



St John Fisher
Catholic Church, Coventry

Saturday 22nd
June 2024



St. John Fisher Parish, Coventry

A celebration of 60 years



Foreword

Saturday 22nd June 2024 is the day we celebrate sixty years of St. John Fisher Roman Catholic Parish Coventry. A history forged in the post-war industrial boom; six decades that has seen a growth in the City's prosperity and population.

We celebrate the emergence of an embryonic mission parish emerging in the Nineteen-Fifties into a Twenty First Century Parish, embracing the post-industrial period. A history that begins with no physical church, but a strong sense of community identity guided, by its Founding Father Fr. Benjamin Tarbuck. From green fields to bricks and mortar we have seen the emergence of a spiritual home for Catholics of both the Western and Eastern Christian traditions.

Fr. Seamus Gilroy succeeded Fr. Tarbuck but his tenure was cut tragically short by his untimely death. We turned to a Coventrian Fr. Bob Wright who oversaw a quarter of a century of Catholic community life in our church and our schools and in the life of our city of Coventry .

Coventry's modern history is defined by the adversity in the face of war. The resilience of the parish and the World at large was tested in 2020, when we were faced with

the impact of Covid 19. An event that coincided with the death of Fr. Bob.

It fell to Fr. Des Devenney to lead the parish through its period of isolation and back to a normality free from "social distancing". It has also been his task to prepare the parish for its biggest change since it began in 1964.

The change is created by a change in the demographics of Christian Society in the United Kingdom. Where once much of the congregation shared Irish heritage and looked across the Irish Sea for its clergy.

Today we find that new waves of immigration originate from India and celebrate Eastern Christianity. Our Parish Priest today is Fr. Sebastian Namattathi, born in Kerala, the South-Western State of India, which is home to the Syro-Malabar Church. It now falls to him to lead us into a new era, in which the cosmopolitan history of Coventry takes a new turn. The future challenge for St. John Fisher parish, is how we embrace the promotion of Christianity through a plurality of Eastern and Western traditions.

Our Patron Saint John Fisher (1469-1535)

Our parish is named to commemorate the life of St. John Fisher. He was born at Beverley, Yorkshire, into a wealthy family. At the age of fourteen, he was sent to study at Cambridge University. He went on to teach at Cambridge and was instrumental in the foundation of two colleges Christ's and St. John's.

In 1504 he became the Bishop of Rochester and made powerful friends, notably King Henry VII's mother, Lady Margaret Beaufort. He rose from being a professor of theology to Chancellor of the University of Cambridge.

He opposed Henry VIII's divorce from Catherine of Aragon and could not support his proposed marriage to Anne Boleyn. In April 1534, having refused the Oath prescribed by the Act of Succession, Bishop John was arrested and confined to the Tower of London, and on 17th June 1535, he was tried and condemned to death. On 22nd June 1535 at the age of sixty-six, he was beheaded at Tower Hill. His head was impaled on a pole on London Bridge, until it was discarded to make way for that of Thomas More a fortnight later.

On 9th December 1886, together with Thomas More, John Fisher was beatified by Pope Leo XIII. He was canonised, again with St. Thomas, on 19th May 1935 by Pope Pius XI. His feast day, celebrated jointly with St. Thomas, is on 22nd June, the date of St. John's execution.

Ref: <https://www.fisherhouse.org.uk/st-john-fisher>



A portrait drawing of St. John Fisher by Hans Holbein the Younger

1.0 Historical Context of Catholicism within Coventry

Today, in 2024, it might be difficult to imagine a Coventry that didn't have any Roman Catholic churches or parishes. England was part of Christendom, the Medieval notion of a Christian World with Rome at its centre.

England broke with Rome in 1534 when Henry VIII enshrined the Act of Supremacy. The effect of the act was to make him, and his heirs, the Supreme Head of the Church of England. Cathedrals, priories, and parish churches that, hither to, looked to Rome for its authority now became Anglican with the Archbishop of Canterbury as its senior bishop. This also brought about a policy known as the "dissolution of the monasteries".

This had a particularly profound impact on Coventry; in 1539 Coventry's first cathedral was dissolved. The Cathedral and Priory of St. Mary was established in 1102 and was a major seat of Catholic learning and ritual. It is said that its scale and importance can be compared to that of York Minster today.

Despite Coventry's importance as a medieval centre of Roman Catholicism, it became a hot bed of Protestantism the 17th and 18th centuries.

"In the second half of the 18th century the number of Catholics is said to have increased from a mere four in 1757 to 107 by 1770. By 1884 there are said to have been 2,600 Roman Catholics in Coventry, which thus maintained its position as the leading Roman Catholic centre in Warwickshire outside Birmingham."

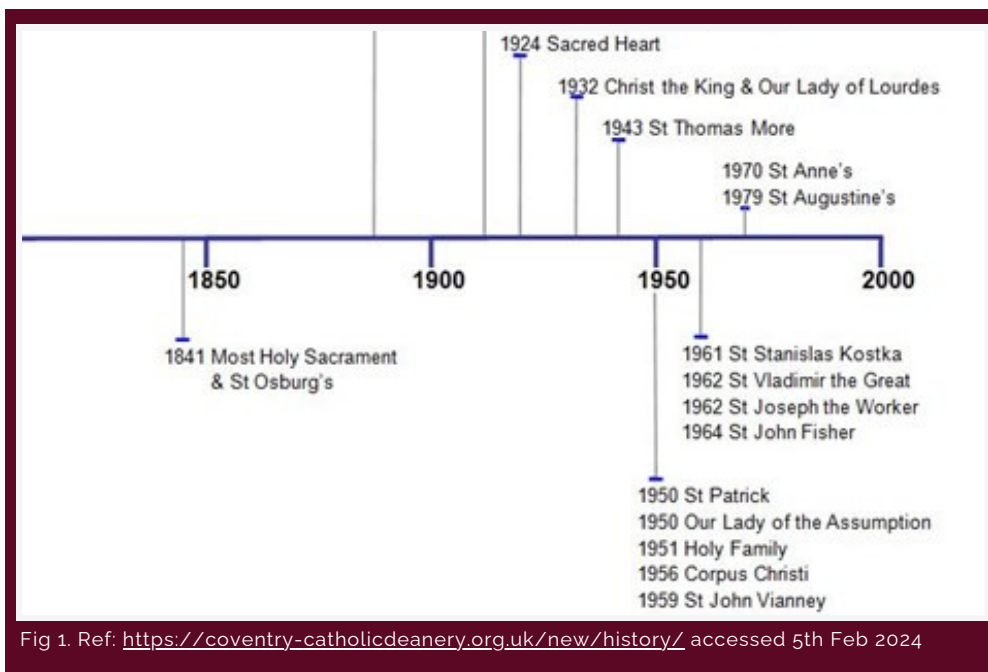
Ref: <https://www.british-history.ac.uk/vch/works/vol8/pp368-371>

The resurgence of Roman Catholicism took an important turn in 1803, with the return of a Benedictine order to Coventry. They established a mission, in a house in Little Park Street. By 1807 this had transferred to a small brick chapel in Hill Street, dedicated to St. Mary.

It wasn't until the Catholic Emancipation Act of 1829, that Catholics were able to sit once again in the British Parliament as Members of Parliament. It was against this important political change that St. Osburg Parish, was established in 1841. It was the first Roman Catholic Parish to emerge following the reformation and was a critical moment in Coventry's history. St. Osburg replaced St. Mary's chapel built in 1807. St. John Fisher Parish emerged in 1974 as the seventeenth Roman Catholic parish in Coventry.



2.0 A timeline of the development of Catholic parishes in Coventry



It can be seen from fig.1, that the development of Catholic parishes in Coventry was extremely limited in the Nineteenth Century. In fact, there were only two by the end of the century, St. Osburg and St. Mary & Benedict. The Twentieth Century saw only one parish added before the Great War (WW1) and a further four by the end of World War 2 (WW2). In the Post-War period, the Fifties witnessed a further five parishes being created. This was almost matched by the Sixties, where four more parishes were added including St. John Fisher Parish in 1964. Two of the new parishes in the Sixties reflected post-war migration from Eastern Europe with

parishes being established for the Polish Community, St. Stanislas. The Ukrainian community being served by the parish of St. Vladimir the Great. In the Seventies growth slowed, with the addition of St. Anne in 1970 and finally in 1979 the addition of St. Augustine.

The timeline showing the growth in Catholic parishes reflects the exponential growth in Coventry's population. Fig.2 shows that the population quadrupled in the half-century between 1901 and 1951. During the Fifties and Sixties, the decades often referred to as the "Baby-Boom", there was a rise in population almost equivalent to the total population of 1901.

2.0 A timeline of the development of Catholic parishes in Coventry

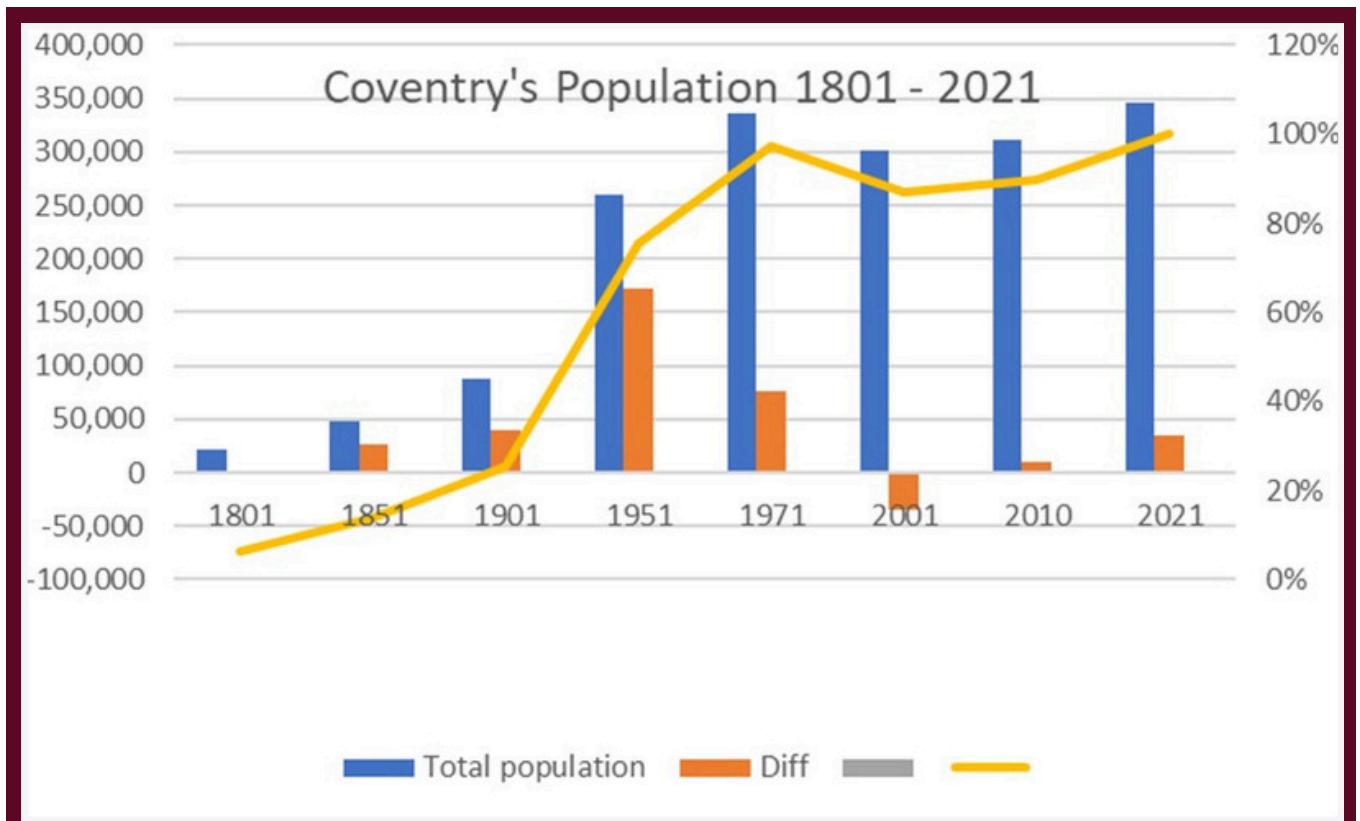


Fig 2. Population Growth 1801 to 2021

Table 1 . Population Growth 1801 to 2021

Year	Total Population	Change in population over period	Growth %	Population % Compared to 2021
1801	21,853	-	-	6%
1851	48,120	26,267	120%	14%
1901	88,107	39,987	83%	26%
1951	260,685	172,578	196%	75%
1971	336,136	75,451	29%	97%
2001	300,844	-35,292	-10%	87%
2010	310,500	9,656	3%	90%
2021	345,328	34,828	11%	100%

Ref: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Coventry>

Fig.3 Shows how Coventry's boundaries have expanded hugely since St. Osburg was established in 1841. Changes in 1899 saw the creation of two parishes St. Elizabeth (1912) in the Foleshill district and Sacred Heart (1924) in the Stoke District. These are important in the history of the emergence of St. John Fisher as both parishes ceded territory in the creation of the new parish. We see that the 1931 changes bring Wyken home to St. John Fisher Parish into the City's boundaries. However, the neighbouring parish of St. Patrick established in 1950 also played a major role in the emergence of St. John Fisher.

Coventry has a long history of innovation and industrialisation dating back to ribbon making in the Middle Ages. The thread of industrialisation runs from textiles through to watch making and on into the invention and manufacturing of the Safety Cycle, which forms the basis for the cycles of today. This in turn led to the manufacture of motorcycles, motor cars, machine tools, aeroplanes and aero engines.

Skilled and unskilled migrant labour came from all over the world. Including The Republic of Ireland, Poland and Italy not to forget population movements South from the Northwest, the Northeast and Scotland.

Many of the people arriving were drawn from previous generations of Irish migration and many identified as Roman Catholics.

Industrial and economic developments in the City fuelled the rise in population and the growth of Coventry's boundaries. These factors are all inextricably linked with the growth in Catholic parishes in the city. Not only did newly arrived Coventrians need work but their children needed education which also saw the building of Catholic schools across the whole of the City. Most of the schools were directly associated by name with a particular parish. Notably St. John Fisher School opened on 4th January 1954 but wasn't associated with a specific parish church. However, it was destined to become the centre of the new parish but it would take a decade for the transformation to take place.

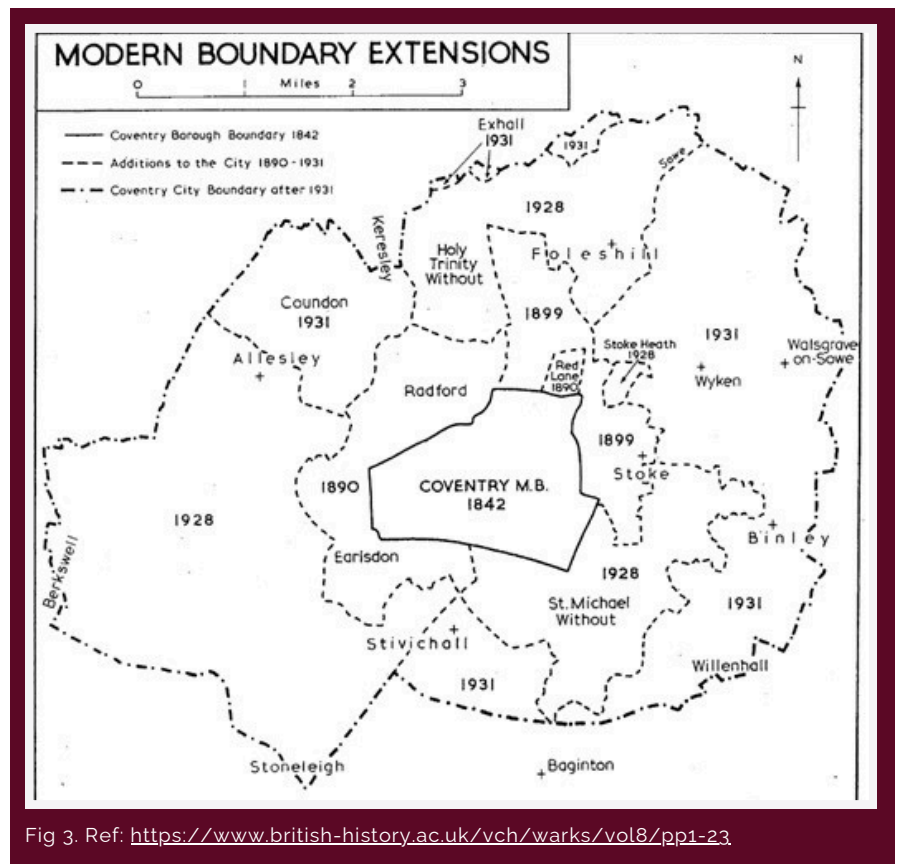


Fig 3. Ref: <https://www.british-history.ac.uk/vch/warks/vol8/pp1-23>

3.0 A time before the formation of St. John Fisher parish

Many of the families connected with the school attended Sunday Mass at the neighbouring Sacred Heart in Stoke, or St. Patrick's in the Potter's Green district. Fr. William Conefrey and his curate Fr. Anthony Browne from St. Patrick's parish served the spiritual and pastoral needs of the school. A second primary school became affiliated with St. John Fisher parish, St. Gregory School which opened in 1971.

The mission parish of Walsgrave began its existence in 1950, when a resident priest was appointed to conduct services at Binley Road, and Wyken Hostel, Belgrave Road.

In 1955 Wyken Hostel was replaced as a Mass centre by the St. John Fisher School, Kineton Road. In 1956 a new permanent church hall, dedicated to St. Patrick, was opened for the parish at Clennon Rise, Bell Green, on a site convenient for the residents of the new Henley Green estate.

It was designed by K. Newton of W. H. Saunders & Son, and was built of brick to seat 450. Services continued to be held at Stoke Hill Guildhouse and at St. John Fisher School.

4.0 A timeline of St. John Fisher Parish Priests

Years	Parish Priest	Curate/Assistant Priests
1964 to 1994	Fr. Benedict Tarbuck (RIP)	Fr. Aidan Bass Fr. Gerry Breen (RIP) Fr. David Lloyd Fr. Peter Jones (RIP) Fr Michael Neylon Fr. Thaddeus O'Malley (RIP)
1994 (April to October)	Fr. Seamus Gilroy (RIP)	Fr. Christopher Thomas
1995 to 2020	Fr. Robert (Bob) Wright	Fr. Michael Gamble Fr. Sean Farrell (RIP) Fr. Derek Edwards Fr. Martin Pratt Fr. Linh Nguyen Fr. David Gnosil Fr. Paul Moss
2020 to 2023	Fr. Desmond (Des) Devenney	-
2023 to present	Rev. Dr Sebastian Namattathi	-

5.0 Formation of St. John Fisher's parish

The building of the parish church in 1972 was not the beginning of the parish. The parish of St. John Fisher emerged in 1964 and found its original home in the school hall of St. John Fisher Primary School. However, before 1964 the embryonic parish was beginning to form and its roots can be traced back to 1950.

The mission parish of Walsgrave began its existence in 1950, with weekly Masses being celebrated at Stoke Hill Guildhouse, Binley Road and Wyken Hostel, Belgrave Road. In 1955 St. John Fisher School replaced Wyken Hostel as the location for weekly observance.

The indomitable Fr. William Conefrey, served the pastoral needs of the parish

before it became St. John Fisher. He was the Parish Priest of St. Patrick parish which was based at Clennon Rise, Bell Green, based in new permanent church hall built in 1956.

This hall served as the church until a new church was built in Deedmore Road. Fr. Conefrey was effectively the Parish Priest with the Wyken based congregation attending Masses at St. John Fisher School acting as an outpost of the St. Patrick parish. He was supported by Fr. Anthony Browne who shared responsibility for saying Mass and supporting children at St. John Fisher School when preparing them for the sacraments of First Holy Communion and Confirmation.

6.0 The Founding Father - Fr, Benedict Tarbuck

September 1964 saw the arrival of Fr. Benedict Tarbuck in Coventry at the age of 38 years. A native of the Black Country, he had served at St. Michael parish, Wolverhampton since 1960 having been ordained in 1950. He was charged by Archbishop Francis Grimshaw with establishing a new parish in Coventry, one of four new parishes to be set up in the Birmingham Archdiocese.

At 11 o'clock one Friday night he drove his Morris 1100 into Clennon Rise and knocked on the presbytery door of St. Patrick. He was greeted by Fr. Conefrey and asked if he could have a bed for the night. There was no "room at the inn" Fr. Conefrey told the expectant young priest, he explained that all of the rooms were taken by Fr. Poole and the live-in housekeeper. Fortunately, Mr. & Mrs. Michael O'Donnell the caretakers of St. Patrick School in Deedmore Road, were able to provide lodgings where he stayed until February 1965.

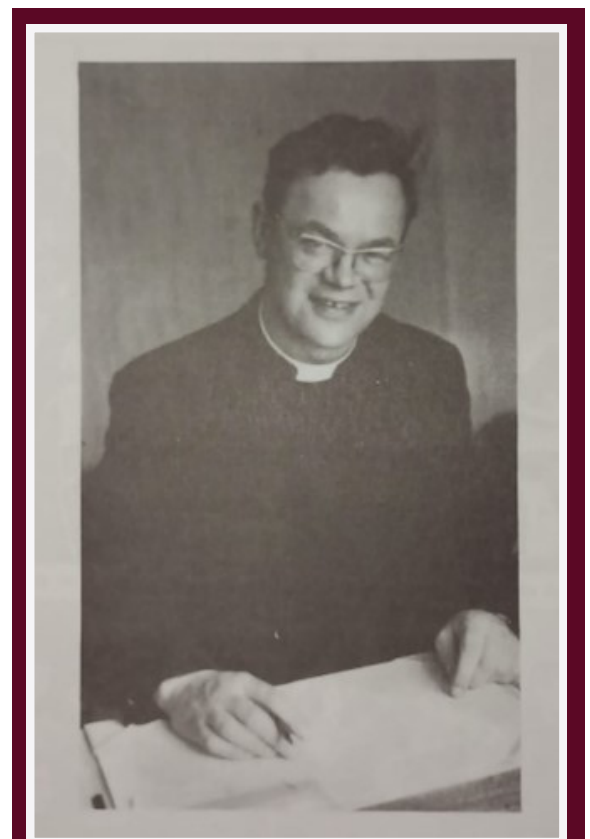


Fig 4. Fr. Benedict Tarbuck in 1964

An article in the Coventry Evening Telegraph (15th Feb 1965) shows Fr. Tarbuck moving into an old farmhouse (57 Woodway Lane) with the help of Michael O'Donnell. This was to be the presbytery of the new and yet unnamed parish. The farmhouse stood on a 10-acre site and Fr. Ben's brief (instructional mandate) was not only to build a church but also a new primary school, with work to start that year on building the school, whilst Sunday Mass for the foreseeable future, were to be continued at St. John Fisher School Hall and Stoke Guildhouse.

The new school was to be dedicated to Ss. Peter & Paul and as it was envisaged that church would occupy the same site, it was logical therefore that the new parish would be similarly named. However other apostles were considered, The Catholic Pictorial 4th Oct 1964 speculated that St. Jude might be the saint that would be immortalised by the Walsgrave based parish. The initial plans for the church in Woodway Lane included the building of a wooden structure at a cost of £4,000, however this was rejected by the planning committee.

In an interview with Fr. Sean Farrell in 1999 Fr. Tarbuck confided that he thought that the Woodway Lane site was too remote. In those days one side of Woodway Lane was residential whilst the other was almost entirely agricultural land where even gymkhanas (horse riding shows) were regularly held.

"I could see that it was not a good idea to build a church there because at the time there were no houses around there, it was all fields. My thoughts were on the St. John Fisher School site because that was where the people were.

"I had to get in touch with other parishes, Sacred Heart and St. Elizabeth to encroach on their territory, so that I could create a boundary for St. John Fisher parish. I finally got to expand the parish toward Sacred Heart parish and in the other direction the boundary went along Blackberry Lane. This meant that St. John Fisher would be in the centre of the parish."

Planning permission was granted on 9th April 1970 as advised in a letter from Coventry City Estates Department to Fr. Ben. The design by Desmond Williams & Associates was for a large church with simple architecture. This reflected Fr. Ben's ambitions set out in Archbishop Grimshaw's brief. He told Fr. Sean:

"Three churches had been built in Coventry at the same time, St. Patrick, Holy Family, and St. Thomas More. These had been big projects. The archbishop had told me not to build anything on the same scale - that is why we got what we did".

The trend in the seventies was for multipurpose functional buildings, so the design plans included a presbytery and a parish centre. It took another 20 years to see the opening of the parish centre built at a cost of £200,000. The cost makes a remarkable comparison with the cost of the church at £35,000 and the presbytery was £14,000. It is also interesting to note that the design of St. John Fisher closely mirrors that of Holy Spirit, Runcorn, Cheshire (Diocese of Shrewsbury).

Fr. Ben explained to Fr. Sean that initially he had to negotiate with both the planning and education departments to secure the site for the church which formed part of the school's playing fields.

He had to haggle over the price, which was originally set at £20,000. Fr. Ben was a shrewd negotiator and finally struck a deal for the much-reduced sum of £14,000. The Council envisaged that the church would be built behind the houses on Dartmouth Road. Fr. Tarbuck was clear that this wasn't acceptable and eventually achieved a much more prominent position on Tiverton Road.

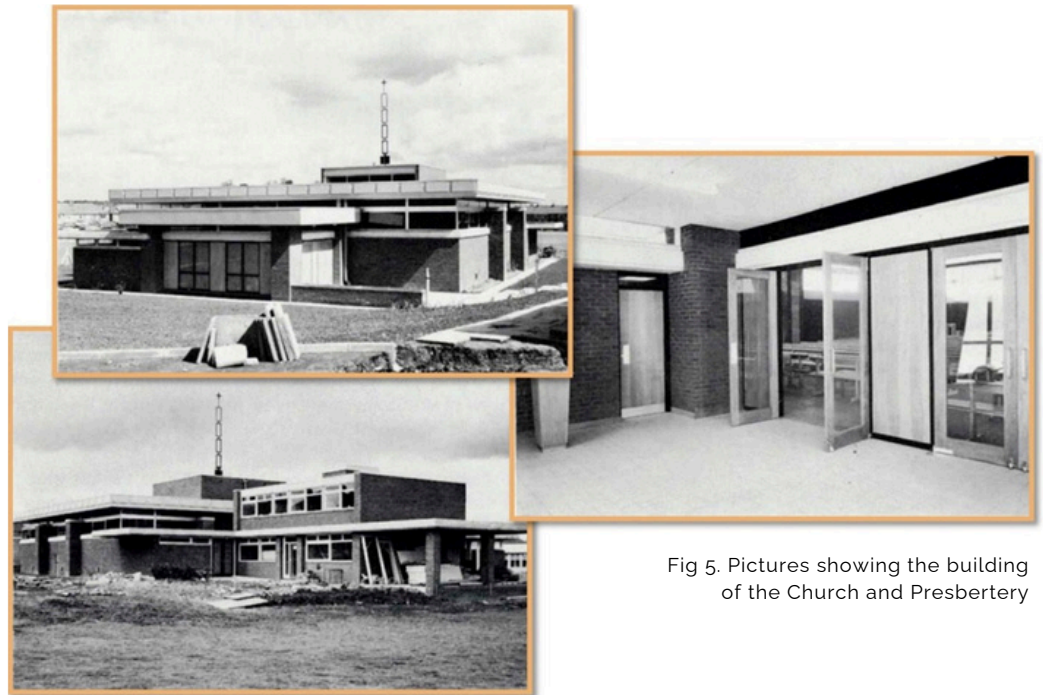


Fig 5. Pictures showing the building of the Church and Presbertery

The Archbishop of Birmingham, the most Reverend George Patrick Dwyer, gave a Solemn Blessing of the Church on Thursday 18th May 1972. The debt incurred in building the church was paid off in 1985, passing this milestone allowed for the church to be consecrated.

On Saturday 22nd June 1985, The Most Reverend Maurice Couve de Murville (the Archbishop of Birmingham) conducted the service. Fr. Ben said that he had timed the consecration to coincide with the 400th anniversary of the death of St. John Fisher who was executed in the reign of Henry VIII and it was also the 50th anniversary of his canonisation.

Fr. Ben was appointed the Catholic Dean of Coventry in 1984. At the age of 68 years in 1994 he decided to leave St. John Fisher Parish for a quieter parish in Coleshill, The Catholic Church of the Sacred Heart and Saint Teresa. His leaving was reported in the Coventry Evening Telegraph. He told the reporter:

"I have also enjoyed being in schools and holding classroom Masses".

He also reflected on fortnightly visits to the Biggin Hall Hotel to meet up with The Bishop of Coventry, Simon Barrington-Ward, for a chat over a pint of Marston's. The Bishop, paid Fr. Ben a very warm tribute saying:

"I have always felt that he was a friend and as if he was the Roman Catholic Bishop of Coventry."

In 1963, shortly before Fr. Ben's arrival in Coventry, work began on the Walsgrave Hospital project. The building work was completed in late 1968. He served as a chaplain at the Hospital for 25 years.

On 8th June 2006 the Coventry Telegraph reported Fr. Ben Tarbuck's death at the age of 79 years old. The Most Reverend Vincent Nichols, Archbishop of Birmingham, said:

"Canon Tarbuck was a robust and caring priest whose resting place at St. John Fisher Church will keep him very much in the thoughts and prayers of the people of Coventry."

Fr. Ben returned to St. John Fisher Church to be interred, where he now rests in peace in front of the church that he was so instrumental in its creation.

7.0 A brief interlude - Fr. Seamus Gilroy

In April 1994 Fr. Seamus Gilroy became the second Parish Priest of St. John Fisher and was faced with the task of replacing Fr. Ben. He was a soft-spoken, mild-mannered man born on 2nd April 1947 in Shannow, County Cavan, Eire. He was of course a post-war baby, one of the "Baby-Boomer" generation.



Fig 6. Fr. Seamus Gilroy in 1994

Ordained in January 1972 at first he worked in Staffordshire and Birmingham parishes. In the fourteen years prior to taking up his duties as the Parish Priest he played a key role in training new priests in his role as Vocations Director at Oscott College, Birmingham. Regrettably he died prematurely at the age of just forty-seven on the 13th October 1994.

He had been feeling unwell and was driving to see his doctor when his condition became worse, forcing him to pull across in Westminster Road, Coventry, he was found collapsed near his car and later died of his illness.

Fr. Tom Farrell said: *"It was very sudden and unexpected and has left us very sad"*.

He went on to reflect on the fact that Fr. Seamus was a keen sportsman and football fan, who, in his youth, had played Gaelic Football for County Cavan and only stopped playing in his early forties when a knee injury forced his retirement.

"He was a non-smoker, not over-weight and active sports-wise until recently. It's rather taken the wind out of our sails".

Fr. Seamus returned to his native Ireland to be buried at Drumkilly Church, County Cavan, near the place of his birth.

8.0 The Sky-Blue era - Fr. Bob Wright "one of our own"

Fr. Bob, as he was affectionately known, was "one of our own," echoing the familiar football chant that celebrates the arrival of a home-grown boy on to the pitch during a Coventry City football match. Robert Wright was born in the Hillfields district of Coventry on the 12th June 1951. He was the son of Irish immigrants and one of four children; he had three sisters.

He attended St. Mary and St. Benedict Primary School in the shadow of Highfield Road, home to his beloved Coventry City Football Club. He then transferred to Corpus Christi Primary School Ernesford Grange where he passed his eleven plus exam before becoming a pupil of Bishop Ullathorne Grammar School in the Green Lane district of Coventry.

From here he would start his journey into the priesthood. He was ordained as a priest on the 15th January 1977 after studying at Oscott College, Birmingham. His first posting was to The Church of the Immaculate Conception, Bicester, where he was an assistant priest for four years. In 1981 he moved to Our Lady of the Angels, Nuneaton, staying until 1984.

He moved on to the parish of Our Lady of Mount Carmel in Redditch where he remained until 1988. He spent seven years at the West Indian Chaplaincy, Bayswater Road, Birmingham; this period played a very important role in Fr. Bob's desire to be inclusive of ethnic Catholic communities. This would manifest itself in annual Intercultural Masses held at St. John Fisher Church. These events would be remembered for the vibrancy of the liturgy brought to life by steel bands and the joyous rendition of familiar hymns.

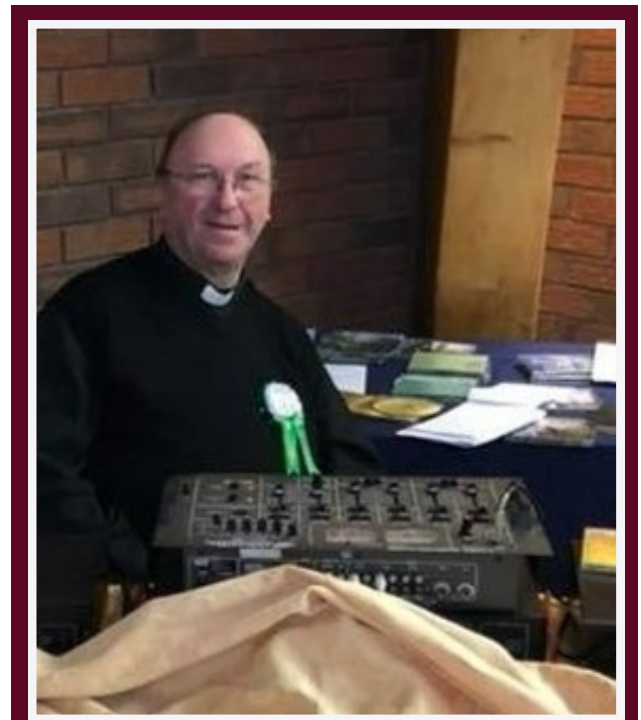


Fig 7. Fr. Bob Wright as Disc Jockey

These were also great social events, where the parish centre was full of aromas of ethnic food emanating from traditions around the world.

It was in 1995 that he came home to St. John Fisher parish to become the Parish Priest following Fr. Seamus' untimely death. Fr. Bob was a shy and modest man by nature but was warm and fun loving.

He is remembered by hundreds of school children as a disc jockey at the parish's primary schools of St. Gregory and St. John Fisher, providing the entertainment for end of year celebrations. The parish centre was a hub of social activity with race nights, St. Patrick's Day celebrations and other seasonal festivities such as the New Year and Christmas. His instinct for inclusivity revealed itself in annual interfaith services with the nearby Anglican Parish of the Church of the Risen Christ.

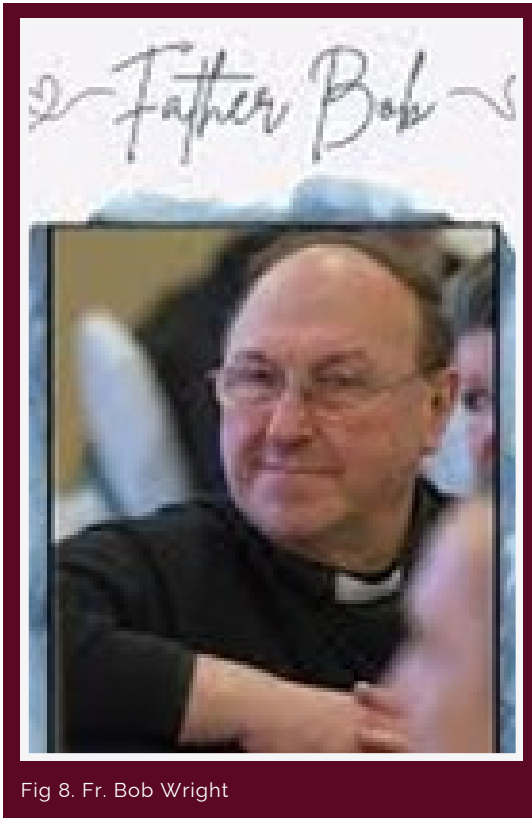


Fig 8. Fr. Bob Wright

He led pilgrimages to Lourdes every year involving many of St. John Fisher parishioners. On the 14th March 2007 leaders from the Muslim, Christian, Sikh, Hindu and other communities came together to bless Coventry City's new football stadium, the Ricoh Arena. Fr. Bob represented Coventry's Catholic Community, he was of course not only a devout Catholic but also a die-hard sky-blue supporter.

On the 5th March 2020 Fr. Bob died bringing to an end a quarter of century's service to St. Fisher parish, its schools and the citizens of Coventry. Christ the King posted the following:

"We are sad to announce the death of Fr. Bob Wright, Parish Priest of St. John Fisher, who passed away earlier today. He was 43 years a priest, and 25 years at St. John Fisher. He was born and brought up in Coventry. An inspiring priest who will be sadly missed."



Fig 9. From left to right: Fr. Des Devenney (St. John Fisher Church), Nora Mole, Liz Carr (Fr. Robert Wright's sisters) and Peter Deeley (Building Contractor)

Whilst Fr. Bob was cherished by his parishioners, he was also a highly respected figure in Coventry society at large. His contribution to the life of the city was acknowledged when a new housing development neighbouring the church immortalised him by naming one of the roads Robert Wright Drive.

9.0 From Covid. A return to normality - Fr. Des Devenney

Fr. Bob's funeral was held on Friday 20th March 2020. There wasn't an empty seat in the church for his Requiem. The service was attended by all his family, his loyal parishioners and many members of the local clergy. It was a fitting tribute to the man who was loved and respected in equal measure. On the same day the "Bishop's Conference" issued the following statement in a letter signed by its President, Cardinal Vincent Nichols:

"It's very clear that, following official advice and to keep each other safe, save lives and support the NHS, at this time we must not gather for public acts of worship on our churches. This will begin from Friday evening, 20th March 2020, until further notice..."

Ref: <https://x.com/catholicew/status/1240240903895351296>

Less than a week later, on 25th March, the Coronavirus Act 2020 was given Royal Assent, and came into effect on 26th March 2020, the whole country was placed in "Lockdown". Had Fr. Bob's funeral been one day later, only six mourners would have been present.

It was against this extraordinary background that Fr. Des became the fourth Parish Priest of St. John Fisher. When he stood on the altar at St. John Fisher to say his first Mass it was to an empty church. He addressed his new congregation through a video "live-stream" provided by YouTube. It wasn't until 4th July 2020 that limited numbers were able to attend church in person and then subject to strict conditions of "social distancing".

Fr. Des was born, in the Sparkhill district of Birmingham, in October 1953.

He was the eldest of six children. Like his predecessor Fr. Bob, he was born to Irish immigrants who had moved to the Midlands to find work in manufacturing industry. He attended the English Martyrs Roman Catholic Primary School, Evelyn Road, Birmingham.



Fig 10. Fr. Des Devenney, Tuesday 8th September 2020

At the age of eleven he became a pupil of Cotton College. This was a Roman Catholic boarding school established by the Birmingham Archdiocese in 1873 in North Staffordshire. It was also known as Saint Wilfrid's College; it closed in 1987.

It was here that Fr. Des and Fr. Bob's paths would cross for the first time. Fr. Bob was two years older and joined the college as a sixth former. In 1972 Fr. Des became a seminarian at St. Mary's College, Oscott, Birmingham. Once again Fr. Des' orbit would coincide with Fr. Bob's as they had rooms opposite one another on the same landing.

On the 2nd May 1981 Fr. Des was ordained as a priest by Bishop (Patrick) Leo McCartie at St. Catherine of Siena Church, Birmingham. His first posting as an assistant priest, would see him spend four years at the Immaculate Conception Church, Bicester. This was yet another occasion where Fr. Des followed in Fr. Bob's footsteps as he was Fr. Bob's replacement in Bicester.

This was followed by a two year return to Birmingham at St. Mary & St. John Erdington and St. Anne, Chelmsley Wood. During this period, he was also Chaplain at the nearby Archbishop Grimshaw School. Fr. Des' last stint as an assistant priest saw him spending two years at the Holy Trinity Church, Newcastle-under-Lyme leaving after two years in 1990.

For a decade Fr. Des was the parish priest of St. Paul Church in the Kings Norton area of Birmingham leaving in 2000, he was also Chaplain to St. Thomas Aquinas School.

In the next three years Fr. Des gives up parish life, first going to Dublin to work at All Hallows College, now part of Dublin City University (DCU). Here Fr. Des completes an MA in "Pastoral Leadership". His dissertation was entitled "Is compassion important in the life of a teacher in a Catholic School", a topic of contemplation for academics, practicing teachers and pupils, both now and then.

He went on to work with the Catholic Missionary Society in London. Here he worked in many parishes and schools in England and Wales.

Fr. Des returned to life as a Parish Priest, first for a brief stint at St. Joseph Church, Malvern before coming to Holy Family Parish in Whitmore Park, Coventry. In 2004 Fr. Des succeeded Fr. Aengus Donlon who had served the parish for the previous eighteen years. Fr. Des served as a Parish Priest and also as Chaplain to Cardinal Newman School for the next twelve years.

He left Coventry in January 2016 to become Parish Priest of Our Lady & All Saints, Stourbridge. Opened in 1857, the mid-Victorian Gothic Revival Church was designed by E.W. Pugin.

So, Fr. Des must have had a sense of déjà vu when he returned to Coventry. On this occasion to become the Parish Priest at St. John Fisher and succeed his old friend Fr. Bob who had recently sadly died.

Given Fr. Des' age his tenure at St. John Fisher was inevitably going to be shorter than his other periods as Parish Priest. One of his final acts was preparing the parish to celebrate its Diamond Jubilee.

10.0 A new era- Rev. Dr Sebastian Namattathi

One Sunday in October 2023, Fr. Des read a letter from Canon Paul Fitzpatrick, Episcopal Vicar for the Pastoral Area of Coventry, Warwickshire and Oxfordshire, informing the congregation of St. John Fisher, that the course of the parish was to undergo the most significant change in its near sixty-year history. A demographic time-bomb had been quietly ticking away, perhaps unnoticed, or more likely being ignored. The clergy of English parishes during the twentieth century had largely been drawn from the Irish diaspora.

Changes in social attitudes and economics had shifted since the 1960s resulting in a tendency towards the secular state and a geographical shift in the sources of migration to Coventry. The result was that less people attended Mass regularly from its traditional base. The composition of the congregation saw a decline in those with European heritage, to one which had roots in the continent of Asia. The economic migration of the Irish, Italians and Polish to work in the manufacturing industry was being replaced by people from Kerala on the southwestern coast of India, to work in healthcare.

The letter discussed the rise in Coventry of the Syro-Malabar community. Most St. John Fisher parishioners were unaware of the term Syro-Malabar or that such a Christian tradition existed.

The congregation had always been part of the Western Christian tradition with its centre in Rome. Most people were familiar with the Eastern Tradition of Christianity that had been practiced in the city, since



Fig 11. Rev. Dr Sebastian Namattathi

1962 at Saint Volodymyr the Great Ukrainian Church (Stoney Stanton Road, Coventry). They also know that whilst the Pope is head of the Ukrainian Church, the Liturgy followed is different to that of the Roman Catholic Church.

Now they became aware that the Eastern Church that had spread through Persia had offshoots in Asia. Thomas the Apostle was responsible for taking Christianity to Syria and later to Malabar (also known as Kerala) in India. The East Syriac Rite was adopted and still practiced which gives rise to the term Syro-Malabar.

The change meant that Fr. Des would transfer to the parish of St. John Vianney and Our Lady of the Assumption, Coventry to become the Parish Priest for both.

He replaced Fr. Sebastian, in what was effectively a “priest swap” between parishes.

Fr. Sebastian was born in Kerala in January 1972, the youngest of a family ten children. Like Fr. Bob his predecessor but one. His education started at St. Mary School, not of course the one familiar to Coventrians but one based in his hometown of Nakapuzha.

The pictures below show the rural nature of Kerala: a place famous as a pilgrimage and celebration of St. Mary. The school system is similar to that of the United Kingdom and Fr. Sebastian studied at Mahatma Ghandi University in 1989, before entering St. Joseph's Minor Seminary, Kothamangalam in 1991.

Here he gained two degrees covering Indian, Greek and modern philosophy. By 1991 he was studying at St. Joseph's Pontifical Major Seminary, Mangalapuzha and was ordained as a priest on the first day of the new millennium, 1st January 2000.

Fr. Sebastian's first six years as a priest, saw him taking the role of Master of Intercultural Theology at his local diocese

in Kerala. It was in 2006 that he left his native India to spend two years studying in the Netherlands at Radboud University, Nijmegen.

From there he moved to Rome for almost four years, where he gained a licentiate and doctorate in Pastoral Theology, at the Pontifical Lateran University. Clearly his time in Europe enhanced his knowledge of theology, however crucially it enhanced his understanding of the world and his knowledge of European languages.

By 2012 he had returned to Kerala to become the director of the catechism at Kothamangalam, 20km away from his hometown of Nagapuzha.

In 2015 Fr. Sebastian was asked to come to United Kingdom to serve the Syro-Malabar community in the Midlands. Migration from Kerala to the UK had risen through the 21st Century rising to estimated 40,000 citizens by 2021.

Pope Francis established the Syro-Malabar Eparchy* of Great Britain on 16th July 2016, the third of the 32 Eparchies of the Syro-Malabar Church to be located outside India.



Fig 12. St. Mary's Pilgrim Church, Nakapuzha



Fig 13. St. Mary's Public School, Nakapuzha

The Eparchy's centre is St. Alphonsa Cathedral in Preston. Mar Joseph Srampickal the head of the Syro-Malabar Church in Great Britain and is based at Our Lady of the Rosary and St. Therese of Lisieux in Saltley, Birmingham.

'Eparchy (Greek: ἐπαρχία eparchia "overlordship") is an ecclesiastical unit in Eastern Christianity that is equivalent to a diocese in Western Christianity. An eparchy is governed by an eparch, who is a bishop.

It was at this time, unnoticed by the Catholic Community of Coventry that Fr. Sebastian started his work at both the Churches of St. John Fisher and at St. Patrick by celebrating services on alternate Sundays using the East Syriac Rite. This meant that he was very busy as he was also the Parish Priest at St. Francis of Assisi, Kineton, Warwickshire.

In 2018 he moved the short distance to Our Lady and Saint Wulstan in Southam, before moving at the end of 2018 to become Parish Priest at St. John Vianney in Coventry together with Our Lady of the Assumption, Coventry.

Fr. Sebastian's and St. John Fisher Parish's story continue into a new chapter in which, like the heraldic eagle, Coventry now looks both East and West.



*The end of 60 years.
The beginning of the future.*