

Churches In and Around Liverpool – 6

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ST. OSWALD’S, OLD SWAN

The establishing of a Catholic Church at Old Swan is associated with the name of Fr. Maddocks – the priest who carried off the fever-stricken Fr. Bernard O’Reilly and helped to save a bishop for the diocese.

Fr. Maddocks had been a curate at St. Nicholas’s and we are told that the idea of a church at Old Swan arose from his sympathy for the Catholics who, at the time, had to walk from Old Swan to St. Nicholas’s to Church – and back again.

How many lived at Old Swan – the name was originally the name of the inn at the corner of Broad Green Road – we are not told.

When St. Nicholas’s was built in 1815, Clarence Street marked the outer ring of the buildings, so far as the town was concerned. Moss-lake and the adjoining marsh spread across the level ground between the top of Brownlow Hill and Parliament Street – there being no Oxford Street or Bedford Street in those days.

In 1830 the Liverpool to Manchester railway was completed, but the Liverpool terminus was at Edge Hill. Between 1830 and 1836 (series of) tunnels were made, bringing the line to Lime Street. The Moss-lake area must have been drained about this time and we read of the laying out of Bedford Street, Abercromby Square, Oxford Street, Chatham Street and Falkner Square between 1800 and 1835.

There were glass works and rope works at Old Swan in the early days, but the railway and the work on the tunnels must have brought many Catholic workers to the district.

A church being needed, Fr. Maddocks was prepared to do things in a grand manner. He looked to no less a person than Mr. Augustus Welby Pugin as his architect. Pugin was one of the remarkable figures of his period. A convert to Catholicism, he had all the converts enthusiasm for a new-found truth and a great desire to break down the prejudices of his fellow-countrymen and quondam co-religionists against the Catholic faith. To cover the land with Roman basilicas would not – in his opinion- help to sooth John Bull. He might consider Catholicism as a possible expression of truth, if the churches took a

shape already familiar to his mind – the style of the English 13th century building. So Pugin became the apostle of English Gothic. It is one of the oddities of history that this exotic personality, in many ways so un-English, should be so tender to English prejudice. His tall, slim figure had little to suggest the sturdiness of John Bull. The long cloak he loved to wear would have befitted a Continental desperado – his effervescent spirit was the opposite of Anglo-Saxon phlegm and his tendency to extremes of judgement were equally distant from the Englishman's supposed steadiness and moderation.

St. Oswald's was the first Pugin church in the district and the first Catholic Church in the North of England since the Reformation to be adorned with a steeple. The Relief Act of 1791, while allowing Catholics to have their churches, provided they were registered, emphasised the graciousness of this toleration by forbidding both bells and steeples. So St. Oswald's is a link with the architecture of medieval Catholic England and at the same time marks a stage in the disappearance of the penal laws.

An old print shows the church standing in a wide country lane, with hedges and trees about it and in this setting the strength and elegance of the building is striking. One enters the precincts by a lych-gate, a reminder of the old Catholic custom which was part of the funeral ceremony. There the priest met the body of the dead parishioner. Between the outer wall and the church is the cemetery – another reminder to the olden days when towns were not so large and the church which gave its children spiritual food and support in life, gathered them in its shade and stood sentinel over them in death.

In the corner near the entrance is the tomb of Fr. Maddocks. He was one of the wonderful priests of old, who did so much for the diocese and whose memory remains an inspiration.

He went to Ushaw as a boy in 1815, the year of Waterloo. From Ushaw he went to the English College, Rome, and on his return to England as a priest, he became curate to Dr. Youens at St. Nicholas's, Liverpool. His zealous soul was moved by the difficulties and isolation of Catholics at Old Swan and he was allowed to go there and establish a parish.

His first abode was a poor cottage and he said Mass in an out-house and drew round him the nucleus of a congregation. Towards the

end of 1839 a site for the church was obtained through the good offices of Mr. Challoner, s prominent timber-merchant. After the church had been opened in 1842, Fr. Maddocks next care was to build a school and after this he built a presbytery – “an unpretentious place,” we are told it was. Then comes a very illuminating incident in his life. To get the best teachers he could for the children, he asked the Sisters of Mercy to come to the parish and he gave up to them his newly built presbytery, himself going “to a very small and poor little cottage in which he spent several years in the greatest poverty, denying himself almost the necessities of life.” Yet such was the heart of the man that, we are told, his housekeeper had to hide his clothes or he would give them away to the poor.

In 1851 he became a Canon. In 1854 he opened a new two storied school and in 1856 he bought a nearby Methodist chapel. Part of it was used for school purposes and in the other part of the building he establishes the very successful ST. Oswald’s C.Y.M.S. in 1860 and 1861 he built the present presbytery, having Mr. Daniel Powell as his architect.

He died on March 4th, 1864, at the age of 63 – having begun the parish with nothing and leaving a splendidly equipped establishment – a fine record which deserves to be remembered.

In the churchyard there is another tomb which calls for notice – that of the last Parish Priest, the Right Rev. Monsignor Clarkson. He attended St. Oswald’s school as a boy and knew personally Fr. Maddocks and all the succeeding Rectors of St. Oswald’s.

He was a product of St. Edward’s College, Liverpool, and of Ushaw, and he was a credit to both. After being ordained at Ushaw, he taught mathematics at St. Edward’s from 1881 – 1886. In 1886 he went as Rector to St. Alban’s and returned to St. Oswald’s as Rector in 1898. There was about him a profound sense of the dignity of his office, a meticulous care for the perfection of everything relating to the service of the altar, an affection for his people and a kindness and courtesy which make him one of the great men of the old school. They seem not so much poor fallible beings of flesh and blood, but rather exquisite pieces of porcelain, perfectly designed, delicate yet strong, and flawless.

Under Fr. Clarkson's care, St. Oswald's became one of the finest parishes in the city. He built new schools at a cost of over £8000 and spent nearly £2000 on reconstructing the old schools. He established St. Vincent's Hospice for the Dying and put a new organ in the church and added to the presbytery.

These achievements reflect credit on the parishioners as well as on the priests and in addition to all this St. Oswald's has subscribed over £6000 towards the Metropolitan Cathedral.

Although Monsignor Clarkson's heart was in his parish, his interests were not by any means exhausted by the parish and his name cannot be mentioned without reference to his munificent benefactions to Upholland College.

Moreover he was ever on the alert for the possibilities of expansion and St. Cuthbert's, Stanley, and the churches of Christ the King and St. Margaret Mary owe much to him. He retired from active work on April 29th, 1936, and died as the air raid sirens sounded at 12 o'clock on September 6th, 1940. He was succeeded by the present P.P., Fr. N. Coghlan.

The interior of St. Oswald's has been fully described by the architect himself, but a number of changes have been made since his day. Pugin was one of those who loved to shroud sacred mysteries in mystery. For him the altar was fittingly veiled from view by a screen – a notion which has support in Eastern customs. The original rood-screen has been transferred to the back of the church and a mahogany side screen on one side and an oak side screen on the other have been used for the altar rails. Their detail is a copy of work at Ely.

The centre light of the window behind the altar used to portray St. Oswald – but this window has been transferred to the west end and the figures in the east window from left to right now are: St Oswald, St Michael, the Sacred Heart, St. Elizabeth and St. William. The statues in the reredos niches represent Our Lady, St. Joseph, St. Cuthbert, St. Gregory, St. Catherine and ST. Helena. According to Mr. John Harman they are the work of Early himself, of the firm of Early and Powell, Dublin. (One wonders if this is a clue to the origin of the statue of Saint Patrick at St. Patrick's.)

At the gospel side of the sanctuary is the tomb of Bishop Brown, the 1st Bishop of Liverpool.

From his portrait, Bishop Brown seems to have been a man of impressive appearance. He was born at Clifton in 1786, being connected with the Gradwells. He went to Crook Hall – the pre-Ushaw foundation – and was ordained in 1810. He taught at Ushaw until 1819, and went to from the College to Lancaster, remaining there until his appointment as Vicar Apostolic of the new Lancashire District in 1840. He was consecrated Bishop of Bugia in partibus infidelium at St. Anthony's, Liverpool, and on the restoration of the hierarchy in 1850 he became the 1st Bishop of Liverpool. He died in 1856 and was succeeded by Bishop Goss, who had been his co-adjutor. Another relic of Bishop Brown remains at Bishop Eton. He took Eton House as his residence some years before 1850; hence it was called Bishop Eton. The house was transferred to the Redemptorist Fathers in 1851.

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