

**Christ the King Parish
from
January 1946 to 1970
(After we were separated from St James Parish, Reading)**



On the occasion of our parish's fiftieth anniversary it was suggested that it would be good to remember how the parish of Christ the King was formed, to remember our past history and the wonderful example we received from our first parish priest and those who followed him. The Foundation Stone was laid on 25th October 1958 by Archbishop John Henry King and the opening of the church and the first Mass and consecration took place on 6th December 1959. In remembering we must positively move forward into a new era here at Christ the King Church, Whitley.

These are my own memories and impressions of how the parish as we know it today came about. There may be parishioners who have other memories which we can include in this little history.

In 1945 I remember Fr Thomas Lane from St James asking my mother if she knew of a building which might be hired and used as a Mass Centre on Whitley Estate where most of the catholic community lived. My mother suggested the Scout Hut in Callington Road and that was used until that became too small for the ever growing congregation.



It was in January 1946 that Fr Patrick Collins, an Irish man from Curry in County Sligo, came to Whitley to be the first parish priest. Prior to this we were served by the priests from St James in Reading, who came to say Mass in the old hut in Shinfield Road, which since 1928 had been our Mass Centre.



I remember Fr Collins as a rather rotund, shortish, dark-haired man with twinkling Irish eyes. A man of great strength of character, determination, vitality, sense of fun and courage especially as he grew older and suffered a great deal of ill health.

We must remember that the Whitley Fr Collins came to was a vastly different district to the one of today. I recall that Northumberland Avenue from the roundabout to Whitley Wood Road was a country lane which we locals knew as 'Muddy Lane'. The roundabout itself was still home to a huge anti-aircraft gun.

On the site of South Reading Leisure Centre there were huts which were home to the army personnel who manned the gun battery. When the Army vacated the camp the huts were taken over by the 'squatters'. These families were homeless often from other areas where they had been bombed out of their homes and living with relatives in overcrowded conditions. The huts were home to them for some time until they could be re-housed in the new developments which were sprouting up all over Whitley. There was no Madjeski Academy in those days and the surrounding area was just fields and scrub land.

At this time we had to walk by way of a narrow footpath, which is now Hartland Road, to Christ the King Church on Shinfield Road. The church was situated in the grounds of an old house which we knew as Colonel Bill's land. It was an old army hut which was donated to us by the Parish of English Martyrs after they had built their new church. Time had taken its toll and it had become a dilapidated building which leaked when it rained. The only lighting was by smoky oil lamps and the heating was totally inadequate with equally smoky paraffin stoves. As children we got absolutely filthy just going to Mass! Just after World War Two there were no cars and hardly any bicycles and for most it meant a long walk through unlit country lanes – hard to imagine in this day and age. The new Mass Centre in Callington Road in the heart of Whitley where most of the parishioners lived was a godsend, but could only be used on a Sunday morning.

Christ the King Church in Shinfield Road became alive with the coming of our own parish priest. Mass was said each morning as well as on Sundays with Benediction, catechism classes and choir practice. During May we held our processions around the woods which encircled the church.

We used both Shinfield Road and Callington Road for some time. Fr Collins' first home in his new parish was two rooms in the house known as 'The Lighthouse'. This was the home of a parishioner so called because of a miniature lighthouse set in the front garden. The house was situated almost opposite to the turning into Foxhays Road. It was while he was at 'The Lighthouse' that Fr Collins earmarked the surrounding waste ground for possible sites for our permanent church, presbytery and primary school.

The Lighthouse was eventually demolished to make way for the extension of Northumberland Avenue, Hartland Road and Whitley Wood Road.

The roads were built by the German prisoners of war who were housed in Shinfield Park in Whitley Wood Road just near to Woodside Way. These prisoners of war were awaiting repatriation to Germany.

When 'The Lighthouse' was demolished Fr Collins moved into Northcourt Avenue where he had lodgings in another parishioner's home for three years.

The parishioners of Christ the King soon knew that they were very fortunate in having such a 'man of the people' for their parish priest and rallied around him – there was so much work to do.

Before long we had outgrown the Mass Centre in Callington Road and negotiations began to find a bigger property and we moved to the large hall in South Reading Community Centre. I do not apologise for mentioning my mother, Mrs Sadie Anderson at this point. Through the war years and after, she prepared the altar in the Mass Centres every Sunday and on Holy Days of Obligation, washed the altar linen, cassocks etc (no washing machines or tumble dryers in those days), mended the hymn books, made the kneelers and provided the flowers. There were four of us children and we each had an allotted task – we took it in turns to set out the chairs and kneelers, gave out the hymn books and minded the baby while mother prepared the altar etc. Local neighbours set their clocks by Mrs Anderson and her children going to Mass at the same time week after week and year after year. After Mass everything had to be put away again! Lunch was always late on Sundays! The hall had to be left so that it was ready for the scouts and guides and other functions which were held there during the week.



It was while we were at the Community Centre that Fr Collins made contact with the Prisoner of War camp in Whitley Wood Road and the Catholic prisoners were allowed to march down Northumberland Avenue to Mass each Sunday. These men certainly enriched our lives and formed a choir to sing the Mass as it had never been sung before in this area. Peace and forgiveness were preached and Fr Collins encouraged us to invite the POWs into our homes to celebrate Christmas and Sunday lunch until they were repatriated. My parents felt they could do this even though our own father was still waiting to be demobilised from his duties in the Armed Forces.

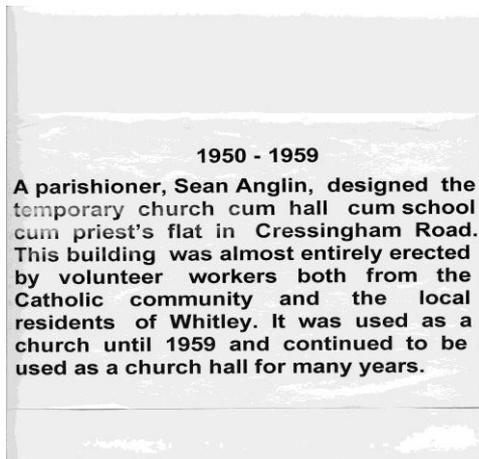
By this time we had our own choir led by Mr Frank Kemp we practised in his house, actually in the store room at the back of his work place. Mr Kemp played an ex American Army Surplus Harmonium and put us through our paces. Choir practice always ended when Mrs Gladys Kemp brought down from the flat above orangeade and doughnuts a rare treat for us. No wonder we were so keen on going to choir practice!

A lasting memory for me was the Christmas Mass 1946, we sang in the choir but all the congregation was enthralled by the singing of the German choir, we had never heard 'Stille Nacht' sung in harmony and the congregation requested this carol to be repeated and it was sung several times because we all just loved those beautiful, well practised, harmonising voices. We appreciated the hard work these German prisoners had put into making of such a beautiful sound. As children we were so impressed by the gifts our two German POWs had bought with them when they came for Christmas lunch. Made from whatever scraps they could find they fashioned a brightly painted wheel barrow, a rocking cradle with all the bed linen and for my older sister and myself there was a dolls house complete with all the furniture, soft furnishings and electric light. Our home at that time was lit by gas light to this day we will always remember their kindness to us.



During this time Fr Collins was helped and supported by the nuns from St Joseph's Convent. Sr M Anselm, Sr M Benignus, Sr M Brendan, Sr M Ignatius as well as other sisters worked tirelessly in the parish, giving religious instruction to children attending non-Catholic schools, taking choir practice, visiting the sick, cleaning the church, arranging the flowers and they were the first Girl Guide leaders in the parish.

It was a familiar sight to see Fr Collins visiting his flock on his trusty bicycle. He was always out and about getting to know the people. He became a source of great inspiration to his growing flock and gained the respect of all the local community. Parishioners banded together and knocked on doors to make a census of the whole of Whitley and the surrounding rural areas. Each new housing development was visited as soon as it was built. People were invited to take part in the services and join the many church organisations and gradually the spiritual life of the parish grew.



1950 - 1959

A parishioner, Sean Anglin, designed the temporary church cum hall cum school cum priest's flat in Cressingham Road. This building was almost entirely erected by volunteer workers both from the Catholic community and the local residents of Whitley. It was used as a church until 1959 and continued to be used as a church hall for many years.

Great plans for the future were made. It was not long before some of these plans came to fruition when a temporary church cum hall with an attached flat for the parish priest was built.

The land where this church was erected was already owned by the church and sited half way up Cressingham Road. The building of the church was the talk of the town because it was built by the people of the area, men and women of many differing beliefs and none, helped in whatever way they could. Skilled and non-skilled, men, women and children, volunteers all, toiled side by side after their own day's work had finished to complete the church in record time. My sisters and I had a special job, after our mother had sewn up the kneelers we stuffed them and sewed the top, this chore was repeated in the homes of several parishioners. We were also allowed to put the wooden floor tiles in place on top of the adhesive; a job which was really hard on the knees! This building was to serve us for many years.

In 1954 it became an annexe to St James' School when two classrooms were opened. For the first time children from Whitley did not have to travel to St James, in Reading for their Catholic education. These children my brothers, sisters and self included had to travel by bus to St James School during the dark days of the war. Occasionally we received lifts home on winter afternoons. Fr Thomas Lane packed as many as ten children into his car and dropped them off at their homes; he worried for their safety in case of air raids. How wonderful were all our parents who placed their trust in God and His Blessed Mother and felt so strongly about having a Catholic education, that they sent their children so far and during war time. On the day that the bombs fell on Reading it was a dark afternoon and we were let out of school 30 minutes early so had cleared the town centre and missed being caught up in the bombing. Indeed we were blessed.

All of Fr Collins' grand schemes had to be funded so the parishioners pooled their resources and many non-Catholic friends helped to plan and arrange several enormous Whit Monday Fetes. These were held in Hills Meadow, Caversham. As a child I remember the excitement when the fetes were advertised by larger than life Disney-type characters processing around the streets of Whitley, the like of which had never been seen before and not since! These fetes were the first big fund-raising scheme. Another and even more ambitious scheme was the football pool which was much more profitable.

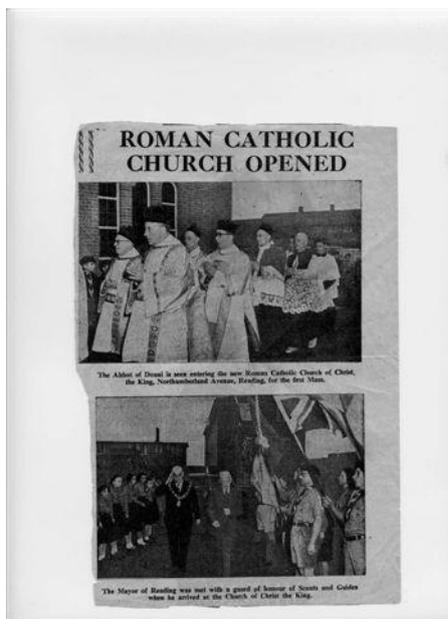


I suppose it is right to say that our parish church was built with proceeds from these football pools (gambling in other words!!) which were time consuming to run but there was a dedicated group of people who organised and devoted so much time to raise the funds needed for our church for so many years.

During this time the nuns from St Joseph's Convent continued to give so much to the spiritual life of the parish and supported the Parish of Christ the King in so many ways. There were no cars available to the sisters in those days and they had to walk from the Convent to Whitley and then around the parish carrying out their good work. We have cause to be grateful to these sisters for their commitment, support and help in laying such firm foundations in our faith.

In the meantime Fr Collins 'had a dream' and we all prayed hard that plans to purchase the land in Northumberland Avenue and Brayford Road to build our permanent church and later school came to fruition. Often while taking a short cut through the waste land which was to be our church, Fr Collins could be seen pacing out the land, scattering miraculous medals and saying the rosary. If we were seen we would be invited to march up and down with him joining in the rosary. So many prayers were offered up and once again these prayers were answered and dreams were realised. This time the church was built by an all professional team of builders and the foundation stone of our church was laid by Archbishop John Henry King on 25th October 1958.

I remember, after our Legion of Mary meetings, we poured over the plans and studied catalogues of religious fixtures and fittings with Fr. Collins. The present sanctuary lamp, not to everyone's taste, but the members of the Blessed Sacrament Guild paid for it by donating half a crown (12½p) each month. There was not much money in the pockets of the parishioners but they were generous and gave what they could. Great care was taken over choosing the furnishings, the statues, crib figures and Stations of the Cross and you must agree they are really second to none.



It was on 6th December 1959 that the beautiful church of Christ the King, Whitley was consecrated with the Abbot of Douai officiating and we at long last celebrated the first Mass. The dream of our beautiful, permanent church had at last become a reality and has flourished providing a place of worship, peace and fellowship here in Whitley for half a century.

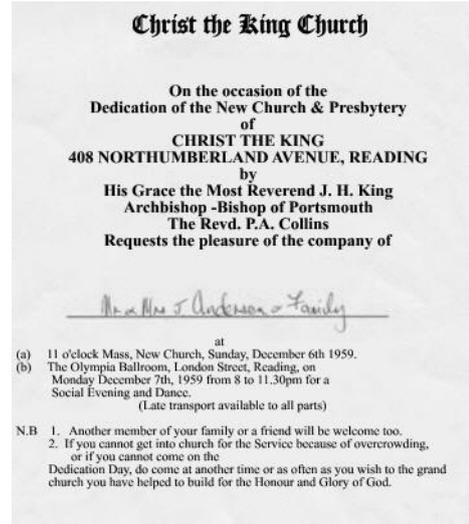
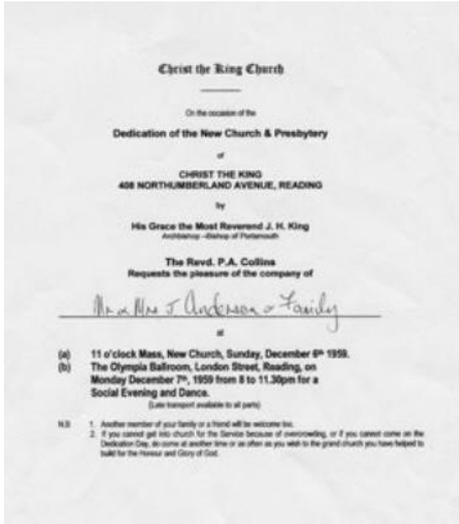
Fr Patrick Collins still had more to do; there was a school to build. Again plans were made and approved and eventually on 3rd July 1968 the Primary School of Christ the King was opened and the children of Whitley at last had their own school within the heart of the parish. It should be noted that when St James School closed down on 28th June 1968 and pupils transferred to Christ the King School only six children dropped out because of the distance they had to travel.

Fr Patrick Collins was truly a man of the people and a man who touched so many lives. The whole area mourned him when he died suddenly while on holiday in his homeland – Co. Sligo, Eire on 31st July 1970 (R.I.P).



We had lost a man who was dedicated to caring for his flock and all came to him whatever their religion for his wise counselling. A generous man who lived frugally and he gave what he had to those in most need.

For me personally, and I am sure many would agree, he was certainly a man who influenced the lives of so many. I know that as a child and into adulthood he is one to whom I owe so much in my own spiritual formation and to whom I will be always grateful. I feel I was indeed fortunate to have known him well and it was a privilege to have had the opportunity to work with him. We should all be humbly grateful God for giving us such a great, loving and dedicated priest who did his best to unite us in Christian love and lead us closer to God and our eternal home. Fr Patrick Collins always said that should he reach heaven then he would be at the pearly gates to personally welcome all the parishioners from Christ the King in Whitley to their heavenly home.



On the left is the original Invitation , On the right is just a copy to highlight the document.



The original Souvenir of The First Mass in Christ The King, Showing the front and back of the Souvenir.

By courtesy of Mr. Alex Carnell

THE END

This is a just brief history of the very beginnings of Christ the King Parish in Whitley. The Parish has had to cope with many changes during the last fifty years, but the parish community that is Christ the King Parish, has taken all in its stride and continues to grow and go from strength to strength. Each subsequent Parish Priest has made changes and we thank all of them for their devotion and endeavours on our behalf.

**Our Thanks to Mrs. Patricia Rolt for the history
Of our parish from 1946 / 1970
and pictures.**



THE PARISH PRIESTS OF CHRIST THE KING

From 1946 when it all began until the present time.



Rev. Fr PATRICK COLLINS 1945 - 1970 (RIP)



Rev. MICHAEL NUGENT 1970 - 1981 (RIP)



Rev. Fr DONAL O'BRIEN 1981 - 1987



Rev. Fr VINCENT FLANAGAN 1987 - 1994



Rev. Fr NICHOLAS HEAP 1994 - 1998



Rev. Fr GERARD FLYNN 1999 - 2007



Rev. Fr Bruce Barnes MA STL FRSA



Rev. Fr Patrick Madden 06. 09. 2010

01. 09. 2007 - 22. 08. 2010

