

Roman Catholics

There is little evidence that traditional Roman Catholicism survived in Hook Norton after the Reformation in more than a few families, or that recusancy was a problem in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.¹ However, in-migration helped to create a Catholic community by the early twentieth century; perhaps, on the pattern of other places, some were the families of Irish Catholic navvies who had settled in Hook Norton after building the railway. By 1926 Mass was being said regularly in the The Sun Inn by a priest from Banbury, though by 1931 it had moved to The Bell. The mission at Hook Norton was officially founded in February 1932 from Banbury, but fell under the jurisdiction of the parish of Holy Trinity in Chipping Norton, all within the Birmingham Archdiocese.



At the dedication of S. Joseph's, 11th September 1932

Photograph in Village Museum and Archive

¹ Recusants were Catholics who refused to conform to the Church of England even occasionally. As a result, they continued to suffer from civil and legal penalties down to 1829. In 1683 there were three Catholics in the parish. Mary Clapinson, ed., *Bishop Fell and Nonconformity*, Oxfordshire Record Society, vol. 52 (1980), 38-39.

Local Catholics (who are said variously to have numbered at that time over 30 people or just three or four families) decided to build a small church in Hook Norton and purchased land at the corner of Park Road and Rope Way in Southrop. Much of the work was done by Jesuit student priests from the Catholic college which had opened at Heythrop Hall in 1926. Completed in 1932, the wooden chapel was dedicated to S. Joseph and blessed on 11 September that year by Archbishop Williams.

From then on, Hook Norton was serviced by Jesuit priests from Heythrop. After the college closed in 1969, the parish was served by the Jesuit parish priest from Chipping Norton, who travelled over regularly to hold Mass every Sunday. In spite of there being only 25 Catholics within Hook Norton, the chapel, which could accommodate about 65, was often full, thanks to the Catholic families that travelled in from Swerford, Long Compton, the Rollrights and the Tews.

The chapel had some fine wood carving, notably the altar, the priest's chair, the lectern, and the canopy over the altar. These were carved and donated partly by a parishioner and partly by Jesuit brothers. In the early 1970s it was redecorated



S. Joseph's in 1932

Photograph in Village Museum and Archive

and re-modelled to conform to current liturgical practice; the altar was brought forward and the altar rails and dais removed. The whole chapel had originally had very dark stained wood, but was now painted cream to look more Scandinavian. The work was done largely by Don Cornelius, Teddy Liddel and Fr. Gerald Fitzgibbon.



In 1997 the Archbishop of Birmingham decided that responsibility for Hook Norton and Shipton-under-Wychwood was putting too much strain on the Chipping Norton priest, especially in winter. Worried by the continuing shortage of priests, he decreed that the Chipping Norton priest must not celebrate more than two Masses in a weekend in their parish, in order to free them to cover for other priests elsewhere. Since the two Masses would both be in Chippy, members of the Hook Norton congregation warned that the effect would be to disperse their congregation. This is exactly what happened, as Hook Catholics chose to attend Mass in Chipping Norton or Brailes or Adderbury or Banbury. Some stopped going entirely. The last Mass was said in S. Joseph's on 21 December 1997, and a valedictory Mass subsequently celebrated in the Manor House in February 1998.

The poor condition of S. Joseph's was seen by the Diocesan authorities as good reason for abandoning Mass in Hook Norton. As local Catholics argued, that was irrelevant, since other locations were available, including St. Peter's, where the Anglican Rector, John Acreman, was concerned about what he saw as an alarming sign of "the Church in retreat". Despite a good spirit of ecumenicism, the Catholic priest of the time rejected the Anglican offer. To preserve the memory of S. Joseph's, Acreman agreed to house a pew-front from there in St. Peter's, where it still remains. The priest's chair and lectern made by John Downes were moved to the Lady Chapel of Holy Trinity in Chipping Norton.

Two years later the site of S. Joseph's was sold for development for £47,000 and a bungalow (now called "Martins") built on the site. Happily, the steps built in 1932 were retained. As a disillusioned former Hooky stalwart remarked, "It is pleasing to know that the path trodden by three generations of Mass-goers is still there".²

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References:

History of Holy Trinity Catholic Church, 1836-1986, and 1836-2000,
in Village Archive.

Tony Higgins, "The Catholic Church in Hook Norton",
notes in Village Archive.

Notes by Don and Val Cornelius, in Village Archive.

² Tony Higgins, Notes.