



Origins

Catholic presence in Hemel Hempstead goes back many centuries. During the Reformation there was a struggle for supremacy between Catholics and Protestants. Both sides did things which we now find hard to understand; both sides had martyrs for the faith. However, the outcome was that Catholicism was forbidden and the rigour of the law was used against those who wished to remain Catholics, for some 200 years from 1559. Parish churches everywhere became Anglican. In 1767, there were fewer than 100 Catholics in the whole of Hertfordshire¹. However, when full civil rights were restored to Catholics, the Catholic faith began to spread again, partly by natural growth, partly by conversions, and partly by immigration. Hemel Hempstead saw its Catholic presence increase.

As you stand at the bottom of the organ, looking east towards the statue of Mary, you are looking into the first Catholic church to be built in Hemel Hempstead after the Reformation. This original church is now the Blessed Sacrament Chapel.

A map of Boxmoor in 1897 shows the site of the church as empty land². However, in 1893, Fr Henry Hardy was asked by Cardinal Herbert Vaughan to take under his care the scattered Catholic population in West Hertfordshire beyond Watford. This area extended from Rickmansworth to Tring, and Fr Hardy established Mass centres in each of the towns, travelling from town to town in a pony and trap³. At first Mass was said occasionally in a cottage at 37 St John's Rd⁴. After that it was said in the Presbytery, or priest's house at 186 St John's Road, bought by Fr Hardy.

¹ M. M. Rowlands (ed) *English Catholics of Parish and Town 1558-1778* London: Catholic Record Society, 1999, citing figures from the Return of Papists submitted to the House of Lords.

² Old Ordnance Survey Maps: Boxmoor 1897 (The Godfrey Edition).

³ Catholic Directory. 1892

⁴ R. Hands, J. Hands & E. Davis, *The Book of Boxmoor* (Frame, 1994, 2nd Edn: Baron Birch Publishing) p 35.



The Church of St Mary & St Joseph was opened officially on August 7th 1898. It was very small, seating no more than 40 or 50 persons. The entrance was on Wharf Road, through the arch where the statue of Mary now stands. The chapel extended only from the entrance to a spot near the present statue of St Patrick. At this point the Catholic population in Hemel Hempstead was still small, and the building of the first chapel was apparently made possible by a gift from the Vanheem family⁵.

The church was built with the small wooden belfry which it still has today, with two tubular bells⁶. A small building was soon added to it, then known as the Schoolroom, but always, it seems, used as a sacristy. It was probably built shortly after the church itself. Fr Hardy was tireless. His biographer Fr Peter Phillips records that when his pony died in 1903⁷, he was forced to walk between Boxmoor, Berkhamsted and Tring, often returning home drenched and exhausted. Later he bought a tricycle ... covering long distances.

Twenty years later, in 1918, where there had been one parish there were now four. Fr Hardy was parish priest at Tring and the parishes of Boxmoor, Berkhamsted and Rickmansworth each had their own resident priest. The tiny church of St Mary & St Joseph, Boxmoor, had Mass at 8.45am and 11am on Sundays, with Benediction at 6.30 pm (4 pm in winter). The church was never locked. In that year Fr Hardy died on February 2nd, having pioneered the restoration of Catholic life in West Herts. Peter Phillips records, 'All the descriptions of him ... contain such words as "gentle", "simplicity" and "loving care".' When he died the Watford Observer noted his 'sympathetic nature and benevolence to the poor'⁸.

During the Second World War, the church was a spiritual home to Catholics from both sides of the divide. According to oral tradition, US airmen stationed at Bovingdon air base came to Mass in such numbers and with such generosity, that the parish was able to think of expanding the church. In fact the marriage papers of the parish show at least five marriages between American servicemen and local women. Nearby Felden was the site of a prisoner-of-war camp and Germans from the camp formed a choir to sing at Mass.

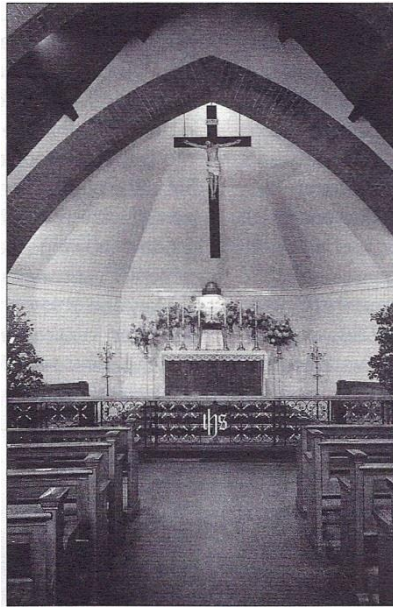
⁵ Peter Phillips, *The Story of a Priest* (privately published: Darlington, ed)

⁶ Catholic Directory, 1918

⁷ Peter Phillips, *The Story of a Priest* pp 21 & 27

⁸ Hemel Hempstead Gazette Jan 23 1997

When Hemel Hempstead was designated a New Town, the population began to grow rapidly. Until 1955, when the parish of Our Lady, Queen of All Creation was established, St Mary and St Joseph remained the only Catholic Church in Hemel Hempstead. People from Ireland were coming to work in the factories, while a significant proportion of the Londoners rehoused in Hemel Hempstead were also Catholic. It was urgently necessary to expand the church building. The solution was to build an extension on at right angles to the original chapel. Its combination of masonry arches, wood flooring and roof with dormer windows gives it a homely feel.



The altar in Christmas 1949

The Blessed Sacrament Chapel

The chapel is called the Blessed Sacrament Chapel because Catholics believe that Jesus is present with us in a special way in the eucharist, or holy communion. Some of the eucharist is reserved in the tabernacle, on the altar of the Blessed Sacrament Chapel. If you wish, you are welcome to kneel and pray here.

The Statue of Mary with the Infant Jesus was made by the Mayer Studio in Munich, sometime between 1898- 1903. It has therefore probably been in the church since then. Only 28 copies of the statue were made, nearly all of them placed in churches in Bavaria or the Tyrol⁹. The firm was famed for the delicacy of its work, and the gentle, loving expression on the face of Mary in this statue shows how well-deserved their reputation was. The commemorative plaque on the base was added after the death of Fr Jeremy Lear, who died aged 35 in an accident in Peru. He was a priest of the Arundel and Brighton diocese who had been working with the poor in the diocese of Piura. His brother and sister-in-law live in Hemel Hempstead.

The Statue of St Patrick shows St Patrick dressed in gothic robes as a bishop. At his feet is a snake, recalling the story that he drove snakes out of Ireland. The shamrock which he used to illustrate the doctrine of the Trinity features prominently. This also explains the gesture in his right hand, where he is teaching the Trinity: one God, in three Persons, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. St Patrick is the patron saint of Ireland. Many of the workers who came to build the New Town in the 1950s were Irish, and they clubbed together to buy the statue as a gift to the church.

⁹ Research by Alexander Sidorov via correspondence with Mayer Studio, 1999.

The stained glass windows are on the left, and face on to St John's Road. The first one depicts Dorcas, a holy woman healed by St Paul. She loved to help the poor and needy, and in fact was well-known for making clothes for the poor with her own hands - she is holding one of the garments in this picture, and her symbol, at the top of the window, is a spinning wheel. Her story is told in Acts 9.36-42. The window is dedicated to Kathleen Potter. Next to Dorcas is Cecilia, patron saint of music, holding her symbol, an organ. Appropriately this window commemorates Molly Radlett, for many years organist of this church.



A wedding in October 1949

The other stained glass windows show the patrons of the church, Mary, the mother of Jesus, and Joseph, her husband who was also the guardian of the holy child.

Above Mary is a heart pierced by a sword, recalling Simeon's prophecy to Mary in Luke 2.35, that the child Mary brought into the Temple would fulfil God's promises but in the process her soul would be pierced with sorrow like a sword.

In the window showing Joseph, he is carrying a carpenter's square, a tool of his trade.

The St Mary and St Joseph windows are dedicated to Alice Porter (1895-1977) whose parents, Mr & Mrs Parrish, were licensees of The Bull pub, Bovingdon. She was a strong supporter of this church.

The window near the corner shows the Baptism of Jesus by John the Baptist, and shows evidence of the style of the Catholic artist Eric Gill, whose fame and influence were at their peak around the time this window was made in the early 1950s. At one point the baptismal font stood in this corner, hence the choice of subject. The window was given in memory of Valerie Wolstonecroft (1910-1954), wife of a local GP and active supporter of this church, especially in preparing children for their First Communion.

To the right, just before the door into the sacristy, is a window of plaster and coloured glass, which together form flower patterns. This window is clearly influenced by the Moorish style which was influential in Britain in the 1890s.

The Nave

This is the main part of the church and, unusually for Catholic churches, it is orientated north-south rather than east-west. The architects have shown considerable ingenuity in turning the difficulties of the site to their advantage. The ground slopes sharply down to Horsecroft Road, and the solution was to build a small parish hall on the lower slope, with the nave of the church running above it.

The masonry arches are curved in the neo-gothic style, and recall the upturned hull of a boat, style often found in country churches in Normandy. The eye runs naturally down the length of the church to focus on the altar.

Along the right-hand side of the church are statues of saints. The first is of St Anthony of Padua, a Franciscan saint who lived from 1195 to 1231. He was a famous preacher who was also devoted to the needs of the poor. He is usually depicted carrying the infant Jesus (as here) on a book, symbolising his love of the Lord whom he served through his preaching and learning. Catholics traditionally invoke St Anthony when they have difficulty in finding lost articles.

The next statue, St Peter, shows the saint holding a key, reminding us of Jesus' words to Peter in Mt. 16.18-19: 'You are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven ...'

Next to Peter is St Therese of Lisieux (1873-1897) a Carmelite nun in France who was canonised in 1928. She gave the example of what she called the Little Way, in which we take the demands, tensions, difficulties and frustrations of everyday life as an opportunity to grow spiritually. She is sometimes known as the Little Flower. In ordinary things lies our power to become more open to God and God's grace.

St Joseph was charged with protection of Mary and the child Jesus.

St Jude (sometimes known as St Jude Thaddaeus) is one of the twelve disciples who answered Jesus' call (see Mark 3.18). A martyr for the faith he is shown with a club because of the tradition that he was clubbed to death. Catholics traditionally ask St Jude to pray for them in desperate situations. According to tradition, St Jude Thaddaeus was given a rare miraculous image of Our Lord, which is sometimes linked to the image on the Shroud of Turin. This explains the medallion which the saint is shown wearing.

The pulpit is made from oak, as is the panelling, around the sanctuary. The lectern is also made from oak, and given in memory of Sydney Trower, a long-standing member of this church and former sacristan.

On the right-hand window-sill is the alternative Noah's Ark baptism font made by the ceramic artist Rachel Mary Stanley in 1995. It features a charming selection of birds and animals, at least one species (the dodo) being extinct, the message being that through our membership of Christ which we receive in baptism, we should be good stewards of creation. You can see two elephants, a dolphin, a chimpanzee, a giant turtle, a whale and wolves. Many of these are endangered species, reminding us that part of the meaning of baptism is our taking our share of caring for the world, which God made and gives us in stewardship.

To the left of the sanctuary is the Sacred Heart statue. This devotion to the heart of Jesus is a reminder of how Jesus there was full of a burning love for the human race. This love would take him to the cross where his side would be ripped open and, metaphorically speaking, his human heart exposed - reminding us of the divine love with which his heart beat for us.

The altar is faced in Portland stone. The altar is very large in proportion to the rest of the church.

Above the altar in the niche is a painted figure of Christ on the cross. Alongside Christ are the Virgin Mary and St John the beloved disciple, who stood at the foot of the cross until the end of Jesus' suffering (John 19.26-27). These figures were painted in 1999 in the Eastern Orthodox style by a Russian artist resident in Britain, Alexander Sidorov. The face of Jesus on the cross shows suffering and dignity. The darkness of the figures reminds of the mystery of the cross, which cannot be penetrated lightly or easily. It is part of the mystery of God's love for our world.

Finally, around the church are the traditional 14 stations of the cross, made of plaster and painted. Despite the simple material, the figures on them are often presented with considerable delicacy and care. In a sense the whole church itself, but especially the altar, are the 15th station of the cross, because here we celebrate the resurrection of Christ. Death can no longer imprison him. He gives to all who believe in him this same gift of eternal life. He also gives us his companionship as we journey through this life. May his blessing and peace be with you always.

Order of building

Our church was built in several stages. The first stage was the chapel which extended from the statue of Mary (where the door originally was) to where the present statue of St Patrick stands. This was built in 1898.

To these a sacristy and workroom were added in 1900. The chapel was further extended in a straight line, from St Patrick on to where the door opens on to the porch. This was done in 1903 and the plaque near the statue of St Patrick testifies that this was partly due to the generosity of Sir Roper Parkington and his family. Possibly at this time, the first entrance was closed off and a new entrance placed where the organ now is (if you go out into the street you can see the arch where the notice-board now is; this was the second entrance).

In 1938 the parish secured enough funds to build an extension at right angles to the first church. This extension pushed the church southwards, and extended roughly to where the entrance to the sacristy is located. Finally, in 1951 a further extension was built on to the 1938 one, lengthening it further and providing the new sanctuary that you see today. A small hall was built underneath.

In any case, it is worth remembering that although our church is small, it had to be built in four stages. There were few well-to-do Catholics in those days. There was no state aid. The church had to be built, as it is maintained today, by the generosity of the people who belonged to it or who visited it.

Our Community

We hope that you feel at home with us also as you visit, or walk around using this booklet to guide you.

This guide is also an opportunity to mention the important role of religious sisters in the life of the parish. St Mary's Dominican Convent in Green End Road has been part of Boxmoor life since 1953. The sisters, who belong to the Dominican Congregation of Newcastle, Natal, were instrumental in founding a number of Catholic schools in Hertfordshire.

Their mission is to preach the Word of God and they do this in various ways with special emphasis, at present, on catechesis. In 1995 the convent became a joint novitiate where women who feel called by God to participate in this Dominican ministry are given two years initial formation.

Between 1900 and 1954 there was also a small convent of Assumptionist sisters at The Poplars, Cowper Road. Initially this was a house of rest for sick children from their school in Kensington; later it became a gardening school. These were the first nuns in Boxmoor. At first they sometimes met with harsh words and even stone-throwing, before winning the trust and affection of local people¹⁰.

Remember, however, that a church is built of living stones. The true church is the People of God, who come here to find strength, peace, and renewal, through their communion with Christ, the Son of God. They seek also the prayers of Mary, and the other saints, to help them in their commitments. The gospel is preached here, and lived in the world. From this place Catholic Christians go forth to work with Christ to build up the kingdom.

The range of activities supported by people in this church ranges from toddlers to senior citizens. We work with other groups in the community, and we support ventures as far afield as Zimbabwe and Bangladesh. If you live locally and would like to learn more about our work, please feel free to take away with you a copy of our Parish Booklet.



The church serves a community of about 2000 Catholics in the areas of Boxmoor, Chaulden, Apsley and Felden plus the town centre of Hemel Hempstead.

¹⁰ 10. Letter to Fr T. Tastard from Provincial Archivist of Sisters of the Assumption, June 23 2000. Before the Poplars the sisters had lived at 'Rosehill' in St Johns Rd.