

# THE ORIGINS OF SAINT BEDE'S CHURCH

In the nineteenth century, Tyneside was at the forefront of the Industrial Revolution. As mines and forges, factories and shipyards opened there was need for men and women to carry out the work. Irish immigrants came in large numbers at that time and many worked and settled in Jarrow.

The need to provide for their spiritual lives meant that Catholic missions began to open up along the Tyne. South Shields was one of the earliest. Clergy from England and from Ireland worked hard to provide the Mass and the Sacraments for the rapidly growing Catholic community.



FATHER EDMUND J. KELLY  
*(Who Founded the Mission)*

Father Edmund Kelly, from Moincoin in the County of Waterford, Ireland, was appointed to the Catholic mission at Saint Bede's in South Shields. This appointment also included responsibility for the Catholics living in Jarrow.

Father Kelly began celebrating Mass for the Catholics living in Jarrow in 1856 at 175 High Street for the Catholics in Jarrow. The house was demolished in the post-war clearances.



The numbers were sufficient for a church and it was decided to build one named after Saint Bede. Bishop William Hogarth laid the Foundation Stone on 30<sup>th</sup> October 1860. The superior of the Dominicans at Saint Andrew's in Newcastle, Father Aylward OP<sup>1</sup>, gave an address to the large number of people present including many clergy among which was Father George Meynell, who was stationed in Gateshead.

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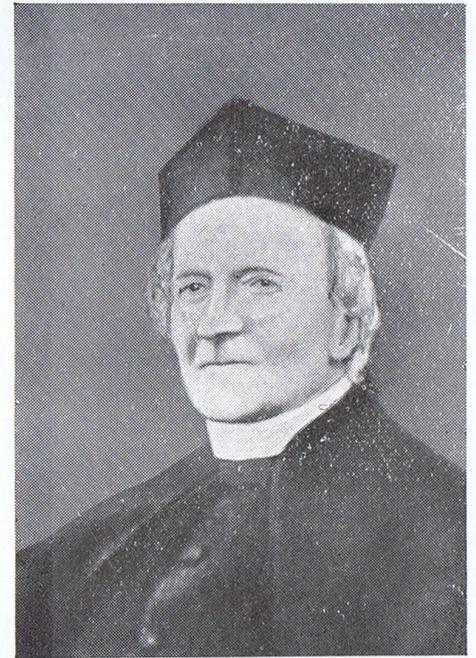
<sup>1</sup> Sometimes, mistakenly referred to as Fr. Bernard OP. The community of Dominicans St. Andrew's was not established as a priory so it was led by the then superior Fr. Aylward OP.

The new church was built by voluntary labour. Mr. Thomas Lumsden, a joiner, and Mr. McGlinshey, who was skilled in the building trade, directed the work. As the church took shape Father Kelly began celebrating Mass within the walls of the building.

During this time Father Meynell was moved from Saint Joseph's, Gateshead, to Saint Bede's, South Shields. He worked with Father Kelly in serving the people of Jarrow.

Father Kelly officially opened the new church on 27<sup>th</sup> December 1861 by celebrating Mass. He was assisted by Father Meynell and Mgr. Charles Eyre, from Saint Mary's Cathedral, Newcastle. Mgr. Eyre preached on words from the Book of Genesis (Ch 28 v 17)

*'This is no other than a gate of heaven'*



FATHER GEORGE MEYNELL  
*(The First Resident Priest)*



The first church was a very simple building with plain pointed windows harking back to a medieval style of architecture called 'Early English'. Not only was it built by the pennies of the poor but Saint Bede's was actually put up by the parishioners. Both men and women of that early community gave of their spare time in the evenings and on Saturday afternoons to raise the walls and roof so that Jarrow would have a permanent place for Catholic worship.

Some lent their strength and enthusiasm as labourers while others were skilled as masons and builders. It is an inspiring story. As we look at Saint Bede's Church today we can only be grateful for what they did and be challenged to carry on the work of building up the Church in our day, in our own way.



After the opening of Saint Bede's Father Kelly seems to have confined his ministry to South Shields leaving the care of the Catholics of Jarrow to Father Meynell who became our first parish priest. A presbytery had to be built and a school. These were put up on either side of the church. Again, the parishioners did the work and Father Meynell acted as a labourer on the site; he was helped by boys and girls from the school who carried the bricks.



In 1871 Father Kelly died and was taken back to Ireland to be buried at Moincoin. The people of Jarrow did not forget the work done by their founding priest. In his memory they commissioned a window above the old sanctuary altar.

In the lower panels of the window are three scenes showing Father Kelly in prayer, celebrating Mass and being ordained.

The Catholic community continued to grow rapidly and it became clear that a bigger church was needed. It was decided to turn the church round and a new extension was built along the south end. To make it possible for everyone to have sight of the altar, the sanctuary was repositioned to this new end. The old sanctuary became a new entrance area.

The parish must have been in a position to pay for an extension of considerable expense. This time a professional architect was employed.

Turrets were provided for bells. The blessing of bells in those days could only be carried out by a bishop. Bishop Chadwick had died in May 1882 so they needed to find a bishop! Bishop-elect, John William Bewick, invited the Bishop of Galloway, John McLachlan, to perform the ceremony on 16 October of that same year.

The building work went on through 1882 and a fine extension was added. The carving on the outside of the new end of Saint Bede's is very good. A walk around the outside of the church reveals how the plain lancet windows with simple stone-work give way to wonderful leaf designs and fearsome heads and gargoyles – someone had a lot of skill and a lot fun sculpting them.

One gargoyle is of someone with toothache!



There is an image of a green man (if you look carefully on the side of one of the turrets).



The green man represented the power of nature and the fruitfulness of the earth created by God

The architects were Dunn and Hansom (the same firm designed the spire of Saint Mary's Cathedral, Saint Michael's in Newcastle and the new Chapel of Saint Cuthbert at Ushaw). The builder was James Storar, local councillor and parishioner. The windows of the new end of the church are more intricately carved and along with the fine carvings were the work of Sherratt and Ovens, a Preston firm.



They made a particularly fine rose window in the gable end of what is now the hall – it seems to be based on the great medieval window, 'The Bishop's Eye', in the south transept of Lincoln Cathedral. It is an unusual design for a rose window as it does not focus on the centre of the circle but has two halves of intricate flowing tracery.

The newly extended church was opened on Sunday, 1 April 1883. Bishop Bewick presided at an 11.00am High Mass on that day. The Very Reverend Father Alphonsus O'Neill, a Passionist priest, preached on a passage from the prophet Haggai (Ch 2 vv 6-9) This includes the line:

*'The glory of this latter house shall be greater than of the former, saith the Lord of hosts; and in this place will I give peace*

– a contemporary account in the Tablet says that the sermon was of great length!

The parish continued to expand and over the following decades the sanctuary was adorned with a fine altar, screens and altar rails. Sacristies were added too, but most of what you see in the church today is the result of the two building projects of 1861 and 1883.



On 12 April 1885 a new altar was dedicated by Bishop Wilkinson. It was installed when Father Martin Hayes, originally from Tipperary, was our second parish priest. Father Meynell had commissioned the altar but there was a delay in its completion and he had retired to Penrith due to failing health .

The Altar, Tabernacle and Screen (called a Reredos) were designed by Dunn and Hansom and are of Caen stone carved by Sherratt and Ovens of Preston. The Tablet of 25 April 1885 says it 'is a piece of the most beautiful sculpturing'. At some stage the central pinnacle was reduced in height; originally it was 21 feet high and surmounted by a pelican feeding its young. The altar at the front of the Sanctuary that you see today replaces the one of 1885.

In the 1980s the Sanctuary was reordered to allow the Mass to be celebrated with the priest facing the people in keeping with the renewal begun by the Second Vatican Council. The old altar was removed from the back wall and a marble one was placed at the front of the sanctuary. This Altar came from the Catholic church in Alnwick. The work was carried out under the direction of the architects J & W Lowry Ltd.

The 'new' Altar was blessed on 30 May 1985 by Bishop Hugh Lindsay when Father John Gibbons was our parish priest. At the same time the Bishop consecrated the church; anointing the walls with Chrism. Four Consecration Crosses with candles below are attached to the walls as reminders of that special day.



At the same time the left hand side of the 1883 extension was screened off to make a sizeable parish hall. A new entrance and porch was made at the back of the church.

Saint Bede's Parish today is still a lively and flourishing family. All are welcome to share our worship, our life and our love.