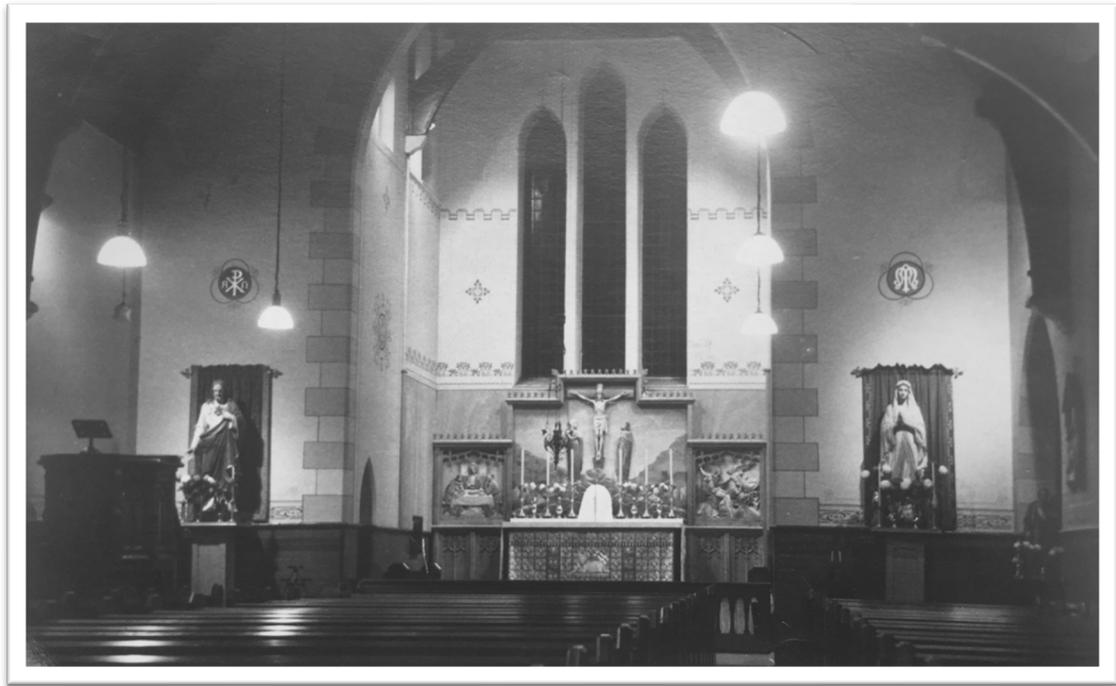


## **A Brief History of The Holy Infant and St Anthony Parish Astley Bridge**



Astley Bridge was still a village in 1877. The few Catholics of the district attended St Mary's Church, Bolton and the children walked daily to St Mary's School. It was considered that the time had come to have a church school of their own. Their faith and courage seemed to out run their prudence; but their long-term planning was justified by the results.

The area to be served by the new Mission was cut off from the parent Mission of St Mary's and stretched, as it still does, from Waterloo Street to the Darwen boundary and through Belmont Village to Tockholes Plantation. In addition, it included part of Tonge Moor and Turton. That apostolic man, Bishop (afterwards Cardinal) Vaughan, Bishop of Salford, and Father William Taylor of St Mary's, Bolton, were the planners, willingly supported by the faithful of the district.

In 1874, a plot of less than an acre, hitherto used as a brickyard, was acquired from Mr George Parker Brockbank in consideration of the yearly ground rent of £47. On this was erected by Mr Leach, Contractor, a school-chapel. It was a substantial, unpretentious brick building of two storeys, and a basement. The first storey served as the school. The basement was used as a playground in wet weather. The upper storey was the chapel. This had some unique features. It was entered by a stone staircase on the north side of the building. It had no windows. It is thus described in 1893: "Above the school in the chapel, which is 66 feet long and 30 feet wide and affords accommodation for 300 worshippers. The lighting of the chapel is by means of a 'lantern' which extends the whole length of the building, with the exception of the two extreme bays. The light obtained by means of this lantern is a modulated one, the direct ray usual in ordinary cases giving place to one more subdued and effective."

There was joy and enthusiasm and legitimate pride among the few hundred Catholics of Astley Bridge and district when the new Mission of the Holy Infant and St Anthony was solemnly opened by Bishop Herbert Vaughan on Sunday, 22<sup>nd</sup> July, 1877. For two years there was no resident priest. The Mission was served by priests from St Mary's, Fr William Taylor, the Rector, who died in 1878, Fr Patrick Dillon and Fr C J Huybers, who died in 1879. The parochial Baptismal Register begins on 23<sup>rd</sup> March, 1879, the Marriage Register on 28<sup>th</sup> June 1879, and the Confirmation Register on 6<sup>th</sup> March, 1885.

The first resident priest was Fr Maximilian Jüttner from Germany, who served the Mission from 1879 to 1884 when he returned to his native land. He was a pious and devoted pastor. He occupied a cottage in what is now called Park View on Moss Bank Way. The struggle to support the infant Mission was great. It was heavily in debt for the building and parishioners were few and poor, despite the fact that one of them came to Mass from Turton on a white horse, to the admiration of the neighbourhood. Old parishioners tell how Fr Jüttner's housekeeper begged food for the presbytery and how on the eve of Lady Day a few of the faithful rushed round Astley Bridge and Turton for subscriptions to pay the ground rent. But if these founders of the parish were poor in money, they were rich in piety.

Neither rain nor snow stopped them from coming to Mass from Belmont, Egerton or Turton. In summer, the congregation was swelled by a large number of Irish harvesters. Mass on Sunday began at 12.30 and lasted until 2.00. After Mass, parishioners who had come a long distance, and the harvesters, had lunch at the Church Inn near the Bridge, where free bread and cheese were provided with the beer.

Fr Pius Charles de Witte, a Dutchman – “Pious by name and pious by nature” – commented the Bishop – served the Mission from 1884 to 1888. He lodged in Mackenzie Street. He was a fervent and energetic priest who left his mark on the spiritual and material development of the new Mission. He built the present presbytery in 1885, a sign of the parishioners’ ready sacrifice and the priest’s energy.

The opening of the school seems to have coincided with that of the chapel. One of the teachers, Miss Fyland, pays a great tribute to the devotion and kindness of Miss Holland who was head mistress during the first years of the school. “A real mother to the children”, some of whom were as young as 2 and 3 years of age; a true type of those splendid teachers who of old did so much for so little. For some time, to supply emergencies, two of the Sisters of the Cross and Passion walked daily to the school from Clarence Street.

Fr de Witte was succeeded by Fr M O’Reilly and Fr J Darby who stayed only about two years each. The life of the Mission changed greatly under Fr A M Vantomme, who came in 1893. He was a Belgian, a man of great energy and courage. He should be called the second founder of The Holy Infant’s Parish. Trusting in the loyalty and generosity of his flock, he boldly set about building a new church with only £700 in hand. The foundation stone was laid by Rt Rev Dr Bilsborrow on 10<sup>th</sup> August, 1901, and opened on Sunday, 27<sup>th</sup> July 1902, the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the founding of the parish. The architect was a Mr Bromley, and the contractors, Jones & Sons. The church was built in 1902 of red brick with stone dressings and a slate roof. It is small and compact, with a five-bay nave and a narrow sanctuary flanked by sacristies which project out to each side with pairs of gables. The roof is supported on hammerbeams and arched brace trusses, with purlins and rafters, all exposed and boarded above. The windows are lancets, arranged

in groups of three and separated by buttresses. There is a choir loft at the west end with a timber gallery front. The War Memorial pieta, now situated near the church entrance, dates from 1925.

This undertaking involved alterations to the old building. The basement was made into a Men's Club. The old chapel on the second storey was reconstructed to serve as addition to the school. The glass lantern was removed and windows made in the side walls. The cost of these two undertakings was £4,400. When Fr Vantomme was transferred to Padiham in 1915 the parish had, and still has, every reason to be grateful to him for his work for Souls.

His successor, Fr Douglas Evershed, was a convert. By his priestly character and personal charm, he endeared himself to Catholics and non-Catholics alike. His musical talents were of a high order, and the choir flourished under his direction. He enlarged the presbytery and joined it to the church by a long corridor. In late years the parish had grown in numbers demanding the assistance of a curate. The first was Fr George Griffin and the second Fr John O'Dwyer. The popularity of Fr Evershed with all the inhabitants of Astley Bridge was shown in the tribute paid to him at his death in January 1927, a tribute expressed by Bishop Henshaw: "I grieve with you because a fine Christian gentleman has passed away; a charming personality is lost; a good priest has died."

The Salesian Fathers opened Thornleigh College in 1924. Fr Joseph O'Shaughnessy came as parish priest of Holy Infant's in February 1927. He was a fervent priest, zealous, energetic and downright; a sterling character. From the first he had the welfare of the parishioners at heart with the focus on the school. The fine tradition of early days has been enhanced by such gifted head teachers as Mrs McAvoy and Mr Brodrick.

A serious illness in 1939 slowly brought Fr O'Shaughnessy's busy life to an end and on 1<sup>st</sup> October, 1940, he died. He was a good priest and left a parish spiritually fervent. Canon Norbert Barre became parish priest in 1940 and continued work to beautify the inside of the church. The original oak sanctuary furnishings include the altar and reredos with carvings of the Supper at Emmaus and the Sacrifice of Isaac from the Tyrol, were installed

around this time. Canon Barre had a special devotion to the English Martyrs. This explains why he commissioned Charles Lightfoot & Sons of Manchester to install the windows dedicated to St Thomas More, St Margaret Clitherow and St Ambrose Barlow, together with windows dedicated to the Holy Infant, Our Lady, St Joseph and St Peter. The striking east window has semi-abstract stained glass designed and made by Philip Brown of Gounil and Philip Brown of St Leonards-on-Sea in 1964. A flat-roofed porch and baptistery designed by Greenhalgh & Williams was added in 1969.

The parish joyfully celebrated the milestone of 140 years in 2017. To mark this special occasion, Bishop John Arnold visited Astley Bridge to celebrate Holy Mass with the parish community and celebratory events took place during the year, organised by Fr Molloy, the parishioners and the school.

A short history of the parish, written in 1952 to mark the first 75 years, ended with the following reflection...

*The tree planted by the founders of the parish has yielded fruit a hundred-fold. New housing estates and the provision of new schools are problems looming larger every day, but with God's help, the faith and generosity of the Catholic pioneers of Astley Bridge will be renewed in their children when necessity arises.*

### **Parish Priests - Holy Infant and St Anthony Church, Astley Bridge**

1879 – 1884	Fr Jüttner
1884 – 1888	Fr de Witte
1888 – 1891	Fr O' Reilly
1891 – 1893	Fr Darby
1893 – 1915	Fr Vantomme
1915 – 1927	Fr Evershed
1927 – 1940	Fr O'Shaughnessy
1940 – 1975	Canon Barre
1976 – 2000	Mgr O'Connor
2000 – 2012	Fr Wright
2012 – 2018	Fr Molloy
2018 – 2022	Fr Horne

### **Assistant Priests - Holy Infant and St Anthony Church, Astley Bridge**

1921 – 1922 Fr Griffin  
1923 – 1927 Fr O’Dwyer  
1932 – 1939 Fr Foudy  
1939 – 1940 Fr Jefferies  
1940 – 1945 Fr Hulme  
1945 – 1946 Fr Foudy  
1946 – 1951 Fr Coupe  
1951 – 1958 Fr Hopkins  
1955 – 1967 Fr Unsworth  
1958 Fr Rattigan  
1967 – 1969 Fr McMahan  
1969 – 1976 Fr Livesey  
1976 – 1984 Fr Macfarlane  
1984 – 1987 Fr Haworth  
1987 – 1990 Fr Boast

### **Headteachers - Holy Infant and St Anthony Primary School, Astley Bridge**

1877 – 1894 Miss Holland  
1894 – 1919 Miss McEvoy  
1919 – 1949 Mr Brodrick  
1949 – 1958 Mr Greenough  
1958 – 1983 Miss Holden  
1983 – 2002 Mrs Chapman  
2002 – 2014 Mrs Lawton  
2014 – 2022 Mrs McGrath