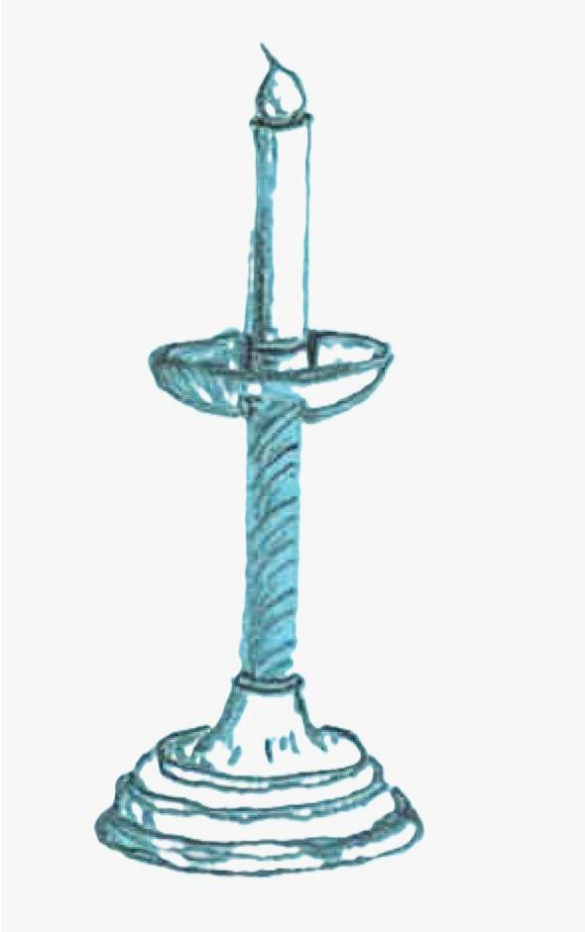
Steadfast in Faith



A history of Catholic Faith in Marnhull & Gillingham

A.M.D.G.
Ad Maiorem Dei Gloriam

HYMN TO OUR LADY OF MARNHULL

Deep amid the vales of Dorset,
Stands our lowly little Shrine
Cast Thy glance of love upon it,
Gentle Lady, Make it Thine.

Once this countryside resounded
Loud with humns of love and praise
Faith and Hope an d Love renewing,
Bring again the ancient days.

Maiden, Mother, for us pleading,
Bring us Light, O make us see
The True Path for ever leading
To Thy Gracious Son and Thee.

Sin and Sorrow long have stayed us,
Touch our earth-chilled hearts with love,
Mary Mother, save us, aid us
Lead us to Thy Son above.

Long our steps have strangely wandered,
Turn the wandering steps aright,
Guide us, lead us, upward, onward
Out of darkness, into light.

Deep amid the vales of Dorset,
Stands our lowly little Shrine
Cast Thy glance of love upon it,
Gentle Lady, make it Thine.

Written by Fr William Casey, parish priest 1824-1867

Steadfast in Faith

The Reformation years

Until the Reformation and Henry Vlll's break with Rome all churches in Britain were Catholic, and any pre-sixteenth century church was originally a Catholic church. Little is known of the existence of Catholics in the village of Marnhull during the hundred years following the break with Rome and the establishment of the Anglican Church. However, in the surrounding districts of Sturminster Newton, Gillingham and Shaftesbury there is ample evidence of Catholics, known as 'Recusants', who, until 1689, were convicted and heavily fined for refusing to attend the new services in what had been, until recently, their own Parish Church, so attached were they to the Old Faith, and particularly to the Mass.

Their names appear in the official Recusant Rolls detailing the date of their non-attendance and the fines inflicted. In these same places, more names occur in other State documents, such as the Protestation Returns of 1641 for Dorset, where local recusants are listed for refusing to take the Oath upholding the Protestant religion. It is likely that if there were any 'unlisted' Catholics in Marnhull they would have been in contact with their coreligionists in the district. Perhaps they managed to hear Mass at Fiddleford Mill, the fine house of the steadfast White family. Much nearer, in the neighbouring village of Stour Provost, a significant Catholic community emerged during the 17th century. A legacy left by one of their number was to be a valuable contribution to the Marnhull Mission when it was founded in 1725. By that date the conversion to the Church of the Hussey family of Marnhull had already become a landmark in the history of Catholicism in the village.

Much was to change as the 18th century progressed, with the Papists Act of 1778 repealing some of the restrictions of earlier years, and the Catholic Relief Act of 1791 which restored limited rights to Catholics in the practice of their religion, although their priests, teachers and premises were required

to register at Quarter Sessions. It was with the 1829 Act of Catholic Emancipation that the real breakthrough came, restoring the right for Catholics to practise their faith freely, and allowing them electoral rights on a par with their fellow citizens. Some restrictions did remain: for example, they were not allowed bells on their churches.

The Husseys of Marnhull and the early development of the parish

The Hussey family came to Marnhull in the mid-17th century. George Hussey bought Nash Court in 1651, with extensive property, farmhouses and lands amounting to 380 acres which were systematically added to over subsequent years. As Lords of the Manor, they were highly influential in the village and beyond. Through the conversion of George Hussey's second wife Grace (née Dyve), probably in the early 1660s, the whole family became staunch Catholics. For the next 200 years they were to be the mainstay of the Catholic community as it developed and grew in Marnhull and the surrounding area. They provided a refuge for the priest, housing and employment for their Catholic workers, and their home, Nash Court, though less impressive than the grander houses of the great Catholic families, the Arundells, Welds and Webbs in other parts of the region, nonetheless became a focal point for Catholicism in the northern part of Dorset.

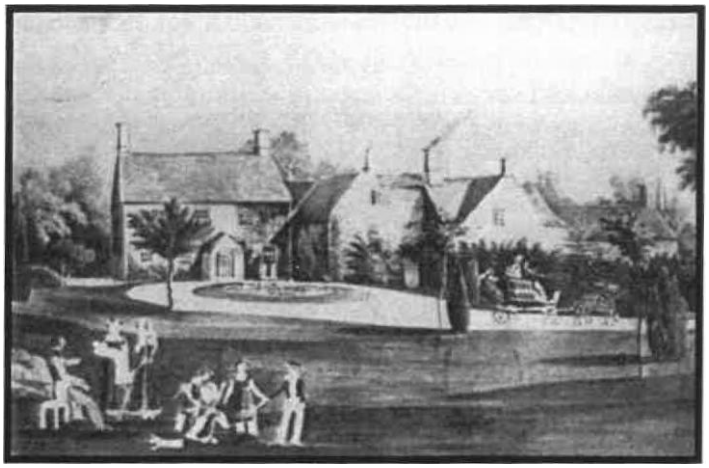

Cecily - Outstanding Benedictine nun of the Hussey Family

From this time onwards there would always be a priest in Marnhull, either as chaplain to the family in Nash Court, or as a visitor, possibly on missionary work in the area.

Later, in 1725 when Father Thomas Cornforth built the Old Presbytery in Old Mill Lane, the Marnhull Mission was founded and an unbroken line of priests to this present day was established to serve the congregation. The Husseys played a crucial role in the early foundation of the Mission and they continued as benefactors of land and finance until the latter end of the 19th century.

Foundation of the Marnhull Mission

Father Thomas Cornforth came to Stour Provost and Marnhull in 1725. Immediately he set his sights on building a cottage to reside in, with a chapel above to accommodate some twenty to thirty persons to hear Mass. A site, easily accessible to both Stour Provost and Marnhull, was found in Old Mill Lane. He appears to have had means of his own and the ear of a number of kind beneficiaries



Old Nash Court

Our Lady's Church today. Drawing by Mary Walker Thomas Hunt

The account for the building of the old Presbytery by John Pike shows that the total cost was £285.9s., of which £99.1s.11d came from Father Cornforth's own purse. The Old Presbytery survived until 1953 when sadly it was demolished to make space for a car-park. The gable end can still be seen in outline on the wall of the adjoining house.

A bequest in Trust made by Mr James White of Stour Provost (possibly in 1731) provided an income for the secular priest who served the Mission. The trustees at law were the Husseys of Nash Court who also continued to have a chaplain at their own house.

Father Cornforth died at the age of seventy in August 1748, having served the Mission for twenty-three years. He is buried in St Gregory's churchyard.

The present parish of Marnhull is in direct line from Father Cornforth's foundation and is the oldest of its kind in the Plymouth diocese.

Later Eighteenth Century

After Father Cornforth's death in 1748 and until the last decade of the 18th century a succession of at least eight priests, Seculars, Jesuits, Benedictines and a Franciscan, served the Marnhull congregation. Some of them stayed for a short time, filling in during a brief vacancy, others stayed longer.

Recently ordained, Father Sebastian came to Marnhull in 1750. He was a fine young priest, highly regarded for his apostolic zeal, but sadly he died after seven years of ministry *'a victim of charity on 28 July 1757 in consequence of a putrid fever caught while attending a poor family in the town of Shaftesbury'*. He too was buried in St Gregory's churchyard.
Fr. Edward Hussey OSB, one of the Nash Court family, served the mission for fourteen years, from 1772 to 1786. It was he who started the Baptismal Registers in 1773. During his years there were fifty-eight baptisms and twenty-nine confirmations, indicating a well-established congregation in the village and environs at that period.

After his death in 1786 a number of priests 'supplied' until June 1789 when Father John Stanley arrived. He was to remain in charge of the Mission for thirty-one years, without a break. His long ministry in Marnhull must have brought a sense of stability after the many vicissitudes and changes of earlier times. From the numerous letters he wrote to his bishop, at that time Vicar Apostolic of the Western District, one can picture a very dear priest, with his own physical and mental infirmities, seeking to assist his people spiritually and materially, yet finding the task extremely difficult.

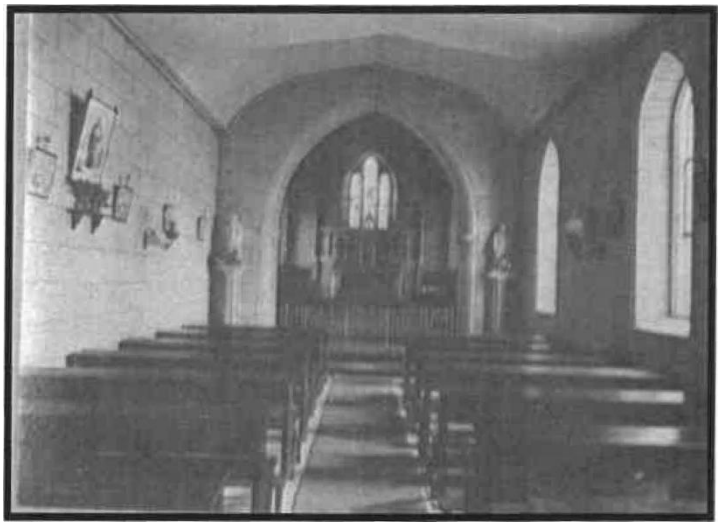
He was much loved by and devoted to his flock who, with the exception of a few better-off farmers and craftsmen, were poor labouring people of the countryside. It is indicative of his regard for them that he left money in his will for their relief, £8 in particular to Martin Shepherd '*to help him his pay his rent*' and £200 for the upkeep of the Mission. Having withdrawn from active ministry in 1820, he lived on in the village with a poor Catholic family until his death in 1828. The new young Mission priest, Father William Casey, attended him on his death-bed, and was deeply moved by the experience.
During these years these priests enabled the Catholics of Marnhull to hear Mass and receive the Eucharist, but other sacraments were more of a problem. Confirmation was conferred at Marlborough, many miles away, in the mid-eighteenth century, and in 1781 Bishop Walmsley administered the sacrament in Marnhull. In 1802 Bishop Sharrock confirmed at the nearby Bonham Mission, and there was a further confirmation in Marnhull in 1820.

Nineteenth and Twentieth Century

Father William Casey and the Building of Our Lady's Church

In 1824 Father William Casey, recently ordained at St John's College, Waterford, succeeded the several priests who had been 'supplying' since Father Stanley's retirement in 1820. His long ministry of nearly forty three years was to be of the utmost significance in the history of the Catholic Community in Marnhull.

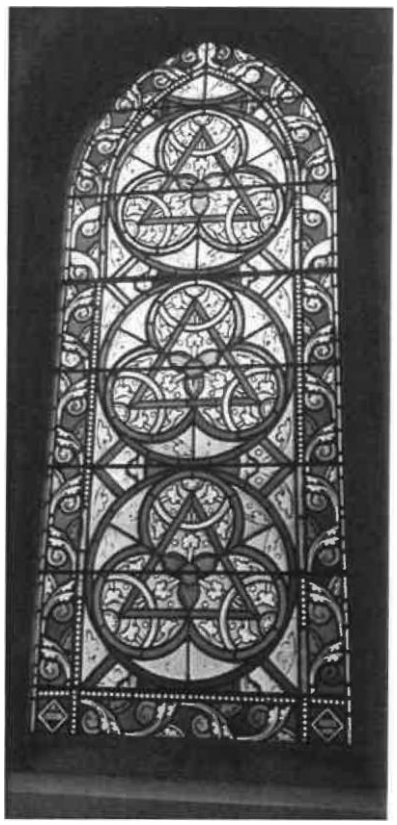
Within the shortest time of his arrival, he was already planning to build a new church to replace the chapel in Father Cornforth's presbytery, now in a dilapidated state. Using Father Stanley's bequest and availing himself of the Rawe Fund which had been set up by Mr Richard Rawe of Purse Caundle Manor, '*a most devoted, fervent and generous Catholic Gentleman*', Father Casey began in earnest to plan the finances for building the Church. A young man of charm and culture, with good sense and clarity of vision, he was able to appeal successfully to the higher and lower Catholic gentry and to keep the bishop in touch with the project. For example, as a postscript to a long letter concerning financial support available, written to the bishop in March 1828, he states '*Lord Arundell and myself have made out an excellent plan for a chapel (Church) which I am sure Your Lordship will approve when I have the pleasure of shewing it to yo*u' and as another postscript to a letter to the bishop a few days later: *'Lady Arundell means to write to Lord Shrewsbury. 'to solicit his subscription for the Chapel, so Your Lordship need not take the trouble of writing to him should you not already have done so*.



Earliest known photograph of Our Lady's Church, c 1895. There is the original low ceiling to the nave, and no door to the sacristy. The stained glass east window is in place. There are altar rails. The crucifix on the altar is canopied, and there are statues of Our Lady and the Sacred Heart, a painting of a saint (Gregory?), and flat mounted Stations of the Cross, Note the oil lamps.

One notes the young priest's adroitness in handling the matter and his energy in overcoming all obstacles. With the help of wealthy and influential friends he was determined to build a Catholic Church fitting for the public worship of God. This aim was particularly relevant in light of the Catholic Emancipation Act of 1829 which restored to Catholics nearly all the legal rights of which they had been deprived for centuries by the Penal Laws. And so the beautiful little Church that we know today was built, dedicated to Our Lady, blessed and used for the first time on 3rd July 1832 amid much rejoicing. It was the first free-standing Catholic church in Dorset. When Richard Rawe died in the following year he was buried in the 'new chapel at Marnhull'. His will showed that he had been a most generous benefactor not only to Marnhull but to numerous other Catholic charities and good causes, notably '*£l,500 towards the foundation of a Mission at Sidney (sic) in New S. Wales*'.

To return to Father Casey, the founder of the Church and School: after almost forty-three years of service at Marnhull, broken only by one year 1839-40 when he was needed in Tawstock, he retired in 1867, first to Cork, then to London, where he died in 1873. As a mark of gratitude and affection, his congregation and friends erected a handsome stained-glass window in his memory, showing Our Lord as the Good Shepherd. This window, behind the altar in the sanctuary bears the words "Pray for the soul of the Reverend William Casey 42 years pastor of this parish", It was made by Drake of Exeter and installed in 1875.



On the north and south walls of the sanctuary are the striking "Trinity" windows, of a totally different style, by Lusson of Paris, engraved 1869. Lusson was a renowned stain glass window maker who had been invited to repair the medieval windows of Notre Dame, Paris.

Father Thomas Spencer (1867-78) continued the constructive work of his predecessor. Apart from renovating and enlarging the old school, he had the

old Presbytery '*re-roofed with tiles at a cost £45, the thatch having been on it for 150 years when the house was built by Rev Thomas Cornforth*'. On the pastoral side he was very active and there were as many as 97 baptisms during his time at Marnhull.

After Father Spencer's departure in 1878, the next six years saw the brief ministries of two priests, Fathers Walter Keily and John McCarthy, the latter leaving the parish in 1884. This was a particularly difficult time, for in the same year Nash Court, in Catholic ownership of the Hussey family for over two hundred years, now at last passed out of their hands. Their fortunes had declined in the stressful agricultural crises of the 19th century and there was no direct male heir to salvage the situation. However, with Father McCarthy's departure in August 1884, '*a remarkable phase for Marnhull was entered, one calculated to improve spiritual affairs here'*.

Religious Orders at Marnhull

Benedictine Nuns at Nash Court (1795-1807)

In 1795, early on in his ministry in Marnhull, Father Stanley had welcomed the arrival of a community of English Benedictine nuns, recently exiled from Paris by the French revolutionaries. At that time Nash Court was '*to let*' by the Husseys. Through the good offices of Lord and Lady Arundell of nearby Wardour Castle the nuns were able to lease the house and turn it into a Convent — much to the astonishment and interest of the villagers. A local girl, known in the village as 'Pretty Betty' soon entered the Convent and was professed as a lay sister in 1796.
Father Stanley said Mass for them every weekday until they had their own chaplain and at first they joined the regular congregation in the chapel at the Old Presbytery for Sunday Mass. Very soon they were able to observe the strict Benedictine way of life as they had formerly in France. In 1798 an advertisement in the Ordo (the Benedictine calendar) read that there was '*a place of Education for young ladies with board and tuition at the Convent of the Benedictine Dames of Paris at Marnhull*' . That the nuns were also concerned with the schooling of poor local Catholic children is evidenced in a letter from the prioress to Bishop Sharrock where she proposes employing for 20s a year a young Catholic lad to do small tasks and

messages *'on condition that he goes for two hours daily for lessons and catechism to the neighbouring priest'*.

A startling, and, in retrospect, humorous, incident took place in 1803 when, in the midst of an invasion scare, a magistrate appeared at the door with a search warrant in case the nuns were hiding firearms or even Napoleon's own brother, to assist a French invasion! At the end of the fruitless search, the magistrate, somewhat abashed, was about to apologise for the intrusion, when the prioress, with a twinkle in her eye, assured him that it was not the first time their convent had been searched, When in Paris they were considered so English that they had been accused of hiding Pitt, Bonaparte's great enemy, and now they were considered so French that they were suspected of sheltering Napoleon's brother. After this little speech she led the magistrate and his men into a small parlour where she refreshed them with homemade wine and gingerbread.

The Building of St Joseph's Priory

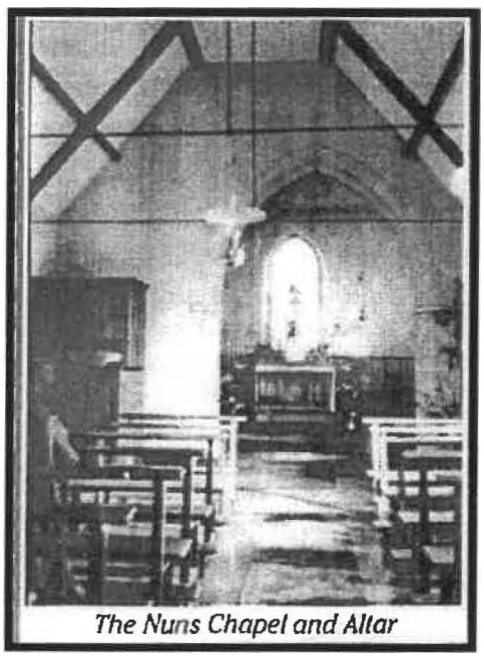
In view of the unsatisfactory condition of the parish in 1884, Nash Court no longer being in the possession of the Hussey family, and Fr McCarthy having left, the bishop wished to hand over Marnhull to the Canons Regular of the Lateran of Bodmin who had recently come to England. Marnhull seemed an ideal place for them to set up a priory and a small college for boys who aspired to join the order. The Canons took possession of the Old Presbytery, making considerable alterations to it to accommodate their greater numbers. The bishop had a larger sanctuary and sacristy built on to the existing Church, and the Canons on their part, erected in 1886 the adjoining building which was named St Joseph's Priory.

Father Augustine White was appointed superior and was also charged with the care of the Parish. In the same year, the bishop confirmed forty persons in Marnhull. New windows were placed in the Church, which was also redecorated and fitted with a new set of Stations of the Cross. All seemed to bode well for a long tranquil period under the spiritual guidance of the Canons. This was not to be. In 1891 the Canons resolved to give up the

work at Marnhull as soon as they could find a purchaser for the Priory and to remove the college to Bodmin. Fortunately, the Oblate Fathers of the Sacred Heart at Beaminster decided to come to Marnhull and took up residence in the Priory. Their Superior Père Féron became responsible for the parish as well. This community stayed only a few years in Marnhull, leaving for Belmont House in Shaftesbury, although one of their number, who spoke good English, Father Alexandre Dodard, remained as missioner to serve both places, with his residence chiefly in Marnhull. When the rest of the community finally returned to France, Father Dodard stayed on as a subject of the Plymouth diocese. For the next twenty-five years, from 1897, he was to serve the parish with energy and zeal, taking special interest in the little school, which was greatly enlarged by him, continuing to assist its development on the religious front. Finding himself alone in the vast Priory building, it was arranged that he should reside in some good rooms at the end nearest the Church, shutting them off from the rest of the Priory, which was then rented out, as was the old Presbytery. This arrangement was not to last for long.

Nuns at St Joseph's Priory — the 20th century

Three successive Communities of nuns were to inhabit the Priory in the first half of the 20th century, with considerable repercussions on the parish.


The Nuns Chapel and Altar

First, a few sisters belonging to the Filles de Jésus of Kermaria, fleeing the anti-religious laws in France came for a brief stay of only two years, 1903-05.

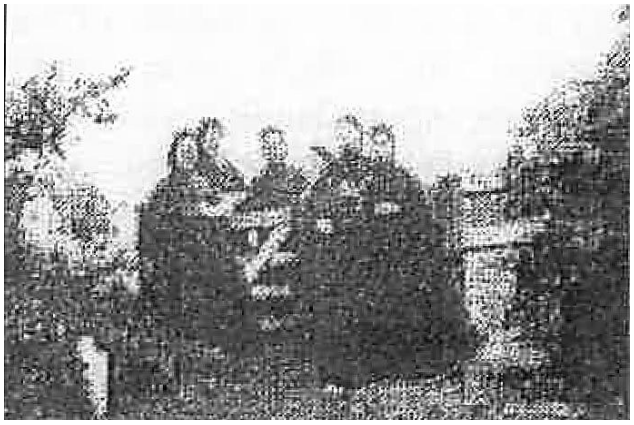
Much more significant was the arrival in 1906 of a Community of French Cistercians (Trappistine) nuns. As members of a fully-enclosed Order, they needed a private Choir (Chapel) and Chapter House.

To achieve this, an arch was formed in the wall between the sanctuary and the Canons' sacristy, with a grille. Note the side altar, now gone.

Exterior of nuns ' chapel. The garden is now the school playground.

The sacristy had to be very much enlarged and made into the nuns' Choir and Chapel. To have a new sacristy, a doorway was formed in the wall of the Church beside the High Altar and another door was made for exterior access from the cemetery. This new large sacristy was divided into two by a partition, one side for the priest and the other for the nuns who looked after the vestments and sacred vessels. These were passed through to the priest preparing for Mass by slides or drawers.

The Community successfully ran a laundry 'with considerable machinery' in a property they had purchased next to the cemetery. Older members of the parish recall talking with the extern sisters who had a little lodge beside the Priory. The nuns stayed until their dwindling numbers and, finally, the death of the Reverend Mother in 1920 necessitated their return to France. Six of the Community who had died in Marnhull were laid to rest in the cemetery, beside the Church, in Father Dodard's time.



Group of Nuns enjoying Marnhull countryside

The Priory was not to remain empty for long. In 1921 it was taken by a Community of twenty-four nuns, the Helpers of the Holy Souls, who had it constituted as their Novitiate in England. Inevitably more building was to be undertaken. They had a new commodious house constructed at the back of the Priory and steadily renewed and repaired the whole of the

old premises which, with the gardens, had become very neglected. Father Michael Weddick, who succeeded Father Dodard in 1922, wrote of these nuns: '*Visiting the people, caring for the sick, forming or fostering Mother's Meetings or Guilds, instructing converts, teaching catechism, and in general helping most generously and usefully in all sorts of church and parochial matters has rendered their presence invaluable and their work quite beyond praise*'.

Refurbished Church and New Presbytery

Father Weddick himself worked tirelessly during his six years at Marnhull (1922-28). Within his first two years of ministry, the Church exterior had been repaired and the cemetery put in order: the interior of the Church had been repainted, the High Altar and Tabernacle refurbished, a new organ installed, and three new statues, each with an oaken canopy, erected: St Gregory the Great, St Joseph and Our Lady venerated here in Marnhull under the title of 'Our Lady of Many Gifts'.

The Church after Fr Weddick's refurbishment in the 1920s. Altar rails and confessional remain as before, but the nuns' altar can be seen on the left. The crucifix above the altar is canopied, and another now surmounts the sacristy door. Statues of Our Lady and St Joseph are canopied and flank the chancel arch on plinths. St Gregory's statue with a similar hood is on the left hand wall. The window recesses are still decorated although the painting has gone from the walls of the nave, which is carpeted. The oil lamps are gone from the walls, but the chandelier remains. Note the ventilation louvres in the roof, operated by a cord at the window on the left. The little trolley with flowers in front of Our Lady's statue is used today in the chapel room.

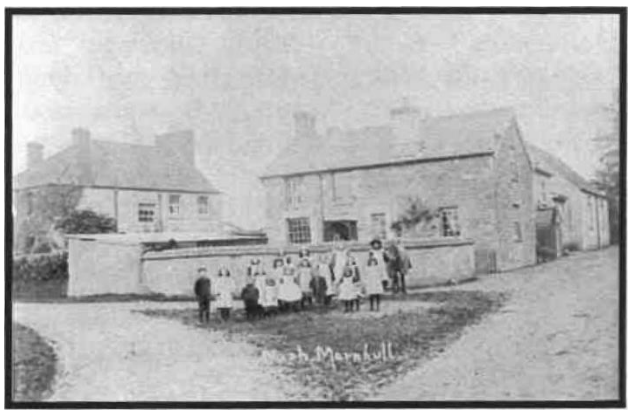
There is ample evidence of that warm piety and devotion which characterised the Church in the period between the two World Wars. Father Weddick was fascinated by the history of the ancient mission he had been called to serve. He set about writing a brief sketch of the principal events of interest in its long evolution, in order to stimulate an understanding of our Catholic heritage and an appreciation of what our forefathers had done and suffered for the Faith. Before his departure in 1928 a new Presbytery had been built and the original cottage of Father Cornforth had been let out to tenants.

At the rear of the church are brass memorials to four soldiers killed in the First World War, and one in World War Il, and the churchyard contains several commonwealth war graves

The later 1920s and 1930s were difficult for the Church in Marnhull. The congregation was getting smaller, for many of the young people of the old Catholic families were obliged to leave the village in search of work in the towns. The Baptismal Registers show just two or three baptisms a year, sometimes, as in 1926, 1933 and 1936, just one. The parish was still rated as a poor Mission. There was growth, however, in Gillingham which between the years 1925 and 1946 was served by the chaplain to the Carmelite convent.

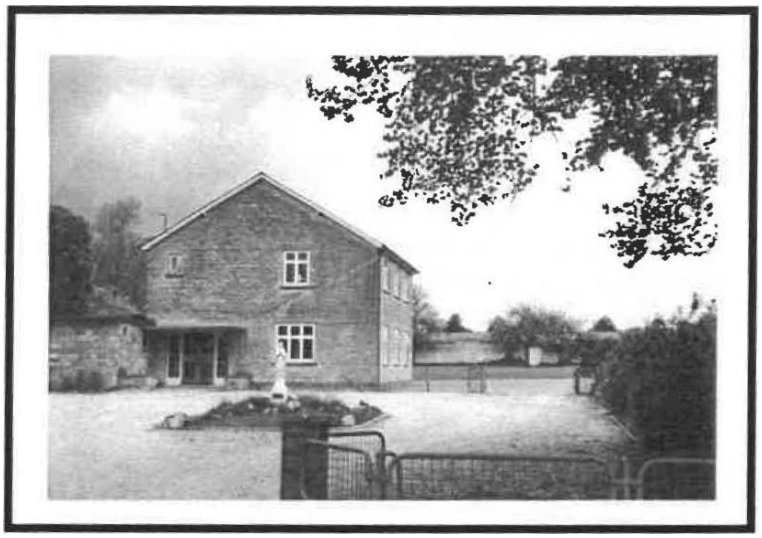
The Parish School

Recognising the urgent need for a school for his young parishioners, Father Casey had prevailed upon Mr Hussey to help him in the endeavour. He was able to write to the bishop in 1844 *'Last year Mr Hussey of Nash Court gave a valuable piece of land in perpetuity to build a schoolroom, and a cottage and garden for a Teacher'.* By 1846 these had been built at the corner of Old Mill Lane and Great Down Lane. Mr Hussey promised £20 a year towards the upkeep of the school and Teacher.



Children outside school in Old Mill Lan

Old Catholic School in Great Down Lane
Built 1846-1897



The School in more modern times

The little school, the oldest in the Plymouth diocese, with an unbroken record in the same parish, began with six pupils. It was enlarged and modernised in 1871 and 1897 by additions to the original cottage. In 1953 it moved down Old Mill Lane nearer the Church, using part of the former convent building. The nuns' chapel, which was separated from the church with a folding panel, was for a time used as the school hall, with a stage where the kitchen is now situated, and then as a classroom. The school expanded rapidly in its new location and over the years the modern building we see today was built.

All the parish priests since the move have played a part in improving and enlarging the buildings. In the 1990s major construction took place to provide three new teaching and cloakroom areas for the younger pupils, in addition to a fine new school hall. Pupils who were at the school when the former nuns chapel was used as a classroom recall that the partition was

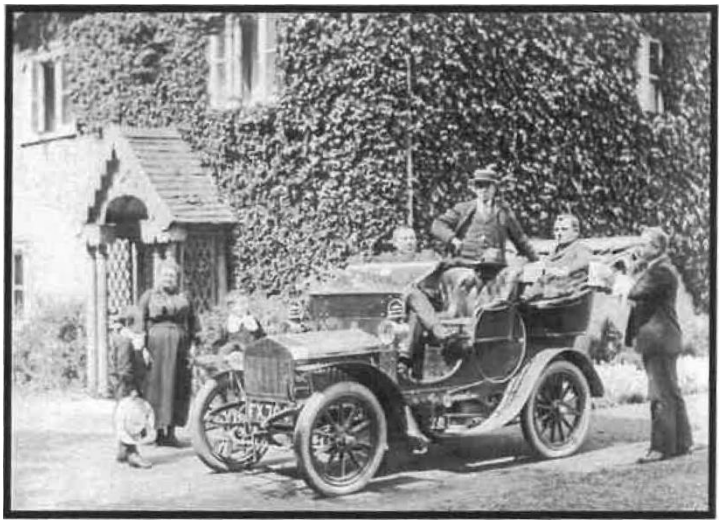
not soundproof, and on occasion they would hear Mass being celebrated, and sometimes a funeral proceeding only a few feet away.

In 1997 there were about 170 children on the roll and today Catholic education, now including a class for preschool children, continues under a dedicated staff, with parishioners participating in "Days of Faith".

St Benedict's Church in Gillingham

The development of the Church in Gillingham is particularly interesting. In 1900 Father Thomas Matthews who had retired through illness from his chaplaincy to the convict prison, Portland, rented Pierston House at Milton-on-Stour and in it fitted up a large room as a chapel. He would say Mass there for local people in the Gillingham area. This was continued until 1907 when the lease fell in and Mass at Pierston House ceased. Father Matthews stayed on at Bonham to help the Downside Benedictines who were responsible for it. The people of Gillingham '*having tasted the sweets of Mass so close were most desirous of its continuance*'.

Major Freame of The Chantry, Gillingham, a fervent Catholic and the last in the male line, through his mother, of the Husseys of Marnhull, decided to transform a cottage he owned near Rolls Bridge into a Chapel to secure Mass locally for Gillingham people. Father Dodard agreed to come from Marnhull three Sundays a month and every Holyday. There are very elderly Marnhull people who still remember seeing Father Dodard making his way in one of his cars to Gillingham on Sunday mornings. A contemporary description of the Chapel states '*It was a tiny simple attractive building still thatched, originally with only twelve chairs for the congregation*'. It measured 40 feet by 20 feet. There were thirty-one Catholics present when it was solemnly blessed at the first Mass celebrated there on 24th November 1907. A small but steadily growing congregation came to the little church dedicated to St Benedict.



Fr Dodard outside the Old Presbytery with one of his famous cars

Carmelites in Gillingham

In 1924, when Father Weddick was parish priest in Marnhull, a Community of Carmelites bought The Chantry, a fine old house, from the Freames. At this point it became possible for a priest to be chaplain to the nuns and priest to the congregation, having accommodation first at the Convent and later in the town.

Between 1925 and 1946 seven priests were to fulfil this role.

The Chantry - home of the Freames and then of the Carmelite nuns

St Benedict's as it was

A disastrous fire gutted the little Church of St Benedict in 1929. When it was rebuilt, the cottage beside it, which also belonged to the Freames, was incorporated, which virtually doubled the size of the original church.

St Benedict 's gutted by fire

After the war, with the departure of the Carmelites from Gillingham and relatively small numbers of parishioners in both Marnhull and Gillingham, it was decided to revert to the earlier arrangement.

Father John Bolland (1974-1979) tastefully enlarged St Benedict's Church, added another transept and improved the sacristy area. The recent provision of new windows has greatly enhanced the church.

St Benedict 's today

The Parish since the Second World War

There have been considerable developments in the parish over the last 50 years. In 1953 the school was transferred from its original site into the more capacious newer convent buildings which had been vacant since the departure of the Helpers of the Holy Souls nuns with the war. The Priory itself, in possession of the diocese since 1950, was sold to the Youth Hostels Association in 1960. It is now in private hands.

Later Twentieth Century

Since the Second Vatican Council in the 1960s, great changes have been brought about in the Liturgy, its language, and notably in the role of the Laity. In 1982, to celebrate the 150th anniversary of the foundation of Our Lady's Church by Father Casey, a major repair, redecoration and reordering of the Church was effected by Father Christopher Smith (1979-1989). The original altar was moved forward for Mass facing the people, and the gap left by its removal filled with matching panels made by Major Dominic Cardozo. This present altar contains a time capsule. The font was removed from the rear of the church to the present position in the sanctuary, and a new confessional created at the side. Fr Smith's great interest in the history of the Parish inspired in his parishioners a deep appreciation of their Catholic heritage in Marnhull and resulted in 1892 in his editing of a "History of the Catholics of Marnhull 1534-1832".

In the 1990s, Father Michael Cole undertook major construction work to enlarge and enhance the school. He also renovated the sacristy to the highest possible standards and planned, when funds permitted, to convert the original nuns' chapel into a dual-purpose room — a chapel for worship at Mass, and a room where the parish could meet for various activities, with the provision of much-needed basic facilities, and, particularly, access for wheelchairs. This work has now been undertaken, giving the

parish additional seating for Mass and a room for parish activities, providing accommodation for a variety of parish events: meetings of the evangelisation team and educational courses, as well as coffee mornings. The provision of audio-visual facilities has greatly increased the possibilities for use.

Our Lady's today

Externally there has been little change. In 2007 the porch was rebuilt in accordance with heritage standards, with handrails at the steps, and there is now wheelchair access to the chapel room. The lantern over the porch was designed by George Bounds in the 1980s, but it is not known when the bellcote and bell were installed.

During the post-war years there have been striking demographic changes in North Dorset as elsewhere in the country. With the continuing exodus of many young people from the countryside in search of jobs, entering advanced education, and for other reasons, many of the old Catholic families have disappeared. This has been counterbalanced by a regular inflow of families attracted by the accessibility of a Catholic School; and an increasing number of retired people who are drawn to this area, not only for the beauty of the countryside and gentler pace of living, but also because of the benefit of two lovely Catholic Churches in Marnhull and Gillingham. In the last decade the congregations of the two churches have been increased by a number of immigrant families coming to the district.

The years since the Second World War have seen a change in the relations between the various denominations in Marnhull, who now meet for ecumenical services, study groups and social events. This is well demonstrated by the gesture of the Revd Darrell Weyman, Anglican priest-in-charge in 2000, suggesting a memorial in St Gregory's churchyard to the eight priests buried there during penal times. (We should not forget that many lay Catholics will have been buried there too, as other burial places were not permitted. Similarly from 1754 to 1837 St Gregory's will have seen the marriages of Catholics who wished their union to be legally recognised).

Some special features of Our Lady's Church

The parish has a thurible from 1733, but this is no longer in general use.

1 2 3

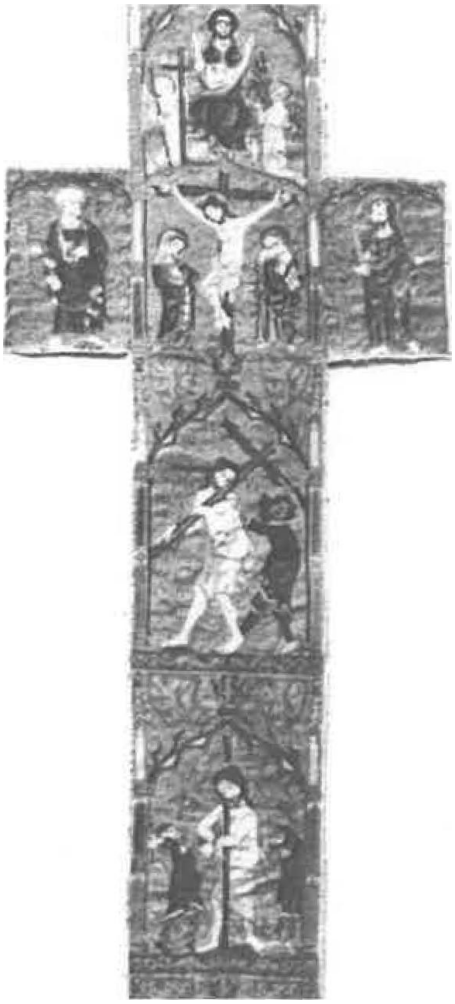
Marnhull Tapestries

To mark the 150th anniversary of the Church in 1982 six fine tapestries of six West-Country saints were designed by local artist Joan Payne and worked by a group of parishioners.

These are to be seen on the reredos of the High Altar and depict

4 5 6

(l) Blessed John Slade (of Manston),
(2) St Walburga,
(3) St Aldhelm
(4) St Boniface,
(5) St Edward and
(6) Blessed John Comelius.



The Marnhull Orphrey 1315-1335

This piece of medieval embroidery now in the Victoria & Albert Museum was for many years with the parish, and still in use mounted on a 19th century chasuble, in the 1930s. How it came to be in Marnhull is not known, but in 1936 it was lent to the V & A for an exhibition and was subsequently sold to the museum for E500. The orphrey is considered an exceptionally fine piece of late medieval English Orphrey Cross needlecraft and was described as "almost as fresh as when it came off the embroidery frame".

In 1986, Diana Porteous, moved by her family and friends who had returned from pilgrimage, began to say the Rosary in Our Lady's after Mass on Mondays. She was joined by other parishioners and as time went on the numbers grew so it eventually became a fixture in the church weekly calendar. We end our rosary with "All the Saints in Heaven, pray for us" which was always evoked by Coral & Johnny Harrow.

New Church in Gillingham

For many years, it was noted that St Benedict's Church in Gillingham was not large enough to accommodate Gillingham's growing population. After much deliberation on whether to develop the existing Church building, the Plymouth Diocese was able to purchase the Methodist Church in Gillingham High Street. As well as providing a large space for Catholic worship, the "New Church" building will accommodate a presbytery for the Parish priest, an office and a large church hall. It is hoped that the church will be open for worship by the end of 2025.

Priests serving the Marnhull Mission and Parish

	(* Buried in St Gregory's Churchyard)
1690s	Francis Mutlebury OSB *
1740s	Edward Burdett *
1725-1748	Thomas Cornforth *
1748-1750	Richard Molyneux S.J. (sen)
1750-1757	John Joseph Sebastian *
1757-1769	Richard Molyneux SJ (jun) intermittent *
1766-1768	Robert Cole SJ intermittent
1768	George Bishop intermittent *
1772-1786	Edward Hussey OSB *
1786-1786	William Allam OSB
1787	John Smyth
1787-1788	Henry Bishop OSF
1789-1820	John Stanley *
1801-1802	Charles Fryer
1820	Alexandre Simon
1820-1821	Pierre Gilbert
1821-1824	Romain Dessaux
1824-1867	William Casey
1839	John Larkin
1839-1840	William Bond
1867-1878	Thomas Spencer
1878-1881	Walter Kiely
1881-1884	John McCarthy
1884-1891	Canons Regular of the Lateran
1891-1897	Abbé Féron's Community
1897-1922	Alexandre Dodard
1922-1928	Michael Weddick
1928-1929	Edward Morehan
1929-1933	Patrick Dwane
1933-1937	William Moylan
1937-1945	John Hug
1945-1950	James Buckley
1950-1960	Francis Gallagher
1960-1962	Joseph O'Brien
1962-1967	Terence McCaffrey
1967-1974	Thomas Hunt
1974-1979	John Bolland
1979-1989	Christopher Smith
1989-2002	Michael Cole
1996-2015	David Walford (priest supporting the parish)
2002-2021	Martin Budge
2010-	James Mackain-Bremner (Deacon)
2011-	Michael Turnbull (Deacon)
2021-2023	Francis Straw OSB
2023-2024	Joseph Nwiboko
2024-	Cletus Onyebuchi Ibeka

Priests Serving in Gillingham

1900-1907	Fr Thomas Matthews (Pierston House, Milton on Stour)
1907-1922	Alexandre Dodard (from Marnhull)
1922-1925	Michael Weddick (from Marnhull)
1925-1930	Robert Lyons, chaplain to the Carmelite convent
1930-1931	Allan Parkin
1931-1933	Harold Shepherd
1933-1936	Walter Conway
1936-1938	Michael Kennedy
1938-1939	John (?) Prince
1939-1946	Andrew O'Keefe

Religious Communities in Marnhull and Gillingham

Nash Court

1795-1807	English Benedictine Nuns of Paris

St Joseph's Priory

1884-1891	Canons Regular of the Lateran
1891-1897	Abbé Féron's Community
1903-1905	Filles de Jésus nuns
1906-1920	Trappistine nuns
1922-1939	Helpers of the Holy Souls nuns (sold property to the Diocese in 1950)

The Chantry, Gillingham

1924-1945	Carmelite Nuns

The Population in Former Days

Returns of Papists

There were four or five occasions between 1660 and 1791 when something like a National Census of Catholics was attempted: no equivalent exists for any other religious denomination. In 1767 there were 52 Catholics in Marnhull, 68 in Shaftesbury, 59 in Stour Provost and one in Todber. The Marnhull Catholics comprised 14 men (including the Lord of the Manor and his priest), 23 women and 14 children.

Thomas Hayward's Census of Marnhull 1821

Account of the Population, etc of the Parish of Marnhull in the Hundred of Sturminster Newton Castle and in the County of Dorset, conducted by Thomas Hayward, Schoolmaster. This Census enquired in the number of dwellings, families, occupations, ages of males and females, and significantly into the religion of the inhabitants. Thomas Hayward entered 97 Catholics in his Schedule, of whom 47 were male and 50 female.

Place of Residence	Name	Occupation		M	F
Lashmore Lane	John Curtis	Weaver	9	5	4
North Moorside	Philip Curtis	Yeoman	3	2	1
Thornton Down Lane	John Johnson	Stonemason	3	1	2
	Benedict Johnson	Stonemason	5	2	3
Old Mill	Eliz. Skinner	SingleWoman	1		
	Thomas Chant	Malt Maker	6	3	3
Bartletts	Elias Johnson	Yeoman	5	3	2
Haines	Elizabeth Hann	Widow	2	1	1
	John Hann	Sawyer	2	1	1
Musbury Lane	James Hatcher	Labourer	6	3	3
Ham Lane	Geo Hatcher Sen	Manufacturer	2	1	1
Burges	Susannah Fillol	Widow	1		1
	Thomas Bastable	Blacksmith	6	2	4
	William Rutley	Baker	7	4	3
Woods Farm	Richard Hatcher	Yeoman	13	7	6
Cadenham Cottage	William Hatcher	Labourer	4	3	1
Burton Street	Geo Hatcher Jun	Manufacturer	4	3	1
	Martin Shepherd	labourer	5	3	2
	Maria Curtis	Mantlemaker	5		5
New Street	Thomas Russ Jun Honor Colbourne	Cordwainer Manufacturer	5 1	2	3
Batt Alley	Samuel Chant	Labourer	2	1	1

It is interesting to note that there are present parishioners who are direct descendants from some of the families named in this list, e.g. Bastable, Johnson, Curtis.

Our deep gratitude is due to God and Our Lady who have guided and guarded priests and people over the long history of the Catholic Community in this beautiful corner of Dorset.

The original text was compiled and written by Mary Bradbury in 1997.
Revised and updated 2019 & 2025