

A HISTORY OF ST. MATTHEW'S PARISH, JARROW

The parish of St Matthew, in the Monkton area of Jarrow, was officially founded in September 1935. Before that date, however, from Easter 1931, Sunday Masses – served from St Bede's Church in Jarrow - had taken place within the future parish boundaries, in the Chapel-of-Ease in Belsfield Girls' Central School on Bede Burn Road.

A new parish for the Monkton area of the town was becoming necessary because of the influx of people coming from older properties in the town centre into the new estates around Monkton and Primrose in the late 1920s and 1930s.

In 1920, Canon Henry Mackin of St Bede's, Jarrow, a far sighted man in many respects and especially in education, had bought a substantial plot of land in the area where Bede Burn Road met Butchers Bridge Road. This land included the 'Jubilee' Field, so named because it was bought by Canon Mackin in the year of the Silver Jubilee of his Ordination. It was intended to be used some time in the future to be the site of a school for boys. The large house and associated buildings at Belsfield, which were situated on the land, became the Catholic Central School for girls, and was run until 1925 by the Daughters of the Cross, and then continued to the end of the 1950s with lay staff.



Convent at Belsfield

From 1920 it served as the Convent of the Daughters of the Cross. From 1935 to 1959, it became the presbytery for St. Matthew's Church

The former Convent of the Daughters of the Cross at Belsfield became the presbytery when St Matthew's was formed as a parish in 1935, and remained in this role until the new presbytery was built adjoining the new church in the late 1950s.

From its formal beginning in 1935, with its first priest, Fr John Malachy Conlon, and situated in a very pleasant part of the town, St Matthew's parish became a close-knit community. There was no purpose built church, and no primary school, but this did not prevent the parish being an active body.

Mass and other church services from 1935 were held as before in the Assembly Hall of Belsfield Girls' School, on Bede Burn Road – part of the school during the day, and a church for early morning Mass and for Sunday Mass and other services at weekends.



Belsfield School Hall/Church
- Fr Conlon's Silver Jubilee 1947

Fr. Patrick Ryan, Fr. Thomas Kerrigan, Fr. Malachy Conlon, Fr. Edmund Histon

One of the jobs associated with being an altar boy during these years was to carry the kneelers from the hall after morning Mass and stack them in an outbuilding so that the school day could proceed.....and this after serving Mass at 7.30 am, and before going to school themselves elsewhere.

In the meantime, unemployed men of the parish built a substantial wall around part of the land purchased by Canon Mackin, the site which was intended to be for the building of a future church for St Matthew's parish. The ground was used in the meantime for allotments.

From the founding of the parish and in the absence of a primary school, children who belonged to St Matthew's parish attended various schools in the town, including St Bede's Infant Schools at their sites in Monkton Road and Grant Street. After the destruction of Grant Street School in a bombing raid in 1941, some of the children who attended there were eventually found a home at Mayfield RC Senior Girls' School in Pine Street. Before the War, St. Matthew's children for whom places could not be found in the existing Catholic schools in Jarrow had schooling provided for them in part of Valley View (local authority) school where one of the teachers was Miss Norah Moore.

After the war, temporary classrooms known as 'The Huts' were established in Finchale Terrace in Low Simonside for Infant stage children, in the charge of Miss Molly Finnigan.

At the Junior stage, girls were accommodated as one class in the Church/School in Belsfield, with their teacher Miss Nelly Finnigan, while Junior boys attended St Bede's School in Harold Street, in the town centre. This situation extended into the early 1950s.

So children from the parish had no real school home, being dispersed in so many ways. A church was needed, but the obvious priority was to build a primary school on the site already earmarked for it, the land having been bought years earlier by Canon Mackin for that purpose. Local Catholics raised the sum of around £48, 500 and the new school in Alnwick Grove, located just under a mile from the present church, was opened on 28th June 1954. This was – and still is – a fine building, large and airy surrounded by a huge field. Some of the girls who attended the church/school/classroom at Belsfield recall troupes of them carrying piles of books along York Avenue to the new school before its opening day.

The Head teacher was Miss Molly Finnigan, and her sister, Miss Nelly Finnegan was on the staff; they were now teaching boys and girls in the same class, something which had not happened before except in the Infant schools.

The Girls RC Central School stayed at Belsfield until 1959, when its staff and students were transferred to the new St. Joseph's Grammar Technical School in Hebburn.

In 1960, Belsfield became the home of St Bede's Senior Boys School, which since the early years of the war had been rehoused in St Bede's Harold Street School after their school in Low Jarrow, near St Paul's Monastery had suffered a 'near miss' in a bombing raid.

During the decade following the war, until their new school was opened in 1954, many of St Matthew's Junior age girls were still being taught in the Assembly Hall/church of Belsfield School.

The next project for the parish was to plan for the building of a church, on the site bought almost 40 years earlier by Canon Mackin. Six years after the opening of the school, St Matthew's at last had its own church, opened on 9 October 1958 by Bishop James Cunningham.



Opening of New Church 1958

Fr. James Walsh (Hebburn)

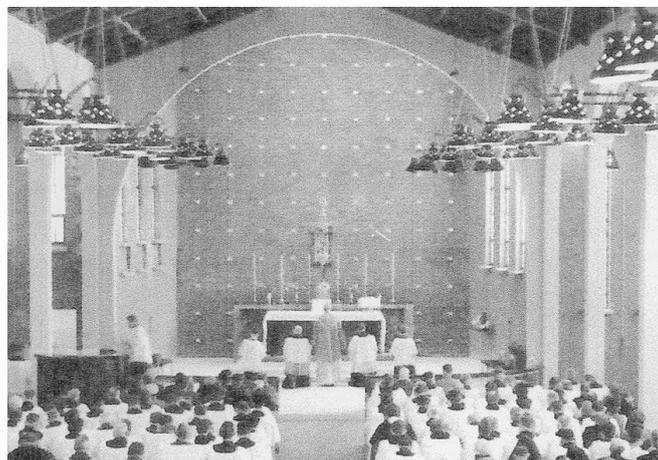
Bishop James Cunningham

Fr. Malachi Conlon

Canon Austin Forkin (Hebburn)

Mgr Paul Grant (President of Ushaw College)

Opening of New Church 1958



This was a building typical of the style of 1950s and 1960s Catholic churches, designed by Gunning architects, with a high roofed, hall type interior, with most internal walls featuring exposed red brick.

The high and wide wall behind the sanctuary was rendered in dark blue bricks, interspersed with gold/white bricks. The building of this church was such a milestone in parish history, along with the building of the modern primary school only four years earlier.

A presbytery was built adjoining the church, and in late 1969, a Parish Hall was built which has become a vital addition to the parish.

In 1983, the church building was consecrated, in the silver jubilee year of its opening, following the re-ordering of the interior, including all walls being plastered and painted white, which lightened the building considerably. New modern windows were installed, carpets were fitted and the existing porch was modernised.



Bishop Hugh Lindsay and Priests
Fr. Mark Carroll (Parish Priest), 3rd left

Sanctuary after Re-ordering



In 1985, the parish marked the golden jubilee of its original foundation with many events and celebrations, including a very successful Exhibition of photographs and memorabilia in the Parish Hall.

In subsequent years, and especially in 2008, further improvements were made within the church building and the adjoining presbytery.

Going back to the fifties, it is important to note that during the years when St Matthew's had no real church and no school, the parish was instrumental in helping to fund a new church for the fledgling and rapidly growing neighbouring parish of St. Mary's – full name is Our Lady of the Assumption – which was opened on the Scotch Estate on the outskirts of Jarrow in 1952.

The parish priest of St. Matthew's, Fr Conlon, was appointed to take charge of this new parish.

Fr Michael McCleary became St. Matthew's Parish Priest, and stayed in that role until the late 50s, until poor health prevented him from continuing; because of this, he took no part in the ceremonies marking the opening of the long-awaited new church in October 1958. He died in September 1959, and Fr. Conlon, who had overseen the establishment of both St. Matthew's Parish and St. Mary's Parish, died the next month.

During these years, from its beginnings when Canon Mackin bought it in 1920, and into the 1960s, and 1970s, Belsfield House and its grounds had played an important role in the history of the parish, and in ways which would not have originally been envisaged. It is not easy to overstate its part in the unusual arrangements for Catholic education in the town, involving both St Bede's parish (the mother church, founded in 1861) and St Matthew's. From 1920 as we have seen, it was the Girls RC Central School until 1959; it became a temporary home for the church from the early thirties, though temporary meant almost 30 years; Junior Girls were taught in its church/school hall for several years; from 1960, into the 1970s, it was utilised by the Senior Boys school, until local schools were re-organised on Comprehensive lines.

From the early 1970s onwards, parts of the site were sold to housing developers and Bede Burn View now occupies the corner where Belsfield and its grounds once stood.

In 1973 its Jubilee Field was used to host the 1300th anniversary celebrations of the birth of the Venerable Bede when thousands of people visited from local and national places, and the celebrant at the Mass was Cardinal John Heenan.



Bede 1300 Celebrations 1973

Fr Dennis Tindall
Cardinal John Heenan

The parish continues to thrive; it is not possible to list all the many and essential activities which it enjoys, with its social groups, its aid groups, its liturgical-related groups, its music and those who work behind the scenes.

Most of all, it is the loyal parishioners who make the parish fulfil its sacred role in an increasingly secular society.

(Mary Swales August 2017)