

History of The Parish of St. John, Standishgate, Wigan, 1686-1965.

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The Catholic Church of St. John, Wigan

Evidence exists of Wigan as a Roman Town, and in all probability, there was a settlement of one of the Celtic tribes before the Romans built one of their chief colonising camps in the second century A.D.

A fairly good specimen of an altar of this period is to be seen in the Parish Church, and some Samian ware at Upholland College. Wigan was without doubt a borough during Saxon times and is therefore among the oldest in the country though it was Henry III who gave the town its first extant charter in 1246.

The famous, 'Legend of Mab's Cross', arises out of the events of the 14th century. Sir William Bradshaigh, who married Mabel Norris, the heiress of Haigh, being implicated in the murder of Sir Henry de Bury, became outlawed and though pardoned in 1315, concealed himself until the death of his enemy, the Earl of Lancaster in 1322. In the meantime, Dame Mabel, his wife, believing him dead, had married again. Hearing of this Sir William returned in disguise, revealed himself to his tenants, and drove out the intruding knight whom he overtook and slew at Newton-le-Willows. The Lady Mabel was ordered as a penance, to walk barefoot once a week for a year from her house at Haigh to a cross just outside Wigan in Standishgate, a distance of about two miles. The cross, ever since known as 'Mab's Cross', is still preserved in Standishgate and not far from St. John's Church. The tomb of Sir William and Dame Mabel is to be seen in the parish church.

During the 15th and 16th centuries the town maintained its prominence as one of the chief towns in Lancashire and its church attained considerable influence during the religious controversies of Elizabeth's reign. Wigan played a part in the Jacobite Risings, and particularly in the, 'Lancashire Plot' of 1690-1694. The town was also concerned in the Risings of 1715 and 1745: during this latter rebellion the Young Pretender passed through Wigan both in advance and in retreat and spent the night on each occasion at Walmesley House in Westwood.

Wigan formed one of the oldest missions of the Society of Jesus and prior to any connected history we have of this mission, we find evidence of its existence in short biographical notices of individual priests who were appointed to serve in it, and a letter

from the Protestant Bishop of Chester to the Privy Council in 1583, testifies to the staunchness of the faithful of Wigan as being, 'stubborn and contemptuous recusants', or in other words, firm and constant Catholics. The importance of the position of the Society of Jesus in the town, both as missionaries and as instructors of youth may be gathered from the fact that in the time of James II it had a large school or college, accommodated originally in a spacious mansion outside the town and bought for the purpose, attended by more than a hundred scholars, and that Bishop Leyburn confirmed on the 14th and 15th of September in the year 1687, 1,331 persons. As the chapel, attached to the school, was at first but small, it used to be densely crowded, and yet we read that the Mayor and his Councilors frequently assisted at the services. Just before the breaking out of the revolution in 1688, materials for building a new church and college were prepared, nay, its erection had been begun, the site for the boarders' quarters having been marked out, when the excited mob tore up and destroyed the foundations.

The history of this Catholic college has, ever since those days, left its mark on an extensive neighbourhood alongside the river Douglas, and has given its name of Scholes, or Schools, not only to the whole district round where it stood but also in a variety of forms to its hill, fields, lanes and streets. The situation naturally lent itself for an educational establishment and may have been already so employed; in truth, the existence of a school in this district, as far back as 1625, was indicated in the Annual Letters of the Society. Local records describe the buildings which existed here in 1687; while the alterations and excavations made in School Lane a very few years ago, brought into view the old demolished walls and rough ground plan, to which access was gained through the former College gateway by an entry in the main street of Scholes, which is still called, *Down ith' gates*.

The Society of Jesus, till very lately, retained part of this property and as the present church of St. John's stands within a stone's throw from the old College on ground devised to the Society, it is probable that both stood on what was called the, 'Standish Gate property.'

On the ecclesiastical side of its history, St John's parish possesses the famous, Mab's Cross, well known to and held in respect even by protestants, who when attending a funeral used to, and perhaps do still, take off their hats in reverence for that great act of repentance and self-humiliation which the carefully-protected fragment of the cross still records.

Sir William Bradshaigh, of Haigh Hall, having in the time of Edward III been absent from home for nearly ten years, as a Crusader to the Holy Land, his wife, Mabel, receiving no tidings of him, married Sir Osmund Neville, a Welsh knight. On the return, however, of Sir William, his wife, struck by the deepest penitence for her rash act and being held justly to blame, was condemned for life to the severe penance of walking barefoot once a week from the chapel in Haigh Hall to a cross placed on the top of the hill leading from Standish into the town, and still called, *Mab's Cross* – a distance of

more than 2 miles. Husband and wife were fully reconciled before death, and their bodies lie side by side in the old parish church. Still more prized, however, is the venerable church itself, so truly Catholic in its foundation and its history for centuries, carrying us back, as it does, to the time when all Wigan was one in faith. It tells us of the ancient family of the Bradshaighs, which contributed members to the Society of Jesus in the persons of Father Peter Bradshaigh, twice Rector of the Lancashire District; and Father Richard, missionary in the county, Rector of the College of Liege and St. Omer, and Provincial for four years; of Father Robert, sent into exile for his religion, and of Father Thomas, a worthy brother of the two last named, Minister, Procurator, and Consultor in Rome. Its mortuary chapels and vaults contain the bodies of the Lindsays and Catholic Walmesley's, whilst its restored architecture is intimately connected with the return to the faith of the Hon. Colin Lindsay, a devout and learned scholar, who was in his Protestant days, churchwarden of the parish. The family of Walmesley of Westwood gave a member to the Society, Father Christopher, who joined in 1708, and became Prefect of Studies and Professor of Philosophy and Theology at Liège. To the same family belonged Father Henry Walmesley, who for a time was in charge of the Wigan mission, while his nephew, Father Herman, was Rector of Stonyhurst and is now Superior in South Africa. The Right Rev. Charles Walmesley, Vicar-Apostolic of the Western District in the latter half of the eighteenth century, was another member of the family.

As the lie and length of a road are marked by the succession of milestones, so may the history of a parish be traced out by its registers, and by the names of its successive pastors. The first Baptism entered in St. John's books takes us back to March 16th, 1740, when Father Brockholes was missionary. His registers were, however, very imperfectly kept as Father Marmaduke Langdale states when he copied them in 1780. It is curious to note in these entries that the word 'Christened' did not give place to 'Baptised' till 1777; and also, that the names of the fathers and mothers were not at first entered, but only those of the godfathers and godmothers. Father Charles Brockholes has generally been considered the father and founder of the mission of St. John's, although Father James Canell, the missionary at Wigan in James II's time, possesses some claim to the title, for he was the first fixed salaried priest in charge, probably from 1682 until 1722, when he died in Wigan, on March 27th aged 73, having joined the Society in 1671. His name occurs in a documents signed by Miss Clare Gerard, dated April 3rd, 1696, by which she directed the four executors named in her will, William Gerard of Garswood, John Gillebrand of Chorley, Richard Worthington and Thomas Worthington of Wigan, to pay the interest of a small legacy towards the maintenance of a priest in and about Wigan; 'and that after his decease it shall go to the Jesuit that shall come to help the poor in and about Wigan, but for want of such help of the Jesuits, then for the priest that shall help as aforesaid, be he of what Order it pleaseth.'

God he hapneth to be one'. Father Canell is the first resident missionary that can be named, and probably lived in or near Wigan when the College was destroyed. In the

status for 1701 his annual income is given as amounting to £20 drawn from the College District funds, £10 subscribed by the people, and certain other small sums, making it not above £31 in all. Father Thomas Kirk was, it seems, his coadjutor from about 1710 to 1716, two small volumes of those dates bearing his signature as resident in Wigan. He had entered the Noviceship in 1689 and died in 1718.

Before the Society of Jesus found themselves settled in Wigan with any prospect of obtaining a peaceful and permanent footing in the town, they must have had to endure constant hardships and persecution; this is sufficiently indicated in the Society's private records of the Lancashire Mission and of individual Fathers. Thus, a definite tradition exists that they had at one time a small chapel and house attached, situated at the immediate corner of Chapel Lane, a very likely position from its contiguity to Scholes Bridge, where there formerly was a ford, and just beyond which was, or had been, the Jesuit College. It is said that on the appearance of a second priest, probably a mere visitor, the people were at once so enraged that they gathered round the house, attacked it furiously and began pulling it down, and so the Fathers had to make their escape half-dressed to the dwelling of a Catholic at Rockferry, in the direction of Ince. Another tradition assigns to the Society's missionaries, as a temporary resting-place, some old tenements down one of the yards in Due Street, and adjoining Lord Street, which belonged to the Walmesley family. The existence of a stone building and arched entrance in Lord Street somewhat favours this tradition.

Father Canell's successor was Father Edmund Smith, whose letters bore the address, 'Mr. E. Smith, to be left at Apothecary Gerard's in Wigan'. He died in 1727 at the age of 61. Father Richard Smith, the Rector in 1725, seems to have held a tight hand over Father Edmund's expenses, for he allowed only for £20 a year for his 'diet, washing, fire, candle, and attendance, and no more for these sort of necessaries. Item for his clothes and pocket-money £6 a year, besides forty shillings a year as interest during his life for £40 he gave up in Mr. Billing's time, which as the forsaids are to be payed half yearly'.

Father Smith was likewise required to pay his apothecary's and doctor's bills out of the above allowance and any charitable gifts and mortuary perquisites he might receive. The Rev. Sir Piers Mostyn, of Talacre, was probably the next missionary and came in 1727; after which time his address was, 'At his house in Wigan.' He was too deeply imbued with the spirit of the Society to take up his title publicly, and here he probably died in 1735.

Father Charles Brockholes, whose name was the first to be connected with the mission of St. John's under that title, entered the Society in 1704. He was in the first instance placed at Black Rod, in succession to Father Turbervil, as chaplain to the Andertons of Lostock, but he removed from that place to Wigan in 1740. As he had previously served Wigan from Black Rod, so he now reversed the order. One would fain derive the name Black Road from *Black Rood*, and thus give it an ecclesiastical origin, but the ancient form of the word was simply Black Road, suggesting no higher connection than the discovery of the treasure of coal that lay beneath the surface of the district. The place

itself is said to have been an ancient Roman station, the Coccium of Antonius and Ridogunum of Ptolemy. The neighbourhood was under the care of the Society from an early date. Father Brockholes, on moving into Wigan, took up his residence in Standishgate, where he built a house almost entirely at his own expense, and arranged the upper part of it as a chapel, in order to guard the Catholics worshipping in it from molestation. It is supposed that this house still exists as a well-known fish-shop, standing between Dicconson Street and Powell Street, just behind the Dicconson Arms, (now demolished), in old times the town residence of the Catholic family of Wrightington Hall. The house possesses a large wainscoted room, still in a good state of preservation, in which a door immediately over the fire-place admits to a recess of some size. At the time we speak of, the congregation (under the title of 'customers') numbered 300. It is interesting to note that the house still stands, and it is now occupied by the firm of V. Standish and Son who are parishioners of St. John's. A priest's hiding hole is still to be seen over a fire-place in the house.

On the death of Father Brockholes in 1759, Father John Worthington took his place, and served the mission for many years, dying at Wigan in 1777 at the age of 64 years. Father Marmaduke Langdale, his successor in the mission, was sent thither soon after his ordination at Cologne in 1776, having been Master at the Little College Bruges at the time of the Suppression. In 1785 he erected the old chapel of St. John's, fronting the street, and having its altar close to the spot on which now stands the present Walmesley Cross. At same time he built a house also fronting the street, and divided from the chapel by a short, narrow passage leading to a side entrance into it. When the priests subsequently left this house, it was occupied by a Mrs. Money Penny, until taken into use by the Sisters of Notre Dame, and afterwards removed to make room for their present large convent.

The mission is said to have greatly flourished under Father Langdale's care although he died in November 1784, at an early age, greatly lamented by his flock. Father Richard Barrow then at Pontefract was sent to succeed him after already labouring for eighteen years in his former charge. But he was spared to work for thirteen years more, as he died in 1799 at the age of 61, and was buried in the Windleshaw Cemetery, near St Helens. This spot, formerly belonging to the Gerard's of Garswood, is made especially interesting to the Province by the interment within its precincts of so many of our Fathers. It has formed indeed for many years the burial-ground for the Catholics of St. Helens, Portico, Ashton, Blackbrook and Birchley. In 1835, Sir John Gerard gave a piece of land adjoining it to enlarge its precincts. In one portion of it lie ancient remains of a mortuary chapel or religious house, which according to tradition, mark the site of some priory, whence it is often called Windleshaw Abbey or Priory. It is brought into nearer relations with Wigan by the supposition that it was dependent on an abbey in the township of Upholland. The parish owes to Father Barrow an especial acknowledgment of the perfect order, neatness, and legibility of hand, in which he wrote out and preserved the parish registers. His successor, Father Herman Kemper, a native of Westphalia, whose poor writing was more than made up for by his cultivation of the

parish so that the help of another priest was needed to attend to its ever-increasing members. Father Barrow left the mission in 1808.

St. John's was next served by three brothers of the name of Tate, in succession. The first of these was John Tate. He was sent in 1805 to assist Father Kemper and continued until he was transferred to Lydiate in 1821. After him came his brother, Father Joseph, who began work in Wigan as a secular priest, but became a Jesuit in 1810. The third brother, Father Thomas Tate, was universally esteemed and beloved for his frank and obliging disposition and belonged wholly to St. John's, Wigan, beginning his life's work there in 1811 and completing it at his death on March 29th, 1819. His kind and devoted attention to the poor and the sick was worthily crowned by a martyrdom of charity, for his death was caused by an attack of typhus caught at the bedside of a parishioner.

As the year 1819 introduces us to a new era in the history of St. John's parish, and the erection of its present church, it will be interesting to trace by the help of its registers the development of the Catholic population during the time when the old chapel was in use. In the year 1766, 33 baptisms had been entered, but no marriages; in 1791 the baptisms had increased to 92, the marriages numbering 19. The year 1816 recorded 192 baptisms and 18 marriages, whereas the new St. John's registered in 1841, 254 baptisms and 28 marriages; and again in 1866 275 baptisms and 38 marriages. The bench-rent book also tells its tale: in 1786 there were 114 bench-holders – 'Lancashire men all, sound and true'. From 1786 to 1818, the bench-book is perfect; more so than the punctuality of the payments, for it tells of defaulters, that some 'cannot pay', and that others 'will not pay'.

In 1819 St. John's possessed three missionaries, and the congregation increased from its original '300 customers' to 3,000. Both before and after this date the church in Lancashire began gradually to venture upon more public and independent action, and this we learn from the fact that on October 15th, 1824, a general meeting of the Catholics of Wigan and its vicinity was held in the schoolroom in Rodney Street, Roger Anderton, of Birkett Bank, being in the Chair. The purpose of this meeting was to found a Wigan Catholic Association, which should agitate, in every loyal and constitutional way, for the repeal of the laws then militating against full liberty of religious worship.

In 1817 the great increase of the congregation had convinced leading Catholics of the town that a new and more spacious church ought to be built, and a meeting was held at which a resolution, signed by 1,400 persons, was passed, that steps should immediately be taken to obtain the necessary funds for its erection. The foundation stone was laid on January 27th, 1818, and the church was opened on June 24th in the following year. It stands upon the plot of land lying behind the old chapel built in 1785. Subsequently to the building of the new church, the old chapel was pulled down, and two houses facing each other on either side of the entrance to the chapel yard were erected on its site.

A somewhat brief account of St. John's new church written at the time, describes it as a well-proportioned building, with a severely plain exterior, basilica in shape. The plan and

decoration of the interior went more ornate and elaborate, and were modeled on the Greek type of architecture, having a wide-spread panelled roof, unsupported by pillars and a deep and richly moulded cornice carried round to sustain it. The high altar was placed within a wide recess immediately in front of a dome or canopy, of very elegant design, which served as a reredos, and it was flanked on either side by three massive columns resting on heavy pedestals

The proportions of the church are about 120 feet in length, by 50 in breadth, and close on 50 feet in height. By the help of the organ gallery the building can accommodate fully 1,000 people. The cost of the structure was about £9,000. No definite statement has been preserved as to the name of the architect of the church or the sources of its design. A rather vague tradition points towards the Fathers of the Society of Jesus themselves as its originators, guided by their researches abroad and in Rome, and employing clever workmen taken from the neighbourhood. It is part of the same tradition that the exceedingly graceful and perfectly proportioned details of the interior ornamentation were copies from the designs of Andrea Pozzo, a Jesuit lay-brother, and a famous architect and decorator who was born at Trent in 1642 and died at Vienna in 1709.

The earliest decoration of the church was carried out by a Mr. Joseph John Scoles in the year 1834 at the request of Father Haggerty. In the year 1849, during the administration of Father Mann, the interior of St. John's was again decorated, this time by a Mr. Bulmer at a cost

of £400. These improvements included the addition of the pilasters which are carried along the sides of the church and break the monotony of their fiat surface. The four windows nearest the sanctuary were also filled in with stained glass, representing as their subjects, the Good Shepherd the Blessed Virgin with the Divine Child, St. Joseph, and St. John the Evangelist, Patron of the church and parish. These windows were presented by Father Henry Walmesley, of Westwood; and a memorial brass in the church records the fact and date. The window immediately behind the high altar was bricked up by Mr. Bulmer, in order to give effect to the decorations. Subsequently, during the same Father's time, in the year 1874 the whole church, and more particularly the altar end, was richly and solidly coloured with designs more effective in themselves than in perfect keeping with the character of the architecture. It was in the course of these decorations that the window behind the high altar was re-opened and filled with stained glass of a brilliantly coloured Byzantine pattern – the work of William Gardner of St. Helens.

In 1885, under Father Gradwell's direction, the other portions of the building, were thoroughly repaired and decorated; the church was for the first time paved with tiles, new benches were installed and new standard gases were so placed as to light up brilliantly the whole interior.

After serving the parish for an unusually long period, Father Gradwell was succeeded by Father Vincent Bond. Father Bond was responsible for the erection of the altar-rails. The marble-work was executed by Messrs. J. and H. Patterson, of Manchester, and Mr. Preston, of Wigan, carried out the new flooring and alterations to the sanctuary. The altar-rails, of bold design, are straight in front, but curved at the sides, and are upwards

of 52 feet in length. Their appearance is richly decorative. The balustraded portion is composed of finely selected light alabaster relieved by panelled pilasters, inlaid with spotted Serravezza marble. The base and broad capping are formed of richly-coloured Griotte marble, while the step on which they stand is bluish-grey dove marble. The pedestals of the large engaged columns near the altar were also panelled and cased with marbles. The flooring and new arrangements of steps were laid with narrow herring-bone pitch-pine boards.

Besides the smaller brass put up close to the sacristy door in memory of Henry Walmesley, the church has two memorial brasses, which are fixed to the wall on either side of the entrance door which read:-

'Pray for the soul of the Hon. Colin Lindsay, of Deer Park in the parish of Buckerell, in the County of Devon, 4th son of James 24th Earl of Crawford and 7th Earl of Balcarres who departed this life on the 28th day of Jany., A.D., 1892 aged 72, and for the soul of his wife, the Lady Frances, of Deer Park aforesaid, daughter and co-heir of William Forward, 4th Earl of Wicklow, K.P., who departed this life 20th August A.D. 1897, aged 76, on whose souls may God have mercy. Amen.'

'Of your charity pray for the souls of Herman Kemper Walmesley, of Gidlow, Wigan, who died 17th December 1890, aged 74, and Ellen, his wife, who died 6th November 1851, aged 36 years, fortified by the rites of the Church. In affectionate remembrance of whom this tablet is erected by their loving children.'

The object which at once arrests the attention on entering the Church is the exceedingly chaste and perfectly proportioned canopy, the character of which is probably unique in this country. The lower part of the structure forms a large round drum which enclosed the tabernacle, and above this solid foundation rises the dome. It commences with a gilt balustrade passing round it and intersected, at different points, by the black marble base on which its slender pillars rest. These support the domed roof of the canopy, and with their Corinthian capitals form the chief beauty of the whole construction. The cupola is itself of original and effective design, being formed of a second gilt balustrade in due proportion, and surrounded by a pierced corona or lantern, bearing up a cross at the highest apex. The interior of the dome is divided into slightly tinted panels containing a religious emblem in light gold. The dome enshrines within its pillars a large crucifix, with figures of the Blessed Virgin and St. John supporting it on either side.

From the year 1819 when St. John's was first opened the changes amongst the Jesuit Fathers became too numerous to admit of much individual mention. The first we name, Father William Cotham, brought the Jesuits into connection with the outlying district of Upholland, acting as Chaplain at Orrell Mount in 1820 to a community of Benedictine nuns.

Still nearer Wigan stood Hayfield (Highfield) at one time the seat of the Gerard family. Among the missionaries there was Father Richard Moore in 1701, and Father Bennet who died in 1761.

St. John's owes to Father Haggerty a very grateful acknowledgment of the excellent work which he achieved both in the church and in the district. Although at St. John's for only seven years he won in an extraordinary degree, the love of his congregation, and of the people of the town.

He died in 1834 of typhus fever, the first of five priests who in succession succumbed to the same disease. In the May of 1831, an additional plot of land had been purchased and was at once used as a churchyard for the Catholic population, bodies buried close up against the walls of the priests' house, and as afterwards discovered very near to the surface, and this it was suspected, was the cause of the outbreak. The 'Health of Towns Act' fortunately removed this evil and arrested the succession of deaths attributed to such a cause.

Father William Ibbotson died in 1834, and in 1837 Father James Catanach fell a victim to the fever whilst attending the sick. Father Francis Hearn was attacked by typhus and died at Hodder on April 29th 1847; while Father Robert Johnson closed the list by dying of typhus in 1847 at Southhill, to which place he was removed. In the same year, Father James Walker recovered from the disease after being anointed.

In 1851 Father Thomas Seed took charge of St. John's and remained until he was transferred in 1859. He was succeeded by Father Hill who left in 1867 due to ill-health.

From 1819, St. John's missioners were three in number and the congregation increased from 300 to 3,000. In 1858 the increase reached 6,000. By the year 1872 confessions rose from 12,000 to 14,000 annually, the baptisms from 300 to 400, and the Paschal Communions had attained the number of 2,000.

Meanwhile the confessions had so accumulated in numbers, that one of the confessionals could no longer be spared to serve as a sacristy. Father Maurice Mann, missioner from 1847 till 1851, not very efficiently supplied the want by the erection of a small square room, so little in keeping with anything about it, that it well deserved its nickname of the 'wart.' Father Hill's coadjutors were Father Selby and Father McQuoin, and so continued till 1864, when Father Gradwell took Father McQuoin's place, and in 1878 was put in charge of the mission - a charge which carried down the history of the direction of the parish to a very recent period, and when added to fourteen years of previous residence forms one of exceptional record.

On April 29, 1854, Father Seed introduced into the parish the Notre Dame Religious who have recently entered into possession of their grand new convent, with its large body of pupil-teachers and flourishing high school for ladies; so, Father Hill left behind him an abiding memorial of his term of office in the fine-toned bell fitted in the wooden belfry and weighing 11 cwts. The bell was consecrated by Bishop Goss, the Bishop of Liverpool, on June 8, 1861. Father John O'Reilly signalled his term of office by the acquisition in 1868 of a new organ built by the Yorkshire organ builders, Conacher and Sons and supplied by them with a hydraulic blower.

In every Catholic district the parochial and ministerial work of founding schools, guilds and confraternities must be a matter of the highest importance, and so about the year 1819, when 450 children attended the Sunday School, and only 12 boys and 12 girls

found room in the day school, more suitable schools were built in Rodney Street, near King Street and facing the old Grammar School of the town. We read of appeals being made in 1830 and 1831 by the trustees and conductors of the Sunday Schools for an increased contribution towards their support.

As the congregation of St. John's increased, the building in Rodney Street was found too small and too far from the church. Father Hearn bought a plot of land in Dicconson Street and he lived to see the schools opened in Dicconson Street before his death, in 1847. At the present time (1965) these buildings are still in use, but not as schools.

The lower room is used as a parochial hall and the upper rooms as a Youth Club.

During Father Seed's time, Father Joseph Howell leased two cottages in the lower part of the town in Caroline Street, down Wallgate, and had temporarily fitted-up there a school for the children who lived at too great a distance to walk as far as Dicconson Street. The school was named after St. Joseph in memory of Father Howell. A Christian Doctrine Confraternity was formed in the parish, of young

And middle-aged men and was directed by the late Mr. Benson, J.P. In 1871 public Benediction of the Blessed Sacrament in the church was introduced on Sunday afternoons for the benefit of the Guilds and Sunday schools, and became an institution carefully maintained.

Shortly before the close of the decade, a St. John's Young Men's house Catholic Club was inaugurated and a suitable home found for it in the house occupied for many years by the Fathers of the mission, on the right side of the main entrance into the churchyard. On March 17, 1905 St. John's Men's Sodality amalgamated with St. John's Catholic Club to form a society called 'St. John's Young Men's Society'. The first Chaplain of the CYMS was Father Flynn, S.J.

St. Joseph's Association is now the name of the Women's Confraternity but it was instituted as a purgatorial confraternity which had frequent Masses said for the faithful departed. This Confraternity had a long and memorable history.

The year 1875 saw the building of the Presbytery in Powell Street and which is still used for that purpose.

Before the end of the century, the new school in Brick Kiln Lane was built.

In December 1893, when Father O'Hare was Rector, the schools in Dicconson Street were condemned by the Education Authority. Father Shapter, his successor, secured a site in Brick Kiln Lane. The price asked for was £2,000, but there is no record of the actual price paid. Plans for a two storey building were approved in 1895

The new buildings cost about £5,000 and the school for girls and infants was opened on March 4, 1896. Father J. Turner was Rector when the new school was opened.

In the year 1933, the Superior General of the Society of Jesus found it necessary, due to other work to which the Society was committed, to relinquish the parish of St. John's, and so ended the long and glorious work of the Society of Jesus at St. John's and in Wigan and District.

From the beginning of the century the following Jesuit Fathers served

as Rectors of St. John's:-

1898-1903: Patrick Hayden

1903-1906: Joseph Flynn

1906-1910: George Carolan

1910-1923: George Wilcock

1923-1932: William Fitzmaurice

1932-1932: William Gough

Whilst at St. John's, Father Wilcock installed a new bell in the tower which replaced the bell installed by Father Seed in 1861 and which was found to be cracked. He had the four stained-glass windows taken out and re-leaded at a cost of £371 10s. 0d., and built new confessionals which were first used in May 1922.

Father William Fitzmaurice succeeded Father Wilcock in 1923. His first job being to have the church redecorated. In November 1927, he was instrumental in the organisation of a parish Bazaar when the magnificent sum of £3,000 was raised for this and other church purposes. In the year 1928 he founded St. John's Operatic and Dramatic Society And he himself was producer. The Society is still in existence.

Father William Gough's Rectorship, though short, was historic, for he was the last of a long line of Jesuit Fathers who were Rectors of St. John's.

In the year 1933, the first Secular priests came to minister at St. John's and Father Philip Mahon was inducted as Rector of the parish on October 8 of that year. With him came two newly-ordained curates as assistant priests - Father William Hall and Father George Houghton. Father Mahon's death came with tragic suddenness when he collapsed and died whilst reciting his Office in the churchyard of St. John's on March 23, 1939.

Father James McKenna succeeded Father Mahon for just one year as he died from a painful illness on April 13, 1940

Monsignor Joseph Moss, D.D., was Vice-Rector of the Beda College Rome, when he was appointed to succeed Father McKenna. Monsignor Moss had been evacuated to Upholland College during the war years. This well-beloved priest, after a period of indifferent health, collapsed and died in Oldham on August 31, 1949. His ministry at St. John's was during the difficult years of war when nothing in the way of repairs or improvements could be carried out, but during the year of his sacerdotal silver jubilee the interior of the church was 'washed down', and he did much to improve the Parochial Hall in Dicconson Street after it had been vacated by the RAF who had occupied it throughout the war years.

In October 1943, Father William O'Connell, Assistant priest, formed St. John's Youth Club for boys and girls. The Club first met in the lower room of the CYMS Club, but soon after moved to more spacious quarters at the 'Elms' in Wigan Lane. These

premises were eventually taken over by the Wigan Education Authority and the Club moved to the upper floor of St. John's Parochial Hall in Dicconson Street. To enable the rooms to be put in a satisfactory condition to house the Youth Club, the Ministry of Education made a grant of £1,000 for structural alterations and £250 for furnishings and equipment. The Youth Club occupied their new premises in August 1950, which were opened and blessed by Bishop Halsall, the auxiliary Bishop of Liverpool. The Club has gained many successes over the years in drama and athletic events, and is still flourishing.

The present parish priest, the Rev. John Walter Campbell, D.D., PhD B.A., Vice-Rector of Up Holland College, succeeded Monsignor Moss and was inducted parish priest on September 25, 1949.

During the war years, 1939 to 1945, no big redecoration or renewal schemes could be undertaken and the church and parish properties had suffered in consequence. Doctor Campbell set about the task of remedying this and on October 27, 1949, called a meeting of parish representatives when it was decided to organise a three-day bazaar. The bazaar was held in the Parochial Hall in Dicconson Street in April 1950 and the magnificent sum of £3,500 was raised. During the five succeeding years, 1951 to 1955, Garden Parties were held on the Wigan Athletic Football Ground at Springfield Park, which resulted in a total profit of £2,580 for the parish. Springfield Park had been booked for one Saturday in each of the five years for the total sum of £100.

The success of these efforts was due in a large measure to the inspiration and organisation of Father John Kielt who was an assistant priest at St. John's. Father Kielt was transferred to the Sacred Heart, Chorley, in 1957 where he died suddenly on July 28th 1960, at the age of 47.

As a result of these efforts, the church was decorated, and on July 15th 1951, a special service was held at which Bishop Halsall, Auxiliary Bishop of Liverpool, presided. The re-roofing of the church and the presbytery was carried out along with many other necessary repairs.

On July 12th, 1956, Doctor Campbell celebrated the silver jubilee of his ordination, and at a crowded meeting of parishioners in the parochial Hall, he was presented with a spiritual bouquet and a cheque for £575. As a result of this, Doctor Campbell purchased and installed two new permanent altars. The high altar, which was made of wood, was replaced with a permanent marble altar and a new tabernacle, and a marble Lady Altar was also erected. These were completed in 1959 when the church was 'washed down'.

The permanent altars enabled the church to be consecrated and on June 17th 1959, the church was consecrated by Bishop Boisguerin, an exiled French Bishop from China resident in the Liverpool Archdiocese.

At this consecration ceremony, the Society of Jesus was represented by Father L. Darbyshire, S.J., a one-time curate at St. John's.

On Monday evening June 22nd, 1959, John Carmel Heenan, Archbishop of Liverpool, and later to become Cardinal Archbishop of Westminster, assisted at High Mass and

preached to mark the 140th anniversary of the opening and the recent consecration of the church.

In November, 1961, Archbishop Heenan gave his approval for plans to widen and improve the Powell Street approach to the church; to build two sacristies - one for the clergy, and one for the altar servers and a new baptistry. The architect was Mr. T. B. Marsden, of Southport. This building was ready for use in November, 1962.

It is impossible to discover the names of the priests who over the years have been assistants at St. John's, but here are the names of a few of those still remembered.

The Jesuit Fathers were:-Fathers Melling, Coverdale, Lomax, Darbyshire and Pye.

Father Pye is especially remembered as a keen and devoted chaplain of the Boys' Guild and the CYMS

Secular assistant priests have been:- Fathers W Hall, G. Houghton, J. J. Barry, B. Flynn, W. O'Connell, J. Kielt, T. Rattigan, C. McEnroe, P. Higgins and J. Kennedy.

The present assistant priests are Fathers Francis Smith and Victor Bridges

Much has been written in this history of the material side in the growth of St. John's, and many are the names of the priests who ministered here. But buildings and priests do not make a parish. We must not forget the many lay folk who down the years have assisted at Holy Mass, received the Sacraments and supported by their generosity and organised the various schemes proposed by the clergy. They may not be mentioned in any human record, but their names are inscribed in letters of gold in, 'The Book of Life'. The full story of St. John's is not yet told; there is no doubt that many who come after us will add to its glory, for we can only pay our debt to the past by putting the future in debt to us.

ST. JOHN'S, STANDISHGATE, WIGAN.

CHRISTMAS, 1965