St Francis of Assisi Church, Ascot

1889 ~ 1989 History by Philip Fearon

The land where the church is, was occupied by a number of wealthy families with substantial houses surrounded by large gardens. Amongst these was Charles J.Stoner and his wife Maude and EF.Devenish Walshe, who with other neighbours had to travel to Binfield Park to receive the Sacraments and hear Mass. Devenish Walshe sold 37 acres to the Institute of the Blessed Virgin Mary, where St.Mary's Ascot convent and school were built and Mass first celebrated in August 1885. In 1886 Mr and Mrs Stoner built a chapel in Llanvair opposite the present church, where local Catholics could attend Mass.

On a visit to Paris, Charles Stoner met some French Franciscans from the Province of Acquitaine. His friendship developed and when the Franciscans were expelled from France in 1887, and in May 1887 Fr Bernardin Ibald and Fr Fidelis Bouille arrived in Ascot, Devenish Walshe gave them some land and Fr Joseph Scoles (An architect)was appointed architect and on 8th May 1888 the foundation stone for the church and the Friary was laid by the Bishop of Portsmouth. The first Mass was celebrated on Christmas Day 1888. On the 4th July 1889 the Bishop consecrated the church and dedicated it to St.Francis of Assisi.

The Stonor family contributed 40% of the total required complete the project. The most prominent contributors to the project were the Carthusians and the Jesuits orders. Other contributors included Cardinal Manning. There were many other leading figures who contributed, including Duke of Norfolk, Lord Arundel, the duchess of Newcastle, and other contributions from Italy, USA, Belgium, Hungary and from France the exiled Princess Eugenie and Duc d'Orleans.

In April 1887 the French friars took over the mission at Ascot where the Franciscan order was permitted to build the church, friary and school on ground which belonged to the Diocese. In June 1901, the church ceased to be a mission and the Parish boundaries were drawn up.

During the second world war, on 10th November 1940 a bomb landed on the school, destroying it and damaging the Friary.

The parish included some prominent parishioners. The Irish tenor, Count John McCormack often sang in the choir. Mrs Rose Kennedy, mother of President JFK, Bing Crosby and Bob and Dolores Hope then parishioners presented the parish with the statue of St.Francis that now stands at the entrance to the school. The proximity to Heathrow Airport meant that the parish was often visited by a number of Franciscans, including Bishops and academics.

In 1951 the nativity crib figures were purchased and the statue of St.Theresa of Lisieux was given to the church.

Due to the diminishing resources and vocations in the Franciscan order, it was decided to close the Friary. This saw the departure of the remaining friars. In May 1980 Fr Brian Murphy-O'Connor and Fr. Jeremy Garratt, Diocesan priests, came to St.Francis to take over and the Franciscans began to leave.

With the liturgical changes in 1986 and fewer priests it became necessary for more lay involvement. This saw the first ever promotion of parents/school involvement for the First Holy Communion, RCIA (rite of Christian Initiation of Adults), the first Parish Council, the Parish preparation for the Sacrament of Confirmation and the introduction of Eucharistic Ministers.

THE CHURCH

The legacy of the church is now enjoying its centenary. Before we enter by the main West doors, let us pause for a moment and examine the outside of the church. As you can see it is made of red brick. It has an imposing bell tower and a number of crucifixes mostly mounted on peaks. Above the main entrance is a statue of a Madonna and child, at the side entrance above the door is a statue of St Francis, whilst on the South facing wall is a statue of St Bernardine of Siena. As we enter the church by the main door the symmetry of the design is apparent. The centre aisle is flanked by gothic arches supported by octagonal piers leading down to the centre point of the church, the High Altar . This is beneath the apse, which provides a fitting wooden canopy to highlight the whole of the sanctuary.

The lancet windows on either side of the altar provide ample illumination, except in the dullest of weather. The altar is shielded from the choir at the rear by a stone reredos, with sculptured angels acting as sentinels on each side. On either side of the centre aisle lie secondary aisles leading to the chapel of Our Lady on the right, and to that of St Joseph on the left.

THE HIGH ALTAR

Tabernacle is the original one donated in 1889 by Mrs Lonergan. This is mounded in marble with the word Sanctus inscribed. Above is a rather unusual crucifix, which has two figures of the crucified Christ, one on either side of the cross. The candlesticks that can be seen against the background of the reredos, are four of the original six which were donated by Miss A. MacDonnell.

The altar was moved from beneath the tabernacle in 1969 to meet the liturgical changes, and the damage incurred by this removal was repaired in the same year. The silver sanctuary lamp suspended on the left as we face the altar is one of two given by Mrs Rose Kerr. Beneath this inserted into the wall is a small safe called the Aumbry, containing the Holy Oils, which are used in the Sacrament of the Sick. Between this and the reredos is a very cunningly concealed window, by which the progress of the Mass could be seen by other priests from the sacristy. This enabled them to assist with sermons, or in the giving Holy Communion, without undue interference in the Sacrifice of the Mass. On the right of the altar is a plaque of recent origin commemorating the years spent in Ascot by the

Franciscans. In the alcove between the High and Lady altars is a set of tubular bells donated by a Timothy Kennedy dated 16 April 1905.

THE CHOIR

If we move behind the High altar we can see the choir. This consists of intricately carved oak stalls, sixteen in number, facing an altar and reredos both carved in oak. The stalls were completed in 1930, the altar and reredos in 1932.

To return to the front once again, oak altar rails extended across the width of the church. they were presented by Admiral Cochrane in 1925 in memory of his mother. In the redecoration of the chapel in 1988 these were removed and returned to the family to be used once more for ecclesiastical purposes.

THE LADY CHAPEL AND SOUTH AISLE

We now move across to the right to the Lady Chapel. Originally this consisted of an altar, and a statue of Mary Immaculate, given by Mr and Mrs Maxwell Stuart. The altar and altar rails have now been removed and the whole area carpeted.

The original statue of Mary Immaculate now is mounted beneath a stained glass window. This is a Franciscan heraldic shield. It is not dated but presumably is one of the original windows. This window is very interesting and bears further scrutiny. Unfortunately we have no records at present to help us decipher it, but on it we can see the traditional Franciscan symbol of hands, the papal crown, the crown of thorns, among the scenes depicted.

To the right of the chapel are two further stained glass windows. The first of St Clare was made by Mayer and Co. Munich and is also undated and the second is of St Rose of Viterbo, given by Mrs Cochrane in 1898.

It is in the Lady Chapel that Charles and Maude Stoner were buried in 1919 and 1921 respectively, their tombstones can be seen on the floor of the church, with a commemorating plaque on the adjoining wall.

The stations of the Cross begin here. It is presumed that they were in the church from the beginning. They cost twenty two pounds which in those days was expensive. They appear to be French in origin, and one of the principle subscribers to them was the exiled Empress Eugenie. As we proceed along the aisle to the back of the church we see other stained glass windows. The first pair depict Lt Cuthbert Stoner in his army uniform being presented to Our Lady, who is holding the infant Jesus. Lt Stoner is accompanied by St Francis and St Cuthbert. It was inserted in 1919, and is in memory of Bernard James Stonor and Cuthbert Mary Anthony Stonor.

The next two windows illustrate the Angel at the tomb with the Holy Women and are in memory of Janet Mary Stafford, these are dated 1925.

The following two stained windows show Christ healing the sick, are in memory of Dr John Kennedy, and are dated 1928. The Holy Family are represented in the next two stained glass windows which are in memory of Mary Howes, Eliza Ann Kennedy and Thomas Kennedy, 1950, 1952.

Finally the last two windows illustrate the Baptism of Christ by St. John the Baptist, these are in memory of Eleanor Elizabeth Mary Howes 1966. This was an apt siting as the original Baptismal Font was close to them. This Baptismal font has been recently removed. For may years, however, a silver bowl was used as a Baptismal bowl until the purchase of a new font in 1988. The silver bowl was given by Miss Cynthia Ashton-Cross, and was reputedly won at Crufts Dog Show.

The statue of St. Anthony is presumed to be the original one that was in the church from the beginning.

THE SACRED HEART CHAPEL

The Sacred Heart Chapel occupied the site of the present book stall. Its altar was consecrated in 1892, but was dismantled in 1965. The altar was given to the parish church at Berkhamstead, where it is now the High Altar. the chapel was later converted to a Baptistery, with marble flooring.

As we walk from the south of the church to the North we pass under the organ gallery, underneath which until recently was a sound proof vestibule. Here it was that the original baptismal font stood before its transfer to the Sacred Heart chapel. the original siting is clearly visible on the church floor.

The present organ was installed in 1964, this replaced the original one which was bought for approximately fifty-four pounds in 1891. Many improvements were made to the original organ over the years. In addition to these the organ was raised a tone to suit the voice of Count John McCormack.

THE NORTH AISLE

We now arrive at the north aisle. If we first turn to the left we come to an alcove beside the holy water font. This as many will remember, held the statue of St. Peter. On the opposite side was the flower room, which was converted into a confessional in 1969. In the alcove was a Calvary, this was removed and replaced by a Pieta in Seaton Devon stone carved by Gorton of Ludlow. at present the Pieta is in the garden at the rear of the friary, together with a statue of Our Lady. In the alcove we now have the statue of St. Francis, which dates from the beginning of the church.

ST JOSEPH'S CHAPEL

As we follow the aisle towards the altar it can be seen that there are no stained glass windows on the north side, except that of St. George on the wall beside the altar. This window was given by Mrs Cochrane in 1898 and was badly damaged in 1940 by the bomb. In 1950 it was restored at Mrs Cochrane's expense. On the left is the statue of St. Theresea of Lisiex, this was give to the church in 1951. It is most appropriate that it is position in such a prominent position as there are three relics of St. Theresa in the church.

The altar in the chapel was recently removed in the refurbishment, as were the altar rails, and the floor re carpeted. The statue of St. Joseph was in the church at the beginning, and now lies above the original position of the removed altar.

RELICS

In addition to the relics of St. Theresa of Lisieux the church has a relic of the True Cross, together with relics from the church of St. Praxedis in Rome, set in a silver cross reliquary. There are also relics of St. Vincent de Paul, St. Gregory VII, Blessed Raymond Capuchin, and finally a relic of St. Francis, which was acquired after 1952.

As we take our leave of the church and take a final look at the altar focussing on the sanctuary and beautiful panelling above in the apse, it can easily be understood why so many love the church, and appreciate the artistry and expertise of the priest architect, Fr Scoles.

1980 - 2006 History being compiled

In 2005 Fr Charlie McKloskey came to St Francis. An old baptismal font was installed at the front end of the church.

In 2010 Fr Thomas Taaffe took over the Parish. The community expressed a wish for a new Parish Centre to be built. As plans started to be put together, it became obvious that the fabric of the church was in urgent need of attention. Very little maintenance and refurbishment had been carried out for over fifteen years.

In conjunction with the Diocese, new Quinquennial Inspection Report was carried out to evaluate outstanding work that needed urgent attention. The community expressed their wishes that this work should be carried out before the Parish Centre is built.

In consultation with the Diocese, funding from the refurbishment and the Centre would be found from the sale of parish assets (Land that had been purchased by the parishioners in the late eighties).

The church was closed off for restoration work between February and June 2013. Services during the week continued in the Friary, while weekend services were transferred to the school hall.

Apart from the redecoration of the church, work was carried out on the parquet flooring which was found to be heavily affected with dry rot. After further checks it was considered necessary to remove the block wood flooring and instal new stone slabs throughout.

The old entrance porch was removed and a new porch installed right across the front entrance.

St Joseph chapel was rededicated to the Sacred Heart and a new marble statue was acquired from Ireland and positioned on the plinth. St Joseph Statue was also moved to the north side of the church.

New plinths were installed from St Anthony's and St Theresa's statues.

Both the Sacred Heart and the Lady's Chapels were upgraded with mosiac background (see gallery photoes).

The Monk's chapel was refurbished. The flooring was restored and steps taken to return the look of the chapel to the days of the Friars.

In 1980 Portsmouth Diocese took over the Church and Friary