

St Joseph's

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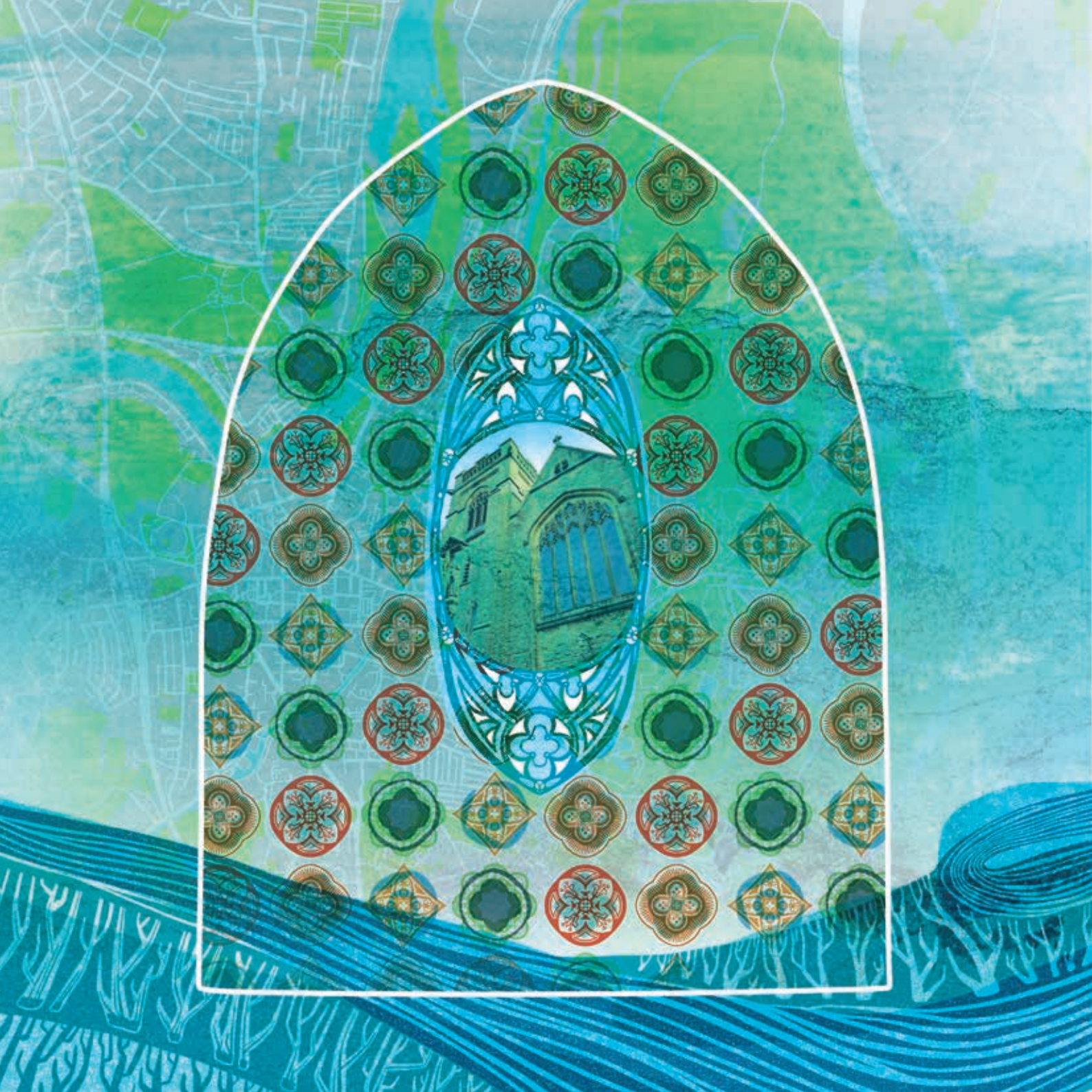


The

Story



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Introduction

St Joseph's parish in Skerton is over a century old. Like the ancient road that it sits upon, its story is long and far reaching, its beginnings murky and clandestine, inspiring and courageous

This story is not restricted to Skerton, nor even to Lancaster or the North West. It spans not only the centuries, but countries, across the British Isles to continental Europe and back again. It is inextricably linked to the wider world by the nature of the universality of the Catholic Church.

A casual visitor to Lancaster may well drive in or out of the city via the A6, the road that stretches from the south to the north of the country like a spine through the middle of England. At the northern end of Lancaster, the A6 will take our visitor through Skerton, a once independent township that is now encompassed within the wider city, its houses spilling up to the banks of the River Lune that, nevertheless, separates it from the rest of the city.

¹ *St Joseph's Lancaster 1901-1976* (Preston: T. Snape & Co, 1976) and *Our People Our Parish. A History of St Joseph's Skerton 1896-1996* (1996)

If our visitor is concentrating on the road ahead they may well miss an imposing building set slightly back from the road concealed in the summer by the vibrant leaves of many beech trees. But if they do glance as they drive past they may well see that there is unmistakably a church standing in spacious grounds, an impressive tower breaking into the sky. They will see bricks and mortar and perhaps be intrigued by its impressive historic architecture. What they won't be able to see with a mere look is the deeply rich human story that brings blood and life to its stone walls.

This account is that story. It is not a history of the parish; parish histories have already been written and written very well.¹ This is not an attempt to catalogue every event in the existence of the parish, but rather to tell a story that follows the thread of the life of the parish from before its physical construction, through to its design and early beginnings, wars to peace and into the present day.



Part One





Lancaster and the Reformation

Part One The hard road and the dark night

It was dark along the hedgerows, and in the nightfall, it was easy to stumble on the broken country lanes. But the shadowy figure, wrapped up against the bitter cold, knew the countryside as though it were a roadmap to his own heart. Traveling miles alone he was familiar with the hard road and the dark night. Adept at disguise, his purpose was spoken about only in whispers by those whose indiscretion could cost him his life. Though well acquainted with the shadows, he carried with him a light in the form of a mission; to ease suffering, bring hope, and minister to wounded souls.

After sundown he would arrive in secret places; the farms and barns of those sympathetic to him, or the wealthy houses of those who could support him, where he would offer Mass, flimsily protected by watchmen from the priest hunters.

He escaped the gallows once in his life, but the second time his luck ran out. The man known by many names was discovered to be Fr. Edmund Arrowsmith, a Catholic priest, and he was betrayed at the Blue Anchor Inn by a young couple he had been attempting to help. He was put on trial and condemned to death. The execution was arranged for August 28th, 1628. To be a Catholic, and to be a priest in England in the 1600s was to be a traitor to the Crown.²

² John Hogan,
Edmund Arrowsmith
(CTS Saints of the Isles
Series, 2016)

It had been twelve years since a Catholic had been executed in Lancaster and there had been good reason to hope that that would have been the last time the town would see blood-soaked streets at the expense of religious freedom. The people of Lancaster were appalled. Both Protestants and secret Catholics alike were united in the belief that the execution simply would not and could not take place; it was widely said that a last-minute reprieve would be granted. Yet as the days lumbered towards the date of execution, nothing changed. Arrowsmith remained interned within the damp walls of Lancaster Castle, no reprieve was granted, and though it was all anyone talked of day after day, no one in authority stepped forward to grant clemency.

To make matters worse, Sir Henry Yelverton, the judge who had condemned Fr Arrowsmith to death, was a man burdened and embittered with his own personal grievances, and he arranged a most barbaric death for the priest. He was to be hanged, drawn and quartered, disembowelled and his organs thrown on a fire. His head was to be boiled and displayed on a stake in the city. Sir Henry Yelverton's friends had taunted him, declaring that he wouldn't dare sentence a Catholic priest to death. Yet Yelverton had no intention of losing face.

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Perhaps still anticipating that the execution would be called off, the people of Lancaster came out in droves to watch the beginning of the proceedings on the day of the execution. Arrowsmith was to be taken from Lancaster Castle up a hill just outside of the city, to a patch of moorland where the hanging would take place. The exact timing of the execution had changed several times in the hope that it would not attract a large crowd; Yelverton was eager to avoid civil unrest. He was to be thwarted on that point at least. Fr Arrowsmith was known for his cheerful character, his warmth and his quick wit. Whether or not Lancastrians knew this first-hand, they nevertheless revolted against the idea of his execution. Yelverton may well have ordered his killing, but with the time of execution imminent, no one could be found willing to carry it out. A pitiful and tragic passing of the buck occurred in the final, scrambled moments before the allotted time of Arrowsmith's death. A butcher had been hired to do the job but paid his servant five pounds to carry out the task instead. The servant, as it is delicately put in one history, 'absconded'; he would not have an innocent man's blood on his hands. With time running out, an army deserter was found and pressed into service. He did what most other men would not, and so

³ Michael Mullett, 'Reformation and Renewal 1450-1690' in Andrew White (ed.), *A History of Lancaster 1193-1993* (Keele University Press: Ryburn Publishing, 1993), p. 62.

amongst the crowds and on a leaden-sky summer's day, Fr Arrowsmith mounted the ladder to his death.³

Sir Henry Yelverton refused to come to the execution site but watched instead through a spyglass from the window of a friend's house. Later that evening they dined on venison. Sitting at the table, Yelverton compared the meat side by side with Arrowsmith's organs that he had demanded be brought to him to inspect.

Undoubtedly there were some in the crowd that day who came to watch for the gruesome thrill of it. But there were also people who came to be edified by the death of a martyr. Fr Arrowsmith had gone willingly and unwaveringly to an unfair and unjust death. Mid execution, while still in control of his faculties, he said:

"I die for love of thee; for our Holy Faith; for the support of the authority of thy vicar on earth, the successor of St Peter, true head of the Catholic Church which thou hast founded and established."

This was Lancaster in the Seventeenth Century.



⁴ *The Roman Catholic Relief Bill.*
https://api.parliament.uk/historic-hansard/lords/1926/dec/10/roman-catholic-relief-bill#S5LV0065Po_19261210_HOL_3

To be a Catholic, from 1529 until the slow drag of the Catholic Relief Acts that took from 1766 to as late as 1926 to enact, was to put oneself at a severe social disadvantage.⁴ The severity of this disadvantage waxed and waned through the centuries depending on the whims of Monarch and political climate, but at its most severe it was to risk one's life. After the bloody upheavals of Henry VIII's break from Rome, Edward VI's enforcement of Protestantism, Mary I's dizzying, brutal and all too short return to Catholicism, came Elizabeth I's initially moderate reign. Elizabeth's temperate approach to the question of religious freedom for Catholics must have come with some glimmer of hope for common folk, exhausted by the constant volatile change from one extreme to another. However, all this changed in 1570 when Pope Pius V excommunicated Elizabeth and stated that her English citizens were free from their responsibly to owe her loyalty. The Crown retaliated. They expelled all Roman Catholic priests from the country in forty short days. Priests could remain only if they took an oath of loyalty to the Queen. The offence was high treason; its punishment death. Anyone assisting or hiding a priest could be committed as a felon or executed by the swifter method of decapitation. To be hanged, drawn and quartered was a ruthless technique reserved only for priests and traitors.

The implications of these rulings meant that the celebration of Mass was illegal. It must have seemed at that time that the decline of Catholicism in England was inevitable. Indeed, the majority of the lay faithful, either by conviction or in fear of their lives, submitted to Protestantism. Meanwhile, the practice of the Catholic faith burrowed ever deeper underground. Yet determination for the survival of the Faith was strong, and the seminary in Douai, France, which was founded by a Lancashire man, Cardinal William Allen, in 1568, was to become of primary importance in the perseverance of the Catholic Church in England. While Oxford and Cambridge were both cleansed of Catholics, a new English College was established in Rome, also founded by Cardinal Allen in 1579. Seminaries at Valladolid (1589) and Saint Omer (1596) were built. These were the powerhouses of the English Mission, training young men smuggled out of England, who would return to their homes as priests to minister secretly to the lay faithful.

Despite much strife and confusion, Roman Catholicism survived in England thanks to the concerted efforts of priests and people. The role of the gentry at this time was invaluable; they could ensure that priests remained hidden and looked after with a roof over their heads and food to eat so that they could provide the sacraments to the people. They provided a safe place for the faithful to come when churches could no longer be used. In these secret





rooms with secret passages the Real Presence in the Eucharist could be maintained in the long years English Catholicism was suppressed. While the South and East of England in closer proximity to London kept up with the Protestant reforms sweeping the Continent, in the North West a more organised Catholic resistance could be sustained. This recusancy was so successful that in 1567 Queen Elizabeth wrote to Bishop Downham of Chester who was responsible for Lancashire saying that nowhere else in the country saw such 'disorders' as in Lancashire and that she found 'a great lack' in his efforts to stamp out 'popery'.⁵ She ordered him to ensure that the matter was soon dealt with. Even so, despite the relative ease with which Catholicism could survive in the North West, the price was still high, and over the centuries the people of these areas paid for it with their lives.

The dramatic story of these recusant priests sweeps from the heartlands of England, across the swell of the English Channel and reaches deep into the centre of a tumultuous Europe. To become a Catholic priest necessitated leaving England in complete secrecy, or under pretence of one's real destination. Once safely arrived at the seminary, English candidates for the priesthood had to sign a promise stating that they

would return once ordained. Many were, in effect, signing their own death warrants. Once their studies were completed and ordination had taken place they returned to England, arriving at night on the eastern shores of the British Isles, contending with darkness, inclement weather and anyone unsympathetic to their cause. At this point, portraying oneself as a wealthy gentleman of leisure, was a useful ploy if it could be managed. One such priest, Fr John Gerard (1564-1637) excelled at this, taking on the role of an affluent countryman almost to the point of scandal so convincing was his prowess at cards, carousing and hunting.⁶

From the coast, the priests would travel into England, always at the mercy of those who could afford to conceal them, vulnerable to whatever measure of welcome they would receive. This could be frustrating; a priest could find a place to stay but if his hosts were unwilling to let him travel or have others visit him, his vocation to serve was severely stymied. Even when priests could serve the faithful, their safety was dependant on the silence of their local communities which could turn them in at any time. In some cases, priests were arrested mid-way through Mass, or forced to hide for days without food or relief in tiny priest holes while properties were combed from top to bottom in search of them.⁷


⁵ Michael Mullet & Leo Warren, *Martyrs of the Diocese of Lancaster* (Preston: T. Snape & Co., 1987). p. 14.

⁶ John Gerard, *The Autobiography of an Elizabethan*, trans. Philip Caraman (Leominster: Family Publications, 2006)

⁷ Alice Hogge, *God's Secret Agents* (New York: Harper Collins, 2005)

To become a Catholic priest necessitated leaving England in complete secrecy ...





Resistance also took simpler forms and, emboldened by local authorities willing to turn a blind eye, the lay faithful could make their feelings known in creative ways. The term 'Church Papists' was applied to Catholics who made the required visit to Anglican services but under duress. They made their true feelings known by praying the Rosary during the service, stuffing cotton wool in their ears during the sermons or using Latin prayer books instead of the English translation.⁸ Women were intrinsic to Catholic continuity during these times; in gentry families it was the women who oversaw and made the decisions on fasting, abstinence and the keeping of feast days. The choice of what to eat and how to celebrate could affect large households from the most important member of the gentry family to the lowliest servant employed under that roof. While it was not uncommon for men to conform outwardly to the new religion in order to make their way in life, the women kept the integrity of the Catholic faith and life intact in their homes and amongst their families. In Cumbria, for example, seventeen of twenty-two Catholic families were 'led by wives with husbands who conformed'.⁹

⁸ Mullet & Warren, *Martyrs.*, p. 13.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 16.

Lancaster's reputation as the 'hanging town' was confirmed in the 1800s by the many hangings

that took place at Lancaster Castle. But in the centuries before, fifteen Catholics were brought to trial and executed on the moor on the hills above Lancaster. The Feast Day of the Lancaster Martyrs is celebrated on 7th August. The opening collect for the celebration of their Mass reads as follows:

Almighty Father, may those who died on the hill above Lancaster, grieving for England which they prayed God soon to convert, be our patrons now in heaven that our lives may witness to the faith they professed.

In the dark days of persecution, it must have seemed that the possibility of Catholicism ever returning to her full glory in England was bleak indeed. This was the state of Lancaster and the little settlement of Skerton: the Catholic faithful remained for many years without priests, without churches and without the sacraments. Perhaps many hoped and prayed for the day when peace would return and they could worship freely and openly, but many did not live to see it happen.

Part Two





Learning How to Breathe Again

**Part Two
Walking along
the banks of the
Danube, Henry
Coulston was a
long way from
the Lune and
his Lancastrian
home**

Vienna rang with the sharp clip of iron on stone, jangle of metal on leather, and the cacophony of all humanity's rich and poor. He had arrived at the seat of a titanic European Empire in the early Nineteenth Century and though he did not know it then, his family would eventually become the catalyst for the origin of St Joseph's Parish in Skerton. But meanwhile he, like many other Catholic Englishmen before him, had left all he'd known for high adventure in mainland Europe.

Coulston's family had made their wealth in Lancaster in one quick generation by their 'corner[ing] of the bulk of Lancaster's leather trade'.¹⁰ The Industrial Revolution made them rich; a rapidly growing population, more horses, more shoes, more tack meant that they climbed the social ladder with breath-taking swiftness. Even so, not all doors were open to them in this new world of high social standing. They were Catholic, and this meant social disadvantage. Henry Coulston, seeking the career of an army officer, could not receive a commission in the British Army. Instead, though born and bred in the

rolling hills of Roeburndale, he found his home in the Austrian Army, an army whose Empire had only recently been known as the Holy Roman Empire, its capital city the seat that bridged Western Europe with the East, an army that marched under the standard bearing an image of the Immaculate Conception. This army was truly to become Henry Coulston's entire life, for he was to die in it in 1833; a long way from home indeed.¹¹

The Coulston family were immensely wealthy. The gap between the rich and the poor was not one easily navigated, and they could have easily protected what they had worked so hard to gain. With the death of Henry, and another brother, John, who was a mission priest in Wilmslow who died in an epidemic in 1889, the family wealth passed to Margaret Coulston, born in 1823.¹² She had a sister who became a Carmelite nun, Mother Mary Frances. She too was no stranger to the need to travel for the continuation of one's faith; by the time she became a nun her Religious Order had already fled to the Low Countries during the Reformation. They settled there for a few hundred years before being forced to return to England, this time due to the persecutions unleashed by the French Revolution.¹³

¹⁰ *Our People Our Parish*, p. 2.

¹¹ Norman Gardner, 'The Coulston Family's Part in the Catholic Revival in Lancaster', in http://lahs.archaeologyuk.org/Contrebis/23_46_Gardner.pdf

¹² *Our People Our Parish*, p. 2.

¹³ 'The History of Darlington Carmel' in www.darlingtoncarmel.co.uk/about



Catholics were free to openly practise their faith again.



Many of the Catholic martyrs of the Reformation are now canonised or beatified, their deaths so public that their witness was unequivocal. Other likely martyrdoms are more obscure; their witness less easily verified, while others simply died in prison, like Fr Paul Atkinson (1655–1729) condemned not to execution, but a lifetime's imprisonment for his vocation as a priest. And then, little by little, the tide turned, and a steady development of Catholic emancipation took place. The process was complicated: Beginning with the Papist Act in 1778, relief was granted in the form of land ownership to Catholics on certain conditions. This led to anti-Catholic riots in London and Scotland, but by 1791 Catholics were allowed to practise their faith, establish schools, and even to build churches. Restrictions were still in place. Schools, chapels and priests were to be registered. Chapels were to be discreet; no bells and steeples were permitted. The barn churches at Claughton-on-Brock, Goosnargh, Scorton, Fernyhalgh, Cottam and Hornby are good examples of this restrained style. No Masses in the open air, no wearing of clerical garments outside. But no longer would anyone be prosecuted for being a priest, saying Mass, attending Mass, assisting at Mass, for educating their children in the faith in established schools, or for joining any Religious Order in communion with Rome. Occupations in law, politics and the lower ranks of the Army were open

to Catholics again. After generations of oppression, Catholics were free to openly practise their faith again.

The progression of Catholic emancipation owed much to Daniel O'Connell, an Irish MP who campaigned in Westminster, and in 1829 the Roman Catholic Relief Act was passed. It was into this world that Margaret Coulston was born, her Catholicity an important part of her identity, and her wealth a useful tool to support the new shoots of Catholic growth in Lancaster. The Industrial Revolution had indeed supplied her family's wealth, but it had also in an unexpected way allowed for the regeneration of Catholicism. Irish Catholics who had made their way to England to help to build the canals, railways, work in factories had to be provided for both physically, and spiritually. In 1811 Catholics in the Army had been given the right to worship freely on account of the higher number of Irish Catholics serving. The British government could no longer turn a blind eye to the contribution of the Irish, and the need to ensure their religious freedom at that time.

At twenty-two years older than Margaret Coulston, and presumably never to meet, John Henry Newman was the one to coin the phrase the 'Second Spring'. Newman was arguably the Victorian era's most famous convert at a time when anti-Catholic sentiment was 'an integral part of what it meant to be a Victorian'.¹⁴ His conversion in 1845 came at great cost to him. He

¹⁴ D. G. Paz, *Popular Anti-Catholicism in Mid-Victorian England* (1992), p. 299.



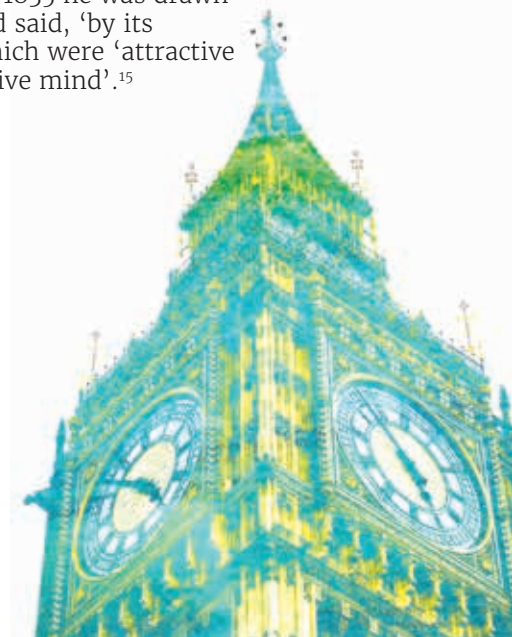
had been Anglican vicar of St Mary's Oxford, highly esteemed by his contemporaries whose friendships he lost along with his academic and professional reputation. He left the established Church of England for a Catholic Church that was just beginning to get back on her feet after the persecution of the three previous centuries. The Church had survived as a small persecuted minority in England and had operated as a collection of scattered missions served by priests who, though now lawful, still had the unenviable task of operating in makeshift locations and hostile environments. But in 1850 Pope Pius IX was finally able to re-establish the hierarchal structure of both England and Wales. Bishops were reinstated with spiritual jurisdiction over geographical dioceses, seminaries re-established and priests could now have their own parishes and an organised structure to minister within. The English Mission as it had been known was now rooted in its own country, but with all the intention of continuing to look outwards.

With the newly established hierarchy, the growth in members, both converts and immigrants, the Roman Catholic Church began to build. It was time to return a Catholic Cathedral to London's streets, and in 1895 Westminster Cathedral, with its grand

byzantine architecture, began to take shape. Up and down the country towns and cities began to adapt and expand their makeshift chapels into something more befitting a reviving Church. Plans for completely new churches were drawn up and funds were donated or raised to enable them to be built. In the Nineteenth Century one name stood out amongst the architects of these new churches; the name of Augustus Welby Northmore Pugin.

Pugin's most famous work was the Palace of Westminster, but in his short lifetime he designed at least 117 buildings, including churches, presbyteries and private homes, both in the UK and in Ireland. He died at only forty years old, leaving behind an impressive legacy of work. He was married three times and had eight children. Another convert to Catholicism, in 1835 he was drawn to it, as a friend said, 'by its ceremonies' which were 'attractive to his imaginative mind'.¹⁵

¹⁵ 'The Life of Augustus Pugin' in https://ipfs.io/ipfs/QmXoyvizjW3WknFijnKLwHCnL72vedxjQkDDP1mXWo6uco/wiki/Augustus_Pugin.html





Pugin had very exact ideas about what a church should look like and he devoted his life to the Gothic style. His conversion to the Catholic Church came from his love of Medieval architecture; he was inspired to seek the thinking behind its shapes and forms. Pugin believed that Gothic architecture was the only way to show truly the grandeur of God in architectural form: in short, 'the Gothic revival was to be the means of reviving the spiritual and social values of the Catholic past,' an attempt to pick up where the Church left off before the Reformation.¹⁶ Brian Doolan writes:

Augustus Welby Pugin's great strength and contribution was his conviction that architecture should be based on the principles of honest and revealed construction and truth to materials. A building should speak clearly of its purpose and be utterly honest. He stated that 'all ornament should consist of enrichment of the essential construction of the building.' He was convinced that Gothic architecture alone allowed these principles to be properly expressed. But more significant was his belief that the right kind of buildings helped create the right kind of society.¹⁷

¹⁶ Brian Doolan, *The Pugins and the Hardmans* (2004), p. 5.

¹⁷ *Ibid* p. 13.

¹⁸ *Ibid* p. 16.

After his death in 1852, his work was continued by his sons. In 1866 Sebastian Pugin Powell, the grandson of Pugin, was born. Through his education at Oscott, he came to serve regularly at Mass for John Henry Newman (made a Cardinal in 1879). When he left school, he joined the Pugin and Pugin firm created in 1875 by his uncles, and 'did a large amount of work for churches, convents and schools.'¹⁸ In 1904 he took over the firm completely.

Back in Lancaster, Margaret Coulston was hard at work procuring land that could be put to good use for the local community. The first Catholic Church in Lancaster had already been established, but this could not serve all the needs of a rapidly growing town. In 1896 a new Catholic school was built in Skerton, a place where Catholic families could finally send their children to be educated. St Peter's Catholic Church, now Lancaster's Cathedral, had been built in 1859, but it was a long walk for those living in Skerton and the surrounding areas, and so the new school was also used as a chapel. It cost £4618 to build, a price nearer to £1.6 Million in today's money.



St Joseph's School

had places to call home again.

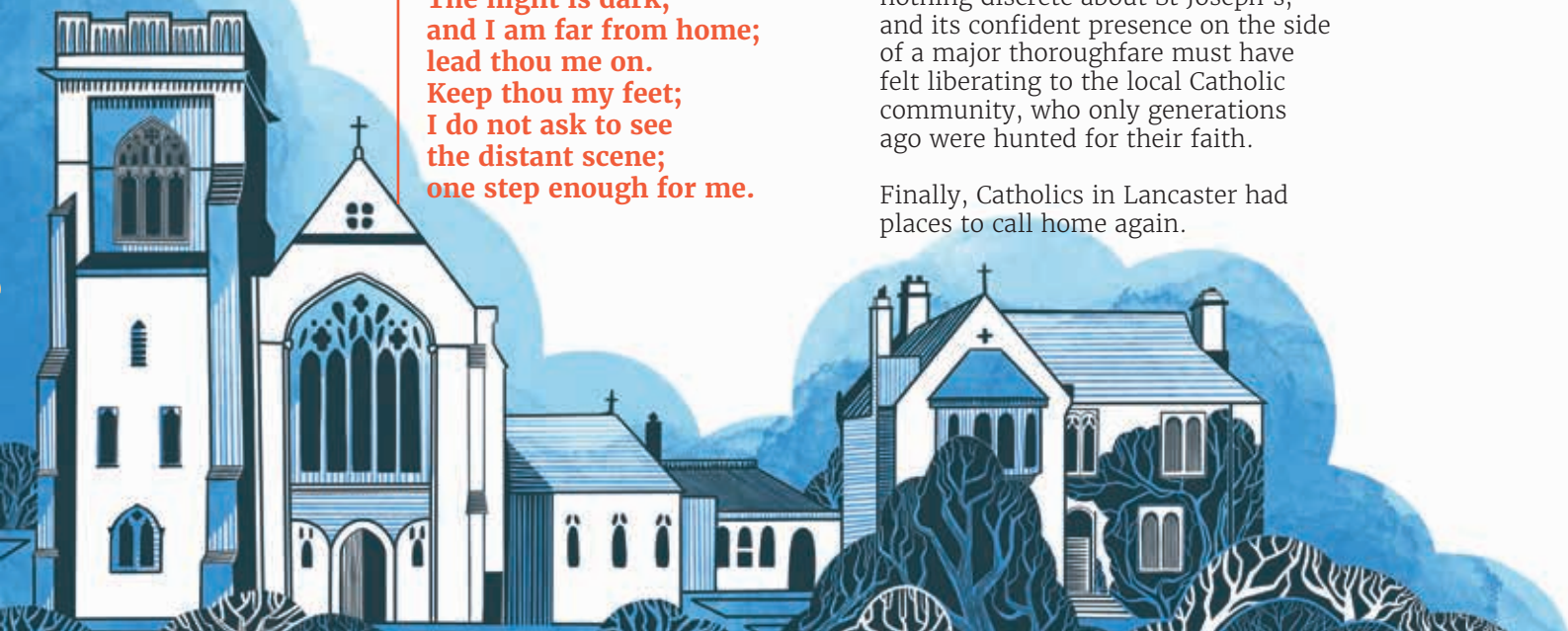
This enormous price was donated anonymously by Margaret Coulston. In 1899 Margaret built a house for herself where she lived for ten years until she died in 1909. The land next to the house was given by her, with the funds necessary, to build a Catholic church for Skerton. Designed by Peter Paul Pugin, it upholds in its architecture the original vision of Augustus Welby Pugin, reflecting the grandeur of God, raising eyes upwards towards something beautiful and majestic.

The foundation stone was laid on the Feast Day of St Joseph, the church's patron, in 1900, just five years after the start of the building of Westminster Cathedral in London. In his famous hymn, *Lead Kindly Light*, written before his conversion, John Henry Newman had written:

**The night is dark,
and I am far from home;
lead thou me on.
Keep thou my feet;
I do not ask to see
the distant scene;
one step enough for me.**

How often in the previous centuries the Catholics who had left England to risk their lives for their faith must have felt so very far from home. And those, like Henry Coulston, who had left family and friends to pursue careers not possible to them in Britain must have wondered at times if it was all worth it. But in slow and steady ways here was the Catholic Church in England coming back to life, one step at a time, beginning with the simple provision of priests and makeshift chapels, progressing to the greater, more confident strides of the building of churches and schools. This was Catholics learning how to breathe again. The unapologetically Catholic and magnificent design of the building of St Joseph's was in contrast to the local 'Catholic relief' chapels of the earlier century, legal but built to the restriction that they must be discrete. There was, and is, nothing discrete about St Joseph's, and its confident presence on the side of a major thoroughfare must have felt liberating to the local Catholic community, who only generations ago were hunted for their faith.

Finally, Catholics in Lancaster had places to call home again.



Part Three





Cut Down Like Sheep

Part Three War and peace in St Joseph's and beyond

In hushed rooms of the Vatican Palace the Pope lay dying. It was August 1914 and Europe had endured a long, hot summer. The Pope had foreseen what many others could not, or would not; war, deadlier and more destructive than the heat that had cloyed heavily over Europe all summer, was approaching, threatening to engulf the entire world. Long before it became common parlance, Pope Pius X had used the term 'Great War' in a letter to a Cardinal in 1912.¹⁹ Over several years he implored peace and a blood-free resolution to the sabre rattling that proliferated across an agitated continent. In his statement: "A Call to the Catholics of the Whole World" he begged them to "to implore God that he may have mercy on His people by putting a speedy end to this catastrophe and by inspiring the leaders of the peoples to peaceful thoughts and actions".²⁰

Pius X released his address on August 2nd. On August 4th German troops, ignoring Britain's entreaties, advanced into neutral Belgium. Britain, ally of Belgium, declared war on Germany. Sixteen days later, as the enormous cogs of war were grinding into action across European soil, the Pope died. He had wished to offer his "miserable life" if it would have meant the war's prevention.²¹

It is said that he died of a broken heart.²² As Europe embarked on one of the darkest periods of its history, the Chair of St Peter sat vacant.

Eight months passed. The war that had broken the Pope's heart was now tearing bloody discord across Europe. On the morning of 23rd April 1915, Canadian and British soldiers gathered to hold the line at the village of St Julien near the strategic Belgian town of Ypres. It was crucial that the German forces did not pass; if they did they would gain access to Belgium's sea ports and beyond. This was the First Battle of Ypres, and a new and deadly weapon was to make its debut. Few men would understand what it was, but its effects were deadly. That morning Canadian and British soldiers saw yellow-green clouds tumbling towards them. The scent of pineapples and pepper drifted on the air, but this was poison gas and it made for a lingering death, burning eyes and tightening throats; death by asphyxiation. Precautions were quickly made: urine could be soaked onto handkerchiefs or socks to neutralize the chlorine gas but this was a makeshift solution at best. The men ran for their lives and the line was heavily compromised. But given the unprecedented 'success' of the gas, the Germans themselves feared advancing and stalled.

¹⁹ George J. Marlin, 'World War I and the Papacy' in <https://www.thecatholicthing.org/2014/08/02/world-war-i-and-the-papacy/>

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Nicholas Schofield, 'British Catholics and the Great War' in <https://www.faiht.org.uk/article/british-catholics-and-the-great-war>





This gave the Canadians and British enough time to regroup and to defend their section. But when the time came to collect the dead there were hundreds of casualties; whole battalions nearly annihilated. Amongst the dead that day was reported a nineteen-year-old boy; his body missing, presumed dead. This boy was a Private in the Lancaster Kings Own Regiment. His name was George Cathcart. Poignantly, he died on the feast day of the soldier patron of England, St George. It took weeks for the news of Private Cathcart's death to wend its way from St Julien across the sea to London, and from there to his parents, John and Mary Cathcart, of Skerton, Lancaster. He was the first of the parish sons of St Joseph's to fall.

²³ Normal Gardner, *The War Memorials*. Section 10 in St Joseph's Parish Archives.

Many more young men from the parish were to lose their lives in the subsequent bloody years that followed. The Cathcarts lost a second son, their seventeen-year-old who died only weeks later on the 5th May 1915. Both boys had enlisted on 4th September 1914 and they were not to survive even a year of the war. They were one of sixty-two sets of brothers lost in Lancaster during the First World War.

Back in August 1914 Pius X's 'Call to the Catholics of the Whole World' now of course included the re-established Roman Catholic Church in England and Wales. Sixty-four years had passed since the Restoration of

the Episcopal Hierarchy in England and the Catholic Church was well on its way to becoming a community of equal standing with the Established Church in the country's public life. The Catholic Church and her faithful still faced prejudice and restriction; the Church was still reviled in some quarters, but her position in the country was by now open, legal and so very different from what it had been only decades before. Lancastrian Catholics now had St Peter's Church near the town centre, and St Joseph's in Skerton, finished and opened in 1901. The parish school, open in 1896, had many successes in its initial years, and slowly but surely a thriving Catholic community was growing. The outbreak of war in 1914 was a great tragedy to befall any community, but it was the first and most tragic to hit the young parish, only thirteen years old. At the time, high unemployment rates haunted Lancaster. In the years before men had emigrated to Canada to find work and on the outbreak of war employees of the Lune Mills were actually encouraged to sign up for the duration of the war.²³ The Army meant security, adventure and wages.

The nationwide patriotic fervour that is often spoken about in the same breath as the beginning of the war was not shared by everyone. The new Pope, who replaced Pius X on 3rd September, 1914, took the name Benedict XV. He adamantly called for peace as soon as he was elected. 'In his first statement to the faithful, he declared he was "stricken with



inexpressible horror and anguish before the monstrous spectacle of this war with its streams of Christian blood'.²⁴ The Pope remained impartial to any country or political stance throughout the war; his flock of faithful Catholics were to be found in every single Army in the theatre of the First World War.²⁵ Each nation's Catholic chaplains operated in varying ways depending upon the restrictions placed upon them by their respective countries. On account of the separation of State and Church, French priests were called up alongside regular soldiers and served their fellow men as best as possible alongside them. German chaplains were known to give the Last Rites to English Catholics behind enemy lines in PoW hospitals and camps. Both Anglican and Catholic chaplains in the British Army were required for their own safety to stay in reserve trenches and avoid the front lines, but English and Irish Catholic chaplains gained a reputation among the men for the disregarding of this rule and administering the sacraments in the Front Lines and beyond. In 1916, this front-line ban was relaxed to allow chaplains to accompany their troops out of the reserve trenches and into battle giving the Anglican padres of

the British Army the same freedom as their Roman Catholic counterparts.²⁶

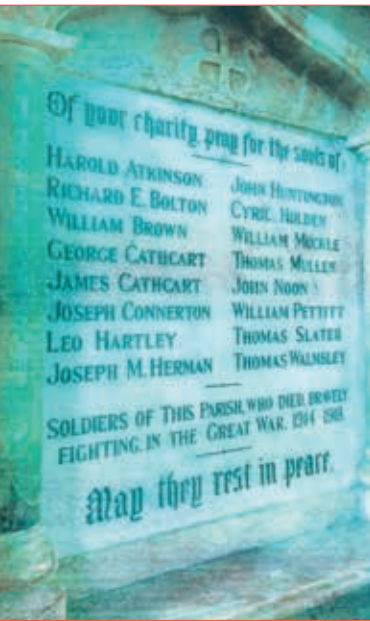
In Lancaster 1012 men are commemorated as war dead from the First World War. While the men were risking their lives on the Front in France and Belgium, many women were employed in the munition factories at home, at great risk to their own lives. This was no more apparent than in 1917, when the White Lund factory disaster occurred. Women were employed to fill the shells which would then be used on the Front. On the 1st October 1917 an explosion ripped through one of the buildings of the White Lund munitions factory. The subsequent damage was horrific; three days of fires and explosions followed. Communities in the surrounding area, including Lancaster and as far away as Burnley, could feel the earth shaking, furniture visibly moving, and windows blown in. Some families were so shocked that they moved from the area and never returned. Ten people died and many were injured.²⁷ War was never far from people's lives, but during those three days, war had come home. It was to devastate the factory site so badly that it was unusable for the rest of the war, and those who had survived with their lives, lost their jobs.

²⁴ Op. Cit. Marlin.

²⁵ A comprehensive explanation of the Catholic demography of each belligerent's armies can be found in Harry Schnitker, *The Church and World War I* (CTS, 2015).

²⁶ Martin Purdy, 'Roman Catholic Army Chaplains During the First World War: Roles, Experiences and Dilemmas', p. 39 in [http://clok.uclan.ac.uk/3762/2/Purdy%20Martin%20Final%20e-Thesis%20\(Master%20Copy\).pdf](http://clok.uclan.ac.uk/3762/2/Purdy%20Martin%20Final%20e-Thesis%20(Master%20Copy).pdf)

²⁷ 'White Lund Explosion' in the *Lancaster Guardian*, Wednesday 26 September 2007 in www.lancasterguardian.co.uk/lifestyle/nostalgia/white-lund-explosion
-1-1170802



Perhaps such was the trauma of the aftermath of the war that there is some confusion over the parish and school memorials of the names of those who lost their lives during it. It is not even certain when the parish memorial was placed in the church, though it is likely it was up by 1920.²⁸ Sixteen names are engraved on this marble memorial that compliments the design of the church itself, but twenty-three from the parish died in total; some in battle, others from their wounds on the return home or at home, and some in training. Norman Gardner movingly explains that 'barely a street in Lancaster and Skerton escaped the touch of the grim reaper', and in some streets, few did not know of a neighbour suffering bereavement of sons, brothers, and fathers. Some parents lost all their sons.²⁹

The famous war poet, Siegfried Sassoon, writes about meeting Christ in the trenches in his poem *The Redeemer*. He says that Christ comes to know that

**Nights are very long,
and dawn a watching
of the windowed sky.
But to the end, unjudging,
he'll endure horror and pain,
not discontent to die that
Lancaster on Lune may
stand secure.**³⁰

A very high price was paid by many people, both at home and abroad to keep Lancaster, on the Lune standing secure.

How does a community devastated by war return to normality and continue with its life? It is not easy to tell. Skerton, out of all of Lancaster was particularly badly hit with loss. In the 'small cluster of streets downstream of Skerton Bridge between the river and Lune St... 41 people died' and 'slightly up river in Skervy, the area between Aldrens Lane, Pinfold Lane and the river... where 75 people died'.³¹

Whilst it can certainly be said that belief in God was inconceivable for many after the trauma and loss of the First World War, it is also true that Catholic conversions abounded. These were strengthened by experiences in the trenches: the bravery of chaplains, the witness of Mass in barns and ruins behind the lines and in dugouts. The sacramental, tangible nature of the Catholic faith with the overt image of suffering on crucifixes, the carrying of rosaries, and wearing of medals and scapulars, helped to spread understanding of the faith. One chaplain, Mgr Bickerstaffe-Drew, wrote to his mother asking her to send him more supplies, 'I have given away about 1,200 and have none left. Medals, small crucifixes, rosaries, scapulars, Agnus Deis, I could give away lots of, and am always being asked for'.³²

²⁸ Op. Cit. Gardner, *War Memorials*.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Siegfried Sassoon, 'The Redeemer' in <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/43168/the-redeemer>

³¹ 'The North West in the Great War: The Worst Affected Streets' in <http://wp.lancs.ac.uk/greatwar/the-worst-affected-streets/>

³² Op. Cit. Schofield.



³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Peter Kreeft, *The Philosophy of Tolkien: The Worldview Behind The Lord of the Rings* (2005), p. 219, cited in <https://www.catholic.com/magazine/online-edition/jrr-tolkien-three-amazing-quotes>

In his article on British Catholics and the Great War, Nicholas Schofield writes that:

[The First World War] led to many conversions. A priest writing in 1930 concluded that 'either directly or indirectly through the War a very large number of individuals have been received into the Catholic Church, who otherwise, humanly speaking, would have remained outside. Well-informed observers have estimated this number for England at 70,000'.³³

In Skerton the parish set about memorialising their fallen, whilst the daily devotional life of the young parish matured and developed. St Joseph's, shortly after the end of the First World War, celebrated the first ordination into the priesthood; James Duffy in 1919. He was one of eight children, who had lived near the church before it was even built and served at the altar at the Consecration Mass in 1901.



Even after the horrors of the War, the Second Spring of Newman's day was continuing, with high profile conversions of British intelligentsia unfolding throughout the century, to varying degrees of interest and objection from those around them: G.K Chesterton (1922), Graham Greene (1926), Elinor M Brent-Dyer (1930), Evelyn Waugh (1930), Muriel Spark (1954), Edith Sitwell (1955), Alec Guinness (1956), Siegfried Sassoon (1957), Rumer Godden (1968) to name a few. Catholicism in Britain was no longer in the shadows, and great works of Catholic fiction and drama were to come from these literary conversions. Meanwhile the author J.R.R Tolkien, who became Catholic at the age of eight, brought into the Church by his mother, was to write not only his epic Lord of the Rings trilogy, but also some striking words on the Roman Catholic doctrine of the Eucharist:

Out of the darkness of my life, so much frustrated, I put before you the one great thing to love on earth: the Blessed Sacrament... There you will find romance, glory, honour, fidelity, and the true way of all your loves on earth.³⁴





³⁵ *Our People Our Parish*, p. 21.

The essence of this quotation; the devotion to the Blessed Sacrament, was an integral part of St Joseph's as parish life continued on into the Twentieth Century. Parishioners today still remember the May processions for Our Lady and the Corpus Christi processions with the Blessed Sacrament: Steps choreographed to precision, flower girls strewing petals on the ground at every eighth step. Such was the sight that crowds turned out from Lancaster, Catholics and non-Catholics alike, to watch. Masses were frequent and well attended; a 7:30 and an 8:30 each morning which would be attended by some of the school children. In these pre-Vatican II days, fasting was required from midnight before receiving Communion at Mass, rather than the one hour required now. Children arriving from Mass at school would be provided with hot cocoa to start the day. Three Masses were celebrated on Sundays: 8.30, 9.30, and 11am. Each Sunday of the month a different sodality from the parish would go up as a group to receive Communion; the Catholic Young Mens Society (CYMS) one week, followed by the Children of Mary (for young people aged up to sixteen) and the Guild of St Agnes (for children up to the age of eleven). The third Sunday of the month was for the Guild of the Blessed Sacrament, and on the fourth Sunday people of the parish went up individually. At the

Children's 9.30 Mass on a Sunday morning the children sat with their school teachers, not their parents, while the 11am Mass was always packed; if one arrived late it would be difficult to find a seat. This was a daily life infused with Catholicism; parish habits that continued into the 1950s. The young people of the parish knew not to take part in any evening classes on a Thursday night, as it was Benediction night. They themselves organised many social events which were well attended. Socialising at the Men's Club stopped at 9pm so that the men could go and pray Night Prayer together. The new parish hall, built with great efforts of fundraising by the parish, opened in March 1939 and allowed the parish to have dances, reunions and meetings of the Youth Club, Men's Club, Women's Guild, Children of Mary and Catholic Young Men's Society.³⁵

This new lease of life for the parish's social life would take a sudden and new twist in the coming months after the opening of the new hall. The summer of 1939 was to be the last one of the all-too-brief period of peace after the end of the Great War. The Second World War, as it came to be known, was arguably one that impacted even more terribly on those left behind at home thanks to the targeted bombing raids exchanged by both sides on their enemies' civilian populations. War is not just tragic, but also absurd, and perhaps none



prayed for their safety

25



the country was
once again at war

more so than the curious experiences that the children of Skerton's Catholic school, St Joseph's, would become familiar with in the following years. In silent single file lines they would cross their playground to descend underground to newly-built shelters. The boys would go ahead to light the oil lamps, and the children would sit on seats around the edges of the shelter to wait out the sound of the All Clear. The country was once again at war, and though this particular experience must have been frightening for the children, it was guaranteed that someone would blow the lamps out in the shelters, plunging them at once both into darkness, and fits of barely subdued laughter.

As 'the Phony War' warmed up into the Second World War, as we know it today, a long predicted and much dreaded war, the King was moved to call the nation to pray. On 23rd May 1940 he saw that Britain was in grave danger, as its army, along with other Allied nations, was trapped on the North West coastline of France, with nowhere to run, the sea behind them and Hitler's Army, successfully already in control of much of Western Europe, at their front. Annihilation was almost certain. Faced with such a desperate prospect, King George VI implored the nation to pray, making the following Sunday a National Day of Prayer. This was faithfully observed by the general population,

who went in huge droves to pray at Cathedrals and local churches, forming long queues as they waited to enter. It is a testament to the healing that must have continued since the last century's worth of Catholic Relief Acts that there is no doubt that all Christians of whatever hue would have joined in this initiative to pray, and there can be no doubt that parishioners of St Joseph's would have faithfully and urgently prayed for their country's and army's safety. Throughout May 1940, the parish Notices Book, read out by the priest at the end of each Mass, recorded that all the Masses throughout the month were to be offered for a 'just and honourable peace' and every Catholic was obliged to 'make at least one visit to the church daily for this intention' for 'our men [are] now dying in their thousands'. Indeed, the parish priest on this week instituted the public recitation of the Rosary every night throughout the week for peace, leading to a day of intercession with Exposition of the Blessed Sacrament and Rosary every hour at 1, 2, 3 (for the children), 4, 5, 6 and 9 o'clock.





These prayers were answered as what followed next was the Miracle of Dunkirk:

In a decision that infuriated his generals and still baffles historians, Hitler ordered his army to halt. Had they continued to fight, the destruction of the Allied forces would have been inevitable and the war would have taken a different, darker and more terrible path. Yet for three days the German tanks and soldiers stood idle while the evacuation unfolded. Not only so, bad weather on the Tuesday grounded the Luftwaffe, allowing Allied soldiers to march unhindered to the beaches. In contrast, on Wednesday the sea was extraordinarily calm, making the perilous evacuation less hazardous. By the time the German Army was finally ordered to renew its attack, over 338,000 troops had been snatched from the beaches, including 140,000 French, Belgian, Dutch and Polish soldiers. Many of them were to return four years later to liberate Europe.³⁶

³⁶ J. John, 'How a Day of Prayer Saved Britain at Dunkirk' in www.premierchristianity.com/Blog/How-a-day-of-prayer-saved-Britain-at-Dunkirk

A day of Thanksgiving was announced for Sunday 9th June 1940. The war was only just beginning, but a terrible premature end had been averted.

The ensuing 'Blitz' of the following years caused not only death and devastation across the country but also practical changes to the way the parish worshipped in St Joseph's. Blackout regulations restricted the amount of light allowed in the church during night hours, meaning it was in near darkness for the Thursday evening Masses and Benediction; these were eventually moved to 3.30pm in winter time. This darkness may or may not have focused the mind and heart towards a more prayerful attitude, but it at least once it caused unexpected trouble, as sleepy altar boys, lulled into near slumber by the darkness meant that mid-way through Benediction the thurible tipped its burning charcoal onto the priest's cope, and the alarmed declaration of "Something's burning!" from the priest momentarily interrupted prayers.

There are nineteen names commemorated from the parish, killed during the Second World War. Like all churches, the parish had the honour and pain of accompanying her people through both the immense joys and sorrows of life, no more starkly accentuated than during war time. This must have been particularly true for the friends and family of the young pilot Marion Lis.³⁷ Lis was born in picturesque Poznan, Poland, the son of cinema owners. A move to Britain at some stage in his young adult life meant that he survived the Nazi invasion of Poland and the terrible atrocities that occurred for the Polish people at that time. Instead, one memorable night, Lis attended a house party in Wales, and perhaps across the gentle clink of drinks and quiet buzz of conversation, met a beautiful stranger who would, in the not-too-distant future, become his wife. In circumstances not recorded by the annals of time they were married not in Wales, but in none other than St Joseph's Skerton, in the autumn of 1943. A parish war wedding; surely an occasion of great joy amid the terrible news both on the Home Front and abroad.

³⁷ See the *St Joseph's Skerton Souvenir Booklet on the blessing of the WWII and Later Conflicts Memorial, 1994.*

Lis was not to see the end of the war, and the parish was to grieve his death along with many others during those dark years. On the 27th April 1944 Marion Lis was unable to abandon his plane as it crashed down over the South of England. He was only twenty-two years old. His body was brought back to Skerton where he

is buried in a Commonwealth War Grave in Skerton Cemetery, survived by his wife and mother, who lived on Vale Road, a mere five minutes' walk from the church. He was one of many brave members of the Polish Air Force, who fought alongside their allies in Britain to free Europe from the grip of Fascist tyranny.

Despite the concerns about Lancaster's own safety, the parish and school still welcomed evacuees from Salford and later, Essex. The Second World War finally rumbled to an end and King George opened his Victory speech on 8th May 1945 with an emphatic thanksgiving to God, adding that

“There is great comfort in the thought that the years of darkness and danger in which the children of our country have grown up are over and, please God, forever. We shall have failed and the blood of our dearest will have flowed in vain if the victory which they died to win does not lead to a lasting peace, founded on justice and good will”.

Part Four





Go Out to the Whole World

Part Four Life, in all its fullness, continued

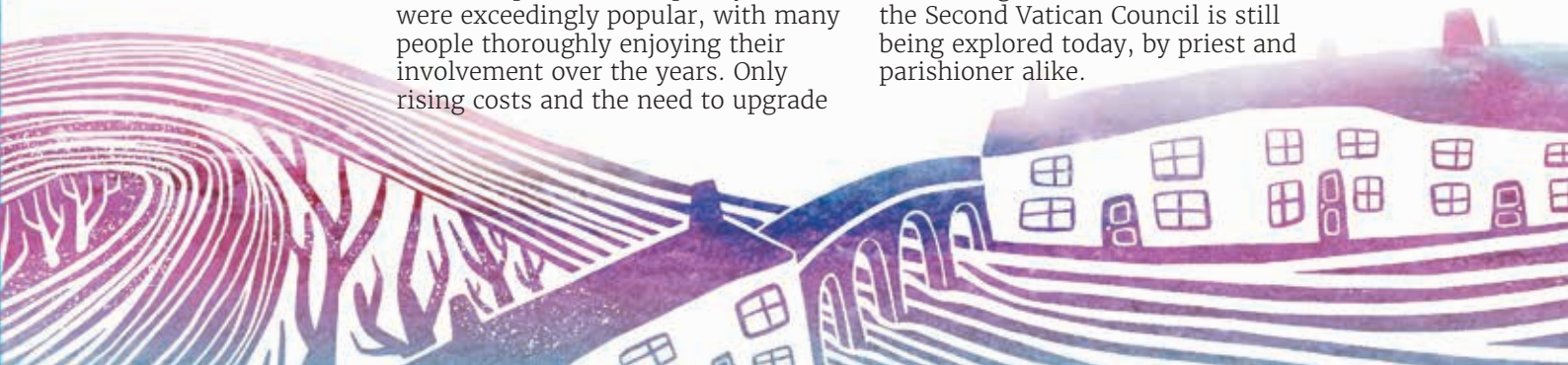
Every society, no matter how big or small, must rebuild after war, and after two horrific World Wars, the people of Skerton and St Joseph's deserved the long period of relative peace that followed, though this by no means lessens the subsequent tragedy of the need to add three more names to the parish war memorial in 1967, 1995 and 2007. What has passed the last seven decades since the end of the Second World War has been a continuation of life despite the odds, despite the attempts of destruction and pain that war brings. Life, in all its fullness, continued.

Perhaps the most exuberant sign of the continuation of high-spirited life and joy was the thirty-three years of wonderful performances from the St Joseph's Amateur Operatic Society, founded in 1958 by Fr Bernard Lockwood. Fr Lockwood began by fulfilling his dream to perform *The Dream of Gerontius*, the poem by Cardinal Newman. The success of this performance spurred the parish on to more; it was eventually decided to put together one operatic production each year. The performances, while amateur, were of a professional quality, and were exceedingly popular, with many people thoroughly enjoying their involvement over the years. Only rising costs and the need to upgrade

the health and safety provisions of the stage and dressing rooms sadly brought an end to the Society in late 1990.

In the 1960 and 1970s the new advances in technology meant that television was an increasingly familiar sight in people's homes, and this meant that even St Joseph's had the opportunity to be transmitted to the nation during this time, when a Mass at the parish was televised. The Mass had to be ticketed due to space and there was some difficulty over who was able to get a ticket and who wasn't, but it was the parish taking a step forward with new technology, an adventure that it has continued with the age of the internet and social media.

Another big change that occurred around this time was the Second Vatican Council and the subsequent translation of the Mass into the vernacular around the world. Parishioners in Skerton remember this feeling odd and strange, and hard to follow, taking some getting used to. In 2010 the translation was finalised so as to stay closer to the original Latin, and the richness of the writings that came forth from the Second Vatican Council is still being explored today, by priest and parishioner alike.



a great chair

From the start, the parish of St Joseph's existed to serve, with Margaret Coulston's establishment of the school before even the parish was built, and this was no different as the end of the Twentieth Century began to draw to a close. In 1986 St John's Hospice was opened just up the road from the church of St Joseph's after it had become apparent that the area needed a Hospice. Whilst excellent care was being provided at the then St John of God Hospital in Silverdale, the hope was that a dedicated Hospice could be built in a more accessible location. Under the charismatic guidance of Sr Aine Cox and with the support of Sr Callistus, St John's Hospice was funded, built and opened, ten years on from the inception of the idea. Sr Aine had a courageous will to achieve what she compared to climbing Everest, that is, the near impossible task of raising the funds to build the Hospice.³⁸ She did not hesitate to ask potential and influential donors very directly for monetary support, an approach that eventually paid off when the Hospice was proudly opened by Anne, the Duchess of Norfolk, after a total of £1.9 Million was finally raised.

Sr Aine was not however simply involved in the very necessary task of practical fundraising. She also embodied the ethos of the Hospice, or perhaps even was its genesis. Those who knew and worked with her, or were cared by her, tell of her ability



to create an atmosphere that allowed all who entered to feel a sense of belonging and peace. She wished her staff not merely to 'work' at the Hospice, but to be a 'presence when attending' someone who is dying, with courtesy and respect. In the Hospice, the staff were meeting a whole range of people, and while she didn't push the religious aspect of her work she wished that 'peace be afforded' to those to whom she was doing the most basic of caring tasks for. She prayed that any fear in their hearts would defuse, and she ensured that she spent a few moments in prayer in the chapel each day. No one was ever sent away from the Hospice who was in need, whether it be someone in need of care, someone who was homeless, or even, as recently happened, a starving and stray dog, who was an unexpected arrival through the Hospice's doors.

This atmosphere of peace, hope and light still pervades the Hospice today and is a testament to both the strength of its founders and the gentle perseverance of its current staff and volunteers. While not officially linked with the parish, it was begun by the Sisters of Our Lady of the Apostles and maintains what we would call a Catholic ethos and there is still a chapel at the heart of its building today.

³⁸ 'History of St John's Hospice' in <https://www.sjhospice.org.uk/history/>



n of faith ...

There is one final memory that happily concludes the story of St Joseph's Parish, and though it is not contemporary, it is the most fitting to end on. On 25th October 1970 Pope Paul VI canonised the Forty Martyrs of England and Wales, including some of Lancashire's own: Edmund Arrowsmith and Ambrose Barlow, who were both executed in Lancaster, and Luke Kirby, John Plessington, John Rigby, John Southworth, and John Wall, executed elsewhere.

In front of a vast crowd the Pope Paul VI declared the authenticity of these saints' martyrdoms and commended their lives as good Christian examples to the world. Amongst the huge crowd that day in Rome were also to be found an Elizabeth Mackintosh and a Mrs Horn.³⁹ They had travelled there from St Joseph's School in Skerton, England. They were there as representatives of the school at the canonisation; the fortunate two whose names had been drawn out of a hat.

The story of St Joseph's had come full circle, though slowly, over many centuries. First, its hidden genesis in the murky Recusant days when the faithful were forced to slip undetected amongst the wild lanes around Lancaster, when the martyrs refused to deny their faith as they were dragged on a hurdle along the cobbles to the moor above the city, and when the city's women kept the Old Faith going in the clandestine secrecy of their homes. Next came the gradual emancipation and freedom

of Catholicism, coupled with the determination of Margaret Coulston who would not die before a school and parish had been built through her generosity. Next the parish came to cherish the sacrifice of its sons and daughters during terrible wars. And this was followed by the rebuilding of society in the latter part of the Twentieth Century, fostered by all the tiny little links of ordinary people doing extraordinary things through their kindness, care, concern for others and their abiding love of God and His Church and Sacraments, oftentimes against great odds and frustrations.

It is thanks to all these little links in a great chain of faith that the parish of St Joseph's survived and thrived, so that on that plaza outside St Peter's in Rome in 1970, the announcement of these great martyrs' canonisation did not fall on the uncomprehending ears of strangers, but on the ears of those who understood, who had walked the same streets, worshipped in the same town, eat, laughed, studied, played, loved, in the same place they all knew as home:

**Lancaster,
on the Lune,
Skerton,
in the parish
of St Joseph.**

³⁹ *Our People Our Parish*, p.10.

Pope Paul VI

