mission was to Brixton, with all its troubles. The police even warned you about knocking on doors at night, but luckily no harm came to you. Nobody does that work anymore; it was too tough, and you must have many anecdotes you could tell us about that time!

At the end of those five years Cardinal Hume wanted you to go back into the Seminary in Chelsea to teach Theology and help form young men for the priesthood. To freshen up you would have to go back to Heythrop to do a Master's degree in Theology.

You were lodged in the attic in St John's Wood Parish. To earn your keep you had to be Chaplain to St John's and St Elizabeth hospitals, as well as the nearby hospice; Chaplain to the Convent in Avenue Rd; and, most importantly, to always be free to sing the full high solemn Latin mass in the parish each Sunday. The Parish Priest there hated it, but they had a very good choir there, so it had to be done!

When you had completed your Master's Degree in Theology you looked forward with some trepidation to having to go back to the Seminary,

but it was not to be. The Parish Priest of Somers Town was not able to cope anymore, there was nobody to replace him, so the Cardinal asked you to step in as a temporary measure. 25 years later you were still there and going back to the Seminary had been forgotten.

Somers Town was a huge challenge. It was a large inner-city parish with all the problems that went with it. It was rundown, disorganised, and even the bed on which you're expected to sleep upon was broken! Your sister and aunts stepped in to help you get the place up and running once more. It was another baptism of fire. You were on call to five hospitals and three schools. Care in the community meant that all the bed and breakfast hotels were awash with drug addicts and mental health patients who weren't receiving any care at all. They all focused on the church at all hours of the day and night looking for money.

A large part of the parish was a council estate, with gang warfare and violence, but the ordinary people, though very poor, had hearts of gold and slowly you were able to build up a sense of community and faith. You transformed a drab, grey, concrete church, by designing and installing colourful mosaics and stained-glass windows.

In 2005 the London bombings happened, and all three bombs exploded within the bounds of your parish. You missed one by about 5 minutes, having stopped to chat with a parishioner on the way to the bank. Providence was at work to protect you.

After 25 years the Diocese had other plans for the Somers Town parish and you were not part of them, so it was a huge wrench to accept a move to Bushey, a totally different but delightful world.

And now a story that you haven't told anyone in Bushey before.

You wanted to see what Bushey was like, so you travelled by train from Euston. It was not looking at its best because it was pouring with rain, and the walk up from the station almost killed you! When you got back to Euston and got off the train you were arrested by two plain-clothed detectives! There had been some sort of violent incident in Bushey the

previous day and you fitted the description! Fortunately, you were able to talk your way out of it.

And so, in 2011, you came to the Sacred Heart. You replaced Fr Michael Markey who had had to retire due to ill health. You quickly settled in, although I believe it took you a while to accept the quiet of Bushey compared to the hustle and bustle of Somers Town. Very soon we got used to your quiet ways as you endeared yourself to the Parishioners, and to the children of our Sacred Heart school. Since your arrival you have led our parish through a lot of changes with wisdom, strength, and compassion. We were truly blessed when you were asked to be our Parish Priest. We all feel that Somers Town loss was definitely our gain, and we are very pleased to be able to celebrate your Golden Jubilee with you.