

# Birtley Catholic Mission & Parish History

## compiled by Father Geoffrey Scott OSB

### 1. The Beginning until 1890.



After the Reformation and during the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. County Durham' Catholic community was served by a number of priests who belonged to the secular clergy or to the religious orders, such as the Jesuits and the Benedictines. In centres of large population like Durham, these priests were supported largely by their small congregations. Elsewhere, the priest was the chaplain to a wealthy Catholic family, like the Riddells of Gateshead. Sometimes, the priest was a 'riding' missionary, going around on horseback, visiting a circuit of small Catholic congregations. Throughout this time, the Catholic community was subject to restrictions and sometimes persecution on account of its beliefs. We have no definite record of a Catholic community in the Birtley area before the 1690s, although it is likely that there were a few Catholics in the vicinity of the nearest town of any importance, which was Chester-le-Street. This was a prosperous market town and the centre of a widespread and important Anglican parish in the Anglican diocese of Durham.

By the 1680s, the Catholic centre of Chester-le-Street was to be found at Lumley Castle and in the park which surrounded it. Richard, First Baron Lumley, had been brought up a Catholic, but became an Anglican in 1687. His sisters, however, and some members of the Lumley household seem to have remained attached to the ancient faith. Lumley's agent was William Tempest and a member of the famous Catholic family of that name. It was



this gentleman who, despite the apostasy of his patron. Lord Lumley, donated in 1696 the sum of £300 (princely sum in those days) to the English Benedictine monks to provide a priest for the few Catholics around Lumley Park and Chester-le-Street. The condition of the gift was that mass should be said each month for the donor by the monk who was supported by the interest from the investing of the fund.

We have little surviving evidence of this Lumley Park mission over the next few decades, although we do possess the names of the monks who served it. There is also a strong tradition that during the period of persecution, these

monks ministered to the Catholics of the area by travelling from place to place disguised as pedlars. Birtley as such can hardly have been said to exist during this time. It can have been little more than a hamlet with a few houses in which lived miners working in the many surrounding pits. This insignificance may partly explain why Father Leander Raffa moved the Catholic mission in 1746 from Chester-le-Street to Birtley. For in the previous year, Catholics especially in the north had undergone a renewed persecution because of their alleged support of Bonnie Prince Charlie and the Stuarts in the Jacobite Rising of 1745. In the city of Durham, an angry mob attacked one of the 'popish chapels', and in Gateshead, Father John Walsh, a Jesuit, who was nicknamed 'Daddy Walsh', was 'smoked out' of his lodgings by the Duke of Cumberland's troops. If Chester-le-Street was such an important town, Catholics would doubtless have wanted to keep out of the limelight, and the quiet backwater of Birtley would have been a suitable refuge for a Catholic priest. Catholics in Gateshead might also have helped in the development of the Birtley mission at this time. Father Raffa was chaplain to the Riddell family whose main seat was at Great Swinburne, north of Hexham, in the 1740s, and the Riddells had a large house and property in Gateshead adjoining the present St Edmund's (Anglican) chapel which still survives. This Gateshead property also seems to have been threatened by the mob at the time of the 1745 rebellion, and it is possible that the Riddells' chaplain, Father Raffa retired to Birtley at this time in order to avoid trouble.

Once in Birtley, the Catholic mission expanded fast, helped by money left to the mission by members of the Brandling family who were wealthy coal owners in Leeds and Felling. Ralph Brandling, who died in 1751 aged 21, left £500 to the Chester-le-Street mission. He had probably been taught as a boy by Father Raffa in the Benedictine college at Douai in northern France. The conditions of this gift were that 22 masses be said yearly for Ralph Brandling, and that 2 masses should be said each month by the Birtley priest in Felling, where his mother lived. It was the Brandlings who seem to have introduced the Humble family to Birtley. Like the Brandlings, the Humbles had connections with Leeds and the heads of the family acted as coal agents for the Brandlings in their pits around Felling and Birtley. The Humbles were to be great benefactors to the Catholic congregation in Birtley for over one hundred and fifty years. The Birtley Catholic baptismal register which dates from this period lists the names of successive generations of this family.

Gradually, more donations were added to the invested capital of the Brandling fund. In 1753, for instance, the Benedictine Placid Hutton, a Durham man, left £100 to be invested to help Birtley. It was for reasons of safety that all these funds were invested with local Catholic families like the Erringtons of Beaufront, near Hexham, who were looking after the Tempest fund in 1725 and the Swinburnes of Capheaton who were later to take care of the Brandling fund.

The Birtley baptismal register gives us an indication of the size of the Catholic congregation from about 1750. More importantly, it also shows the growth of the congregation, as Birtley expanded in response to the demands of industrial growth in the last decades of the eighteenth century. Between 1745

and 1770, there were usually no more than five baptisms a year, but from the 1770s, this figure doubles. It is significant that this increase coincided with two Acts of Parliament (in 1778 and 1791) through which many of the penal laws against Catholics were repealed.

A better indication, however, of the actual size and type of the congregation attached to the Birtley mission during the eighteenth century can be gained from a variety of other sources. In 1744, just before the mission moved from Chester-le-Street to Birtley, the authorities drew up a list of Catholics 'suspected of being dangerous' (presumably they were Jacobite sympathisers); there were 25 of these in Birtley, 14 in Chester-le-Street, including Father Edward Bulmer, and those in Felling included Ralph Brandling of Felling Hall. By far the most valuable source for Birtley, however, is the list of Catholics drawn up nationally for the House of Lords in 1767. This showed that there were 137 'papists' in the parish of Chester-le-Street, of which 14 were living in Birtley, and another 30 in Lamesley parish. The 1767 Returns are particularly useful because they tell us of the ages and professions of Birtley Catholics: 13 of the men worked in the coal trade as miners, viewers, wrights and staithmen, but there were also a merchant, innkeeper and husbandmen. Four Humbles were also listed: Mary (aged 68), and her 5 grandchildren, Ralph (aged 42), and his 9 children, Anne (aged 55) and Margaret (aged 60). The priest, Father Robert Daniel, whose name is also found in this list, was, of course, also responsible for the Catholic congregations found, not only in Birtley, but also in Chester-le-Street, Lumley Park, Pelton, Waldrige, Whitehill, 'Pictree', Fatfield, Chateshaush. Portobello and Urpeth. Thirteen years later, in 1780, the number of Catholics in the whole Anglican parish of Chester-le-Street, which included Birtley, had grown to 180.



By this year, 1780, our picture of the Birtley Catholic mission becomes clearer, thanks largely to letters from the Birtley priests to their religious superior, the Benedictine President who was then living in France. Father Robert Daniel was to be the mission priest until his death in 1781 and for most of his time in Birtley had lived with a family who belonged to the congregation. His letters suggest that the mission chapel itself was to be found in the same family house. By 1779, this family had 'broken up' so the priest was determined 'to purchase land and build a place to pray in himself'. He expected Benedictine funds to be used for this purpose. Despite his grumbles about the poor salary he was being paid whilst in Birtley and about his ill-health, he was reluctant to leave. He admitted that the congregation was large, but that ever since 'the Lumleys' defection', it had been 'unstable'. The only household which had the means to put up the priest as a lodger was that of the prosperous merchant, Mr Thomas Hill, and his was presumably the family which had 'broken up'. There is no further mention of this chapel, and as at the time of his death in

1781, Father Daniel seems to have had a lot of money invested locally. We can only presume this was set aside by him to finance the proposed chapel. There was a brief interval after Father Daniel's death, when no priest was resident in Birtley, and therefore, between 1781 and 1783, it was served from Pontop Hall by the secular priest Father Johnson. The frequent journeys from Pontop soon proved a great burden to him and the Benedictines therefore decided to install Father Bernard Slater in early 1783 as priest in Birtley. He was to remain as pastor of the congregation until his death in 1810.

It is likely that Birtley's first free-standing chapel was erected soon after Father Slater's appointment, thus realising his predecessor's Father Robert Daniel's principal aim. The 1791 Catholic Relief Act allowed Catholics for the first time to build their own chapels. These had to be in secluded positions, they were to be simple and unadorned, without bells or towers, in order that their construction might neither annoy nor alarm Protestant neighbours. Birtley's new chapel was registered on 29th October 1791, and was then described as 'a place of Religious worship, prepared and used in or near the Dwelling House of John Slater, Clerk, situated at Birtley'. This registration was performed by Father Slater, by the merchant Thomas Hill, and by Charles Joseph Humble of the White House, then aged 28 years old, and known by later historians as the benefactor who had donated the parcel of land for this first chapel and priest's house.

## II. 1800 until the Present

From 1800, the history of the Catholic community in Birtley is quite well documented, and except for an interval between 1825 and 1828, there were resident priests in the town. Between 1802 and 1805, there were, in fact, two priests in Birtley, because Father Bernard Slater was joined by the retired monk. Father Anselm Bolton, who made his name as the monk who gave up his home at Ampleforth in North Yorkshire to house his community exiled from France after the French Revolution. Birtley, in fact, was at this time the only mission in County Durham which was served by priests from a Religious Order, in this case, the Benedictines. The Birtley Benedictine priest had still a wide area to look after. In 1807, for instance, we find him officiating as far away as St Andrew's, Newcastle, and at Saltwell, Gateshead, in 1817 and 1825. In Birtley, the priest continued to officiate in the chapel which, as we have already suggested, dated from about 1791.

The best description we have of this small mission chapel is to be found in the Catholic Magazine of March 1832, which describes this chapel and the priest's house being in the north west part of the town, 'a plain unpretentious edifice'. This suggests it was on the site or very close to the present St Joseph's Church, since the centre of old Birtley village was in the area around where Charles Perkins's monument now stands, and St Joseph's is to the north west of this. There were in 1832, at the time of the above report, 'one hundred communicants' in the Birtley congregation, and this number was to grow rapidly as the coal industry underwent a huge expansion



during these years. As the Catholic Irish streamed into this part of the world in ever larger numbers in search of work in the pits, so the little chapel built some fifty years earlier was soon unable to house the growing number of Catholics.

By 1837, Birtley's Catholic mission narrowly escaped being re-absorbed into Chester-le-Street, which had remained the administrative and urban centre of the district. In June of that year, Father William Riddell wrote to Bishop Briggs: 'For a long time I was against the Chapel being built in Chester-le-Street because the most regular attenders in every way were either living at Birtley or close to it. I thought it rather hard upon those who had given general edification to lose the benefit of the slothful and the negligent'. Such sentiments demonstrate how strong the faith was among Birtley folk at the time. But Riddell reluctantly conceded that it might be better to transfer the chapel to Chester-le-Street 'principally on account of it then being in a town'. Again, we are left with the impression of how small a place Birtley must have been as late as 1837. Riddell's letter also gives us some impression of what a poor state of repair the chapel was in by this time: 'The present chapel is an abominable place, so exceedingly damp and rather out of the way, and certainly has no attractions. The House, though small, is very tolerable'.

The tug-o'-war between Birtley and Chester-le-Street in regard to the chapel's location was won by Birtley. The monks preferred to remain in Birtley and pledged their commitment to remain here by deciding to replace the old run-down chapel with a new church in 1842-3, which was designed by the famous North-Eastern architect, John Dobson, who was responsible for some of the finest buildings in Newcastle, including the Central Station. In 1815, Dobson had already designed Birtley Hall (south of St John's Anglican Church and demolished in the 1960s) for the Warwick family, and whilst busy on the new Catholic Church in Birtley, he was also engaged on plans for the Catholic churches at Longhorsley (1841), Felling (1841) and Ministeracres (1843). Dobson designed for Birtley the Chapel, Priest's House and Schools. It was this Church whose 150th anniversary we celebrated in 1993. Its erection marks the Birtley Catholic mission's coming-of-age, for in 1843 it became for the first time a recognisable parish, with its own handsome Gothic church dedicated to Saint Mary and St. Joseph.

The labours involved in all this building fell on the shoulders of Father James Sheridan, who had become the parish priest of Birtley in 1841. He gained permission from his Benedictine superiors to purchase a plot of land from the Maddison family on which he built the church and its associated buildings. This land cost £400 and the building itself, £1000, most of which Father Sheridan seems to have begged from well-wishers in Liverpool. The foundation stone was blessed on July 16th 1842 by the same Father Riddell who had tried earlier to transfer the mission to Chester-le-Street. The church was opened at a mass on 18th August 1843 which was celebrated in the presence of Bishop Mostyn. The procession into the church was led by the 'Newcastle and Sunderland guilds' and Father Henry Brewer, the Benedictine provincial of the North, preached on 'the sacrifice of the mass'. The choir came from Sunderland, the collection taken amounted to £30, and 'after the service,

the company sat down to an elegant and substantial entertainment'. On 12th May 1846, Father Sheridan registered the new church 'as a place of Congregation or Assembly for Religious Worship after the manner of the Church of Rome'. There are many famous anecdotes about Father Sheridan. It is said, for instance, that one night he returned to find the Church doors locked during what was supposed to be a choir practice, so he went into the Church through the sacristy where, to his amazement, he discovered the choir dancing across the floor accompanied by the organ. He promptly expelled them.

Throughout the following decades, the congregation continued to grow, causing another major building scheme to take place in 1862, when the nave was extended, the separate sanctuary built, and the sacristy added. When this project was completed, a High Mass was sung by the Prior of Ampleforth in the presence of Bishop Hogarth, and the sermon was preached by Father Cuthbert Hedley, a native of Morpeth and monk of Ampleforth, and later Bishop of Newport. The choir sang a mass composed by Thomas and John Swinburne who owned a brickyard in the town and who had been educated at Douai. They were to be amongst the greatest benefactors of the parish. The steady growth of the parish continued throughout the rest of the century. A new school was built in 1870, further property was purchased, and land bought for a church and school at Wrekenton in 1882. The century ended in 1896 with the bi-centenary celebration of the establishment of the original Lumley Park mission in 1696, when the choir and orchestra performed Gounod's Messe Solennelle under the direction of the two Swinburne brothers.

What picture do we have of the congregation in these years? The development of a school shows a growing Catholic population, and the setting up of various parochial societies demonstrates the continuing close bond between church and people. In 1895, for instance, Father Benedict Scannell founded the League of the Cross, originally a Catholic organisation to support temperance, but Birtley's League soon developed its own fine brass band attached to St. Joseph's.

Fortunately, we have the personal reminiscences of Father Wilfrid Phillipson who was parish priest in Birtley between 1884 until 1891 which give a revealing picture of the parish at this time. In 1884, with some fear and trepidation, he reached Birtley at night, after a journey on the train from Newcastle, and leaving the station, climbed up to the church, 'along a cinder path with fields on the left, and a few cottages on the right'. There was no pavement, no street lamps, drainage nor water supply. He boasts that a water supply came to Birtley when he promised he would support temperance and teetotalism only after a water supply had been installed. Father Phillipson's parish was still extensive, covering an area of nearly forty square miles. Inevitably he had to deal with frequent serious mining accidents; in 1884, for instance, he remembered forty two dying from a pit explosion. Smallpox was another scourge; during one epidemic, he recounted that he had buried 'our Catholic dead by night'. Father Phillipson was friendly with Miss Charlotte and Miss Anne Humble who were the last two members of a family which had supported the mission in Birtley for generations. He later returned to Birtley to preach the

bi-centenary sermon in 1896, choosing for his text the words: Others have laboured, and you have entered their labours. 'I traced back the history of the mission from the present time to the dark days - 200 years ago - when the remnant of the faithful, at the peril of their lives, met in the narrow, windowless hiding-hole still existing in the village, to receive the Bread of Angels from the hands of a proscribed and hunted priest of God'.

During the 20th century, it is surprising how little the parish as such has changed since Father Phillipson's time. The north aisle and Lady Chapel were added by Father (later Abbot) David Hurley in 1910. During this century, the sodalities and societies have continued to expand: St. Joseph's Football Team, St Joseph's Literary Debating Society Study Club (1930), the Catholic Young Men's Society (1933), the Children of Mary, the Tertiaries, the Catholic Women's League, the Society of St Vincent de Paul, the 2nd Birtley St Joseph's Scouts, Cubs, Brownies and Guides, the Knights of St Columba, and latterly, the Young Mothers' Group. All of these tell us something about the congregation's devotion to its church and to its members. The long tradition of choral music has been maintained in the Male Choir, and has taken on another form in the Folk Group established in the 1970s.

In 1935, the chapel of St Benet at Ouston was founded, which, thanks to the development of new housing estates, has now its own primary school. In the late 1960s, the re-ordering of the church was begun, in accordance with the liturgical directives of the Second Vatican Council, and in the early 1980s, a new social club, opposite the church, was built and linked up with the Parish Hall, which had originally been the school. A major change occurred in 1977



when the Benedictines who had staffed the mission and parish for over two hundred years, left and were replaced by diocesan clergy. The 1970s and 1980s saw an expansion of ministry within the parish as the clergy encouraged members of the congregation to share in their pastoral work.

Thus, a convent was established near the church, which became the home of two Sisters of the Congregation of the Daughters of Jesus, who soon found themselves fully part of the parish. Later, a large team of Eucharistic Ministers were commissioned, allowing many of the house-bound and sick to be visited and to receive Holy Communion more frequently.

Birtley still remains a traditional parish, despite the development over the last thirty years of large numbers of new housing estates. It has no large institutions like hospitals and schools which require more specialist ministries. Instead, its priests devote themselves fully to the parish, and in this way, the traditional character of this Catholic community has continued, as it has in the past, to provide strength, support and inspiration to its members. In 1996, we shall be celebrating the 300th anniversary of the establishment in 1696 of the Catholic Chapel in Lumley Park, and in



1993, we are commemorating the 150th anniversary of the building of St Joseph's.

Our first records of Birtley's Catholic places of worship date from the end of the 17th century, but over the three hundred years since then, much of Birtley's Catholic history has been passed on by word of mouth by generations of parishioners devoted to the town's Catholic history: Inevitably then, the evidence has been elaborated and has doubtless undergone some distortion in the telling.

What follows is an attempt to piece together the evidence we have for the various buildings which have served Church in 1843. We therefore congratulate Father Tony Duffy and Father Peter Kelly and all the members of the parish, and ask God's blessing and protection for the future.

#### The First Chapels: C.1696-1745 Lumley Park, and 1746-C.1791 Birtley

Nothing is known about that first chapel attached to the mission at Lumley Park until 1746, although it was almost certainly a domestic chapel, that is, it was to be found in the home of a member of the congregation. No free standing chapel was allowed by law at this time. One relic which we do possess from this time is the small, late seventeenth century silver chalice which was rediscovered in the 1980s in St. Joseph's Primary School by Father Brian Murphy.

Once the priest moved to Birtley in 1746, another chapel seems to have been established, although this was again in a private house. This was the "windowless" apartment, about seven feet square and hardly six foot high, found in the eastern part of the town. It is said to have been located in 'Atkinson's Buildings', behind the Rose and Shamrock Public House, in what is now Kateregina. The priest lived with a 'pious Catholic family', latterly the family of the merchant, Thomas Hill, and travelled about the countryside disguised as a pedlar. In the middle of the nineteenth century, Father Bede Swale (1850-79) at his own expense kept the little windowless apartment white-washed and clean, out of reverence for the hallowed purpose it once served'. This 'small unlighted chamber' was still standing at the end of the nineteenth century, when Father Wilfrid Phillipson regretted not gaining possession of it.

#### The Second Chapel C.1791-1842.

As we have already seen from the correspondence, there were moves afoot to build a bigger and free-standing chapel in the late 1780s, whose completion coincided with the 1791 Catholic Relief Act, which gave Catholics religious freedom. This chapel seems to have been built on land donated by Charles Joseph Humble, probably near the site of the present St Joseph's. It was a humble affair, and probably resembled a plain nonconformist chapel. When there was no priest resident between 1825 and 1828, the story is told that Mr Humble of Birtley White House, which was situated south of the present Leafield House, had the whole congregation taken to Newcastle for Mass in a farmer's long cart. It was in this chapel that Father James Higginson died whilst saying Mass in 1836. He was taken into the presbytery, and the church



locked, everything being left untouched, until a priest came from Newcastle the next morning to finish the uncompleted Mass.

In 1884, Father Wilfrid Phillipson recounts that the 'sanctuary end' covered with an arched ceiling was all that was left of this chapel. After its replacement by the new church in 1843, it served as a workman's cottage. Its altar and altar-stone were, however, later taken to Wrekenton and used in the new church there from 1882.

### St Joseph's Church 1843-1993. 150 years of Service.

This was opened in 1843 and was dedicated to St Mary and St Joseph. It was designed by John Dobson, who tended to build churches essentially Georgian in style but with Gothic additions. Birtley St. Joseph's is in the Early English Gothic style, with very thick walls and a porch. It was built on a commanding position in the north of the town. The dedication to St Mary seems to have been dropped early on, although older parishioners will remember the stone St. Mary's Terrace which lay to the east of the present presbytery. The only major additions to the church were made by Father Bede Swale in 1862, and consisted of an extension to the nave, a new sanctuary and sacristy. In 1910, Father David Hurley had the north aisle and Lady Chapel built.

### A Tour of the Church

#### 1. The Sanctuary



The original sanctuary of 1843 lay where the front pews now begin. Above the present confessional, designed by a parishioner architect, Wilfrid McCann, in the early 1970s, can be seen two windows out of sequence with the rest, which were part of the original sanctuary.

On each side of the chancel arch are the figures of St Benedict and his sister, St Scholastica. The large east window was the gift of Miss Anne Humble at the end of the nineteenth century; until the 1960s, the name of its donor was to be found in the bottom three panels. The rest, which were part of the original sanctuary. The present sanctuary dates from



1862, although the only original fitment is the stone piscina in the left wall. In the continuous re-ordering which took place in the 1970s and 1980s, the oak panelling, communion rail and pulpit of 1880 - 82, donated by private benefactors, were removed



Below it was the site of the 1862 high altar in stone, which was designed by Hanson and Dunn and was, sometime in the 1970s, to be found in the Lady Chapel. Older parishioners will remember the later, wooden high altar and reredos of oak, with its painting of the Last Supper in the centre, its throne and the two panels depicting the Annunciation and Nativity which are now in the Lady Chapel. This altar and reredos were erected to commemorate the Bi-Centenary of the mission in 1896, and were the gift of 'a respected Birtley family'.

The altar's wooden crucifix with brass figure is now in the sacristy. In 1965, the altar was taken to Ouston. The present high altar, of white marble and alabaster, was moved to its present position in 1979. As can be seen from the depletion of the Sacred Heart in the central panel and the passion flower motifs on each side, this altar was originally dedicated to the sacred Heart, and stood in the Lady Chapel below the Sacred Heart window. It was the gift of the Swinburne family and dates from 1906. The present tabernacle had been positioned from the late 1950s on the earlier wooden high altar, until the reordering in the 1970s, when it assumed its present position.



An interesting feature of the sanctuary is the ceiling which is painted with the arms of important Benedictine monasteries. This work was begun between 1882 and 1884, when Father Richard O'Hare was parish priest and completed under Father Wilfrid Phillipson (1884-1891). It follows the designs of Father Norbert Sweeney of Bath, a Benedictine of Downside.

On the north side the arms depicted are those of:

- St Mary's Abbey, York, Glastonbury Abbey & St Albans Abbey,
- Evesham Abbey & Westminster Abbey.
- (Not identified) *Window*.
- (Not identified)
- (Not identified) *Altar*.

On the south side the arms depicted are those of:

- Douai Abbey (pre 1929) Douai Abbey (post 1929)
- (Not identified) Bury St Edmunds Abbey, & Durham Priory
- (Not identified) The Order of St Benedict.

## 2. The Nave, Aisle and Lady Chapel



The nave, with its beamed roof, and thick walls with narrow lancet windows, is substantially as Dobson designed it. The oak pews, with linen-fold pattern were installed in 1898. The Stations of Cross, which had ornate wooden frames until the 1960s date from Father Wilfrid Phillipson's time (1884-91), and were the gift of the executor of Miss Anne Humble. The large crucifix on the wall in the middle of the aisle originally hung above the pulpit. Until the 1960s there were statues of Benedictine and English saints under canopies on the walls of the nave and aisles, donated by the confraternities of the parish, such as that of Our Lady of Mount Carmel, and by private benefactors. The painting of the Black Madonna of Poland was given to the parish in gratitude from the people of Poland.

The architect of the 1910 aisle and Lady Chapel is not known, although the stone masons were local men. Like the church, they are in the Early English Gothic style. At the east end of this aisle, there is a fine carved statue of our Lady of Lourdes in wood, carved by craftsmen of the Bromsgrove Guild for Father Edward Morrall in 1917, and a statue of St Joseph, the church's patron, which originally stood at the side of the high altar. The Lady Chapel and many of its effects were the gifts of the Blythe and Swinburne families. Its black oak altar, originally against the north wall, was erected to the memory of John Cuthbert Blythe in 1923, when Father Edward Morrall was parish priest. It is now at the back of the main aisle; for a time, it served as the church's temporary main altar, during the liturgical alterations in the 1970s. Unfortunately its matching reredos has been destroyed, although the two large copies of famous Italian oil paintings of the Madonna have survived and are now fixed to the chapel's



walls. The statue of the Crowned Virgin was until the 1960s at the side of the high altar.



On the wall are the marble tablets with the names of those from the parish who fell in the Great War of 1914-1918. These were originally attached to the base of a Pieta, one of many such carved by the firm of Wall of Cheltenham, which was blessed as a war memorial by Abbott David Hurley in 1918 on the 75th anniversary of the church's opening. Until the 1960s, it stood to the right of the Lady Chapel arch, close to the brass plaque commemorating the spot where John Lee, a lay minister of the Eucharist died suddenly during Mass on 16th February 1989. This Pieta is now outside, deteriorating in the graveyard, but fortunately, these panels, together with those added bearing the names of those who fell in the Second World War, were rescued and restored to the church.

In the late 1970s, according to the fashion of the time, the font was removed to the Lady Chapel to be closer to the main altar. Unfortunately, in the process, the finely carved railings around the font were removed. The font, which dates from the time when Father Edward Morrall was parish priest, is a memorial to John Fallow Swinburne, his wife Mary, and his son, Joseph.



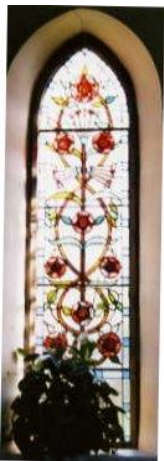
### 3. The Windows



Much of the church's stained glass was removed in the early 1960s to improve the natural lighting. Thus, we have to imagine many of the windows in the north aisle of 1910 being stained glass. Fortunately, some of the original roundels of the 1840s survive in the windows of the south wall of the nave. They represent Benedictine saints. The east window in the present sanctuary depicting the Passion has already been described.

It was the gift of Miss Amie Humble in 1919 to mark the diamond jubilee of the Church and replaced earlier ones of 1843 and 1862.

Miss Humble was the sister of Bishop Cuthbert Hedley and was living in retirement at that time in St Joseph's Convent, Stafford. In the Lady Chapel, the Sacred Heart window is to the memory of Father Benedict Scannell, who died in 1906, and that of St. Edward the Confessor, to the memory of Father Edward Morrall, who died in 1930. This window was originally in the north aisle and part of a much larger one which depicted scenes from the saint's life.



The other two windows, one representing the Church as a lighthouse, and the other commemorating John Cuthbert Blythe, are in the Art Nouveau style, and were the gift of the Blythe family.

Finally, at the west end of the 1910 aisle, next to the original position of the font, is a fine window in the style of the Arts and Crafts movement, showing the Baptism of Our Lord. This is the work of J. Davies of the Bromsgrove Guild, and is dated 1915. It was the gift of the Blythe family, in memory of Jane Ann and John Merry Blythe.



#### 4. The Organ



The first organ was bought by Father Joseph Sheridan (1841-50) and was replaced by a larger, second-hand instrument sometime after 1858, which cost £130. Like so much else of value in the church, however, the present organ is the fruit of Father Phillipson's labours. In 1891, just before he left the parish, Father Phillipson began an organ fund, based on the £200 he had received for the

purpose from John and Thomas Blythe. He received advice from Abbot Anselm O' Gorman, Abbot President of the English Benedictines, who was himself an organist and musician, and was staying in Birtley at this time. O'Gorman recommended that the firm of Nicholson of Newcastle be responsible for the Birtley organ, and it was built after Father Phillipson had left.

A private benefactor, possibly one of the musical Swinburne brothers, had the 16 foot diapason added in 1896. In the 1960s, this fine instrument was divided in half to allow more natural light into the church, although the console was preserved in its original state. The west gallery in which this organ is found was completed in 1892; it replaces an earlier one erected in 1857-58.



#### 5. The Grounds and Graveyard



During the 1960s, the graveyard was mostly cleared of its gravestones, which were re-erected by the wall, and the area turfed. Some of the poplar trees, planted by Father Wilfrid Phillipson in the 1880s were removed at the same time. Besides possessing the gravestones of some of the Church's important benefactors, the graveyard also contains the top of the medieval spire of Chester-le-Street parish church, which is thought to date from the 12th century, and was raised in its present position in 1910 by Jack Blythe. The date of the stone grotto with terracotta figures which is also to be found in the grounds is not known.

On the garden side, to the south of the church, there is the



**burial vault of the priests who have served the parish from the nineteenth century, as well as bronze statue of Our Lady, donated by a private benefactor during the years in which Father Edward Morrall was parish priest, to commemorate some of these priests.**