

History of Church of the Most Holy Sacrament and St Osburg 1845-2009



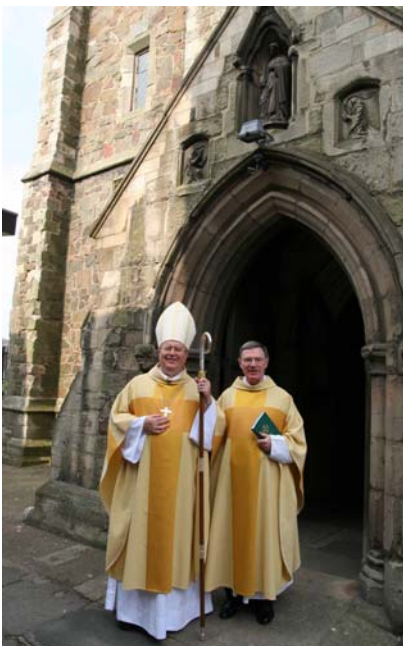
The Catholic Mother Church of Coventry since 1807

Foreward

Officially this is styled "The Church of the Most Holy Sacrament," but it is usually called by the secondary title "St. Osburg's," a name long enshrined in the history of Coventry.

Much of the information in the first part is taken from a booklet produced by Dom Sebastian Simpson O.S.B called "A Centenary Memorial of Saint Osburg's Coventry 1845-1945" as well as "The Church of the Most Holy Sacrament and St Osburg 1856-2000".

I hope that, when you read this you will share my desire to pay tribute to and perpetuate the memory of all the good priests and lay folk of bye gone days, whose steadfastness in the Faith accounts for our present goodly heritage.



I am pleased to introduce this history of the Parish. This has been produced at the same time as the Restoration Appeal gets underway, Easter 2009.

Much of this information and more can be found on the Parish website:

<http://www.coventry-catholicdeanery.org.uk/StOsburg/>

Parish Prayer

Signature

Fr Garry Byrne

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The Background to St Osburg's

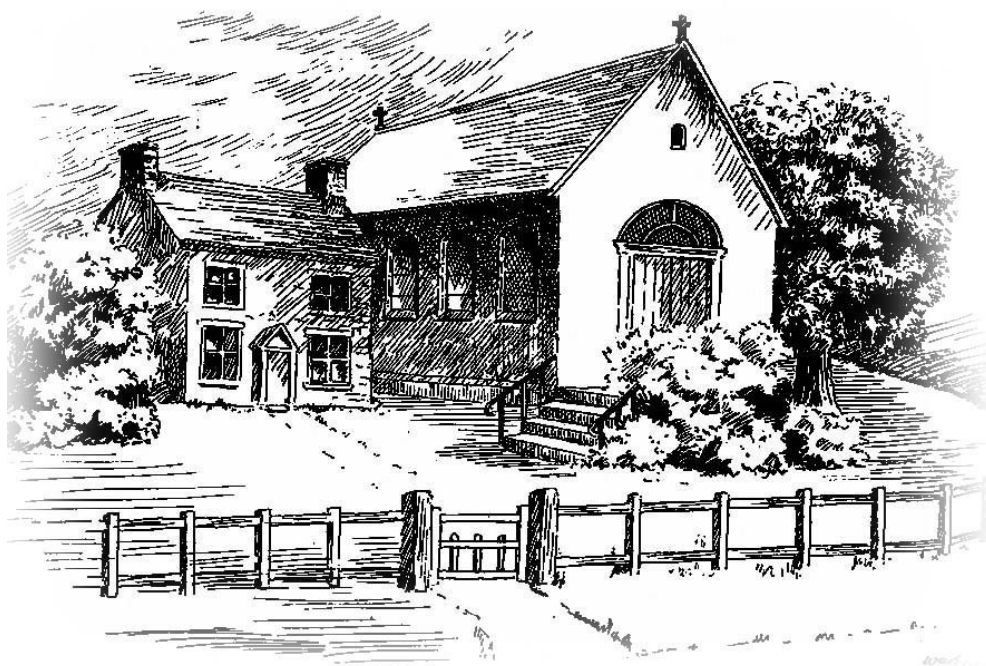
The first settlement in what is now Coventry was the convent established by the Abbess, St Osburg, in Anglo Saxon times. It was destroyed by the Vikings and rebuilt as a monastery for men in 1043 by Lady Godiva and her husband Earl Leofric. It developed into a great Monastery and the Cathedral Church of Coventry – the only Cathedral destroyed by King Henry VIII. The site, to the left of Holy Trinity Church in Broadgate, has been carefully preserved by the City. There are a few remains of the other monasteries destroyed at the Reformation: The Whitefriars Carmelite Monastery (founded in 1342) at the beginning of the London Road; the Carthusian Priory of St Anne, founded in 1381, further along the London Road; and the Franciscan Monastery, of which only the spire remains, in New Union Street.

In 1775 the few Catholics in Coventry attended Mass at the "Mass House", 74 & 75 Little Park Street, which was served by the Franciscans. The Franciscans handed the mission to the Benedictines in 1803. The "Mass House" was sold when the owner died in 1806. Father Dawber bought land in Hill Street and on 8th December 1807 the Church of St Mary and St Laurence was consecrated, the first Catholic Church in Coventry after the Reformation. This was replaced in 1843 by St. Osburg's.

The establishment of a permanent Catholic church in Coventry, the Chapel of St. Mary and St. Laurence, had been brought about by the removal of many legal restrictions on Catholics by an Act of Parliament in 1791, and by the increase in the number of Catholics in the area.

It has been estimated that there were about three or four hundred Catholics in Coventry in 1806, out of a population of just over 16,000. The local newspaper, the Coventry Herald, reported on April 5th, 1827: "Two Protestant Dissenters, a man and a woman, we understand have been converted at the Catholic chapel in Hill Street." This is some indication of how rare such an event must have been.

In 1806 Father John Dawber, a Benedictine monk, bought some land in Hill Street for £155 and in 1807 the new church of St. Mary and St. Laurence was opened.



Chapel of St. Mary and St. Laurence, Hill Street, 1807



In 1841 Father William Ullathorne, who later became the first Archbishop of Birmingham, came to Coventry and took charge of the parish based on Hill Street. He worked with the help of Mother Margaret Hallahan, so that in a few years the number of converts grew to about a hundred a year. Mother Margaret was soon teaching two hundred girls in the school, without any assistant, and a new church, St. Osburg's, was opened in 1845.

In 1884 Coventry was the largest Catholic centre in Warwickshire, apart from Birmingham, having 2,600 Catholics, and a few years later a second church, St. Mary's, was opened in Raglan Street.

In the twentieth century the population of Coventry increased at an extraordinary rate. The weaving and watch making industries had declined towards the end of the nineteenth century, but were replaced by the bicycle and later by the motor car industries. During the years of industrial depression, between the two great wars, Coventry's new industries flourished and the opportunities for employment attracted people from other parts of the country where older industries were dying, for example South Wales and County Durham and also from Scotland and Ireland. Coventry's population grew from 70,000 at the turn of the century, to about 170,000 in 1931, and the city's boundaries were extended to serve this growth.

Today there are 18 Catholic Churches in Coventry

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The Background to St Osburg's

On November 1st 1995, Feast of all Saints, His Grace the Archbishop of Birmingham, Maurice Couve de Murville, celebrated the 150th Anniversary Mass for the people of St Osburg's parish in Coventry together with two Benedictine Abbots, The Right Reverend Finbarr Kealy from Douai and The Right Reverend Charles Fitzgerald Lombard, Downside, diocesan clergy, Benedictines from Douai, the Lord and Lady Mayoress of Coventry, Dominican sisters from Stone and ecumenical guests. Benedictines from the above Abbeys had served the parish for 189 years, right up until 1992 when Father Patrick Kilgarrieff took over as parish priest for the diocese. Margaret Hallahan, who worked in this parish, began the English Dominican sisters at St Osburg's.



All of these people helped to reflect the history of St Osburg's, a church which was built by William Bernard Ullathorne, himself a monk of Downside, and later the first Bishop of Birmingham in 1850 when the hierarchy was restored. He came to the Coventry Mission in 1841, from Australia where he had been Vicar General of the whole continent at the age of 28! The transportation of convicts was then at its height. He ministered to them untiringly and campaigned successfully for that policy to cease. Coventry was fortunate indeed to be sent a man of such energy and ability. He soon put these to work in the service of this Parish.

The situation he found here was not good but still it was a tribute to his predecessors that he was able to do what he did. Catholicism had been wiped out at the Reformation in Coventry, that in a city which had had a great Benedictine abbey, a Charterhouse, two fine parish churches, Holy Trinity and St Michael's, with powerful lay guilds, Franciscan and Carmelite houses as well as great Cistercian abbeys around it supplying the wool trade. The only link with Catholicism was through the Saunders family who held office in the city and had an estate at Wappenbury. Mass was said there throughout this period and a chapel was built in 1734. Coventry Catholics, such as there were, had to walk eight miles for the sacraments. It was from there that the Coventry mission was founded by Franciscans but when they arrived in Coventry in 1757 there were very few Catholics, though more than was at one time thought. Mass was said in private houses by them until they handed over to the Benedictines in 1803.

It was John Dawber O.S.B. who purchased the plot of land on Hill Street on which St Osburg's Church now stands. He could only afford to build a small chapel, St Lawrence and St Mary's which was dedicated in 1807 by John Milner, Vicar Apostolic for the Midlands. A school and presbytery were also built on the site. When Ullathorne arrived in 1841 the school was the only thing he commended but the 40's were heady days in the history of Catholicism in England and great progress was due to be made in the next decade in Coventry.



Ullathorne enlisted a remarkable woman to help him in his work, namely Margaret Hallahan. She had been working in Bruges but now she was appointed to teach in the parish. She had soon enrolled two hundred girls in the school. Several young women began to assist her and to visit the sick of the parish. From these beginnings the Dominican sisters of Stone emerged. Soon Ullathorne, supported by Wiseman, Coadjutor to Bishop Walsh in those days, decided to build a new church and to make it worthy of the revival they both believed imminent in England. Taking with him Charles Hansom, a parishioner and surveyor of the city of Coventry, now commissioned to build his first church, Ullathorne went off to view various Gothic examples abroad and to raise funds for a similar type of building in Hill Street. The style chosen was thirteenth century lancet style for the nave and early decorated for the chancel and side chapels. Pugin reckoned it to be a pure revival of its kind.

The walls of the church are of Marston granite in rubble work, strengthened by buttresses, and the stonework of the interior is in a light stone from a quarry in Exhall. There is a solid tower 17 feet square with a spire. The length of the church is 115 feet. The church consists

of a Nave with clerestory, a North and South aisle, a chancel and two chapels, one Our Lady's chapel and the other, St Benedict's. "Entering by the West Door ... the exquisitely proportioned columns, the lofty arches, springing from moulded capitals, the high and graceful open roof, the solemn disposition of light, the deep chancel receding beyond a noble chancel arch, terminating with the Altar and the richly emblazoned Eastern window, give a solemn and exalted impression." Thus wrote Poole a nineteenth century local historian.

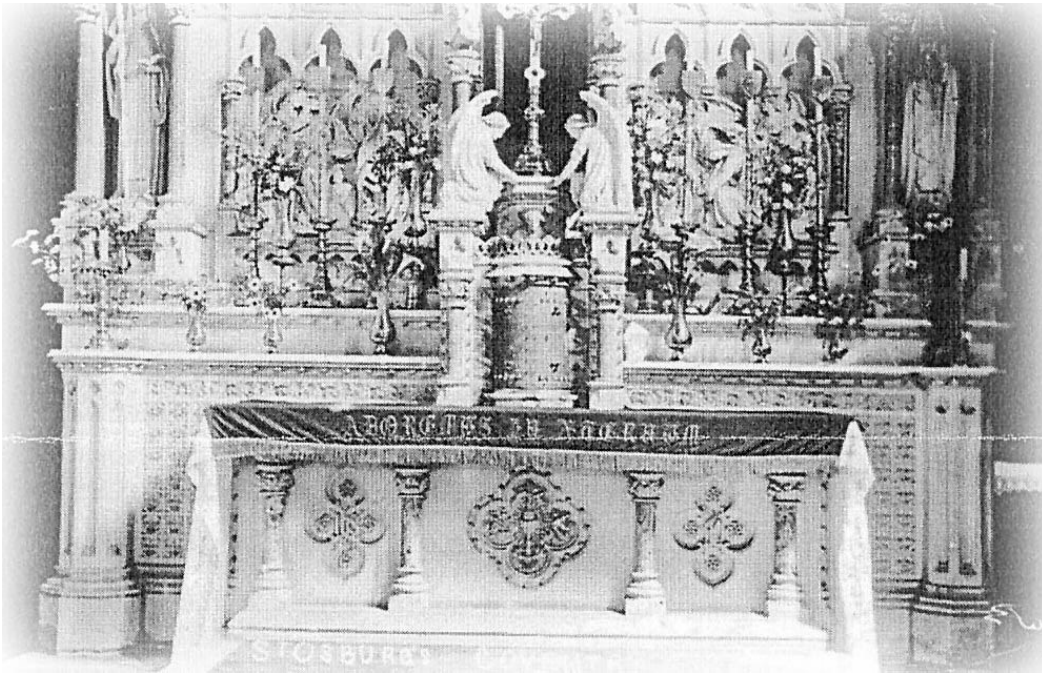
This impressive building was dedicated to The Blessed Sacrament and St Osburg. This saint is special to Coventry and the church was named after her because of her fame in the Middle Ages. We know she was a Saxon Abbess of Coventry, possibly a contemporary and friend of St Chad. The latest theory is that a nunnery was founded here as early as 700AD, giving its name to the city. What is certain is that it was destroyed in 1017 by Danish invaders when Canute was King.

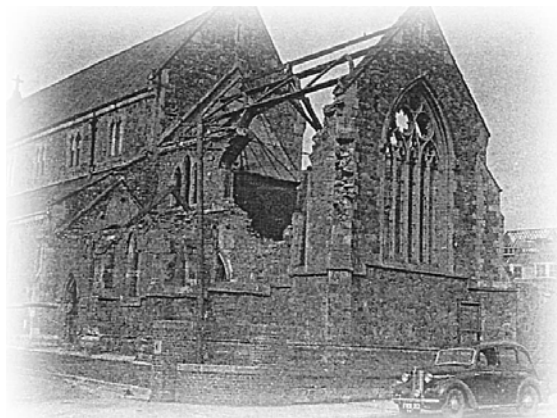
A new Benedictine abbey for men on the old convent site in the city centre was built by Godiva and Leofric, Earl of Mercia in 1043 and its Church dedicated to St Mary, St Peter, St Osburg and all the Saints. So many miracles were worked for those on pilgrimage here that her burial place, in 1410, became a shrine at popular request and by permission of the bishop and clergy. Her feast day, reinstated in 1999 in the calendar of the Archdiocese to be celebrated on 9th September, was to be kept in Coventry in perpetuity. The Reformation did destroy the abbey and the other great religious houses in the city but her name has been kept alive in this place. You will see a window to her next to the Lady Chapel.

The present St Osburg's was consecrated by Bishop Wiseman on September 9th 1845, along with eight other bishops. It was in this church that the celebrated mission of Father Gentili, a Rosminian, was preached and a procession in honour of Our Lady held, the first since the Reformation, to counteract the Godiva procession of the day, then rather anti-catholic it seems. Many returned to the faith and many converts were made in these years, through the school and evening classes for the factory girls. Father Ullathorne delivered talks on the Scriptures and the Fathers to them and to all who would listen. It was here also that Ullathorne was eventually raised to the episcopate of the Western District on June 21st 1846.

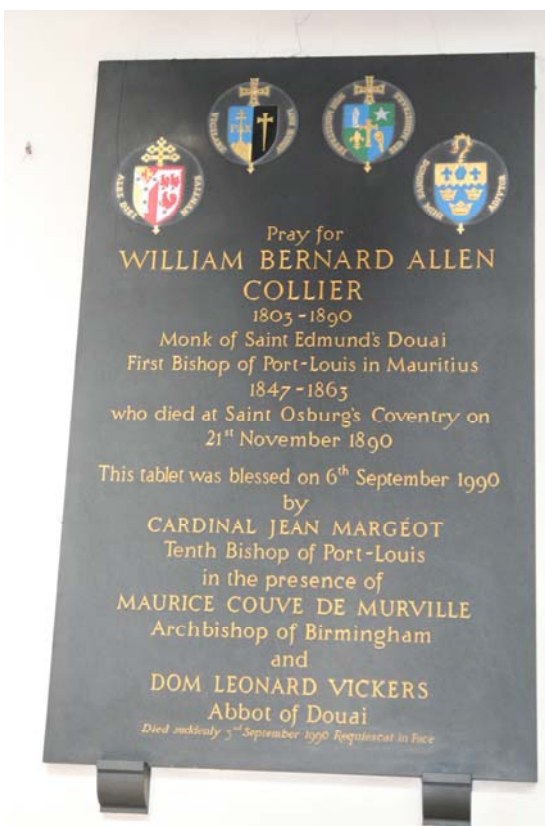
Newman, newly received into the church, attended his consecration from Maryvale. They were later to be a great support to one another. Ullathorne left Coventry with great reluctance, so fruitful had his mission been. His faith in the numerical growth of the church was justified, however.















Faithful pastors followed him, Coventry grew industrially and soon many immigrants to the city filled the fine church he had built.

On the night of November 14th 1940 however, the whole of the chancel and the roof of the nave was destroyed as well as the presbytery and much of the rest of Coventry. The church could not be used until the end of the war, though rubble was cleared away and 1500 people turned up for Easter Mass, with the roof still missing, as early as 1942!.

Meanwhile they worshipped in an Anglican chapel donated, even in those unecumenical days, by the parish of St John's at the bottom of Hill Street.

The centenary was celebrated, in 1945, with the chancel still blocked off. Cardinal Griffin (whose twin brother was par-~~ish~~ priest at the time) came to re-open the church when it was finally finished, on 28th September 1952. The rebuilding had been done out of love for the Church, mainly by the many Irish men who worked in the construction industry. This was their mother church in which so many of them had been baptised and formed in the faith before moving on to join other parishes in the city founded, two of them, from St Osburg's.

Many still come from all over the city for the midday Mass and to enjoy the beauty of the restored east window of Our Lady, the angels and saints, as well as the mosaics in the side-chapels of Our Lady and St Benedict, the sculpted angels carrying shields with symbols of the Blessed Sacrament and the men and women saints including Saint Osburg in the lancet windows of the aisles. It is still a lovely building which we hope soon to renovate and you are very welcome on your visit here.

Alterations

The Sanctuary has seen several changes. In the late 1800s the rood screen was removed. There was a door high up in the left archway to give access to light the candles. The new design will have a screen behind the altar with six candles on the top. The panels will be covered in cloth according to the liturgical colours and changeable. The Church was bombed on the night of the Blitz in Coventry. The Chancel was destroyed with the ornate high altar, all the glass was blown out and half the roof blown off. It was open to the elements until a temporary roof could be fixed.

After the War the chancel was rebuilt with a new high altar. A new front altar was installed in the 1970's with changes to the flooring and décor. The new altar will take its design features from the threefold arches behind the sedilia seen in the picture of the ruined chancel

What Work is to be done?

In 1999 Archbishop Maurice Couve de Murville asked for the Sanctuary to be reordered. This will now become the focal point of the required work.

The existing Sanctuary floor level will be moved forward continuing round to the Lady Chapel. A new stone altar, ambo and tabernacle plinth will be made. These will incorporate designs and details of Tracery from the Chancel ruins bombed during the war. The Altar design includes alabaster figures from the original church. A new presiding chair will be in oak and leather.

Behind the altar will be a new oak screen designed to complement the stone pieces, surmounted with six candles. Screen panels will show the changing liturgical colours of the season.

The font will be moved, after refurbishment, to the front of the Lady Chapel.

The Victorian floor is to be reinstated throughout. A new heating system along with lighting, electrics and audio loop will be a major part of the reordering.

The main entrance to the Church is to be opened up and made more accessible with a new ramp and level changes outside.

The present Narthex will have new glass panels and space next to the choir stairs will become a children's crèche.

Paintwork to be removed and stone columns restored and a complete redecoration scheme is planned. Two toilets accessible by the disabled are to be built off the corridor link to the house, near the confessionals.

Costs and Timeline

The total cost is estimated as £700,000. There are Parish savings of £230,000. The Parish hope to receive a grant of £20,000 towards the toilets. We have been approaching Trusts, Abbeys and parishes to secure loans for the remaining £450,000.

To obtain permission to begin the project we urgently need a boost to our fund raising. Up to date information on the appeal status will be available online.

Please be as generous as you can. It will only take you a minute to play your part in the restoration. Methods of giving include Gift Aid, A Bequest, and A Gift in Memory. Please visit the website to donate online and other ways of helping. Donations can also be Gift Aided enabling the tax you pay to be claimed back.

The Appeal was officially opened at the traditional Easter Monday Mass with Bishop Kenney on the 15th April 2009.





Hymn of Praise to the Trinity

*"Glory to God the Father and to the Son,
King of the universe.
Glory to the Spirit, worthy of praise and all holy.
The Trinity is one God
who created and filled all things:
the heavens with heavenly beings,
the earth with creatures of earth,
the sea, the rivers and springs with creatures of the waters, giving life to all things by
his Spirit,
that all creatures might sing the praises of their wise creator, who alone gives life and
sustains
all life in being.
Above all others, let the creature who reasons celebrate him always as great King
and good Father."*

St. Gregory of Nazianzus. Quoted by Pope John-Paul in 'Incarnationis Mysterium'