

At the start of the 20th century, the nearest places that Catholics in West Oxfordshire could hear Mass were the private chapel at Buckland, the Priory at Begbroke, or the churches of St Aloysius or of SS Gregory and Augustine in North Oxford; in the days before motor cars these were impossible for most people to reach. The Jesuit priests from Campion Hall came to hear confessions and say Mass at Easter, and sometimes a priest came from Oxford; but that was the most they could hope for. In spite of this, there were still small groups of Catholics in the area, who handed the Faith down through the generations, trusting that one day there would be an opportunity to practice it fully.

The growth of a Catholic community in Carterton owes its existence to three remarkable men: two of them were laymen, and one a priest.

In the years before the First World War, George de Serionne, a Frenchman studying at Oxford, became known as the 'Apostle of West Oxfordshire'; he travelled from Oxford by train, on the railway line that ran from Oxford to the outlying parts of the county, to Witney, Brize Norton & Bampton, and Alvescot, and from these railway stations he bicycled around the houses of Catholic families to teach the children the basics of their Faith. He also made himself responsible for the collections at Carterton, and sent regular accounts to the Diocese for his expenses; in August 1922, he had received a cheque for £16.7.6d for 'repairs executed at Carterton', while in December his expenses 'for giving instruction to children' for six months were £10.14.5d.

In 1914 Henry Yeates, a Catholic who had come to live in the new settlement of Carterton in 1906, designed and built a stone church on land which he donated at the Northern end of Burford Road; it cost a total of £120, and could hold fifty people, although the Catholic population at the time numbered twenty-five. It was hoped that the parish would thrive, especially as the non-Catholics of Carterton were thought to

be more broadminded than the people of the more traditional villages in the area. Priests from the newly-built Church of SS Gregory and Augustine, in North Oxford, came to say Mass in the Church, making the journey by bicycle and later on motor bikes. The Servites from Begbroke Priory also came regularly to say Mass in the Church on Sundays; in June 1924, a cheque was sent to the Priory at Begbroke for ten guineas 'sent for 7 supplies'.

Mr. Yeates' Church interior – some of the pews are still being used in St. Joseph's Church

Among the Catholic congregation, the Connolly family took a prominent place; they had come to Carterton from Ireland in 1907, having first emigrated to New York. There were six children in the family, including two who became priests and another a nun. Relatives in Ireland raised money for the new church, and the family played an active part in the parish for over half a century. In March 1938 Father John Connolly invited Father Lopes to his ordination.

By July 1926 it was noted that the collections at Carterton 'have dwindled, partly because an Altar Society collection has been taken; the church roof is very unsatisfactory and will require attention'.

In 1928, the Catholic Church in West Oxfordshire moved into a new phase: Father John Lopes was appointed as priest for West Oxfordshire. Father Lopes was a man of great energy and foresight, and he had inherited enough money to put his ideas into practice, although his impulsive spending resulted in his being declared bankrupt at least twice.

By 1929 he had started Catholic parishes in Eynsham, Witney and Carterton, known collectively as the 'West Oxfordshire Mission'. He published and distributed cards with figures of church attendance, showing how the parishes were growing; in 1930 there were three baptisms and seventy-nine Easter confessions at Carterton. The Catholic population was

estimated at 163 – a high proportion of the total adult population of Carterton, which in 1933 totalled 403.

West Yorkshire Missions – Christmas 1929

By 1935 the chapel built by Mr Yeates was felt not to be adequate for the growing population of Carterton, and in 1936 there was a movement to purchase an acre of land for a ‘Church, Presbytery, School or other similar Mission Building’ in Carterton; but it came to nothing. However, as the settlement grew and changed its character, the traditional farm buildings of Rock Farm became redundant; on April 5th 1938, ‘two barns, open shedding and two yards’ in Arkell Avenue were no longer in use, and Father Lopes bought them from a Mr Blunt for £600; their conversion into a Church and Hall, to a design by Mr Russell Cox, cost £1,389.0.0; the final payment for this was made in 1946.

A letter from the Archbishop of Birmingham giving Father Lopes permission to buy the Barns and the piece of land at Carterton.

,Once the land and the former barns had been bought, they had to be converted into the Church and the Hall that we know today. The building was carried out by Messrs Pether, of Burford; their account for the alterations of the Church came to £635.10s.0d, while the hall cost £432.0s.0d. The ‘new building around the hall’ cost £450, bringing the total to £1510.0.0; this was converted to ‘say £1500.0.0;’ – a gift of ten pounds, not inconsiderable in 1939.

The account for the conversion of the barns to the Church and Hall by Messrs Pethers of Burford in 1939

After the move to the new Church, Mr Yeates’ chapel was used as an overflow for the primary school until 1963; it was finally demolished to make way for the road that now leads into the Hill View estate.

The new Church needed furnishing and equipping, so in addition to the purchase and conversion of the Church and the

hall, the ladies of the parish saved up their sugar rations and made jam from the fruit in the hedgerows and in their gardens, selling them to raise the money that was needed to equip the new Church. The Church was kept simple in its furnishings, in keeping with the simple lines of the barn. The small wooden 'Stations of the Cross' from the chapel hung on the bare stone walls; the wooden lectern from the chapel was used, but the wooden altar was discarded in favour of a stone one. A coloured cross hung above the tabernacle, which stood on the altar; six silver candlesticks were given, in memory of the work done in the parish by George de Serionne. The communion rails were made of brass, with access for the priest and the servers through a gate in the centre. There was a statue of St Joseph, the patron saint of the church, holding his carpenter's tools, on one side of the church, and of a young 'Christ the Workman' on the other; the sanctuary lamp hung from a wooden beam. A Lady Chapel was also built, with an enclosed confessional leading off it. The Yeates' small wooden harmonium provided music for the hymns, played by Mary Yeates.

The Church was divided from the Hall next to it, though there was access to both from the small sacristy.

The Archbishop of Birmingham, to the anger and dismay of Father Lopes, decided that the parish of Carterton should be kept separate from Witney and Eynsham, rather than being a mission. The new parish stretched from the edge of Witney to the boundary of West Oxfordshire. There was also a small Church built in Burford by Father John Littledale, who ministered to the Catholics in the Burford area, including the Irish workmen who came to build the airstrip at Kencot. Father Joseph Griffin was appointed to be the first parish priest of Carterton; he was scheduled to take up his duties at the beginning of 1939. The first Mass was said in the Church on 4th February 1940. Father Griffin was also Chaplain to the R.A.F., who would have a separate Mass centre until the church had been built.

Father Griffin did not stay in Carterton long; his place was taken the following year by Father Cyril Bennett, who also became the Chaplain to R.A.F. Brize Norton. Although there was a new Church and Hall, there was as yet no presbytery; Father Bennett rented two rooms in one of the original tin bungalows in Arkell Avenue, at a cost of £1.15s.0d a week. Here he cooked on a makeshift stove, and was grateful for invitations to meals from Catholics living in the parish. A tall, thin figure, he spoke with great emphasis, often about the latest scientific discoveries. He was supported by the Connolly family, whose priest members occasionally came to say Mass in the Church; and also by Mrs Newenham, who lived at Rock Farm, and by Charles and Doris Rafferty, who lived in the converted stables next to the Farm; Charles Rafferty regularly served at Mass, and trained generations of other servers to follow him.

Sadly, their support was not enough to keep Father Bennett in good health; food rationing probably played a part in his increasing ill health, and in 1949 he was forced to retire; his place was taken by Father John Bullen.

In 1948 Father John Heenan – who was to become Cardinal Heenan – came to the parish, at the invitation of Father Lopes, to conduct a Mission to West Oxfordshire; during his two weeks' stay in the parish he preached in the churches of the West Oxfordshire benefice, and twice in the open air. As a result of his efforts a number of Catholics living in the nearby villages returned to the Church. His elevation to become Bishop of Leeds and subsequently Cardinal of Westminster did not diminish his fondness for the parishes of the area.

Father Bullen, who succeeded Father Bennett, was a much more robust figure; he rode around his large parish on a powerful motor bike. He also developed a talent for woodworking, and sold trays and wooden plates at the Christmas Fair held every year in aid of the Church. He was determined to improve the accommodation of the priest; and

in 1950 a presbytery was built on land owned by the parish next to the Church, at a total cost of £1,750.

At this stage of Carterton's development, beyond Rock Farm and the newly-converted barn the fields stretched down to the Shill Brook. Miss Ursula Hemprich, who acted as sacristan, lived in a converted railway carriage in the woods there, and the children of the parish picked the snowdrops and primroses which grew wild to decorate the paschal candle in the spring. This idyllic situation started to change with the coming of the American Air Force to Brize Norton in 1950; there was increased demand for housing in Carterton, and the USAF had an interdenominational chapel on the air base where their own chaplain said Mass. The road to Black Bourton was closed to make room for a runway and Carterton gradually broke away from its roots in the surrounding villages and became a thriving settlement on its own account.

Miss Hemprich had also cleaned the Church; when she left, her place was taken by Ernest and Peggy Walters, of Black Bourton, and by two sisters, Zita James and Teresa Cuthbertson, who had come to live in Alvescot. When they moved away from Carterton, Elaine Barry became the church cleaner, assisted by Ann Bailey. There is now a cleaners' rota organized by Ginny Roberts.

With the end of petrol rationing in 1950, more parishioners were able to get to the Church from the surrounding villages, especially those towards the Gloucestershire border, including some who had been taught by George de Serionne, and who had rarely been able to get to Mass. There were new arrivals, too; one of these was Elizabeth Wansbrough, who brought several loads of parishioners to church each Sunday; her gifts to the church included a font and a lectern, made by her son-in-law Benjamin Porter, and six brass candlesticks made by the silversmith William Phipps, as well as the hanging lamps in the sanctuary, and the organ. Her son, Joseph, was a regular server at Mass; he subsequently became a Benedictine

monk at Ampleforth, and as Father Henry Wansbrough he is a noted Biblical scholar; for fourteen years, he was Master of St Benet's Hall in Oxford.

By the summer of 1953 the last instalment of the presbytery loan had been paid; but dry rot was found in the beams and rafters of the Church. While this was remedied, Mass was said in the hall.

The parish remained much the same in size: in 1957 there were 140 baptised Catholics in the parish; by 1960 Father Smith reported 180 baptised Catholics, 134 of whom were known to him by name, and there was a regular Mass attendance of 76. It was thought that between 40 and 50 Catholics went to Mass elsewhere; perhaps in Burford or in Witney.

After the aggiornamento movement of Pope John XXIII there were changes to the liturgy. In November 1964, a Mass began to be said on Sunday evenings at Carterton; and three years later Father Joppé was given permission to reconstruct the sanctuary. The stone altar was brought forward, and the tabernacle moved to a niche in the wall behind it. The altar rails were taken away, and lay readers were introduced into the liturgy; on Whit Sunday, a layman was invited to preach the sermon at Sunday Mass.

In November 1964, there were 300 Catholics in the parish; this included the wives and children of the U.S.A.F., who were not catered for by the Chaplain on the Base. In 1965 the USAF handed the aerodrome back to the RAF, and the resulting growth in indigenous population meant that there was a need for more schools in Carterton. St Joseph's Catholic School opened in 1968, to educate the fifty Catholic children of the parish, who had previously had to travel by bus to St Mary's Convent in Witney.

When the School was built, its grounds could be used to hold the annual Summer Fete; social events also took place in the Hall, where Susan Hand started a Nursery School; it was also

hired for Ballet classes and for other social events, helped by Dick and Jessie Turner.

There was an attempt to use the Church Hall as a parish social club in 1967, which was refused, on the ground that too much money would have to be spent on renewing the toilets. However, this problem was overcome by adding a single-storey toilet block onto the Hall.

During the decade of Father Lees' and Father Downey's tenure a social club flourished in the Hall and the land behind it, mostly being used by the local Irish community. There was a football pitch, and a bar in the garage; Steve Crowley led the entertainment committee. On special occasions a band played; there was a football team, and a very good darts team. After a while a mini-bar was built downstairs, and another one in the gallery upstairs so that people could see down into the main hall. The stewards of the club were Mrs Margaret Doyle, and later Stella Edwards; Father Lees was the first Chair of the Committee, helped by Dick Turner, Ernest Walters, Walter Kelly, John Houlihan and Mick Murphy.

During the twenty-five years of Father Vincent Armishaw's tenure as parish priest – and the immediate ending of the social club – gradual changes took place in the involvement of the laity of the parish; women started to come to church bareheaded, and took more part in the liturgy, while lay people began to act as Eucharistic Ministers. Leona Rosario took over the harmonium, and arranged the church flowers. On Father Armishaw's twenty-fifth anniversary as parish priest a 'surprise party' was held in the Hall, which was opened up after many years, and painted in honour of the visit of Bishop Nicholl.

In 2002 the parish gained a Deacon, as well as a new priest: Deacon Bernard Curtin was ordained, and worked alongside Father Emmanuel Gili Hammett. Father Bengt Ove-Jacobson, a fellow Missionary priest, also assisted Father

Hammett. Under their joint tenure the presbytery was extended.

With the arrival of Father Emmanuel the Children's Liturgy began, organized by Karen Parker, who also ran the weekly Youth Club. Megan Skinner became the organist, while at the end of the summer term there was an annual barbecue. There were many fund-raising events, often including suppers; and Leona Rosario started a Friendship Group with a speaker or demonstrator each month, followed by tea in the Hall – or, in cold weather, in a nearby pub. The Hall was also rented out to the Karate and Martial Art Clubs.

Six years later, it became clear that the church needed radical repairs; Father Andrew Foster set up a committee, and the money for repairing the roof and the stone walls was undertaken, at a cost of more than £200,000. While the building work was going on, Mass was temporarily moved to St Joseph's School Hall. As a result of strenuous efforts, as well as a donation from the Oxfordshire Historic Churches Trust, the money was raised and the work on the church carried out.

At the same time a small memorial garden was established behind the Church in memory of a stalwart parishioner, Jessie Turner, as a place set aside for members of the Parish; burials for Carterton take place in the Church at Black Bourton, and this garden is a more accessible place to remember the deceased of the Parish.

The Hall is now also in need of radical restoration; negotiations as to design and cost are going on as this is written, but are likely to be extensive.

The Catholic Church in Bampton

There is mention of Mass being said in Bampton in the middle of the nineteenth century, not long after the Catholic Emancipation Act of 1829. It was organized by a Maltese priest, the Reverend Frances Guaci Azzopardi from Buckland, who travelled to Bampton Castle on alternate Sundays during

the year 1856-57, and said Mass in a chapel over the gatehouse. Nothing more of this is known, except that it ceased after a year, when Father Azzopardi moved away from Buckland; but there must have been a Catholic community living in Bampton, perhaps with a link to the recusant family of the Throckmortons at Buckland.

Eighty years later, in the 1930s, the Eagle pub in Church View was run by the Catholics Mr and Mrs Martin; Father Lopes used to come from Eynsham to say Mass on Sunday mornings in a room over the pub, and this was gradually taken over by the parish priest from Carterton. The Martins charged the parish £3.00 each quarter as rent for the use of their room.

A photograph of the 'Upper Room' at the Eagle, where Mass was said from 1930 until 1960

An undated list of Catholics in Bampton who attended Mass at 'The Eagle'

When the Martins retired in 1960, there was an opportunity to buy land in Queen Street, Bampton for £375.00. Father Brennan applied for planning permission to build a chapel there, and was given the go-ahead by the Archbishop; but the proposal was rejected. Instead Mass was celebrated in a room above the Fire Station in the Town Hall.

In 1964 the Town Hall ceased to be available, and the Mass centre had to find a new home. The Catholic congregation rented a room in the library in the former Grammar School for Mass on Sundays, at the same rate of £3.00 a week as the Town Hall. Early in 1968, Father Lees asked for permission to say Mass during the week at the house of Major and Mrs Phillips, Haytor, in Lavender Square; but this seems to have come to nothing.

1960: The proposed plan (marked with an X) for a Catholic Church in Queen Street, Bampton

By 1974 the room in the Grammar School was becoming too small for the Catholic congregation; and it was then that the

six-year-old Monica Phillips walked out of the Grammar School and began to talk to a member of the choir at the Anglican parish church of St Mary's. She pointed out that the Parish Church of St Mary was not used until after Mass had finished, and asked why the Catholics did not use it.

As a result, after many months of negotiation between the Churches, the Catholic congregation was invited to make use of St Mary's Church for Mass on Sundays and on Holidays of Obligation. No fee was asked, but the money from the annual Jumble Sale was given to St Mary's Church as a contribution towards the cost of heating. A happy and successful ecumenical relationship has been fostered over the years; since the closure of the Convent at Fernham and the Catholic Church in Buckland the congregation has grown in size. Forty years of this ecumenical collaboration was celebrated with sung Evensong and a party in the church in June 2016, attended by the Papal Nuncio.

Parish Priests at St Joseph's Church, Carterton

- 1938 Father J.W. Griffin
- 1939 Father Cyril T. Bennett
- 1949 Father John Bullen
- 1952 Father Arthur McIver
- 1954 Father Andrew Brennan
- 1959 Father George Smith
- 1964 Father Leo Joppé
- 1967 Father Peter Lees
- 1970 Father James Patrick Downey
- 1976 Father Vincent Armishaw
- 2002 Father Emmanuel Gili Hammett & Father Bengt Ove-Jacobson
- 2008 Father Andrew Foster
- 2021 Father Paul Smith

2022 Father Pau; Alan Whieldon