

The history of Battle's Catholic Church of Our Lady Immaculate and Saint Michael



After the reformation Roman Catholicism was replaced by the Church of England as the religion of England. St Mary's church became Anglican.

As time went on it could be dangerous to be a practising catholic, but some of the nobility somehow retained their positions, notably the Dukes of Norfolk. The surprise as far as Battle is concerned is to find that the descendants of Sir Anthony Browne, the new lord of the manor after 1538, also retained their Catholicism.

Sir Anthony Browne's son, also Anthony, undertook an embassy to Rome as part of the restoration of the authority of the Pope in England after the death of Henry VIII's only son, Edward VI and the accession of Mary I. He was made Viscount Montagu for these services, at the time of the marriage of Mary with Philip of Spain. He promptly left the Privy Council on the death of Mary I and the accession of Elizabeth I. But he did not lose favour entirely and was one of the peers who presided at the trial of Mary Queen of Scots. Elizabeth I obviously appreciated his continuing services and paid him a visit a short time before his death, at Horsley, in Surrey, on 19th October 1592.

In 1596 Lord Montagu's widow, Magdalen Dacre, Viscountess Montagu, is recorded as having a resident priest and a schoolmaster at Battle Abbey manor house, who are supposed to have been on friendly terms with the dean of Battle who was said to be 'very lax in performing his liturgical functions'. Lady Montague died in 1608 and her biographer, Richard Smith, who wrote a biography of Magdalen, Viscountess Montague after her death says that she had built a chapel at the abbey and attracted large congregations for the Roman Catholic services. Through the early years of the 17th century no fewer than three catholic priests were resident in Battle; Thomas More, Thomas Smith and the above Richard Smith. Smith became the second Vicar Apostolic¹ of England in 1625. Also near Battle were other recusant landed families such as the Pelhams of Catsfield and the Ashburnhams. More detail of Sir Anthony Browne and his descendants can be read in the paper by Sarah Hall.

Overall the catholic population of Battle shrank in the 17th century, mainly it is supposed because the Montagus preferred from the early 17th century onwards to live and worship at Cowdray House in west Sussex rather than at Battle. In lists made in 1717 and 1723 only five local catholics are named – James Ashenden, Nicholas Eldridge, Mary Brewer and Chrisogonus Manhood of Battle and Henry Martin of Sedlescombe, all of whom held land but were taxed for their religion. In 1742 and 1748 the catholic bishop Challener of London held visitations at Battle and in 1758 a report mentions 'Mr Bennett, a Popish priest' living at Battle. He must have had some small success as by 1767 there were 16 Catholics in Battle and five at Sedlescombe.

So Catholicism lingered on, but many of its centres became extinct – Battle was the sole survivor in East Sussex – but from the late 18th century there was a small revival. The entire initiative for the establishment of a permanent presence in Battle came from Bertram, 5th earl of Ashburnham, who converted to Catholicism in 1872 at the age of 32. This may have been a matter of convenience for him – to have a priest nearby. Twice in 1879 he wrote to the Catholic bishop Danell of Southwark suggesting 'establishing a mission in the district'. The second time around the bishop replied approving the suggestion but left the details to the earl..... A large Catholic mission in St Leonards was at the time served by the Rev John Foy. He was naturally concerned to lose his wealthiest parishioner. He told the earl that there were no Catholics in Battle and he arranged to go himself to Ashburnham Place to say masses. This went on for several years but the earl still spent some time planning for a parish in Battle.

The Catholic Directory gives the date of the formation of the Battle mission as 1882, but it was not until 1885 that tenders were sought for a 'new school chapel' to be built at the rear of a garden of a house in Mount Street (now 'The Hollies' – formerly the house of Richard Sinnock, a benefactor and past member of the adjacent Particular Baptist church³, which was bought by Lord Ashburnham. This suggests that he bought the house a little before 1885, probably in 1882. The idea was that the school chapel should be erected to serve the future school and to be a temporary church. But first a priest had to be found and the Benedictines of Downside Abbey near Bath were approached to see if they could help. The monks were reluctant and it was not until 1887 that the first priest, Fr Michael Gorman, arrived.

Fr Gorman almost immediately started up the school that had been earl Ashburnham's main purpose. To do so he used rooms in 'The Hollies' as well as converting other rooms for a second priest (Fr Henry Cafferata), a housekeeper and a temporary chapel. No wonder Fr Cafferata left only 11 months later complaining of overcrowding. His first congregation (on 6th November 1887) in 'The Hollies', consisted of himself and a local banker's wife. He reported that the only other catholic he could find was a lapsed one who had become an Anglican and freemason after an argument with a priest two years previously. But several people had asked when the new church being built behind the house would be opened. This happened on 2nd February 1888. It should be noted that at this time the Particular Baptists had only just (in 1886) sold an old wooden meeting house and its land which abutted the new church. In 1897 Florence Cottages were built there and have a common wall with the church, an unusual arrangement which is unexplained.

After his first year Fr Gorman had ten Catholics to serve, in the next 21 with the numbers including those at Ashburnham House. But Fr Gorman seems to have become unsettled and left in 1892 having twice served as a chaplain on troopships to India earlier that year. His work was covered by Fr Rosette, Rector of St Stanislaus College at Hollington, who arranged for some Jesuit priests to provide cover for the church, although Ashburnham was separately covered from a new Salesian College at Burwash. This situation continued until a new priest Fr Charles Kimpe arrived in July 1893. He stayed until 1899 when the Salesians

covered Ashburnham again whilst Battle had a temporary priest Fr Thomas Mahon, until Fr Joseph Wilhelms arrived in 1900.

For the work of both the school and the presbytery 'The Hollies' was too small. The earl tried to buy 13 Mount Street but the owner would not sell. Finally the school became big enough for a new structure to be built for it in 1902. This was the largish St Michael's on Caldbec Hill, but the school then failed during WW1 and became an over-large presbytery, with 'The Hollies' being rented out to tenants. The situation reversed in 1924 with 'The Hollies' becoming the presbytery again with St Michael's rented out. St Michael's was finally sold in the early 2000s, was demolished and is now the site of a block of flats and some houses.

Clearly the situation with Ashburnham was tricky. The earl had wanted some 25 masses said per year and for perpetual masses to be said for himself during his lifetime and after his death. Bishop Butt had refused this in 1887 and the earl had seemed content to endow the church without any conditions, but following the earl's death in 1913 some masses were said for his soul and this was continued until at least 1932. The house chapel at Ashburnham closed in 1913 as the 6th earl was an Anglican.

Fr Wilhelms retired back to Germany in 1910, followed by cover from Fr Philip Williams before Rev Peter Ryan came, in turn to be succeeded by Fr Rudolph Bullesbach. His name gave some difficulties during WW1 when he was asked by Lady Brassey of Normanhurst to say mass for catholic officers staying at her house to convalesce – he finally asked Fr John Cronin of Bexhill to cover this duty 'because of my poor name'.

Fr Edmund Miller took over in October 1919 and became the first parish priest when Battle became a canonical parish in 1920, but it was impossible to get the church licensed for marriages until 1928 as insufficient Catholic householders could be found to sign the petition for registration. But Fr Miller worked hard in the surrounding countryside and gradually the number of parishioners rose to be 125 (the Catholic parish covers much of the eastern part of East Sussex and includes Northiam). He became an honorary canon in 1930, retiring in 1932 when Fr Edmund Loman arrived.

However Fr Miller had big problems at Ashburnham as Lady Catherine Ashburnham, the Catholic unmarried daughter of the 5th earl, took up residence there in 1924 when the Anglican 6th earl died without a direct male heir. She re-opened the domestic chapel. This was initially served by the Jesuits from Ore Place in Hastings. Relations with Fr Miller were bad from the start as he considered that since the house chapel was in his parish he should have some input and the Sunday collection. Lady Catherine ignored him. She was briefly on good terms with Fr Loman but the dispute broke out again. Various arrangements were made by Lady Catherine to cover masses until her death in 1953 when the chapel was closed for good.

The Ashburnham coat of arms (of Richard de Esbornham) in circa. 1270

Gules a fess argent in chief three mullets or



There is a rumour that Lady Catherine's executors offered Ashburnham Place to the catholic bishop of Southwark to buy for a convent (Lady Catherine had tried to get a convent into Battle earlier in 1933, when she had pressed the Ursuline order of nuns to take over St Michael's on Caldbec Hill). No part of the estate was Lady Catherine's to sell or bequeath and the house and estate passed to a cousin, John Bickersteth, who subsequently took Anglican orders. Seven years after inheriting the estate he gave it to the Ashburnham Christian Trust², a registered charity.

After 1953 events at Battle have been more orderly. Fr Loman retired that year and priests since then have pursued their normal parish duties. The parish does cover a large area and over time there have been other centres served other than Battle and Ashburnham. These include Whatlington and Robertsbridge both of which have interesting stories outside of the scope of this article.

The Rectors of the Roman Catholic Church of Our Lady Immaculate and Saint Michael:

Rev. Michael Gorman 1887-1892
Rev. Charles Kimpe 1893-1899
Rev. Thomas Mahon 1899-1900
Rev. Joseph Wilhelms, DD 1900-1910
Rev. Peter Ryan, DD 1910-1914
Rev. Rudolph Bullesbach 1914-1919
V. Rev. Canon Edmund Miller 1919-1932
Rev. Edmund Loman 1932-1953
Rev. Paul Crommelin 1953-1956
Rev. John Walsh 1956-1959
Father Scanlon 1959-1959
Rev. Michael Carroll 1959-1978
Father Vincent Maxwell 1978-1987,
Father Terence McLean Wilson 1987-2005
Father Michael McGlade 2005-2006
Father Anthony White 2006-2020
Father Richard A Blythen 2021 to date

Church description:

What has not been described so far is the church itself. The following are some abstracts from the English Heritage Review of Diocesan Churches 2005:

Our Lady Immaculate and St Michael is a modest building of no great architectural importance. The Church was built in 1886, but the architect is not known. The 5th earl of Ashburnham founded and paid for the church, but there is a letter to the catholic bishop of Southwark from Arnold & Co of 60 Carey Street, Lincoln's Inn, London, 9 January 1886, 'Herewith is list of tenders and the architect will unless we heard (*sic*) to the contrary from Lord Ashburnham conclude with the lowest. Kindly notice what a difference between the first and the last!'

The church is of modest proportions, of dark red brick in an Italianate cum Romanesque style, somewhat unusual for a Catholic church. The west front is gabled and has a central doorway with three windows above, all round arched and with shafts, but also keystones with a broad segmental arch rising from rusticated pilasters. The windows are iron framed. The interior is plastered, with a canted ceiling on corbelled trusses. Three stained glass windows in the nave are by Cox and Barnard of Hove.

Keith Foord ©BDHS

Endnotes:

1 Richard Smith was appointed Apostolic Vicar over the whole of England, Wales and Scotland in 1625. In 1628 a warrant was issued for his arrest. He resigned his post in 1631, when he fled to Paris.

2 See <https://www.catholic.com/encyclopedia/richard-smith-bishop-of-chalcedon>. The post remained vacant until 1685. Then from 1688 England was divided into four apostolic vicariates. Vicariates continued until 29 September 1850 when the London vicariate was made into the archdiocese of Westminster, and Nicholas Wiseman became archbishop of Westminster. The diocese of Southwark was created on the same day in 1850 and covered Surrey, Berkshire, Hampshire, Kent, Sussex, the Isle of Wight, and the Channel Islands. Today the Catholic parish of Battle and Northiam is covered by the diocese of Arundel and Brighton.

References:

English Heritage Review of Diocesan Churches 2005

Foord, KD: *Battle Abbey and Battle Churches since 1066* (2011)

Smith R: *The life of the Lady Magdalene, Viscountess Montague* (1672)

- printed in Southern A C (Ed.) *An Elizabethan recusant House* (1954)

Wilson Fr. A McL: *Notes on Battle Catholic Parish* (2010) (Personal communication)

ESRO records:

Ashburnham Estate

ASH Covering dates 1048 – 1984

Catholic

CHC/3/2 1912 – 1934

CHC/3/3 1923 – 29. Earl of Ashburnham gave money in his will proved 13 Feb 1913