

## THE PARISH OF OUR LADY OF GOOD COUNSEL, WICKFORD: A BRIEF HISTORY

### BEGINNINGS

At a meeting of the Brentwood Diocesan Temporal (Administrative) Council on 3 May 1922: 'It was resolved to use £200 of the monies of the Church Building Fund in buying property in Wickford for the purpose of erecting a church thereon. A temporary iron building being erected without delay.' This is the first reference to Wickford in the Brentwood Diocesan Archives.

At the following meeting of the Temporal Council held on 8 June 1922 Bishop Arthur Doubleday (2<sup>nd</sup> Bishop of Brentwood 1920-1951) reported that he had seen Father Aloysius Roche (1886-1968), Parish Priest of Billericay, with regard to a property for sale at Wickford for the sum of £35. Canon Cyril Shepherd (1861-1938), the Diocesan Treasurer and Parish Priest of Stock, was to visit Wickford with Father Roche in order to form an opinion regarding the possible purchase. The intention was to put an anonymous gift of £100 donated to the diocese for use at Wickford towards buying a site in the town. On 13 October 1922 Canon Shepherd reported that he was seeking land at Wickford and that £60 had been offered by diocese for this purpose. However, problems arose with regard to potential vendors being unwilling to sell to the Catholic Church. Two months later, on 14 December 1922, Canon Shepherd informed Bishop Doubleday that there was the possibility of purchasing land on the south side of London Road as it crossed over a stream (adjacent to Bridge House).

Nothing more seems to have transpired until 23 January 1924 when Bishop Doubleday wrote to Canon Shepherd asking the parish of Stock to take responsibility for Wickford which, he believed, 'is going to be even a more important centre' than Billericay, from where Father Roche was currently serving Laindon and was thus unable to do likewise for Wickford. A house was now available in Wickford where Mass could be celebrated on Sunday, beginning immediately. Canon Shepherd, faithful to the bishop's request, began celebrating Mass at Wickford from January 1924. Indeed until 1928 Mass was offered in an annexe to Milestone Cottage, London Road (a mid-seventeenth century dwelling situated about one mile to the west of the town centre towards Crays Hill and named after the milestone which stood at the junction of London Road and Nevendon Road). Meanwhile, Father Roche at Billericay asked Bishop Doubleday to view three possible sites in Wickford that might be suitable for a church. Bishop Doubleday, in giving Canon Shepherd the task of making a start at Wickford hoped that he (Shepherd) would 'feel that you should give me all the support you can in this effort to evangelize this part of Essex.' Soon afterwards, on 30 January 1924, Father Roche informed Bishop Doubleday that a plot that had been viewed on the Southend Road was not practicable for their purposes, but that land was available in Swan Lane for £125. Moreover, Mr C.H. Bowers of Castle Hotel Yard and 'Sunnyside', Guernsey Gardens, Wickford, was acting for the diocese in the negotiations. On the following day Bishop Doubleday thanked Canon Shepherd for assuming responsibility for Wickford even though it was within the Billericay parish. It was agreed that the plot in Swan Lane would suffice for a temporary church and the bishop asked Canon Shepherd to arrange matters. However, on 29 February 1924 the diocesan solicitors returned the contract for the Swan Lane site to Mr Bowers owing to restrictions on the land with regard to building anything other than a private dwelling (i.e. no church or school). The solicitor, Mr Weld, wrote to Mr Bowers on same date: 'As I understand there is a prejudice against Catholics in your neighbourhood, it would be very dangerous for the diocese to buy these plots for the purpose of building.'

There appeared to be no easy solution to making a permanent foundation at Wickford. At a meeting of the Temporal Council on 4 November 1924, Bishop Doubleday again reported negotiations concerning the purchase of land on which to build church at Wickford, Canon Shepherd having taken charge of the matter. A suitable plot had been found for £450, towards which the anonymous donation of £100 given in 1922 would be put as well as a similar amount given for any new site in diocese. The diocese for its part was now looking to erect a temporary building on a plot on the Bridge House Estate, using the rear of the land to place the makeshift church with room for a permanent structure at the front. The Temporal Council, meeting on 15 December 1924, heard that £200 was available for purchase of site at Wickford and that the remaining £250 would probably have to come from the Trinity Fund, a special trust used for church building purposes. Canon Shepherd, who continued to celebrate Sunday Mass at Milestone Cottage, was charging 10/- per week to the Diocesan Poor Country Mission Fund, viz. £25 per annum, in order to help cover his expenses at Wickford. At a meeting on 3 February 1925 Canon Shepherd asked for this sum to be increased to £1 per week and this was agreed by Bishop Doubleday. Meanwhile, on 1 April 1925 Bishop Doubleday wrote to Canon Shepherd about Wickford, where there were ten regular communicants on Sunday, stating that these people 'must be fostered and I believe Wickford has a future.' Five days later the bishop informed Canon Shepherd that £200 towards the Wickford mission had been given by Mr Coverdale (agent to Lord Petre) and by one of the Petre family.

Meanwhile, on 27 April 1925 a conveyance was made to the Diocese of Brentwood on the part of Mrs May Howell of Bridge House for ½ acre of land (150' by 250') situated on the south side of London Road (61 London Road - the site of present church, presbytery and halls). Thus, although still attending Mass at Milestone Cottage, the Catholics of Wickford had at last the prospect of building a church of their own on land owned by the diocese.

However, matters were far from finalised. The diocese was desperately short of funds, leading Bishop Doubleday to inform Canon Shepherd on 24 November 1926: 'I do not think Wickford is ripe yet for a temporary church. In all these cases I think it is right that the people should do something themselves: up to the present we have made them a gift of £450 for the site and are giving them £1 a week out of the Poor Mission Fund. Let the congregation form themselves into a corporate body and collect funds: in another year's time we can see what the result is. It is idle to apply for the building of a temporary church at the present moment... But though I write thus I am not unappreciative of the work which is being done.' Nevertheless, although there was no prospect of building on the recently acquired site in London Road, Milestone Cottage itself offered an opportunity to provide a temporary place of worship. Bishop Doubleday, writing to Canon Shepherd on 27 September 1927, declared himself 'delighted to hear that Wickford is to have an equipped church; there is no reason why it should not do as well as many other places in the diocese.' On 11 October 1927 agreement was signed between Francis & Mary Bright Higgins, the Catholic owners of Milestone Cottage, and Bishop Doubleday/Canon Shepherd leasing a plot at the said property measuring 75 by 35 feet for 21 years as from 29 September 1927. The Diocese of Brentwood was permitted to arrange for the erection of a wooden building to be used as a church or school for an annual rent of one shilling. On 9 December 1927 the District Registrar wrote to Canon Shepherd confirming that proposed Catholic Church at Milestone Cottage fell within civil parish of Ramsden Bellhouse. Shortly afterwards, on Christmas Eve 1927, Bishop Doubleday gave permission for Canon Shepherd to open a separate bank account for the Wickford mission. The Mass centre at Wickford was served by Canon Shepherd until his retirement

from Stock in July 1928 and thereafter responsibility was assumed by his successor, Father Augustine Davidson (1865-1946), who continued doing so until September 1932.

### **THE FIRST CHURCH (1928-1951)**

The first church, dedicated to Our Lady of Good Counsel, was officially opened by Bishop Doubleday in the grounds of Milestone Cottage on 27 May 1928. It was a sectional wooden edifice on brick piles with a corrugated metal roof accommodating 60 people and cost £185, with an additional £100 incurred for furnishings. On 21 November 1928 Father Davidson was told that the £1 weekly diocesan grant for Wickford could not be continued beyond end of year and that Bishop Doubleday had directed that the money for the purchase of land at Wickford (£250) was to be advanced by the diocese as a loan.

The first resident priest at Wickford, Father Henry Healy (1891-1967), was appointed as Priest-in-Charge in September 1932, although initially he resided with his brother Father Michael Healy, Parish Priest of Upminster, while seeking a suitable house at Wickford. In due course a bungalow was rented by Father Healy for use as a presbytery.

Father Healy was succeeded by Father Harold Cahill (1898-1970) in July 1933, who was appointed as the first Parish Priest of Wickford in 1935 on the canonical erection of the parish. In August 1933 Father Cahill informed Bishop Doubleday that he was planning 'a big campaign for our new church.' Father Cahill was by then living in rented accommodation at 'Ashdene', a three-bedroomed house on the High Street, for which Bishop Doubleday paid £50 per annum. The bishop again visited Wickford for Confirmation on 6 May 1934. Shortly afterwards the first parish garden party held in the summer of 1934 was also attended by Bishop Doubleday. On 4 February 1935 Mr Bright Higgins informed Bishop that owing to his wife's death (in 1932) and the departure of his children, added to which were his unsuccessful business ventures in rubber and in poultry farming, he was obliged to sell Milestone Cottage, which he was willing to offer to the diocese for a reasonable sum: 'it will no doubt be many years before a church & presbytery will be built at Wickford.' Meanwhile, Mr Bright Higgins stated, if the diocese purchased the cottage, the priest would be able to live adjacent to the church, which could be extended. On 29 May 1935 Father Cahill asked permission of Bishop Doubleday to celebrate two Masses each Sunday: 'On some Sundays the little church is over full already.' Bishop Doubleday continued to take an interest in the fledgling parish at Wickford, opening the summer fete held on 13 July 1935. On 12 September 1935 Mr Bright Higgins informed the bishop that Milestone Cottage had been sold to Mrs Slater, a Catholic lady from Newark, Nottinghamshire, and her three daughters, one of whom would act as sacristan. Mr Bright Higgins left Wickford on 23 September. Moreover, after an advertisement had appeared in **The Universe** newspaper, it was reported that four Catholic families had recently bought land in the district on which to build houses. Bishop Doubleday made a Visitation of Wickford on 20 October 1935, where he was informed that the Catholic population of the parish had reached 170, the Mass attendance 90 people, with Sunday Masses at 8 a.m and 10. a.m. However, Father Cahill reported that he had no choir and the harmonium in the church 'does not work when damp.' With regard to an Evening service, Father Cahill replied: 'None. Have tried but met with no

response. The church is unlighted & unheated & on an unlighted road.' Nevertheless, he had been successful in attaining the services of a local section of the Catholic Women's League. All except half-a-dozen of the children in the parish attended non-Catholic schools: 'Catechism is given in the church each Sunday 3-4 p.m. Two of the Sisters of Mercy come from Brentwood.' About 20 children attended these classes but 'it varies much according to the weather.' On 22 November 1935 the proposed boundaries for the new parish were circulated, with Wickford now bordering on to Rayleigh, Maldon, Chelmsford, Stock, Billericay and Leigh-on-sea. In May 1936 Father Cahill was involved in a serious motor accident in Wickford but recovered such that on 7 June 1936 Father Roche informed the Bishop's Secretary that Father Cahill was concerned that there was now only one Mass at Wickford, with the result that one half of his parishioners were missing Mass.

Father William Loveland (1894-1983) was appointed as Parish Priest of Wickford in September 1936 and remains the longest-serving incumbent to date (19 years). In October 1936 Father Loveland reported that the Church Building Fund amounted to £264-4-0d. He too initially lived at 'Ashdene' in the High Street but in March 1937 he rented a modern house in Nevendon Road, having found his former residence very unsatisfactory and 'cold enough to exasperate a polar bear.' In 1937 Father Loveland approached the vendors of London Road site (which still had restrictive clauses attached) about re-erecting the wooden church from Milestone Cottage at the rear of the site purchase in 1925, but he was refused permission. On 23 September 1938 there was £555 in Church Building Fund and the Parish of Wickford now received £12-10-0d per quarter from the diocese for the Runwell Hospital chaplaincy. On 29 September 1938 Bishop Doubleday promised to send Father Loveland £500 from diocesan funds as soon as he was ready to build a church, but the subsidy for the rent of the presbytery would have to depend upon a grant from the Guild of Our Lady of Ransom.

The Second World War was declared on 3 September 1939 and any prospect of building was curtailed. On 2 October 1939 Bishop Doubleday wrote to Father Loveland to inform him that it would be better 'to collect for your maintenance and current church expenses instead of a new church since there is very little likelihood of any building at present.' On 23 December 1939 the Church Building Fund stood at £880. By May 1941 Mr Turnbull was the owner of Milestone Cottage. On 3 July 1942 the London Road site owned by the diocese was requisitioned by the Essex War Agricultural Committee for food production and was let to Mr Howell of Bridge House, whose wife had sold the land to the diocese in 1925. In August 1946 Milestone Cottage was purchased by Mr Charles Weston Slaney, who duly reminded the diocese that the lease on the land adjacent to his house was due to expire on 29 September 1948. On 28 March 1947 Mr Slaney enquired of Bishop Doubleday if the diocese wished to purchase the land on which the wooden church stood when lease expired but Bishop declined the offer. On 11 August 1947 Billericay Urban District Council informed Father Loveland that special consent would be required for building a church on the London Road site as it fell within an area designated as for residential purposes. By October 1947 Father Loveland still wished to re-site the wooden church from Milestone Cottage to the land in London Road, which, however, was still requisitioned by the Essex War Agricultural Committee. Failing that he wished to build a presbytery on the London Road site. The Diocesan Architect, Mr T.G. Birchall Scott, wrote to Canon Wilson, the Diocesan Financial Secretary, on 19 April 1948 to inform him that Father Loveland had asked him to draw up plans for a temporary church/future parish hall on the London Road site. Plans were ready by early June, with Mr Birchall Scott proposing to build a presbytery at the rear of the property in order to minimise noise from the traffic. Bishop Doubleday agreed to applying for a building licence, understanding that Father Loveland wished to dismantle the wooden church at Milestone Cottage and

to re-erect it on London Road site, even though the land there was not finally de-requisitioned until 29 September 1950. Pending erection of a church, Mass in Runwell Hospital would be opened to parishioners to attend. Mr Birchall Scott wrote to Canon Dacey, Chairman of the Diocesan Boundaries Committee, on 12 October 1949 with regard to the application for a building licence to erect a temporary church on the London Road site, which building, once a permanent church was put up, would become the parish hall. On 26 May 1950 Father Loveland informed Canon Wilson that a building licence had been obtained and that consequently he sought leave for contracts to be signed. The estimated cost of new (temporary) church was put at £4000. July 1950 marked the beginning of legal dispute with regard to the ownership of the wooden church building at Milestone Cottage. Mr A.K. Thornton, the new owner of the property, claimed the church belonged to him despite the fact that Father Loveland argued that Mr Slaney had said that the Catholics could use the wooden church as long as they liked. Father Loveland hoped Mr Thornton would allow them to remain until the new (temporary) church on the London Road site was completed, with the building at Milestone Cottage then being re-erected as a hall adjacent to the new church. Mr Thornton believed Mr Slaney to have sold him the church as well as Milestone Cottage and its grounds. Father Loveland was adamant that the wooden building was required as hall on the London Road site.

### **THE SECOND CHURCH (1951-1972)**

In due course, however, construction of the second church began on the London Road site in January 1951. Opened on 17 March 1951, the building was designed by Mr Birchall Scott and built by Messrs Flaxman of Southend-on-Sea. It measured 60' by 30' and was constructed of brick with pre-cast concrete columns and accommodated 250 people. The building was registered for marriages in May 1952. Mr Robert Wilberforce of Nevendon Manor gave £200 towards the cost of the new church, which totalled £3970-2-0d including furnishings. The Catholic nurses at Runwell Hospital, under their Matron Miss Mary Alice Titterington, also gave a generous contribution. But the dispute over the temporary church at Milestone Cottage continued. On 30 March 1951 Mr Birchall Scott reported that he was applying to Billericay Urban District Council for permission to remove the building at Milestone Cottage in order to re-erect it on the London Road site adjacent to the new (temporary) church. However, by December 1951 the Diocesan Solicitors had advised not to pursue the case and confirmed this view in October 1952. The wooden church first erected in 1928 therefore remained in situ until it was destroyed by fire some years later. Bishop George Andrew Beck (Coadjutor Bishop of Brentwood 1948-1951, 3<sup>rd</sup> Bishop of Brentwood 1951-1955) visited Wickford on 3 February 1954 to inspect the temporary church. By September 1954 the building was full to capacity at the single Sunday Mass (at 9 a.m.). In December 1954 the Guild of Our Lady of Ransom gave a grant of £100 to Wickford and this was used to pay the rent of the presbytery in Nevendon Road. Meanwhile, a Presbytery Building Fund was opened in order to raise money for the construction of a house for the priest on the London Road site.

On 3 February 1955 Father Loveland was succeeded as Parish Priest of Wickford by Father Bernard Collings (1915-1988). However, Mr Hall, the landlord of the presbytery in Nevendon Road, declared himself unable to let the property to Father Loveland's successor because he wished to sell it. Father Collings therefore lodged with Colonel & Mrs de Roeper at 'Greenacre', Wick Crescent. Meanwhile, the architects Messrs Burles Newton & Partners drew up plans for a three-bedroomed brick

presbytery adjacent to the temporary church in London Road: the house was duly built by Mr Bert Jeffries in the spring and summer of 1955 at a cost of £4175. On 18 April 1955 Father Collings informed Bishop Beck that the Sunday Mass attendance stood at more than 250. The Visitation conducted by Bishop Beck in November 1955 revealed a Catholic population of 440 and a Mass attendance 200. There had been no confirmations since 1934. It was noted that a Parish Mission had been conducted in 1955, the Society of St Vincent de Paul was active in the parish and that two nuns came to teach 25 junior children Religious Education on Saturdays, with the seniors meeting every Wednesday. Moreover, two teachers instructed the Catholic children living in Rettendon. At Runwell Hospital the Catholic chapel dedicated to St Joseph was accessible to both patients and staff. Confessions were heard at Wickford on Friday evening and before Mass on Sunday and Holydays of Obligation and the Diocesan Travelling Mission based at Stock operated a Mass centre at Rettendon Village Hall every six weeks with an attendance of about thirty people. In 1958 a much-needed brick hall measuring 30' x 56' (St Peter's) was constructed adjoining the church. By 1958 Father Collings was celebrating two Sunday Masses in the church (9 a.m. & 11 a.m.) and one at Runwell Hospital (8 a.m.). At the Visitation conducted by Bishop Bernard Wall (4<sup>th</sup> Bishop of Brentwood 1955-1969) in 6 May 1960 mention was made of the work of the Catholic Nurses Guild at Runwell Hospital, although it was noted that the Society of St Vincent de Paul was dormant in the parish and likewise the Catholic Women's League was in abeyance. A total of 35 Catholic children were attending non-Catholic schools, while Father Collings gave instruction twice weekly to the Catholic pupils in the local secondary modern school. Two Catechism meetings took place on Saturday (one for infants and the other for juniors). Interestingly, father Collings reported that the church had been given an Italian organ dating from 1670 and valued at £300. At the next Visitation, on 31 March 1963, it was stated that the Legion of Mary had conducted a parish census in 1962 that a Youth Club had been established, and that 60 Catholic children were being educated in non-Catholic primary schools and 40 in non-Catholic secondary schools. Again, two nuns taught Catechism to the juniors on Saturday morning and Father Collings visited the local secondary school each week. Father Collings asked Bishop Wall to encourage the various Catholic organisations in the parish: the Legion of Mary had only three members; the Society of St Vincent de Paul was not meeting owing to a lack of membership; the Catholic Nurses Guild had only about six members and there were no leaders for the Brownies. However, a Planned Giving Campaign was being considered – it took place in 1964.

Father John Gallagher (1920-2012) was appointed as Parish Priest in succession to Father Collings on 27 July 1967. Bishop Wall's Visitation on 5 December 1968 revealed that the last parish census had been taken at the time of the Planned Giving Campaign four years previously. The Sisters of Mercy from Rayleigh conducted catechism class for children at non-Catholic schools on Saturday morning, the Catholic Women's League and the Knights of St Columba were active in the parish, there was no debt and indeed the parish had £4000 in the bank.

On 29 August 1969 Father Malachy Kelly (1915-1976) was appointed as Parish Priest. At the Visitation by Bishop Patrick Casey (5<sup>th</sup> Bishop of Brentwood 1969-1979) in October 1970 a Catholic population of 800 was recorded with a Mass attendance of 226. Sunday Mass was celebrated at 8.00 a.m. (Runwell Hospital), 9.00 a.m., 11.00 a.m. and 6.00 p.m. The Social Club still functioned and the parish supported members of the Knights of St Columba and the Catholic Women's League. There was also a Young Wives Group and a Planned Giving Committee, while the Parish Committee comprised of the Chairmen of the Catholic Societies and a Secretary. Ecumenical events were reported as just beginning, while the number of children in non-Catholic schools had reached 90. Father Kelly stated

that he visited the local non-Catholic secondary school, but that the Parish Youth Club had been shut before his arrival and that no one was yet willing to run it. Most importantly, Father Kelly emphasised that a new (permanent) church was urgently required to replace the temporary building now in serious need of repair. He concluded his report to the bishop: 'A struggling parish in the process of development. Therefore lacks cohesion. Many societies (e.g. Legion of Mary, Society of St Vincent de Paul, Catholic Women's League) have been started and failed over the years. The Social Club started by Father Gallagher has never got off the ground. No Catholic school. Promise of a new church for at least 15 years – but parish unable to support such a debt. Hope building of new church would unite efforts and become a focal point. Good people. Good Mass attendance on weekdays and in view of their many commitments, e.g. buying a house etc. Generous to the Church.' On 4 October 1970 Father Kelly informed Canon Goldingay, the Diocesan Financial Secretary, that the temporary church, now used for the past nineteen years, was in a state of disrepair and that a permanent building was required. The overwhelming majority of parishioners supported this proposal and there was £8000 in the Church Building Fund( £1000 of which had been loaned to the Parish of Hutton). The average weekly offertory was £50. Moreover, the parish was set to expand further since housebuilding in the locality continued apace, with new homes for 8000 people planned on the Wick Estate from 1971. Father Kelly stated that the present church would prove too small for the congregation within five or six years with the Sunday Mass attendance currently at 400. In December 1970 the Diocesan Finance Board gave permission for the building of a new church. Messrs Burles Newton & Partners were appointed architects and the builders were Messrs J. Hodgson of Rayleigh. Work eventually began on 30 November 1971. The temporary church of 1951 would thereafter become Our Lady's Hall. The parishioners responded to the prospect of a new church by raising funds and between 1970 and 1974 the weekly offertory income doubled. The Visitation of November 1972 recorded a Catholic population of 1000 and a Sunday Mass attendance of 425. The Social Club had been revived and the Catholic Women's League and the Knights of St Columba were active, together with the Altar Society, and the Society of St Vincent de Paul. From the parish no less than 100 children attended St Peter's Primary School, Billericay, with 20 at other Catholic schools and 50 at non-Catholic primary schools. There were 60 Catholic pupils at non-Catholic secondary schools, of whom a total of 20 attended a 15-minute Religious Education lesson which, in Father Kelly's opinion, 'is of very little use.' He also considered it impossible to find help to keep school-leavers in touch with Church. The long-awaited new church was nearing completion and Father Kelly asked Bishop Casey to give a 'word of thanks to all who are helping to raise funds for new church and to all who have donated specific items, e.g. font, tabernacle, altar, stations of the Cross etc. Parish is disappointed for third time regarding primary schooling. Encouraged to help in starting of St Peter's, Billericay – for the first year one half of the children from Wickford. Last Christmas it was announced that only 6 per year would be accepted.'

### **THE THIRD CHURCH (1972 ONWARDS)**

The present church of Our Lady of Good Counsel was opened on 20 December 1972. It had taken the Catholics of Wickford nearly fifty years to achieve this objective. At the Visitation of November 1974 Bishop Casey was informed that the Catholic population of Wickford stood at 900-1000, with a Sunday Mass attendance of 410. The Society of St Vincent de Paul, the Catholic Women's League and the Knights of St Columba continued to function together with the Planned Giving Committee, a Parish Discussion Group, the Young Wives Group, and the Social Club, which promoted events such as Bingo,

dances and a Parish Tote. There were still a total of 70 Catholic children in non-Catholic schools and 140 pupils in Catholic schools outside the parish. In the wake of building the new church the parish was in debt to the figure of £8000.

Father Kelly died on 5 March 1976. His Requiem Mass was celebrated in the church he built by Bishop Casey on 10 March. On 30 April 1976 Canon Vincent Hurley (1907-1994) was appointed as Parish Priest of Wickford. In due course he was assisted in the parish by Deacon Francis Rice (1981-1982), one of the first permanent deacons to be ordained for the Diocese of Brentwood. By 1976 the Sunday Mass attendance had risen to 515. The Church of Our Lady of Good Counsel, now free of debt, was consecrated by Bishop Casey on 8 December 1976, the relics placed in the altar being those of SS Clement & Victoria, Roman martyrs. The parish continued to flourish, witnessing the foundation of a Charismatic Prayer Group in 1977 and a growth in support for ecumenism and projects aimed to assist the Third World. At the Visitation made by Bishop Casey in June 1978 the Catholic population stood at 1500 with a Mass attendance of 525. The Society of St Vincent de Paul remained active as did the Knights of St Columba. Three Catechism classes were held on Saturday for children in non-Catholic primary schools and one on Monday for those in secondary schools. A Youth Club met on Sunday evening. The average weekly offertory now stood at £125 and there was no debt. Canon Hurley commented to the bishop: 'In view of the existing demand for a Catholic primary school (210 children baptised since 1970) and the proposed increase by 7000 of the total population of Wickford, the Area Education Officer of Essex County Council has written to the Diocesan Commission for Education giving priority to the erection of a Catholic school over a proposed county school.' At the Visitation conducted by Bishop Thomas McMahon (6<sup>th</sup> Bishop of Brentwood 1980-2014) in February 1983 the Catholic population was given as 1700 with a Sunday Mass attendance of 455. A Parish Council of 20 members had been established and met in alternate months. Two Sisters of Mercy from Rayleigh continued to catechise primary age children weekly. The Society of St Vincent de Paul, the Knights of St Columba and the Legion of Mary were active in the parish, as were all the uniformed groups and 40 attended the Youth Club. There was also a Church Unity Octave service held in January and an Ecumenical Procession and service on Good Friday as well as an ecumenical bookshop in the town. Canon Hurley informed the bishop that he took part in discussions with the local Anglican clergy. Two Family Fast Days were held annually and Friday self-denial envelopes were sent to CAFOD. Moreover, the parish conference of the Society of St Vincent de Paul had now been twinned with a conference in India. The weekly offertory averaged £204. Bishop McMahon's next Visitation took place on 16 March 1986. He was informed that the Catholic population remained at 1700 but that the average Sunday Mass attendance had risen to 487. The Knights of St Columba were still active and both the Society of St Vincent de Paul and the Legion of Mary visited Runwell Hospital. Canon Hurley himself visited Runwell two or three times per week. However, it was stated that the Parish Youth Club needed developing. Canon Hurley was a member of the Wickford Clergy Fraternal and ecumenical house groups met during Lent and Advent. The Ecumenical Procession continued to take place in the High Street on Good Friday and prayer meetings were also held attended by Christians of various traditions. Canon Hurley considered that the parish needed more trained catechists. At the Visitation on 20 September 1989 it was reported to the bishop that a Parish Mission had been held in November 1987, with door-to-door visiting undertaken by a parish lay mission team. The Parish Council met monthly and the Sisters of Mercy from Rayleigh still undertook the Saturday morning Catechism classes. The Society of St Vincent de Paul remained active and there were also parish groups for Justice and Peace, the Association for the Propagation of the Faith (supporting the foreign missions) and CAFOD.



Father Francis Hastings (1921-2003) was appointed as Parish Priest in succession to Canon Hurley on 31 October 1989 and took up his duties early in November 1989. Deacon Arthur Woods, a parishioner ordained at Wickford by Bishop McMahon on 25 June 1989, served alongside Father Hastings and is remembered for the great influence he carried in the parish. Father Hastings' first episcopal Visitation as Parish priest of Wickford took place on 22 November 1992. He reported to Bishop McMahon that the Catholic population of the parish had reached 2500, with an average Sunday Mass attendance of 469. Deacon Woods had been placed in charge of the Extraordinary Ministers of Holy Communion, the Prayer Group and RCIA (instruction of converts). Scripture groups were led by Father Hastings but it was reported that the Society of St Vincent de Paul now numbered only 4 members. Father Hastings outlined the plans he proposed for the division of the parish into areas/house groups. Having previously served for a brief time in the Diocese of Dundee in South Africa (twinned with the Diocese of Brentwood), Father Hastings was instrumental in ensuring that Wickford was linked to Parish of Volksrust, Natal. Deacon Woods, it was mentioned, was now the Life President of Churches Together in Wickford and Runwell, a tribute to his strong ecumenical leanings. At the Visitation on 26 November 1995 the Catholic population of the parish was given as 3000. There were 27 Extraordinary Ministers of Holy Communion but no Parish Council. The Society of St Vincent de Paul continued to operate and the parish also had a Social Club, Ladies Club, Playgroup, a Mothers & Toddlers Group, and groups associated with the Association for the Propagation of the Faith, Justice and Peace, and CAFOD. However, Father Hastings told the bishop that he thought there was a need to involve laity in parish visiting. Father Hastings served the parish until November 1997, having suffered a stroke four months earlier, before retiring to Nazareth House, Southend-on-Sea.

Father George Towler served as Parish Priest from 1997 to 2002. Appointed on 24 October 1997, he assumed his duties early in November. At this time Deacon Arthur Woods was diagnosed with cancer. He died on 13 September 1998 and his Requiem Mass was celebrated at Wickford by Bishop McMahon on 22 September 1998. At the Visitation 22 on November 1998 Father Towler recorded a Catholic population of 1500 and a Mass attendance 240. There were 36 Extraordinary Ministers of Holy Communion and the active groups in the parish were given as the Society of St Vincent de Paul, the Legion of Mary, the Guild of St Stephen for Altar Servers, the Ladies Club and the Youth Club, together with the Beavers, Cubs and Scouts. Father Towler informed the bishop that he visited Runwell Hospital almost daily. The Parish had been divided into three pastoral areas and refurbishment of Our Lady's Hall (the former temporary church built in 1951) had taken place. Moreover, the Parish of Wickford had now been placed the Brentwood Deanery (it was formerly in the now defunct Basildon Deanery).

In 2002 Father Towler was succeeded as Parish Priest by Father John Glynn. Father Daniel Mason replaced Father Glynn as Parish Priest in 2010. In 2012 Father John Corbyn, a priest of the Ordinariate of Our Lady of Walsingham, was appointed as Parish Priest. It was Father Corbyn who was responsible for the building of the Exposition Chapel adjacent to the Entrance to the church, which itself was remodelled. The current Parish Priest, Father Mark Reilly, came to Wickford in 2019. Father Reilly also serves as Master of Ceremonies for the Diocese of Brentwood and is Chairman of its Liturgy Committee.

## CATHOLIC EDUCATION

In much of the foregoing a constant thread has been the number of Catholic children in the parish who have attended non-Catholic schools and the education of pupils in the Catholic schools in adjacent parishes. However, there have been numerous attempts to build a Catholic primary school at Wickford, a proposal first suggested in 1962. Indeed, there was the possibility of obtaining a site west of Station Road and owned by Ministry of Agriculture as early as 1963. In 1964 the Diocese of Brentwood provisionally revised plans for its projected school at Wickford from 1- to 2-form entry. By this date a site had been identified on Wick Drive south of Hill Drive. However, by 1965 the proposed school had returned to being 1-form entry, a position reiterated in 1966. Father Gallagher wrote to Canon Hurley, the Secretary of the Diocesan Schools Commission (and a future Parish priest of Wickford) on 14 September 1967 on the matter of Wickford obtaining place in the school building programme: 'The position here is that the area is a hive of building activity. In every corner of Wickford there are estates sprouting up and at present there is a great influx of families from Walthamstow & Leytonstone into a council estate. There are great development plans all over and the population is going up rapidly. The one and persistent query is when are we getting a Catholic school.' Father Gallagher was of the view that the proposed 1-form entry primary school would prove inadequate. Indeed, he hoped to build a secondary school too: 'I go to one non-Catholic secondary school and give talks to over 70 catholic children. I haven't got the figures for the junior schools but it must be well over the 100 and I have collected at least 60 names of those aged under 5... This is fast becoming a big town and the parish is suffering greatly from the lack of Catholic schools. None of the surrounding parishes can help.' Canon Hurley replied to Father Gallagher on 20 September 1967, stating that some Wickford children were to be accommodated in the planned primary school at Billericay but that a 1-form entry school at Wickford was still envisaged and that a site had been reserved. On 3 March 1969 Basildon Urban District Council confirmed that a site at Wickford for a Catholic primary school could not be made available until 1973 at the earliest. Moreover, Essex County Council did not approve the scheme.

Father Kelly wrote to Mr Denis L'Estrange, Secretary of the Diocesan Education Commission, on 15 July 1970: 'As you may know there is a large area here scheduled for development & 3 acres approximately have been earmarked for a Catholic primary school.' However, Basildon Urban District Council duly replied that the Catholic primary school at Wickford formed part of the second phase of the Wick Comprehensive Development Area Proposals and was unlikely to materialise until at least 1972. On 23 November 1971 Father Kelly again wrote to Mr L'Estrange with regard to an imminent policy of 'siblings only' of existing Wickford pupils to be admitted to St Peter's Primary School, Billericay. He asked for consideration to be given to a school at Wickford: there were presently 94 children from the parish attending St Peter's, 20 at Catholic schools in Basildon and 20 in non-Catholic schools who attended instruction in the parish on Saturday. Moreover, there were other children who were receiving no Catholic education whatsoever: 'Although, like other parishes, our baptismal figures are declining, this is a developing area and hardly a week goes by without a new Catholic family moving into the parish. Many are newly-weds, but many already have young children... the position is becoming increasingly difficult... the need to get a school into the building programme is now urgent.' On 15 February 1972 Father Geoffrey Pye, Parish Priest of Billericay, informed Mr L'Estrange: 'At present we are still accepting children from Wickford but it becomes increasingly difficult to continue doing so as Billericay numbers grow.' Father Pye understood that the building of a proposed infant school at Billericay was to be delayed until a primary school was opened at Wickford, in which case

both Billericay and Wickford children would suffer. Basildon Urban District Council did not envisage a Catholic primary school at Wickford until 1974. Indeed, the Diocesan Education Commission was promoting Wickford's case but the Local Education Authority was not in a position to agree to its proposals. On 21 May 1974 Mr L'Estrange informed Father Pye at a Catholic primary school was soon to open in Laindon (this in fact never happened) and that the diocese was still trying to get Wickford into the building programme. An ever-persistent Father Kelly reported to Mr L'Estrange on 14 November 1974: 'Many of my parents are becoming increasingly anxious to know what progress, if any, is being made in regard to the provision of a Catholic primary school in Wickford. They know about the abandonment of the proposed school at Laindon, likewise the fact that the school in neighbouring Rochford is virtually empty and are at a loss to know why Wickford has been overlooked. At present about 120 children from the parish are attending St Peter's School, Billericay, or St Anne Line at Basildon, involving travelling a distance of five or six miles each way in order that a Catholic education for the children may be possible. Another 30 or so children regularly attend Religious Instruction on Saturday mornings. Apart from baptisms, this is a developing area and new families are moving in nearly every week. I also receive many telephone calls from people looking for accommodation in the area and wanting information regarding primary schooling for their children.' Mr L'Estrange replied to Father Kelly on 15 November 1974, informing him that the diocese was still trying to get the Local Education Authority to agree to providing a Catholic school at Wickford. However, he went on to admit that it was not the Diocesan Education Commission's top priority for a primary school in Essex. Mr L'Estrange was of the view that the case for Wickford on baptismal figures was not as strong as it had been four or five years previously and he recommended that Father Kelly take a census of the Catholic children of primary age in his parish and of the schools which they were attending. By January 1976, with 90 children from the parish in Catholic schools in neighbouring parishes, it was announced that only Wickford siblings were to be admitted to St Peter's School, Billericay. Mr L'Estrange, for his part, argued that more Wickford children could be admitted to St Anne Line Infants & Primary Schools, Basildon.

Canon Hurley, himself a former Secretary of the Diocesan Schools Commission and well aware of the situation at Wickford, contacted Father Brian Drea, the Diocesan Financial Secretary, on 28 February 1977 with regard to the project for 1-form entry primary school, as had been recently recommended to the Diocesan Education Commission by its Executive Committee. However, by September 1977 the Diocesan Education Commission was stating that no provision had been made for a school at Wickford in any building programme until 1981-1982. In January 1978 the Local Education Authority confirmed that the Wickford school was included in the Essex County Development Plan. By October 1978 the governors of St Peter's School, Billericay, noted that applications from Wickford were growing faster than those from Billericay. However, the diocese could see no case for a school at Wickford in the foreseeable future and even suggested some children might go to the planned new school at South Woodham Ferrers as well as to the Catholic schools in Basildon. On 9 January 1979 the Basildon Area Education Officer said that the Local Education Authority envisaged a 1-form entry Catholic primary school to be sited about one mile from the centre of the town in the Wick area and adjacent to a county primary school. The Local Education Authority stated that it had no objection to a Catholic primary school in Wickford provided all the Catholic children from the town used it and not just those from the Wick area. Indeed the Diocese of Brentwood was even prepared to take over the premises of an existing county school if such became available, and by April 1981 the Local Education Authority was discussing Barn Hall Primary School as a possible location for a Catholic school. Canon Hurley wrote to Mr Frank Murphy (Mr L'Estrange's successor) on 28 August 1981 about pressing the case for the Wickford school: 'You should also know that the baptisms this year are at the highest level ever...

On your first visit to this parish you said that Wickford should have had a school years ago. In contrast with the general decline in births and baptisms, the demand here is increasing.’ On 10 November 1981 Mr Powner, Headteacher of St Peter’s School, Billericay, wrote to the Area Education Officer at Basildon to inform him that his governing body supported the proposal for a school at Wickford. He added that the Wickford children were gradually being phased out at St Peter’s, i.e. siblings only were being admitted but even if the Wickford school should become available by 1982 there would be few existing Wickford parents willing to transfer their children from St Peter’s, while the pressure from Billericay was increasing. On 26 November 1981 Mr Murphy approached the Local Education Authority about the possible use of the premises of a county primary school. He was concerned that no Wickford children bar siblings had been admitted to St Peter’s School, Billericay, since 1979. Yet no solution was in sight. In July 1982 the diocese was still pursuing its interest in the use of the premises of Barn Hall Primary School. On 14 October 1983 Canon Hurley sent Mr Tom Helvin (Mr Murphy’s successor) a list of more than 260 children aged under ten years as an indication of the need for a primary school which, he stated, had first been proposed for inclusion in the Essex County Development Plan in 1968. In December 1983 the Local Education Authority asked the diocese about its interest in purchasing the premises of Barn Hall Primary School (which was due for closure in September 1984). Canon Hurley had been against this idea, preferring instead the premises of the County Infants’ School in Market Road. Nevertheless, in March 1984 the diocese was considering a bid to buy the Barn Hall premises. However, the scheme faltered and on 12 April 1984 Mr Helvin, writing to Canon Hurley, stated that Essex County Council was considering an alternative use for Barn Hall School and in any case there should be an interval of one or two years between its closure and the re-opening of the buildings as a Catholic school. Essex County Council said that by 1987/1988 it might be in position to offer the premises of Wickford County Infants’ School. On 2 May 1984 the Local Education Authority informed the diocese that the premises of Barn Hall School had been allocated for other uses thus were not available. In October 1985 the Diocese of Brentwood informed Essex County Council that it wished to retain an option on a school site on the Wick Estate while waiting for a decision regarding the use of the County Infants’ School premises.

The parishioners of Wickford, together with their parish priests, grew increasingly frustrated at the lack of progress in the matter of the provision of a primary school. In 1993 a parish petition in support of a school was organised. By November 1995 more than eighty Wickford children were attending Our Lady of Ransom Primary School, Rayleigh (a quarter of total roll), with 20 at St Peter’s Primary School, Billericay, but only 4 at St Anne Line Schools, Basildon. In September 1996 there were 90 pupils from Wickford at Rayleigh and 10 at Billericay but less than half-a-dozen at St Anne Line, Basildon. However, the Local Education Authority refused to provide free school transport to Rayleigh, designating such only to St Anne Line Schools, Basildon, because they were the nearest Catholic schools to Wickford. The last piece of correspondence in the Brentwood Diocesan archives on this subject is a letter from Father Hastings to Mr (later Sir) David Amess, the Member of Parliament for Basildon, dated 8 October 1996: ‘When good Catholics move into this area they enquire about schools and on discovering that there is no school in Wickford they look for a home elsewhere, either in Rayleigh or Billericay. So we have come to resign ourselves to living without a school.’

Father Stewart Foster, Archivist, Diocese of Brentwood (December 2022).