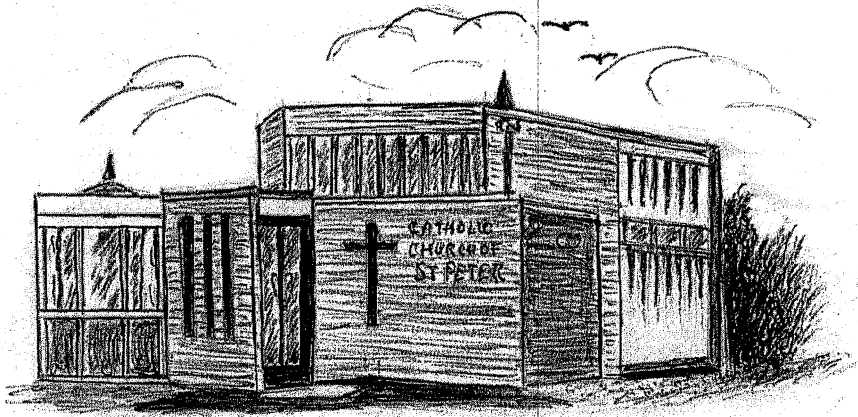


The Story  
of  
St Peter's  
Catholic  
Church  
in  
Biggleswade





**THE STORY OF ST. PETER'S**  
**AND**  
**THE CATHOLIC CHURCH IN BIGGLESWADE.**

10th May, 1998.

Dedicated to the memory of my dear wife,

Mary Watts,

who began this story with me.

R.G.W.

With acknowledgements and thanks to all those who helped  
and supplied material  
and for information from all sources  
including

Eleanor Wood, for her practical support and assistance

Mrs. M. Osborne, the Archivist of Northampton Diocese

the Parish of St. Francis of Assisi, Shefford,  
for access to their records

Mr. Ken Page, of the Biggleswade History Society  
and the Frances Munns Collection

Staff at the Bedford Records Office and Biggleswade Library

John Cottam, front cover and illustration.

## CHRONOLOGY.

- 1905 Biggleswade Mission Chapel, York Place ("The Upper Room")  
opened Sunday November 12th -served by Fr. Henry E. King  
from Shefford, under Canon Youens (later Bishop, restored the  
Shrine of Our Lady of Walsingham) abt. 15 parishioners
- 1906 abt. 17 parishioners      1915 abt. 32 including some refugees
- 1922 Society of St. Edmund from Hitchin took over from Shefford
- 1924 St. Peter's Church, Victoria Place, off Market Square blessed  
Sunday January 27th, under Frs. Arendzen and Athill, Hitchin
- 1925 Society of St. Edmund merged with Augustinians of the  
Assumption, serving from Hitchin under Fr. Aidan Kenny.
- 1931 Fr. Walter Robertson , Hitchin, followed by Father Hennessy
- 1942-43 Fr. Walter Hillier, first resident priest, in lodgings.
- 1943-53 Fr. Michael Kennedy, in lodgings.
- 1948 abt. 98 parishioners      1950 abt. 101 parishioners
- 1953-54 Fr. Reidy- in lodgings
- 1954-67 Fr. Kenneth Chapman (lodgings, then house in 1958)  
1958 purchased present site in Station Road  
1963 moved into new Presbytery
- 1968-81 Fr. Lester Weech (M.H.M.)  
1972 May 11th foundation stone blessed  
1973- May 10th St. Peter's Church blessed
- 1981-90 Fr. John Fennell
- 1990-91 Fr. Kevin O'Driscoll
- 1991-93 Fr. Brian Godden
- 1993 Provost Norman Smith      (1998 Mass attendance 300)



**THE STORY OF ST. PETER'S**  
**AND**  
**THE CATHOLIC CHURCH IN BIGGLESWADE.**

From stone tools found locally, it would seem that this area, still forested, was inhabited by prehistoric man, and a ford across the Ivel was on the main route north. Finds include hand axes and implements dating from the Early Stone Age through to the Bronze Age.

Aerial photographs have revealed traces of Bronze Age burial mounds, as well as crop marks from ploughed up Neolithic sites, and coins of gold, silver, copper and brass have been recovered, minted by Tasciovanus, ruler of the Celtic tribes around St. Albans, suggesting their activity in these parts later on.

However, it was only in the early Iron Age (700BC - 43AD) that there appears signs of an organized settlement here, and in fact, Sandy seems to have been the dominant settlement in the area, continuing to be so and to prosper right through to early Saxon times.

When the Romans came and built **The White Way** north to York (running past the village of Stratton, through Biggleswade via our present London Road and part of Drove Road, then out past Furzenhall), they improved the river crossing here, but made their principal settlement in the vicinity of Sandy Hills, around where the R.S.P.B. Bird Sanctuary is now.

On the heels of the Roman withdrawal to mainland Europe came the Saxon invasion of Britain, and tradition has it that a man called Biccel founded a small settlement by the ford, which thus became **Biccels waed** (or ford. )

Danes also settled in the area, which in 878 formed part of Danelaw.

## CATHOLIC BIGGLESWADE BEFORE THE REFORMATION.

It is thought that there may have been a Saxon church on the little rise where St. Andrew's church now stands, and according to the Domesday survey of 1086, in Saxon times Archbishop Stigand (a former servant of King Canute), held the manor of Biggleswade from the King. However, after quarrelling with successive Popes and with the Crown, he was relieved of all his estates.

In Norman times, Biggleswade was smaller than either of the two adjacent estates of Holme (between here and Langford) or Stratton (just to the south), and in 1086 the manor was held from the Crown by Ralph de Insula (probably a churchman) . It then contained about 1200 acres of arable land and 240 acres of meadow. Apart from the clergy and gentry, there were then about 20 men over the age of 16 in Biggleswade, 27 in Stratton, and 15 in Holme, with two water mills serving the community.

**In 1132, Henry I granted the manor of Biggleswade with Holme to the Bishop of Lincoln, to help endow Lincoln Cathedral, in return for an annual offering of a gown lined with sables. (A choir stall dedicated to Biggleswade still exists in the Cathedral).**

A few years later, when King Stephen was struggling against the supporters of Henry's daughter Matilda, who also claimed the throne , a simple castle of wood and mud existed to protect the Bishop's land and tenants. (Between the site of Franklin's Mill in Hitchin Street, and the present by-pass )

**It is recorded that in 1200 the body of St. Hugh of Lincoln rested overnight in the church on it's way from London, preceded by acolytes bearing candles.**

By the thirteenth century, the feudal system had been abandoned, and small plots for shops and yards were rented for one shilling yearly.

In 1276 Bishop Gravesend installed a vicarage, with a house in the town for Walter Justice, the first appointed to the living. He was allowed the offerings made on the main Feast Days, gifts from weddings and funerals, tithes from local produce, in addition to donations made at the church at Biggleswade and the chapel at Stratton. There would appear to have been many more clergy here then, as in 1379 the vicar had no less than eight chaplains and six clerks to assist him .

In 1475, King Edward IV granted a licence to the Bishop of Lincoln , the Archdeacon of Northampton, John Rudyng and eight others (either clerics, or lay people of either sex) to found a **Fraternity of the Holy Spirit** to pray for him and for his Queen Elizabeth. They could elect leaders, admit others, and acquire land, property and rents, and hold their meetings at a **Brotherhood House**.

Local people left property to the Fraternity , as did Katherine Vincent who left "my house in Biggleswade to the Fraternity of the Holy Trinity on the condition that they pray for the souls of Thomas Vyncent and myself on the Thursday after Low Sunday"

### THE REFORMATION AND AFTER.

The Fraternity was suppressed in 1548, and all it's possessions taken by the Crown, including several houses and over 100 acres of land. Services in Latin ceased, statues were removed, and the use of side altars discontinued. It has been estimated that there was a population of about 550 here at that time.

One local man, Simon Matthew, was an active supporter of the King, being one of the delegates determining the legality of his marriage to Catherine of Aragon, then later being a signatory to the decree declaring the marriage to Anne of Cleves invalid.

When Pope Pius excommunicated Elizabeth I in 1570, priests risked death if they were caught. Although some of the greater houses continued to harbour recusant priests, ordinary people were unable to do so, and within a generation the practice of Catholic worship had more or less ceased. Bedfordshire became a strongly Protestant county, but those Catholic families who could afford it sent sons and daughters to France for education and instruction, even though Catholic education abroad was illegal.

In the Civil War, Bedfordshire was solidly Parliamentary , and in 1649 the manor of Biggleswade was confiscated from the Crown and sold to Thomas Margetts, Judge Advocate in the Roundhead Army under General Monk, and who represented Bedford in Parliament.

At the Restoration in 1660, however, it was returned to the Crown as the possession of the Queen Mother, Henrietta.

### **THE SHEFFORD CATHOLIC MISSION.**

Given the prevailing atmosphere in the county, it seems astonishing that , even before the repeal of the Penal Laws in 1791 and against all odds, some Catholic activity persisted in Shefford .

Two handwritten notes survive :-

"Mary, ye child of a travelling woman, baptized 1728"

and "buried a travelling boy who died 1728"

Tradition has it that a Catholic priest lived at the house of William Noddings, a butcher in the High Street, who died in 1743.

There are records of recusant priests in Shefford who adopted aliases to protect their true identity , in some cases using the maiden names of their mothers :-

			<u>trained at</u>
Thomas Whitaker	(alias Martin)	1738-42 )	the
James Angel		1747-50 )	English College
Stephen Vezzozi	(alias Robinson)	1773-81 )	in
Christopher Taylor	(alias Nicholson)	1791-1812 )	Rome
* John Potier	(alias Jenison)	1812-1823	----- Douai, France

\*John Potier started a preparatory school in Puckeridge, near Ware,  
but on moving to Shefford in 1812 brought the boys with him.

The spiritual life of the recusants was pared down to essentials, their clothes were inconspicuous. They were known as "Mr", or if they had degrees, "Master". Only monks and members of religious orders were called Father. The Priest would use the word "Prayers" to signify the Mass, for fear of eavesdroppers.

When Bishop Challoner came to confirm his flock in 1742 there were 35 people at Turvey, and about 20 at Chawston and Shefford, about 55 in all.

It was the priest Christopher Taylor (mentioned above) who in 1791 admitted that the congregation was very small -

"but this no reason why a Chapel should not be built.

People open shop to procure custom."

This was the year of the Catholic Relief Act, when Catholic chapels became legal upon registration, although the celebration of Mass was still forbidden in any building possessing a bell or steeple.

But where did the funds for the Shefford Mission come from ? Almost certainly not from the tiny and poor congregation of five or six, but most probably from Catholic gentry in outlying areas.

Just the same, Christopher Taylor extended his ministry to Blunham and Hitchin, (a single family in each place), and to Southill and Biggleswade, as well as to Warmington in Northamptonshire.

"My flock is small," he wrote, "but too big for my bedchamber"

It seems likely that in the course of the following years the tiny number of Catholics in Biggleswade had to walk to Shefford for Mass and the Sacraments, an arduous journey of seven or eight miles each way. There was no public transport, and they probably could not afford to possess any of their own.

Entries in Shefford records appear to confirm that there was at that time a private Oratory at Fairfield House in Biggleswade, then the country residence of Count de Torre Diaz, who was attached to the Spanish Embassy. For in September 1899 it is mentioned that the Count's nephew, Cardinal Merry del Val, and also Cardinal Vaughan were both guests at Fairfield House. Again, in 1901, Bishop Riddell, Bishop of the Diocese, noted that he

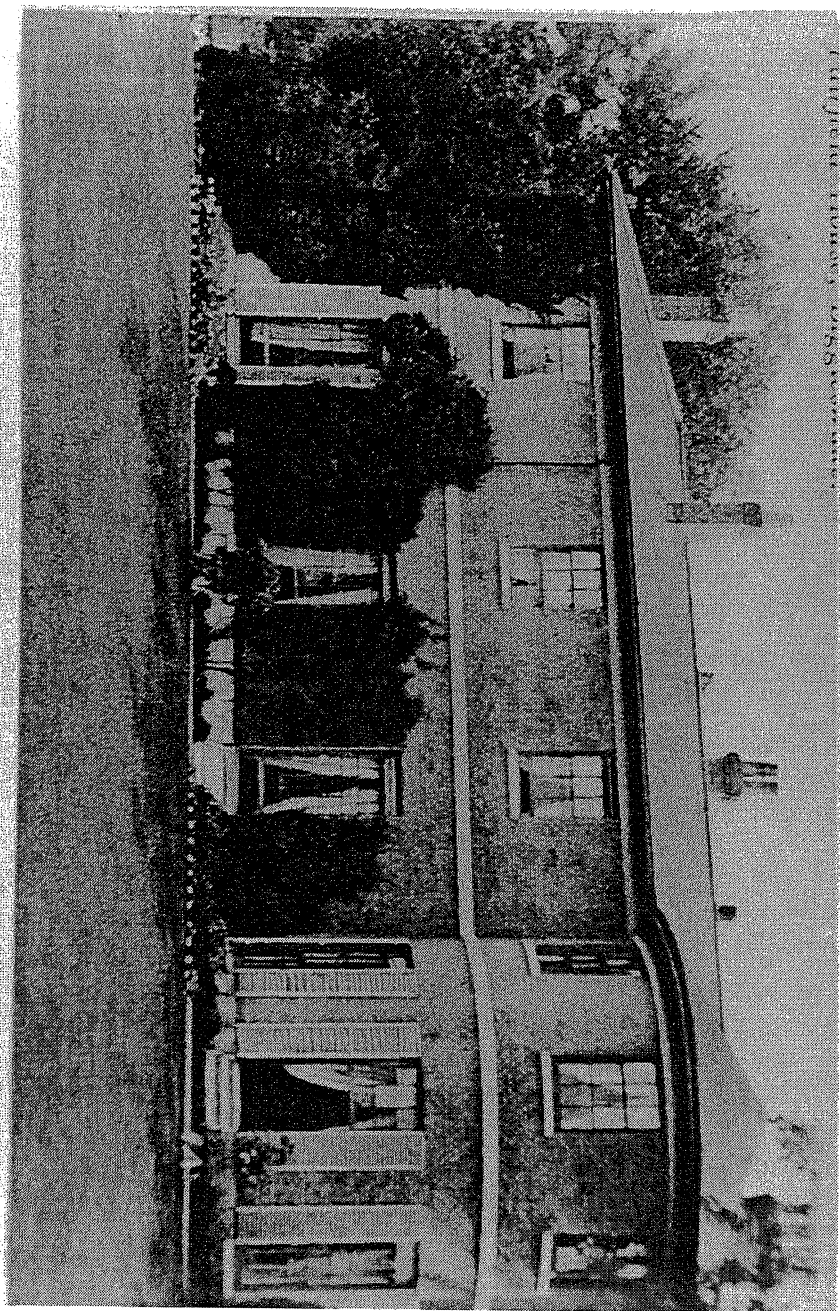
"Went to Fairfield. Count deTorre Diaz".

Shefford also records collections made at **Fairfield** during that time:-

1899	Collection made at <b>Biggleswade</b> for St. Francis Home	£1.19.3
1901	Collection made at <b>Fairfield, Biggleswade</b> for St. Francis Homes and Holy Places (Fr. Collins)	0.15.8
1903	Collection made at <b>Fairfield, Biggleswade</b> for St. Francis Home	2. 0.0

In all probability these Masses were not open to the general public, but it will be seen later that both Cardinal Merry del Val and the Count were to play a part in the re-establishment of a permanent place of Catholic worship in Biggleswade.

opposite.- Fairfield House



THE HIGH SCHOOL BUILDING

# CATHOLIC CHAPEL,

SUN STREET, BIGGLESWADE.

---

TO BE

**OPENED**

FOR

**PUBLIC WORSHIP**

ON

**Sunday, Nov. 12th, 1905.**

---

LOW MASS AT 10.0 a.m.

EVENING SERVICE AT 6.0 p.m.

---

SPENCER & SON, PRINTERS, BIGGLESWADE.



SUNDAY, NOVEMBER 12TH, 1905.

OPENING OF THE CATHOLIC CHAPEL OF ST. PETER  
IN FOX'S YARD, YORK TERRACE, OFF SUN STREET.

(in an upper room at a reputed weekly rent of 2s.6d)

The joyful event as described in The Tablet, 25th November 1905.

"BIGGLESWADE, BEDFORD"

"The little group of Catholics in the above named town and neighbourhood have hitherto had to struggle hard in order to obtain the essential aids of their religion. For St. Francis' Church, Shefford, connected with the orphanage managed by Father Henry King, and situated seven or eight miles away, was for them the nearest Catholic Church, no matter what the season or weather. However, through the zealous efforts of Miss M.M. Denny, assisted by her friends and cordially supported by Father King, a room was secured in Sun Street for a permanent Catholic Chapel. The opening Mass was celebrated, the Sunday before last, by the Rector of St. Francis', and was attended by fifteen Catholics. This will sound small to strangers, but will be considered a surprisingly large number to anyone acquainted with Biggleswade. Fitly did the celebrant preacher encourage his modest congregation with feeling words of hope, taking for his text 'Fear not, little flock'. As many as seventy five attended the evening service at 6p.m., the choristers of St. Francis, who were invited to swell the heartily sung hymns, only accounting for twelve of the number.

In his evening discourse Father King took for his theme the Faith of Old England, treating the subject historically. But, not to omit a circumstance of this glad event, which must have fairly crowned the joy of priest and people, His Holiness Pope Pius X lovingly sent his Apostolic Blessing for the occasion. This mark of special favour was due to the kindly petition of the Cardinal Secretary of State\*\* who was formerly accustomed to visit the neighbourhood during the summer months. The Papal Benediction was duly imparted at the close of the evening service. It is to be hoped that some charitable people, zealous for the house of God, may be moved to supply some of the various needs of in church furniture which still remain to be met, in spite of the marked generosity that has already been extended to this new Mission by kindly benefactors."

\*\* (Cardinal Merry del Val, previously mentioned in this history)



Having been established, though, maintaining the Mission was to prove something of a struggle, as evidenced in this letter from Count de Torre Diaz in 1908:-

STRATTON PARK,  
BIGGLESWADE.

16.9.08

My dear Lord,

I think it my duty in consequence of information which has been given me since your visit here to place circumstances of the origin and rise of the Biggleswade Mission before you.

When we left the neighbourhood with no prospect of returning one of the two Catholic residents undertook to pay the rent of a room for a Chapel & having secured the room asked Fr. King to give them Mass sometimes as the Mass of the seven or eight poor Catholics who could not go so far as Shefford. In spite of bad weather Fr. King said Mass one Sunday in the month and came over every Sunday evening receiving only the few pence of the collection which he always put aside for the adornment of the Chapel.

After two years during which numbers increased but Fr. King's health was much worse - though he never failed to come to Biggleswade - the case was stated by Fr. de Zulueta to a lady who had expressed a wish to help such a mission. Besides substantial assistance in furnishing the Chapel she promised £50 for one year to secure a priest saying Mass & giving and evening service every Sunday. The number of Catholics being so small and poor she saw that her wish of a resident priest could not be carried out so she agreed to give the £50 to Fr. King on condition that her wish of Mass & Evening Service every Sunday were secured to Biggleswade which has always been done.

During these years the number of Catholics has increased to between 30 & 40 and the evening service so largely attended that people have often to be refused admittance. Since your Lordship was here one of the two original members of the congregation came to see me and said the congregation was in great sorrow about the mission.

Some time ago Fr. Youens had said he thought it would be easier to close the mission. Last week he told them that when he was away from home they would they could not have Mass and he would probably have to discontinue the evening service in Biggleswade.

(cont. overleaf)

(/cont.)

In consequence of the probability of closing Biggleswade Mission and your Lordship's conversation about Sandy which as you saw is within easy reach of Biggleswade and that other villages are about the same distance, I have gone thoroughly into the question of receipts and expenses in case you saw your way to a resident priest.

Considering that every expense connected with the church is paid the sum is equal to £100 in most places. Unless the £50 is given for 1909 of course any arrangement is out of the question. A respectable woman age between 30 & 40 who has a little money and lives with an Uncle is willing to move into a larger house for the purpose of facilitating matters and be the priest's housekeeper.

Receipts		Expenses	
Donation	50- 0- 0	Two good	
Collections	13	furnished rooms	11- 0- 0
Saving on (stabling?)	2- 12	Housekeeper	12- 0- 0
	-----		-----
	£65- 12		£ 23- 0- 0
To be collected	4- 8	Of course	
	-----	coals & light are extras	
	£ 70 - 00	Housekeeper boards herself	

The expenses of the Church all included are £20 and that is entirely provided by the congregation.

I have reason to suppose that if the two services cannot be provided for Biggleswade the donor of the £50 is very likely to withdraw the money.

It is true that this may happen at any time & I quite see your Lordship would not wish to be drawn into any expense and that you may be obliged to sacrifice the mission owing to inability to supply a priest. I told the congregation I would lay the case before you but that having done this there must be no protest on our part, that the only resistance to influence your decision permissible is prayer and that having used that with fervour we must consider once your decision given that it is the Will of God shown to us.

Yours respectfully.

(?) de Torre Diaz

(His intervention must have been effective, as the Biggleswade Mission continued to be served by priests from Shefford until 1922, when this duty was taken over by the priests of the Society of St. Edmund, who were teachers at St. Michael's College, Hitchin.)

Meanwhile the condition of the upper room in York Place, accessible by a flight of rickety stairs, had become increasingly dilapidated and unsafe, and on 14th December 1923, the Old Town Hall, in Victoria Place, was conveyed to Fr. J. Atthill (S.S.E.) at the cost of £400. He had £100 in hand and could obtain £250 on a mortgage. He made his report to the Bishop on the following terms :-

**Saint Michael's School,  
Hitchin, Herts.**

Send Biggleswade  
money to Fr. Atthill (Bishop's note)

Jan 5.....1924

My Lord Bishop,

I have pleasure in informing your Lordship of the progress we are making at Biggleswade. We have acquired the hall which you saw having collected nearly £200 leaving £200 as a mortgage. We have possession of it now and it is at present being decorated. I hope to be able to open it this month and intend to take the school choir and have a High Mass to add to the solemnity. It would give me the greatest pleasure and I am sure gratify very much the Catholics of Biggleswade if your Lordship would consent to come to the opening and to bless the new church. I should like the ceremony to take place on January 20 or 27 if your Lordship would be free on either of those dates.

I could not arrange with the Superior General to allow us to open a novitiate in Biggleswade this year. We are holding a General Chapter in the summer however and I have great hopes that I shall then obtain the necessary permission which will enable us to have a resident priest at Biggleswade. For the time being I am giving the charge of the mission to an English Father who will be able to carry out the services in full.

I will send your Lordship shortly an account of the building Fund when I hope we shall be able to claim the donation you so kindly offered. I would be very grateful if your Lordship would send me the money collected for the former fund at present held by the diocese as we shall have to meet the various expenses of decoration and moving very soon.

Asking your Lordship's blessing on our work and with best wishes for the coming year.

Believe me

Yours sincerely

John Atthill (S.S.E.)

**Saint Michael's School,  
Hitchin, Herts.**

Jan 13.....1924

Accepted      Come on  
Sat. 26. Jan. -leave on  
Monday for London (note by Bishop)

My Lord Bishop

Thank you very much for your kindness in consenting to bless the new church at Biggleswade on Jan 27. I am sure your presence will be much appreciated by the congregation. I hope very much that your Lordship will come to Hitchin on the Saturday and spend the night here.

It would be a great pleasure to the Fathers if you will do so.

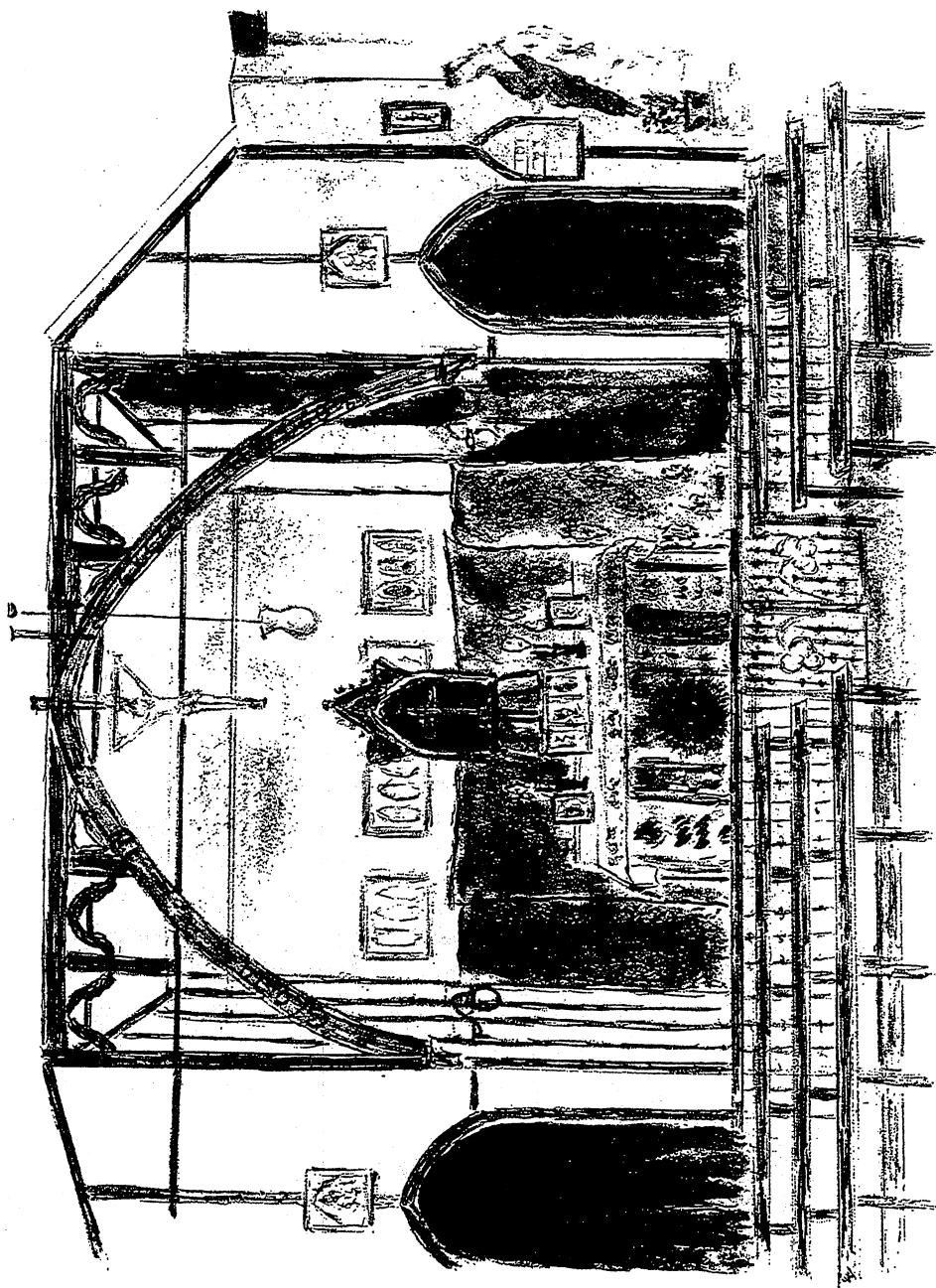
I will arrange for a motor-car to take your Lordship to Biggleswade in time for the ceremony. I have not arranged for a preacher as your Lordship will probably wish to say a few words on the occasion. I have asked Canon Youens who was so long in charge of the mission to sing the High Mass and he has kindly consented to do so.

Thanking your Lordship again for your kindness,

Believe me

yours sincerely in J.C.

John Atthill (S.S.E.)



SUNDAY, JANUARY 27th., 1924.

OPENING OF ST. PETER'S CHURCH, VICTORIA PLACE.

(situated in the Market Square, behind the present Gales' shop, & where the Pet Shop & Motor spares shop is now.)

as described in the "Biggleswade Chronicle" :-

THE NEW ROMAN CATHOLIC  
CHURCH.

Opened by Bishop of Northampton.

On Sunday the local Catholic cause held their first services in the old Small Town Hall, which has been transformed into a very attractive little chapel by local followers.

The Biggleswade Roman Catholic Mission, of which Rev. Father Atthill, S.S.E. (Rector of St. Michael's School, Hitchin), is in charge, have long awaited the opportunity of securing a more central chapel than the Sun Street on in which the Roman Catholics have so for long foregathered in the town for their services, and the Small Town Hall has supplied their need. The decoration work was carried out by Messrs. Geo. Haddow and Son and the structural alterations by Messrs. Styles and Son, but the whole of the letterings and decorations in the sanctuary before the altar was done by the voluntary labour of members of the congregation and by lady followers of the Roman Catholic cause. The alterations altogether have cost about £80.

On Sunday morning the chapel was well filled, many having to stand, on the occasion of the visit of Rt. Rev. Doctor Dudley Charles Cary-Elwes, Bishop of Northampton, who blessed the church and attended High Mass subsequently. (/con.opp)



(cont.)

The Very Rev. Canon L. W. Youens, of St. Francis Home, Shefford was the celebrant, assisted by Rev. Father Atthill, S.S.E. (deacon) and Rev. Father Keaton, S.S.E. (sub deacon).

Rev. Father Arendzen, S.S.E. (the priest in charge at Biggleswade) attended the Bishop. Master Maloney was the thurifer, and there were two acolytes.

Mr. Albert Groves, senior music teacher and choirmaster of St. Michael's College, Hitchin, was the organist, and the male voice choir of the college gave a very talented rendering of the magnificent music of Hasler's Mass, "Dixit Maria." As the Bishop entered the chapel, the choir gave "Ecce Sacerdos Magnus" (behold a great priest) by Sir Edward Elgar, and the offertory piece, sung unaccompanied was "Gaudet In Coelus Vittoria".

The Bishop preached an Easter sermon, giving thanks for the coming revival of the Romish Church in England, and dealing with the history of the Roman Catholic faith in this country after the Reformation. He rejoiced that after many years of seclusion in a back street and services in a chapel of which the outward appearance was ruinous but the interior very dear, the followers of Christ and the Blessed Lady had now obtained a fitting place for worship and sacrament.

He congratulated the children of Jesus Christ upon the work they had done, and prayed that it might bear fruit.

After the service the Bishop interviewed members of the congregation at the Town Hall.

*Biggleswade Mission - Copy of Fr. W. Arendsen's Statement of Accts.  
before leaving Hitchin*

<i>By Collections</i>	<i>42 0 0</i>	<i>Styles-decorating new</i>	<i>58 13 3</i>
<i>Anon</i>	<i>1 0 0</i>	<i>building</i>	
<i>Sale-Cloakroom</i>	<i>23 0 0</i>	<i>Shelley. Photo blocks</i>	
<i>Old Church Fund</i>	<i>40 15 1</i>	<i>&amp; photos</i>	<i>2 2 9</i>
<i>Miss Gleeson</i>	<i>5 0 1</i>	<i>Haddow-painting</i>	<i>13 13 0</i>
<i>Miss A de Luluatta</i>	<i>5 0 0</i>	<i>Goldthorpe-</i>	<i>2 6 1</i>
<i>H.G. Card.</i>		<i>"Courier"-adv.</i>	<i>- 15 0</i>
<i>Mary del Val</i>	<i>5 0 0</i>	<i>"Chronicle"-adv.</i>	<i>- 9 0</i>
<i>Mr. Drummond</i>	<i>2 0 0</i>	<i>Fisher - painting</i>	<i>17 11</i>
<i>Mr. Styles</i>	<i>10 0</i>	<i>Chaundler-Policitors</i>	<i>15 10 0</i>
<i>By Miss Denny</i>	<i>37 5 0</i>	<i>Oil Rocks</i>	<i>15 0 0</i>
<i>Miss Norman</i>	<i>6 5 0</i>	<i>Goldthorpe - Keys</i>	<i>3 5</i>
<i>Mr. Gregg</i>	<i>1 1 0</i>	<i>Interest on money</i>	<i>10 0 0</i>
<i>Mr. Brooke Stevens</i>	<i>10 0</i>	<i>Taxes</i>	<i>11 3</i>
<i>Mr. Jackson</i>	<i>1 12 0</i>	<i>Howitt- sundries</i>	<i>1 10 2</i>
<i>Mr. B. O. Street</i>	<i>4 6 4</i>	<i>Goldthorpe-trimmings</i>	<i>15 2</i>
<i>Mr. Hillken</i>	<i>3 0 0</i>	<i>Paid on purchase of</i>	
<i>Mr. W. O' Sullivan</i>	<i>13 18 6</i>	<i>building</i>	<i>200 0 0</i>
<i>Miss Gibbons</i>	<i>2 0 0</i>		
<i>Mr. Newbury</i>	<i>2 0 0</i>		
<i>Mr. Fox</i>	<i>1 3 1</i>		
<i>Mr. Campbell</i>	<i>2 5 6</i>		
<i>Mr. Hayes</i>	<i>1 10 0</i>		
<i>Mr. Cartel</i>	<i>5 5 0</i>		
<i>Rev. Mason</i>	<i>10 0</i>		
<i>Miss Varney</i>	<i>10 0</i>		
<i>Mr. Grace</i>	<i>3 0 0</i>		
<i>Sale of (?)</i>	<i>5 0</i>		
<i>Raffle</i>	<i>7 17 6</i>		
<i>Loan (?) Monies</i>	<i>50 0 0</i>		
<i>R. P. Bp of</i>			
<i>Northampton</i>	<i>10 0 0</i>		
<i>Balance</i>	<i>29 13 0</i>		
	<i>308 2 0</i>		

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*308 2 0*  
*(Balance 29 13 2)*

1st July 1925

<u>Assets</u>		<u>Liabilities</u>	
New Church Building	400.0.0	Mortgage at 5% less Tax	200.0.0
Rent on Outbuilding)		Balance on Debts	29.12.0
per month )	5.0		
		Half yearly interest	
		due on Mortgage 1st July	5.0.0
		1925	

W. Brendsen L.L.E.

True & accurate Copy

Dudley Charles  
B/p Northampton

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As well as contributions by such eminent personages as the Cardinal and the Bishop, and the substantial amount donated by one of the prime movers, Miss Denny, the Accounts show many well known Biggleswade names, some still familiar in the town.

Such business names as :-

Styles, (builders)

Haddow, (builders & decorators)

Fisher (for many years ironmongers on Market Square)

Chaundler (solicitors, still practising here.)

Goldthorpe (ironmongers still trading on the railway bridge),

Of some particular interest, the Killeen family mentioned in the accounts, and especially the late Mrs. K. Killeen, played a very active role in the fund raising activities then, and continued to do for many years. One of her sons himself entered the priesthood.

After studying in a seminary in Vichy France during the Second World War, he escaped across the Pyrenees and through Spain back to England.

Returning home he joined the Augustinians of the Assumption at Hitchin as Father Roger Killeen, where he later became Headmaster of St. Michael's and Superior of the Order. His sisters Bridget (Biddy Revels) and Margaret (Peggy Kettleborough) remain members of our present congregation, and Mary (Watts) was also one until her death in 1994.

For the following eighteen years, St. Peter's continued to be served by priests from St. Michael's College in Hitchin, originally of The Society of St. Edmund but subsequently as Augustinians of the Assumption when they merged in 1925. It must have been a most demanding life for them, according to a letter received from Mrs. Anne Devereux (née Howitt), a parishioner in those early times. For she says that as well as teaching at St. Michael's on week days, on Sundays they said Mass and heard confessions at the R.A.F Camp at Henlow, on their way to doing the same here in Biggleswade.

Because of this our Mass, due to begin at 10 a.m., often started much later. On the first Sunday in each month, our Mass was timed to start at 9.30 a.m. to enable the congregation to observe, without too much hardship, the then strict observance of fasting from the previous mid-night before taking Holy Communion. She adds that her father played the organ, her mother sang soprano and another lady alto in the choir, and on most Sundays her parents entertained the priest until Benediction at 6 p.m.

St. Michael's College,  
Hitchin,  
Herts.

phone: Hitchin, 172

Biggleswade

15th May 1930

My dear Lord,

The Biggleswade Mission of St. Peter celebrates its 25th anniversary next November, about the 8th.

To mark the event the congregation made an effort last year to gather the necessary funds to decorate the little church both inside and out. They succeeded, thanks to the considerable economy effected by voluntary work on their part.

Your Lordship honoured St. Peter's with your presence on the occasion of its transfer to the present quarters. I have been told that you promised to return whenever the Mission had enough candidates to present for Confirmation.

Those actually needing this Sacrament are not very numerous - eight all told, five adults and three younger people - but the fact of the Silver Jubilee might induce your Lordship to consider a visit to this tiny outpost of the Faith worthwhile.

I make bold, therefore, to ask if your Lordship could during the year 1930 renew this mark of kindly and paternal interest. I need hardly say how much priest and people would appreciate it.

Kissing your Lordship's hand I am

Your Lordship's obedient servant in J.C.

Aidan Kenny A.A.

St. Michael's College,  
Hitchin,  
Herts.  
Phone: Hitchin, 172.

29th April 1931

My dear Lord,

The little mission church of St. Peter of Biggleswade narrowly escaped being burnt down last Saturday night.

At about 9. o.c. smoke was seen issuing from the windows. When the fire- brigade arrived on the scene the flames of an oil stove which seems to have exploded, were already licking a window frame and a rafter above. The brigade were just in time to prevent a serious conflagration.

At one corner of the window in question stood a statue of St. Joseph which with it's plush covered stand remained untouched although the woodwork around it was badly burnt and the whole ceiling blackened with smoke. Many saw more than a mere coincidence in this , so a Mass of thanksgiving was offered the following morning in honour of St. Joseph, for having so wonderfully protected us during his octave.

Of course the building is insured and a claim has been sent to the proper quarter.

The stove that caused the trouble was bought only two years ago and was supposed to be absolutely safe. A safer means of heating the church will have to be found by next winter.

I hope your Lordship is completely restored to health.

Asking your blessing for the Biggleswade mission

I beg to remain, with profound respect,  
Obediently yours in J.C.

Aiden Kenny A.A.



April 30/31

BISHOP'S HOUSE,  
NORTHAMPTON.

Dear Fr. Kenny

St. Joseph has certainly been very good to us over the little Chapel of Biggleswade; I must return him thanks for his protecting hand. What a wonderful escape !

By the way, if you still want to send any one to Shafford for Confirmation, I shall be there on Thursday, July 9. You will have to find the exact time for the ceremony from Canon Youens. I believe it was Fr. Superior who first asked me about it, but I am not quite sure.

With a blessing, and congratulating you and your little flock on their really miraculous escape from losing their chapel

Yours v. sincerely in Xt.

Succeeding Fathers Arendzen and Atthill in serving St. Peter's from Hitchin, came Father Aidan Kenny and then Father Walter Robertson. The latter travelled here by motor-bike, allegedly "held together by string" and constantly breaking down. Through series of fundraising events, Biggleswade managed to provide him with a second-hand, but serviceable, replacement.

In 1931, Fr. Robertson conducted the first Nuptial Mass in St. Peter's, the bride being a Miss Bibby who came from another well known local Catholic family .

The last of the priests to serve us from St. Michael's was Father David Hennessey.

### Biggleswade's First Resident Priest.

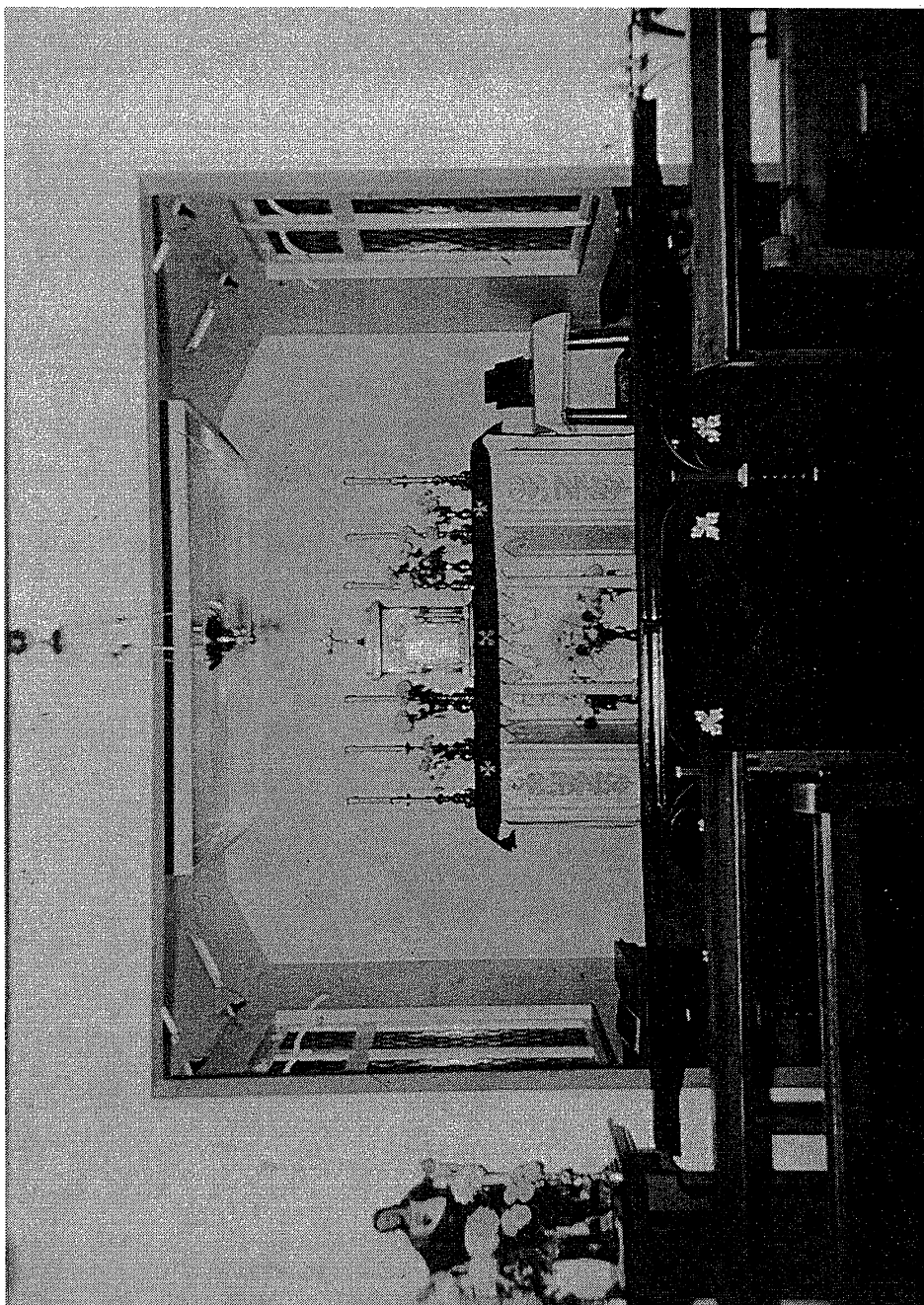
In 1942, Father E. Donald Hillier took lodgings in the town, and so became our first resident priest. He was with us for a comparatively short time, however, as in 1943 he joined the wartime Forces as an Army Chaplain. Apparently it was a familiar sight for the locals to see him at the head of a of procession of children, leading them from the church to the Cinema , where he treated them to the "pictures" after catechism classes on Saturday mornings.

It would seem that these classes were always very well attended!

He was succeeded by Fr. Michael Kennedy, staying for the next ten years and lodging with the King family, who ran a sweet and tobacconists shop located on the railway bridge (where the greengrocers is at present). By this time the congregation had grown to approximately one hundred.

Parishioners who were there at that time still have affectionate memories of the late Mrs. Jenks, a lovely lady, who, rain or shine, was always in attendance to coax wheezy and sometimes rather startling performances from our unreliable old harmonium.





With the coming of Father Reidy in 1953, here for a brief but eventful ten months, developments slowly gathered momentum. He built an extension to the existing sanctuary, and added a vestry to one side of the old church, to meet the need for an increased seating capacity.

Then, during the his incumbency from 1954-67, Father Kenneth Chapman oversaw the planning and execution of the plans which were to lead to the establishment of our present church and presbytery:-

**1958** A house , No. 132 Drove Road, was purchased, and occupied by Father Chapman.

**Vacant land beside the Police Station in Station Road was acquired by the Diocese.**  
(locally regarded as something of a coup, because of our swift action in securing such a valuable location immediately it came up for sale)

**1963** May 1st. - Work began on the present Presbytery, and on November 14th - Father Chapman moved in.

**1964** The house in Drove Road was sold for £2,180

**The New English Rite was introduced on the First Sunday in Advent, - English replacing Latin in the Mass, and the celebrant facing the people.**

After thirteen years, in 1967, Father Chapman was appointed to Aldeburgh in Suffolk, and Father Lester Weech , accompanied by his housekeeper, Mrs. Annie Rice arrived to replace him.

Father Weech, a Mill Hill Father , had been a teaching missionary in Kenya for twenty eight years, then successively chaplain to the Elwes family at Brigg in Lincolnshire and curate at the Church of Our Lady of the Sea, Lowestoft.

In March 1972, work began on building our present church, the foundation stone being laid by Bishop Charles Grant of Northampton. On the evening of the following May 11th. it was blessed by him, as reported in the the "Biggleswade Chronicle":-

### **Bishop blesses foundation stone**

A large gathering assembled at the site of Biggleswade's new Roman Catholic Church in Station Road, on the evening of May 11, for the blessing of an inscribed foundation stone by the Bishop of Northampton, the Rt. Rev. Charles Grant, who was accompanied by his secretary, Father D. Morgan.

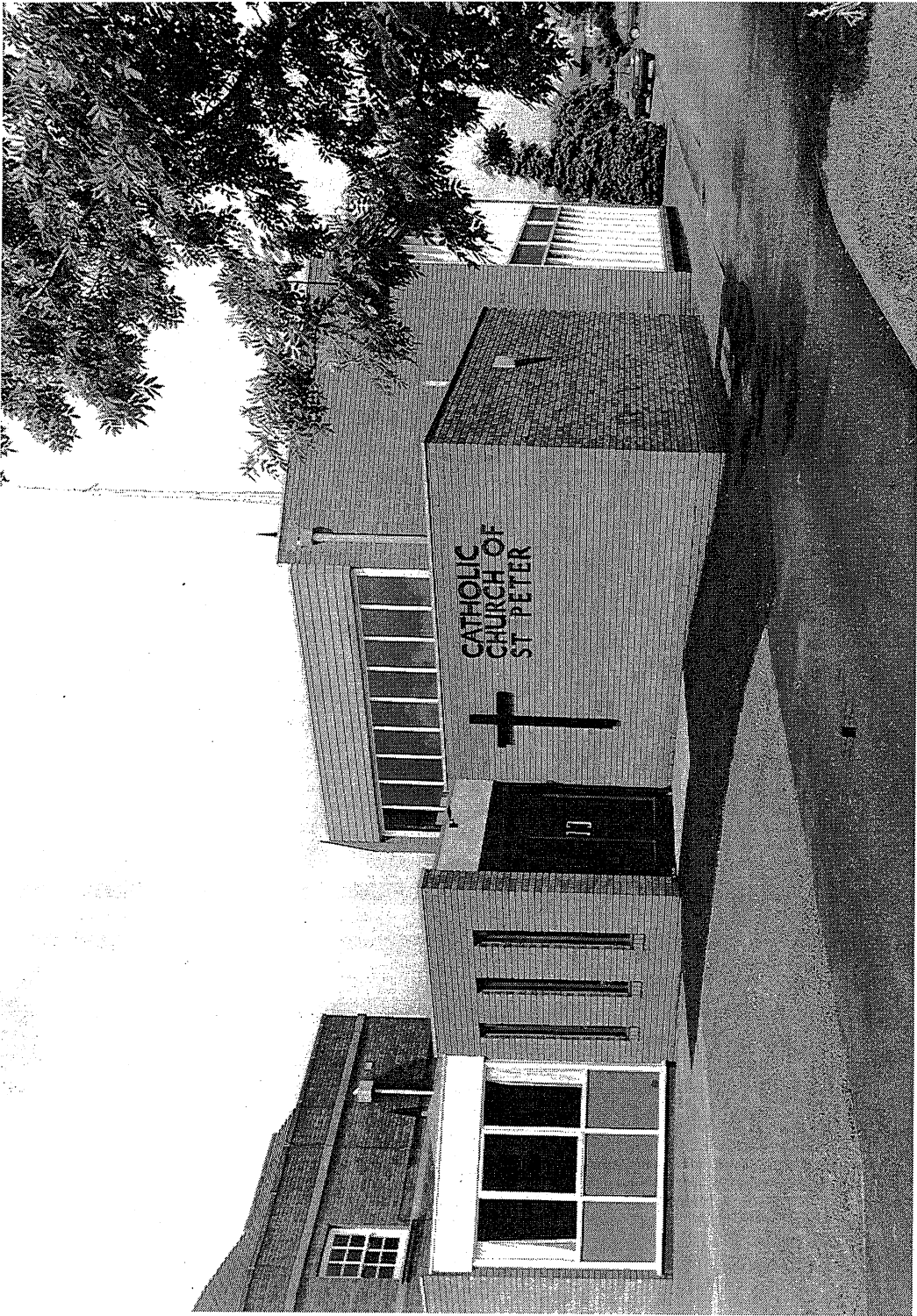
The new church, to replace the existing one off the Market Square, is expected to be completed by the end of the year.

Among those present were the chairman of Biggleswade UDC (Mr. S.A. Butcher), and Mrs. Butcher, the chairman of Sandy UDC (Mr. K.G. Quince) and Mrs. Quince, the vice-chairman of Biggleswade RDC (Mr. J. Sewell) and Mrs. Sewell, Mr. J. Wright (representing Wrights (Langford) Ltd., the builders), and Mrs. Wright, Mr. J.L. Burnett (representing F.C. Levitt and Partners, the architects), and Mrs. Burnett, Father Erity, the Rev. Peter de Visme (Methodist Minister).

The Bishop congratulated everyone connected with the new building, and said that although it was good to see the foundation laid, they were now looking forward to the completion. He thanked the urban council for their co-operation, and referred to the zeal and determination of the Catholic parish council and the priest, Father Lester Weech. He added that the value of the church would be in the use people made of it.

Mr. Stanley Thompson, chairman of the Catholic parish council, said they were pleased the Bishop had recovered from his illness, and was able to attend the ceremony, which he described as a joyful occasion.

Mr. S.A. Butcher said Biggleswade welcomed another new church in the town - it was something the Catholics really deserved.



Originally it was proposed that a church hall should be erected behind the presbytery, with parking facilities in the front of the church, but this plan had to be abandoned because there was draft planning provision for construction of a relief road between the railway and the rear of our site.

In these circumstances, the present multi-purpose church building with the parking area at the rear was decided upon.

Construction work continued under the watchful eye of Father Weech, and the new building was finally completed and opened for worship in January 1973.

But it was not until May 10th, 1973 , on a fine evening after a stormy day , a year after he had blessed the foundation stone, that the church was formally blessed by the Bishop .

A Concelebrated Mass then followed, with the Bishop being assisted by Father Weech and some of our previous Parish Priests, and with representatives of the Anglican and Methodist Churches among the congregation.

The great occasion ended with splendid refreshments which had been supplied and laid out by one of the parishioners.

Father Weech served as our Parish Priest for a further eight years until his death in 1981. He became very frail and ill towards the end of his incumbency but insisted that he would continue until he died "in harness". And this he did, carrying out his priestly duties until the very last, and passing gently and peacefully away in his presbytery. Many parishioners made their way to Mill Hill to be present and say their goodbyes when he returned "home" to his final resting place.

It would be fitting here to pay tribute to his devoted housekeeper, Mrs. Annie Rice, a lovely lady who had supported him for many years. Older members of our congregation will remember her unstinting service to the parish, as well as for the wonderful jams, preserves and cakes she made. Woe betide anyone cutting down the blackberry brambles running wild in the garden at that time! Upon his death she returned to America to live with her daughter, but continued to correspond with her friends here until her own death.

Following the passing of Fr. Weech we were served temporarily by Frs. Marks and Bustin until Fr. John Fennell came to us in 1981. Among his previous appointments he had been Chaplain to the University of East Anglia, and from 1969 was a member of the Matrimonial Tribunal of the Diocese.

It was Father Fennell who ensured that the elegant lectern and free standing crucifix in the sanctuary of our church, purchased from funds donated in memory of Father Weech, were dignified and liturgically appropriate. He went as far as Rome to find the very best, and personally transported them home to Biggleswade.

It was he, too, who ensured that our parishioners were enabled to take a full part in the formation and proceedings of the Diocesan Assembly.

#### **The Papal Visit of John Paul II to this country in May 1982.**

This was a truly a festive time at St. Peter's, and the church was beautifully decorated by volunteers from the congregation. Transport was arranged, and many parishioners attended the the great open air Papal Masses being celebrated at Wembley and Coventry Airport, where several of them had the honour of serving as stewards. As a climax, a "fun" day of entertainment was organised, with a childrens' party in the afternoon and a Parish Supper and Cabaret in the evening.

Father John set up our original Peru Project of aid to the missions there, and a close link was maintained by means of meetings and talks with missionaries and others involved.

He was a learned and dedicated priest, remaining with us for some nine years until going to Our Lady's, Wellingborough in 1990.

A Dublin man, educated at Belvedere College and Clonliffe Seminary, he died whilst on holiday there in 1997, whilst preparing to offer Mass.

Fr. Kevin O'Driscoll succeeded Fr. John, and although his stay was a brief one of just over a year, his energetic and enthusiastic approach made a very positive and popular impression upon our community .

In 1991 Fr. Brian Godden took charge of the Parish, and during his time here he instigated the purchase the present fine portable pipe organ .

Built by Peter Collins of Leicestershire, it was recommended for our church by Dr. Rowntree, an authority on pipe organs in the Westminster Diocese. A similar instrument is used in Westminster Cathedral for choir practice. Although expensive to buy, it has proved to be a good investment, for in addition to providing for part of the music of our own church liturgy, it has attracted a substantial revenue from outside hirings. It has been played in performances both in England and on the Continent, by the B.B.C. for recordings in Westminster Abbey and several large London churches, by the Opera Company in Bruges, and for the Mozart Festival in Salzburg.

Like Father Fennell, Father Brian had a great interest in missionary projects in Peru, and with his encouragement considerable financial aid was provided to them from our parish.

He was concerned also, with the renewal of open Catholic worship in the former state of Czechoslovakia, visiting priests there following the collapse of the communist regime.

Canon Norman Smith arrived to take charge of us in 1993, when Father Godden moved to Slough. He later said that he was "the most moved priest in the Northampton Diocese" before coming to Biggleswade in the heart of Brussels sprout country, and that time he spent in Ghana and Kenya had left a lasting impression on him.

He had, in fact, taken a group in a previous parish to Africa to help an orphanage for children maimed in the Somali war, and help to build four Mass centres and a pumped irrigation system.

## ST. PETER'S TODAY

Father Norman's ministry here has been an extremely active one. He is concerned with all aspects of pastoral welfare, and in addition to many parish commitments he has been a visiting priest to St. John's Hospice in Mogerhanger, and for a time Chaplain to Bedford Prison.

Under his guidance our community continues to develop and thrive. The buildings are being kept in good repair, our finances in good order, and it was he who initiated the valuable acquisition of the "Minor Basilica" (originally a horse-box, now converted into classroom/cum storeroom).

In particular, Father has successfully encouraged the formation of a management support team, able to carry on the day to day running of the parish should he be unavoidably absent for any lengthy time. In this he is very well supported by the many groups and individuals involved in all aspects of our spiritual and social life.

Among those giving freely of their time and effort for the wellbeing of the Parish, no-one has made a greater contribution over a long period of time, than our Ernie Tuck. His constant hard work and skill helps to keep the fabric and furniture of our church in excellent condition, besides saving us considerable expense.

So there was a very happy celebration here in St. Peter's on September 9th, 1994, when we saw him honoured with the award of the Papal Benemerenti Medal, presented to him by Bishop Leo, in recognition of sixty six years of dedicated service to the Catholic Church.

The warm and welcoming atmosphere within our present day St. Peter's community owes much to Canon Norman's own outgoing personal warmth and sympathetic leadership. He is held in much affection and esteem, and with our grateful thanks remains our Parish Priest as we approach another milestone on our historic journey.



THE TWENTY- FIFTH ANNIVERSARY  
of the  
BLESSING of our present ST. PETER'S CHURCH  
on MAY 10th 1998,

Perhaps it would be appropriate now, as we look forward  
to Bishop Leo joining us in our anniversary celebrations  
on Friday 9th of October  
to reflect on the the debt owed to our predecessors for the progress of  
our Catholic community in Biggleswade over almost one hundred years.

- : the arduous long journeys made to Shefford for Mass,  
(most probably on foot).
- : the opening of the tiny and tumbledown attic chapel in  
York Terrace for a congregation of about fifteen.
- : how the Mission almost failed, but was saved by the  
determination and strenuous efforts of a devoted few.
- : The dedication of the priests supplying us from  
St. Michael's following a hard full week of teaching.
- : The establishment and conversion of the Church on the  
Market Square and advent of our own residential priests.
- : and finally the building our present Church and Presbytery  
in Station Road.

So much achieved by the sacrifices and devotion of priests ,  
laity, and benevolent wellwishers.

✠ WE GO NOW, WITH FAITH , INTO THE FUTURE ✠





