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London Borough of Enfield Local History Sheets.

Roman Catholicism in Enfield a history

Introduction

Prior to the Reformation, England was a Catholic country. However the authority of the Church had been challenged in the 14th century by the Lollard movement led by John Wycliffe (died 1384). Despite vigorous efforts at suppression, the ideas of the Lollards had never been totally eradicated.

The first stage in the Reformation occurred in 1534 with the rejection of Papal authority over the English Church. The breach with Rome came about as a direct result of Henry VIII's marital and financial problems and not for religious reasons.

The years 1536-1540 saw the dissolution of the monasteries. The very last monastery to surrender to the king was Waltham Abbey, which survived until March 1540. Despite such innovations as the provision of an English translation of the Bible in all churches (1538), the Church remained essentially Catholic until after the death of Henry VIII in 1547.

In 1548 the first Book of Common Prayer was issued replacing the old Latin missals and service books. By the death of Edward VI in 1553 the Church of England had become an essentially Protestant church. Edward's successor, Mary, who had never accepted the changes, restored Roman Catholicism as the state religion and made vigorous efforts to stamp out Protestantism in England. The process was incomplete at the time of Mary's death in 1558.

Her successor, Elizabeth, had no wish to continue this policy and re-instated the Church of England, as a moderate Protestant church. Although the Church of England, as reconstituted under Elizabeth, proved to be acceptable to the great majority of the population, some never accepted it. The more extreme Protestants (the puritans) were eventually to form the present nonconformist churches. Others remained loyal to the Roman Catholic Church.

Despite active persecution, Roman Catholicism never died out in England. Catholics found themselves largely excluded from public life and unable to educate their children other than by sending them abroad. There were difficulties in the inheritance of property. Catholic priests who fell into the hands of the authorities were dealt with very severely. Many were tortured and executed in particularly barbarous circumstances.

During the reign of James II restrictions on Roman Catholics were temporarily eased but were re-applied after his overthrow in 1688. After the failure of the Jacobite rebellions of 1715 and 1745 Roman Catholics were clearly no longer a threat to the security of the country. The penal laws that restricted their activities were progressively relaxed, until in 1829 all remaining anti-Catholic legislation was repealed.

The process of Catholic Emancipation was by no means universally popular. An unsuccessful petition to Parliament in 1780 demanding the repeal of the Catholic Relief Act of 1778 sparked off the Gordon Riots in London, during which Catholic chapels and the homes of suspected Catholics were pillaged. In 1850 the Pope was able to restore the Catholic hierarchy in England. For the first time since the Reformation, England had a full quota of Catholic

Bishops.

Enfield and District

In the Enfield area the history of Roman Catholicism after the Reformation is decidedly shadowy. Unlike some parts of the country, there were no major Catholic families to act as a focal point. One Edmonton family, the Leakes of Weir Hall, remained Catholic into the early 17th century. The Weld family who held the Arnos Grove Estate in the early 17th century later moved to Lulworth in Dorset where they were openly Catholic. It is probable that the Welds were secret Catholics during their time in Southgate.

The discovery of the Gunpowder Plot (1605) led to a wave of anti-Catholic hysteria. One of the houses searched was Whitewebbs (not the present house). The house had indeed been used by the conspirators. It had also been visited by the Jesuit priest, Father Henry Garnet who was subsequently arrested, tortured and executed. (Garnet was almost certainly innocent of any part in the Gunpowder Plot).

In 1705 there were two Catholic families in Enfield. Robert Leeson lived at Forty Hill. William Le Hunt lived at Scotland Green, Ponders End, where he managed to run a school for Catholic boys in conditions of semi-secrecy. He subsequently moved to Edmonton.

Unlike the rest of the country, Catholics in London had access to the chapels attached to the embassies of Catholic countries. These chapels were able to function reasonably freely under diplomatic immunity. (Just one of the former embassy chapels has survived. The former Portuguese Embassy Chapel is now the church of Our Lady of the Assumption in Warwick Street, W1)

Roman Catholicism in North London was greatly boosted by the arrival of French royalist refugees fleeing the French revolution (1789). One group settled in Hampstead, later building a chapel (St Mary's, Holly Place). Another group settled in Tottenham establishing a chapel in Queen Street in 1793. (This chapel was the direct ancestor of the present St Francis de Sales Church in Tottenham High Road).

The turning point for Roman Catholicism came with the disastrous Irish Potato Famine of 1846-1847. Irish immigrants greatly boosted the numbers of Roman Catholics on the British mainland. The 1851 census reveals the presence of a small Irish community in Upper Edmonton, close to the Tottenham boundary. Since then the numbers of Roman Catholics have been boosted by further waves of immigrants from Poland, Italy and elsewhere, plus a steady trickle of converts.

From 1850 onwards there has been a steady expansion of the Roman Catholic Church in Enfield. Churches have been established at Enfield Town (1862), Edmonton (1903), Palmers Green (1910), Ponders End (1912), New Southgate (1923) and Cockfosters (1936).

Catholic Churches in Enfield

Christ the King, Bramley Road N14

The Benedictines of the Priory of Christ the King, Bramley Road, registered their chapel for public worship in 1936. The church hall was registered for worship in 1940.

Our Lady of Carmel and St George, London Road

A combined chapel and school room opened in Cecil Road in 1862. A permanent church opened in London Road in 1901. This building was destroyed by a bomb in 1940. The present church dates from 1958.

Our Lady of Lourdes, Bowes Road

In 1923 a house was acquired in Bowes Road. This served as a presbytery. A small extension was used for services. The present church opened in 1935.

Our Lady of Walsingham, Holtwhites Hill

This church started life as the chapel of the former St Joseph's Orphanage. It was registered for public worship in 1964. It has since been completely rebuilt.

St Edmund, Hertford Road N9

A temporary church opened in 1903. Work commenced on the present church in 1905. The building was consecrated in 1907.

St Mary, Nags Head Road

A chapel was established in Alma Road by 1896. Ponders End became a separate parish in 1912. The present church dates from 1921.

St Monica, Green Lanes N13

In 1910 a house was acquired in Grovelands Road. This served briefly as a combined presbytery and church before moving to Hazelwood House, Green Lanes. The present church opened in 1914.