



CHURCH OF OUR LADY IMMACULATE AND ST ANDREW

16 Nightingale Road, **HITCHIN**, SG5 1QS
(In the care of the Augustinians of the Assumption)



A Short history.....

There has been an established Catholic presence in Hitchin since the eighth century when Offa, King of Mercia built a religious foundation on the banks of the River Hiz for monks of the Order of St. Benedict. It is here that the present Anglican church of St. Mary now stands.

Some five hundred years or so later, in 1317, the religious importance of the area was emphasised when it was recorded that three Hitchin citizens gave land and buildings at the south-western end of the town's wide main street for the building of a Carmelite Priory. For over 200 years the Carmelites ministered to the faithful of the town until, in 1539, their Priory was dissolved by Henry VIII. It is believed that a second Gilbertine Priory, part of which was on the site of the Biggins, suffered a similar fate.

Thereafter little seems to have been recorded of the lives and worship of any Catholics remaining in Hitchin until 1890 when, more than 60 years after the Catholic Emancipation Act passed by Parliament, Holy Mass was said by Father Spink, a member of the Fathers of St. Andrew, for just twelve people on the 30th November – the Feast of their Patron – in a house in Nightingale Road belonging to a Mr Hutchinson. Gradually, the numbers attending this regular service increased until Cardinal Vaughan, after visiting the parish, decided that a church was needed in Hitchin. In 1899, a plot of land was purchased on the corner of Grove Road and Nightingale Road for the sum of £320. Building commenced and, in 1902, the Cardinal returned for the solemn opening of the new church and its dedication to Mary Immaculate and St. Andrew.

The persecution of the Church in France at the beginning of the century caused many congregations of priests and nuns to come to England looking for a home and for an apostolate. The Fathers of St. Edmund came to Hitchin to take charge of the parish and it was they who set up St. Michael's School on the site where Hitchin Police Station now stands. At about the same time, two orders of Sisters arrived; one left after a short time finding there was not sufficient work for two convents in Hitchin. The other, the Sisters of the Sacred Heart, remained to run a parish primary school and later their own private school as well.

The outbreak of war in 1914 had the immediate effect of drawing the people of Hitchin closer together in a common cause and enabling the Catholics to play a more significant role in the life of the town.

By the summer of 1926, the Augustinian Fathers of the Assumption had replaced the Edmundians as stewards of the Catholic parish at Hitchin. Under their leadership, the school their predecessors had founded became St. Michael's College and the Assumptionist priests undertook wider responsibility for the spiritual welfare of the faithful in the outlying villages. It was estimated at the time that the priests covered over 600 miles each week in carrying out their pastoral duties.

The parish church had been built to accommodate a congregation of 200. With a Catholic population in the town of just 60 people at the time – half a percent of the civic total – it was considered that this left ample room for growth. During the inter-war years, however, the number of Catholics in Hitchin steadily increased due mainly to the inflow of workers from the depression-hit North of England and Scotland and several modifications had to be carried out to cope with the rising numbers.

By the early 70s, Catholics accounted for nearly 10% of the town's population and the need for a larger place of worship became inescapable. So it was that plans were laid for a new church to be sited on land adjoining the existing building – which had to remain unaltered externally – and a Hitchin firm of architects were commissioned to design a new edifice that would harmonise visually

with the older building in its new role as the parish hall. Their success was rewarded by a prestigious architectural design award and the Catholics of Hitchin were provided with a striking new centre for their religious devotions.

The design of the new church blended the best of traditional building techniques with the most up-to-date engineering principles. The altar, tabernacle and candlesticks are of Travertine marble, a stone familiar to those who have visited the Pantheon and St. Peter's in Rome, and the church is furnished with carved statues and plaques that are the work of a parishioner, the late Theodore Kern, a distinguished alumnus of the Academy of Fine Arts in Vienna. The church possesses a fine organ, the work of Saxon Tate, the noted builder of these magnificent instruments.

So it was that, on the 18th December 1977, the new church was consecrated by His Eminence The Cardinal Archbishop of Westminster, George Basil Hume, OSB and a new chapter opened in the history of the Catholic parish in Hitchin.

The numerical growth of the Catholic Community is reflected in the development of its buildings, and has seen the creation of a Reception Room, named after Doris Harris, who bequeathed money to the Parish for this purpose, so that the Priests can receive and meet with Parishioners in relaxed, comfortable and yet confidential setting. We were further blessed with a bequest from John Martin, to create a Pastoral Office, for our two Pastoral Assistants. We were able to refurbish the Hall for Parish and Community use, redecorate the Church and replace all the windows in the Church and Sacristy areas as well as renew totally the guttering of the Church.

However, the real fabric of the Church is its People and over the years we have built up various Groups and Societies to help create and foster Community life and living: examples are: the One World Group, the Gateway Club for people with special needs, Our Lady's Support Group for children with needs; we have the full range of activities for the Scouting and Guiding Uniformed Groups; the Union of Catholic Mothers, the Guild of St Stephen for Altar Servers, the Bethany Club for people approaching the third age and also various spiritual initiatives, like the Monday Meditation Group, the Wednesday Scripture Group as well as providing a home for various Groups which seek to address more particular needs, like Alcoholics Anonymous, people suffering from forms of depression, the Hitchin Society, meetings of Townswomen Fellowship and others as the need arises.

In our town, we are fully involved with the ecumenical work of the 15 churches which are present in Hitchin, three of our Parishioners are on the Council of Churches Together and Trish our Pastoral Assistant is currently the Chair. We are creating joint involvement for pastoral and visiting Ministries to cover the many residential homes in the town as well as working together to foster our Bereavement Visitors and their walking with parishioners at difficult times in their lives. We are actively involved in supporting the Sanctuary, which is owned and organised by Churches Together for those who are homeless, providing overnight accommodation.

As regards inter-faith contacts we are involved with the Sikh-Christian Forum, which is developing understanding between ourselves and this religious grouping. We are involved with Ecumenical Lent Groups; participate in various public acts of witness to our Faith, notably on Good Friday and this coming year for the first time, hopefully also on Pentecost Sunday. We also circulate Easter Greetings to the town on a joint basis. Other initiatives are in the offing, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit!

In such a summary of the past 100 and more years, since the Parish was founded, much has been left out and the many people who have served the Church well and faithfully are not even mentioned. We thank God for all those who have given service to our Parish over the years and pray that we will live our lives as Parishioners, enriched by their experience and wisdom and we pray God that we will be imbued with their Faith and pioneering spirit!

Fr Michael, AA