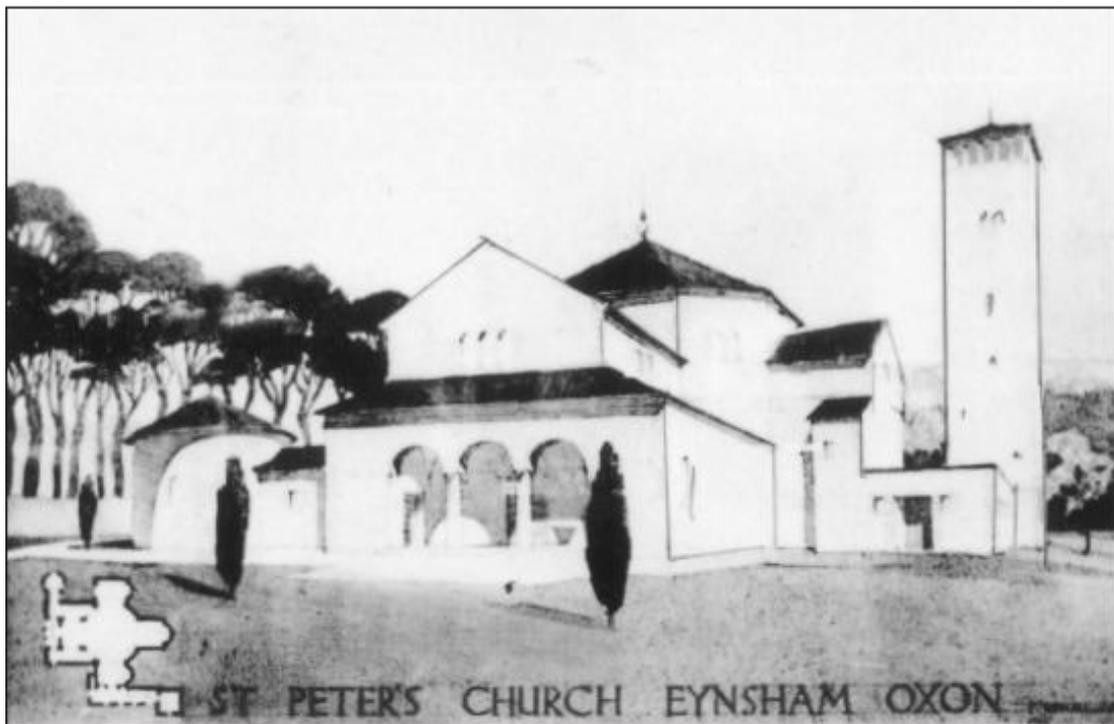
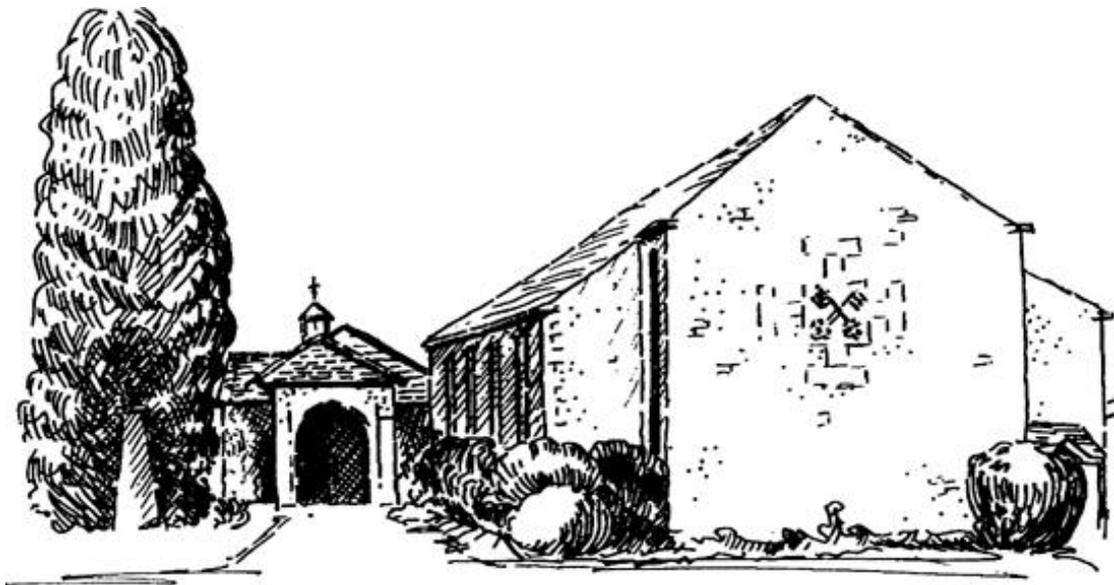


## A History of St Peter's Catholic Church, Eynsham



in celebration of the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the parish, 1929 – 2004

# A History of St Peter's Catholic Church Eynsham

*also serving Cassington, Freeland, Hanborough, South Leigh  
Stanton Harcourt and Sutton*

*by Sara Ruane (2004) updated by Fr Martin Flatman (2008)*

## Foreword

I have recently attempted to put St Peter's church archives in some sort of order. Many of the documents chart the ups and downs of the building of the parish church. The prolonged efforts to provide the parish with a permanent home provided a framework for the development of the Catholic community in Eynsham.

As this 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary approached I have used this archive material, together with memories from parishioners, to give a flavour of the history of the parish, its priests and its people. There are many gaps in the available facts and, worse, there are sometimes conflicting reports.

Two strong threads run through this story: the valiant efforts of priests and people throughout the entire 75 years to provide a fitting church in which the parish could worship for the greater glory of God and the succession of priests who added their individual, enduring stamp to parish life. Woven into the tale we see, through the memories of parishioners, glimpses of a few of the characters that have given so much of themselves to the parish.

This has been a personal exploration of the history of St Peter's and you might have chosen to do it very differently, so to those of you who know the parish well, I apologise if your favourite part of the story is missing. I hope these irreverent but affectionate jottings will help those who are less familiar with the parish to appreciate how this parish was shaped and why it is as it is.

I must take responsibility for mistakes and omissions. Information to correct these will be gratefully received.

I look forward to hearing *your* stories which can be added to the history of *our* parish, **St Peter's, Eynsham**.

*Sara Ruane  
June 2004*

## **St Peter's, Eynsham: the building of a parish**

Our story begins early in 1895 when, by the actions of Mr Herbert May, a small Catholic mission was begun in Eynsham.. The first chapel adjoined the stables of Mr May's home, 'Newland Lodge'. This soon proved too small for the growing congregation so the chapel removed to the drawing-room of the house. Newland Lodge was unfortunately burnt down and the chapel moved to a club-room belonging to the Railway Inn, formerly in Lombard Street. Mr May then settled into a house called St Michael's, and the chapel was once again set up in his drawing-room which was seen as a more secure place for the Blessed Sacrament.

Sunday Mass was said by priests from Oxford or by the Servite Fathers from Begbroke. There was an average mass attendance of between forty and fifty. Despite this, the mission was short-lived and was closed in June, 1898. We can only guess at the reasons for this, but we do know that Mr May moved to Oxford at this time, hinting at 'a variety of accidental and unforeseen circumstances'. Little is known of the Catholic community in Eynsham from that date until the parish of Witney was established in 1914.

The Jesuits of St Aloysius and of Campion Hall took responsibility for the new parish which included the bustling market town of Witney and 38 surrounding villages including Eynsham. Masses were very few and far between. It was not until 1928 that a resident priest, Father John Lopes, was sent to Witney. He travelled throughout West Oxfordshire assessing the numbers and needs of the Catholic community and in addition to his duties in Witney established parishes in Eynsham and Carterton and a chapel of ease in Burford, which in time became a parish. He was later known to some as 'the apostle of West Oxfordshire' because of his long-standing influence.

Much has been written elsewhere about Fr Lopes; I will not retell his colourful story before he came to West Oxfordshire except to note where it is relevant to his life as the parish priest in Eynsham. He had been ordained as a Church of England priest in 1907 after studying at Exeter College, Oxford and at Ely Theological College. He came from a wealthy family and contributed generously to church building funds within his parishes. As early as 1909 at St Basil's in Deritend his taste for the Romanesque style was evident.

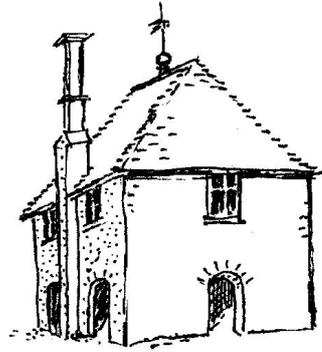
In 1914-15 he became a convert to Roman Catholicism and eventually was ordained deacon at Monte Casino. It was then that he developed an interest in the Benedictine order that would later influence his decision to settle in Eynsham. He was Chaplain of Cambridge University from 1922 until coming to West Oxfordshire in 1928.

In 1929 Fr Lopes established the new parish of St Peter's four miles to the east of Witney, in the village of Eynsham. Larger catholic communities existed to the west of

Witney so at first sight Eynsham may have seemed an unlikely place in which to set up his first new parish, but the village held a particular attraction for Fr Lopes.

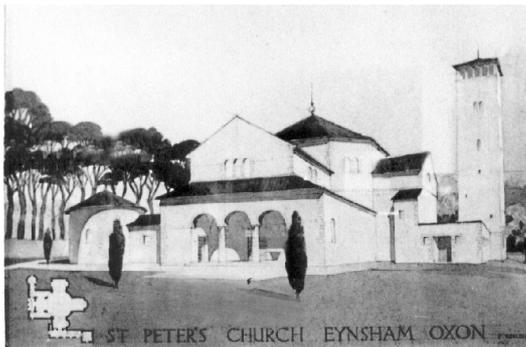
Eynsham had been the site of a large and influential Benedictine Abbey from medieval times until the reformation and with his great sense of history he visualised a new abbey rising from the ruins of the old.

*Market House was built in 1701. The upper room was used as a school. John Bartholomew of Eynsham was a patron of the school and the building later became known as the Bartholomew Room. It has served many purposes including a lock-up, a fire-engine house and from 1929 until 1940 as the church for the parish of St Peters.*



Perhaps foretelling where his future lay, he immediately moved to the village, living briefly in 'Llandaff' in Thames Street before buying 'The White House' in Mill Street. Fr Lopes quickly became a familiar and a formidable figure in Eynsham as he fought to establish the parish. There was no Catholic church and masses were held in yet another temporary location; the Bartholomew Room in the Square.

Fr Lopes was in Eynsham for 32 years and throughout that time he continued to cherish the hope that a Benedictine community would return to Eynsham. To this end in 1939 he commissioned the Oxford architect Gilbert Flavel to design a splendid Romanesque basilica which would encourage the foundation of a new abbey.



*This drawing which accompanied the plans for the basilica gives an idea of the grandeur of the design. The belltower and columned entrance would have been impressive.*

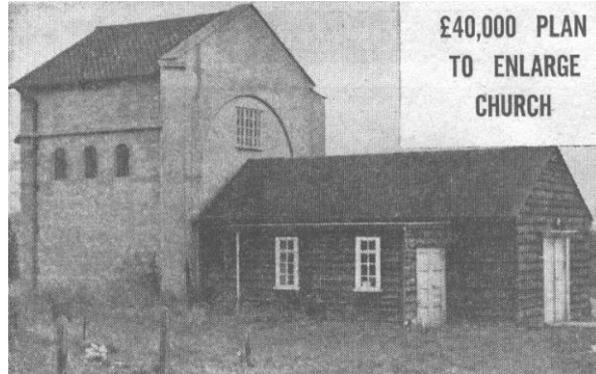
Only a small part of his dream would become reality with the building of the sanctuary which now forms the baptistry at the eastern entrance of the present church. He set about acquiring part of the original Abbey grounds as the only fitting site for the basilica. As luck, or providence, would have it the land was owned by the Mrs Emma Payton Pimm, a member of a prominent local family. After tortuous discussions reputed to have lasted several years a two acre plot of land was acquired with the only condition being that any church to be built would be the work of

her family's building firm. It is perhaps only in latter years that we have come to appreciate the advantages (and disadvantages) of having such large grounds.

Building work was begun by John, George Pimm and Sons and the foundation stone was laid on 1<sup>st</sup> August 1940 by Dom. Justin McCann, O.S.B. the Master of St Benet's

Hall, Oxford. This stone can still be seen at the back of the present church. While the outbreak of war had not been enough to hinder Fr Lopes' plans, work was soon suspended through lack of funds and, possibly, a lack of building workers. Matters were desperate; the parish must have a church! What was to be done?

The answer came in the form of a wooden building which would seat 60 people. This was to be attached, 'as a temporary measure' to create a nave for the newly built stone sanctuary. This sanctuary now forms the entrance of the church through double doors in wall on the left of the picture. Notice that the arch had to be filled in and a window added to accommodate the small wooden building. The 'temporary' arrangement remained in use until completion of the present church in 1968. The basilica was destined to remain a dream due to a lack of financial backing and disagreements about the grandiose design. Undaunted, Fr Lopes set out to make this makeshift wooden structure worthy of its calling. The church was completed by the gift of an altar for the splendid sanctuary, and the installation of a small organ which gave splendid service until it died of exhaustion in the 1970's. The altar remains in use today in the side chapel of the present church.



This poem was written by Anastasia Smith 'on the great occasion of our first RC Church in Eynsham'. Anastasia, now 87 years old, is still a parishioner.

<u>My Little Wooden Church</u>	
Lonely he waits	No great carvings hath
In my little wooden church	My little wooden church
Lonely for the footsteps	No spire attaining to the sky
On the crude gravel path	Just the low lamp burning
Lonely for the children	On the altar bare
As they wend their way	The people, heads bowed
To worship him on this Sabbath	In silent prayer
Day	

Maurice Couve de Murville, later Archbishop of Birmingham, met Fr Lopes first in 1949 and describes him thus. 'He was vast; his voice was deep and resonant ..... he loved conversation; stories, jokes, reminiscences, observations on all aspects of life poured out.' It is not so surprising, given this description and the length of his stay at St Peter's, that Fr Lopes became something of a legend within the community and many tales have survived through the years both of his goodness and his eccentricity.

Father never let the humble 'wooden hut', as it was fondly known in later years, limit his horizons. Noel Green, a parishioner now in his eighties, recalls that 'the priest was

a great lover of the liturgy and he never allowed the paucity of his surroundings or the slowness of his congregation to inhibit him. One unfortunate side to his enthusiasm for liturgical rite was the length of time it took to complete when coupled with his erudite, but prolonged, homilies. Noel remembers that outbreaks of rebellion among his own large brood had to be quelled 'by the bribery of sweets or the threat of instant murder. When all else failed, the bawling child and self-conscious parent would noisily exit the hollowly echoing wooden church much to the relief of all'.

Because his tenure was so long Fr Lopes became very involved in village life and served for many years on the Parish, District and County Councils. His contribution was recognised when a road was named after him. (Perhaps this familiar usage has contributed over the years to the changed pronunciation of Lopes which most of the villagers now rhyme with 'slopes' rather than, more accurately, with 'Lopez').

A wonderful picture is conjured up by Canon Alphonsus de Zulueta of a 'man with grand ideas, with a greater sense of demand than of supply. [He] got through two fortunes in church building and grand living, always full of hospitality, kindness ... and much charity.' He is still remembered in his later years as a man of great vitality, a lover of conversation who retained an interest in all aspects of life.

Throughout the post-war years and the 1950's the building project made no progress because of the lack of funds and perhaps because both the diocese and the people of the parish knew that the basilica was not a realistic option. Fr Lopes was not to be swayed and was encouraged by influential friends like Mgr Alfred Gilbey, who had in 1934 followed the priest into the Cambridge Chaplaincy, and by his stalwart church warden, John Pimm.

Fr Lopes, an ecumenist at heart, was a great friend in the early 1950's of the Anglican vicar of Eynsham, the Rev. Stuart Blanche, later Archbishop of York. They delighted in 'swopping' Anglican and Catholic newspapers and it was he and Father Lopes who together published a regular bulletin giving news and notices of the churches in Eynsham, a forerunner perhaps of today's Roundabout magazine.

In 1959 Fr Lopes retired to the care of the Sisters of St Joseph's Nursing Home in Boars Hill. He would sometimes take a taxi to Eynsham and say mass in his stocking feet. A parishioner remembers the mass often being interrupted by his becoming stranded on the altar and roaring at the unfortunate mass server "Michael, Michael, where's my stick?"

His enthusiasm for the liturgy and for extended homilies remained undiminished. He died on 18<sup>th</sup> September 1961 in his eightieth year, much loved and mourned by all those whose lives he had touched. He was buried at Eynsham on the 23<sup>rd</sup> of September after a requiem mass at Blackfriars

Only ten days before the death of Father Lopes, on the 8<sup>th</sup> September 1961 a new, go-ahead priest, Father Kevin Good, arrived in the parish. Fr Good felt that once the future of his beloved Eynsham was settled the old priest could die in peace. Father Good lived briefly at Newman Hall in Littlemore and then, preferring to be in the parish, moved to a flat at the Talbot Inn where the newly arrived landlord, Patrick

Flynn, was also a parishioner. Finding that this was not central enough he moved to the gardener's quarters of a large house in the village. Preferring to live 'over the shop' Fr Good bought, begged or borrowed a small caravan in the autumn of 1964 which became his home and office for the next two years. Interestingly, he notes that following this move 'petty vandalism has stopped'. Vandalism, contrary to popular opinion, is not an invention of today. He set about reviving the idea of building the new church, realising that the grandeur of Father Lopes' plans was a major hindrance.

After the long tenure of the ageing priest, the parish had to recognise the need for change. This can sometimes prove difficult for both priest and people and it was fortunate that Fr Good could charm the birds out of the trees. He soon became a popular figure and made allies of the young people in the parish who would surround him, chattering like starlings, at the door of the church following mass.

Despite his easy-going manner he pulled no punches. In a letter to parishioners in September 1962 he reflects on the small size of the parish. 'We cannot lose ourselves in the crowd – there IS no crowd! And we cannot leave it to all the others – there aren't enough others! So each parishioner must play his part according as he is able'.

Few families at that time had cars and there was no bus service between Hanborough, Freeland and Eynsham. Fr Good recognised that Catholics in these villages felt isolated from the church and, although technically within the parish, found it difficult to come to mass, so in March 1962 he organised a mini-bus to pick up parishioners. The charge for the service was a shilling (5p) for adults and threepence (1.5p) for children. This service was short-lived but memorable. The seats were arranged around the sides of the bus so there was nothing to hang on to except each other as we swung and swerved merrily on our way driven by Mr Fred Plumb. It was a testament both to faith and to Fr Good's persuasive tongue that so many braved the weekly bus-ride. Fred also played the organ with enthusiasm and performed a hundred and one other tasks, ably supported by his wife Helen who remains a parishioner today.

Parochial events were organised including a children's Christmas Party and an outing on a fine August day in 1962 on a Thames Steamer, downstream from Folly Bridge, which attracted 72 parishioners. It was agreed that local parishes would join together to organise a grand draw in which the prize was to be a 'mini-car', - a grand prize indeed. The prize giving took place in Littlemore and Fr Good was asked to draw the winning ticket. He was not easily ruffled but imagine his embarrassment when the ticket proved to belong to Eynsham Parishioner Esme Green. I'm sure there was no connection, but the joint venture was not repeated.

The collection at each mass totalled between £8 and £10. Noel Green relates how one day an altar server dropped the collection plate at the end of Mass. The plate crashed to the floor and the coins rolled to every corner. The noise reverberated around the building with its raised wooden floor. As the echoes died away Fr Good broke calmly into the shocked silence. "Oh well, ... help yourselves".

His calm good nature was certainly needed in the initial negotiations for re-designing and funding the church and presbytery. The cost of the original basilica by 1965 was

estimated at £150,000, while there was £17,500 in the building fund. In addition, the monies from the sale of Fr Lopes' house were also available. The house had been left to the Benedictine Order who had offered it to St Peter's. Fr Lopes' executors refused to sanction the new church plans and Fr Good, employing lateral thinking, suggested that the legacy might instead be used to build the presbytery. In 1965 the diocese instructed that building should begin and a parishioner wryly noted that " 'Good' had triumphed".

By 1966 building had begun and the presbytery was well on the way to completion. In the summer of 1966 there was a surprise for the parish when Father Good was sent to pastures new. He was not destined to move out of his caravan into the relatively palatial presbytery. It came as no surprise that, being a modest man, he left before most parishioners could say goodbye.

He was succeeded by Father Laurence Daly who 'camped out' in the unfinished presbytery. He had come late to the priesthood and had previously been a quantity surveyor so he was ideally placed to supervise the building of the church and steer a course through to its completion. He was a large man whose slow, stately manner led one parishioner to secretly dub him 'Dilly Dally Daly'.

The foundation stone for the new church was laid in September 1966 by The Right Reverend Joseph Cleary, Bishop of Cresima, Auxiliary Bishop of Birmingham, following the blessing of the foundations of the church and the almost completed presbytery. The 'Oxford Mail' of that day noted that 'the church cost £30,000 to finish, some of which has still to be raised. Until the debt has been cleared the church will not be consecrated'. Everyone waited with great anticipation to see the new St Peter's. The long awaited church was ready to receive her people. St Peter's was beautiful, everything the parishioners had hoped for. The high wooden ceiling added to the feeling of spaciousness and the large windows flooded it with light.



*Surely Father Lopes, if he had lived to see it, could not have been disappointed by this worthy successor to his original grand plan*

In addition to its pleasing design, the comfort that the new church offered was a welcome change. By some sleight of hand the builders managed to leave the wooden building in place while the new church grew around it and parishioners must have been relieved when they no longer had to teeter across scaffolding boards on their way to mass.

One interesting feature of the new church is that traditionalists will notice that it is 'the wrong way round' with the altar at the western end of the church. We can only guess at the reasons for this, but during the 1960's church design had changed to allow more access to the sanctuary with the altar facing

the people. The original sanctuary now at the entrance to the church is narrow and would not have lent itself easily to this more open style.

St Peter's was 'open for business' in 1968, but much of Father Daly's energies still went into overseeing the details of its completion. Despite this, parish duties were not neglected. There was a need for the children attending non-catholic schools to receive instruction. As well as setting up classes in Eynsham, he wanted classes for the children in the other villages too and as a first step he set up the first communion classes in Long Hanborough.

In 1970, his difficult task completed, Father Daly moved on and the parish welcomed Father Timothy Dinan. Father Dinan found himself in a thriving parish, but one that had seen continuing change over the previous ten years and was happy to take things more easily for a while. Part of the building debt was still outstanding and there was also a realisation among parishioners that although the church was complete its upkeep was going to need considerably more money than the old wooden hut. This realisation was shared by Fr Dinan who, while no doubt mindful of the parable of 'the lilies in the field', also had an appreciation that God helps those who help themselves. To the irritation of some parishioners, every couple of weeks the homily would drift into high finance and the vital necessity of a more generous collection. Maybe he had a recurring nightmare that one day he would receive 'the plate' at Sunday Mass and it would be completely empty.

Father Dinan was quiet and had a wry sense of humour. He carried on with the communion classes begun by Father Daly and was very popular with the children, he told them jokes and was a good story-teller. The classes in Hanborough were held in parishioners' homes. Before long it became difficult to fit everyone in as more children demanded to be involved. I clearly remember him sitting on the floor in my sitting-room with his back comfortably against the warm radiator surrounded by a sea of attentive children aged from 3 to 12. The children would flood out at the end of the class to wave him off in his black beetle Volkswagon.

During his time in the parish Father Dinan's health, never robust, began to deteriorate and in 1978 he retired.

St Peter's next priest was Monsignor Francis H Davis. Because of the nature of the parish the day-to-day workload at that time could be tailored to suit Mgr Davis who was already elderly. He was a gentle, modest man and very few in the parish knew that he was a theologian of some note and had taught theology to the seminarians at Oscott College. He was forward thinking and perhaps ahead of his time in his liberal views on social issues. When the Holy Father visited Coventry in 1982 Mgr Davis, as the oldest priest in the diocese, had a special role in the celebration of the mass.

The small church organ having 'died' before Mgr Davis' arrival, the congregation sang hymns unaccompanied at Sunday morning mass. This did not prove a great success; one weekend Mgr announced that he had solved the problem by buying taped hymns so that we could 'sing-along'. He had actually bought three hymns which were

played week after week after week. I never hear 'Go, the mass is ended' without thinking of him.

Mgr Davis did not drive and so the weekly classes for the children ceased but he did like to visit parishioners in each of the villages. This he did, to our astonishment, on a drop-handled 'racing bike'. The sight of this apparently frail old gentleman leaping on to this formidable machine was unforgettable. He would pedal off at high speed, head down, completely ignoring other traffic as it parted before him like the Red Sea, while we said a prayer that he would cross the A40 in one piece.

In complete contrast to Fr Dinan, Mgr appeared blissfully unaware that St Peter's was in danger of insolvency. He emptied the coffers by innocently announcing one day that he had bought a carpet to cover the barren coldness of the vinyl-tiled floor. The ladies of the parish were somewhat taken aback by his choice of a geometric pattern in shades of dried mustard. The more irreverent members of the congregation reckoned the carpet had fallen off the back of a lorry, or that our gentle Mgr had done a shrewd deal on a job lot! He was such a loveable man that no one had the heart to tell him that his choice was not generally thought to be a design classic; although the added warmth the carpet brought to the church was appreciated. Parishioners were alarmed to hear of Mgr's next project. He had to be dissuaded from completely remodelling the interior of the church because he disliked the unorthodox positioning of the altar at the western end of the church. Bankruptcy loomed!

In 1983 Mgr Davis was asked if a strip of land could be bought by St Leonard's to extend the churchyard. Original correspondence shows that the dry-stone wall between the churches was to be taken down and rebuilt. This would have been an expensive undertaking and after protracted negotiations with Eynsham Parish Council Mgr Davis was reluctantly persuaded to agree that a chain link fence could be erected instead and masked with a beech hedge. A price of £1,350 for the land was agreed but the sale was not completed

Towards the end of Mgr Davis' tenure he had become very frail, parishioners had taken on many routine tasks and some tried to increase a spirit of community by inviting parishioners to their homes for coffee after Sunday Morning Mass. In general though, the parish had become rather quiet and sleepy by 1984 – and then came the arrival of Father Aldo Tapparo.

Father Aldo swept through the parish like a whirlwind, leaving us all gasping in his wake. Ceremonial and music were back! St Peter's had become used to Mgr Davis' 'laissez-faire' style and now found every aspect of parish life under scrutiny and subject to change. The new energy and enthusiasm were welcomed but with some apprehension. What would he think of next?

Fr Aldo was greatly concerned that the laity should play their full part in the liturgy. A short time after his arrival an occasion arose for the renewal of baptismal vows.

Father set off solemnly,  
"Do you reject Satan?"

Back came an almost inaudible "I do".

He continued and back again wafted the faint response. He stopped and looked around stern-faced, “Well, do you or don’t you? We don’t have to do this. Now let’s start again, as if we mean it!”

Our responses came out loud and clear, “I DO”. We could not have done it better if we had been US Marines – “SIR, yes SIR”.

A small electronic organ appeared and Fred Plumb having retired as organist, (possibly nervous of the high standard now required), each Sunday found Fr Aldo flying from altar to organ and back again, stage-managing all aspects of the mass. He has a very good voice and sang while he played. He was unimpressed by our mumbled singing so a choir was soon formed and the congregation’s meagre skills were licked into shape. Fr Aldo was always careful that the enjoyment of the music enhanced the liturgy and did not detract from the solemnity of the mass. Music became, and remains, an important and valued part of the liturgy at St Peter’s.

It was decided that there was to be an induction ceremony for our new priest. We couldn’t remember this happening before but it sounded like a good idea. The preparations sent priest and parish into overdrive. Everything had to be right and it was certainly worth the effort: the most impressive occasion the church had yet seen. Another impressive occasion took place on the 8<sup>th</sup> September 1986, when the Service of Dedication of St Peter’s Church was enacted by The Right Reverend Leo McCartie, Auxiliary Bishop of Birmingham. This important event was celebrated with all due solemnity and the attention to detail that we had come to expect.

There are those who will admit that this attention to detail sometimes caused gritted teeth among those who had to meet Father’s exacting standards. An altar server of the time remembers that the geometric design on the carpet came into its own as a marker for the altar servers who needed to stand in exactly the right position so as not to spoil the symmetry of the grouping around the altar.

Eynsham Parish Council wished to complete the sale of land for St Leonard’s church but Fr Aldo tried to re-open the question of the boundary fence, believing that the ancient dry-stone wall should, after all, be moved and re-instated, rather than lost. Following a flurry of letters he conceded that re-negotiation was impractical and in 1985 the sale was completed and the wall disappeared. The chain link fence was erected and a baby beech hedge planted.

The rural nature of the parish, which includes several villages on either side of the busy A40, meant that a sense of community was lacking. Parishioners simply did not know each other. The value of meeting after mass had been proved and a rota was set up to organise coffee at the back of the church after Sunday morning mass and we learned to mingle under Father’s watchful eye. This was the first of a variety of social gatherings designed to bring the parish together.

We are fortunate to have large grounds and these were used for a summer barbecue. In the autumn a parish supper was planned and was held in the church. This caused some unease among older members of the congregation, but there was simply nowhere else. Pews were turned around and tables squeezed between them. Fr Aldo,

ever the perfectionist, rushed around as the tables were laid making sure that cloths were flawless and place settings inch perfect. Dinner for 80 people was prepared in the tiny vestry, although how this was managed remains a mystery. This was so successful that it was decided to hold a 'pancake feast' on Shrove Tuesday in St Leonard's church hall. This attracted not only our own parishioners but also the wider village community. These social events were initiated largely by Fr Aldo and they have all continued until the present and have greatly contributed to parish life.

There were times when Father's enthusiasm proved his undoing. One Sunday morning he was wielding the thurible with gusto and clouds of incense were filling the church when there was an almighty bang. The incense burner had crashed into the corner of the altar and the force of the collision had broken off a fragment of the stone. This flew several feet through the air into the side chapel. There was a stunned silence before he continued as if nothing had happened. During communion a member of the congregation stealthily retrieved the small chunk of stone and by that evening it had been stuck back in its rightful place. You can barely see the join now unless you look very closely!

Father Aldo's love of music drew the parish into a great debate when he decided that the church must have a proper pipe organ. "How much will it cost?" "Do we really need one?" Questions such as this weren't relevant: the bit was between his teeth and the search was on for the right instrument. Great Britain couldn't provide and the search was widened to Europe. Eventually workmen arrived from Belgium to install the organ. We were taken aback at the size and splendour of the beast, but it had to be admitted that it looked impressive and made a wonderful sound! Fred Plumb could not resist it and took to slipping into the church to play when the church was empty, although he rarely played at mass.

People had come to enjoy the faster tempo of parish life and were sorry when in 1987 the time came for father Aldo to move to the larger parish of Bicester. It was time for another change of pace and style with the entrance of Father John Tolkien.

At the time of his arrival I am not sure that Father Tolkien really wanted to come to Eynsham despite the fact that Oxford had been his home. It may be that he saw it as a semi-retirement which he felt was premature. He kept in motion the well-oiled machine that had been organised by his predecessor and gradually seemed to become more at home. Indeed, he took to the notion of retirement and if called on to take on an extra task he would growl "I am supposed to be retired you know!" He zealously guarded his day off and we were careful not to intrude but some wondered what would happen if a parishioner was foolhardy enough to die on a Tuesday.

Fr Tolkien was a strong character who could appear rather fierce if roused. A special irritation was reserved for parents who did not remove noisy children, especially during the homily. He could also be a kind and generous man. It was during this time that a shelter for the homeless in Oxford, 'Gatehouse', asked for the help of local churches to provide food on a regular basis. Father had a long-held concern with the welfare of homeless people and was quick to encourage us to respond.

Father Tolkien became very concerned with security after a break-in at the church. As an elderly man he may have felt a little isolated alone in the presbytery and it was at this time that the wall between the presbytery garden and the car park was built. He liked company and let it be known that invitations for Sunday lunch were always welcome. Given the slightest encouragement, he would hold forth about his father, JRR Tolkien, of whom he was rightly enormously proud. Parishioners too enjoyed the connection and were pleased to casually mention to visitors that “our priest's father was JRR Tolkien, the Lord of the Rings author you know”.

It had long been recognised that St Peter's needed a parish hall but the financial outlay had made this a dream. For Fr Tolkien the question wasn't whether we could have a hall, but rather, how much did we want one? If we were willing to do some serious fund-raising he was happy to



provide the shortfall. The archives don't show what proportion of the cost was raised by parishioners but, due to Father Tolkien's amazing generosity, within what seemed a very short time plans were agreed and our hall was a reality. This excellent meeting place, the 'Tolkien Room' is in constant use and its value to the parish cannot be over-estimated.

English Heritage wanted to explore the site of Eynsham Abbey. This would involve digging up the entire length of the church grounds, from the eastern boundary to the eastern end of the church to a depth of approx. 12 feet. Father Tolkien's enthusiasm for this idea may seem surprising given his dislike of disruption to his routine. He was obviously curious to see what would be discovered and perhaps the scale of the undertaking appealed to him. The priest's generosity also played a part in this project which proved to be very extensive *and* expensive. The results of the 'dig' and the discoveries made have been detailed elsewhere. They were very impressive and worth all the effort involved. In 1994, in failing health, Father Tolkien retired to Oxford.

Our new priest, Father David Mead, bounced into the parish in 1994. He had recently retired as an army chaplain and was full of enthusiasm for his new role. His quirky sense of humour was immediately in evidence in the form of his weekly bulletin which, instead of a straightforward list of forthcoming events, took the form of brain-teasing jottings in which the relevant facts jostled with jokes, reflections and literary allusions. Some parishioners were entertained by the bulletin and spent time teasing out every last reference, while some were baffled and occasionally needed a translation.

Here is an easy example of his style, taken from his first-ever bulletin at St Peter's:

**POOP THEE NOT**

Another thing I have to announce without knowing a great deal about it is (and I quote) The Three Churches' Garden Party. Next Friday, 7.30pm, at 2 Newlands Street. Tickets are (I'm told) available at Mass today @ £2.50 or (I'm quoting again) "£1.50 for Concessions". I have no idea what Concessions are, or what they believe in, but on this occasion they're obviously on to a good thing.

**NOT QUITE LEFT, RIGHT?**

The above party gives me a forum in which to celebrate. I am here a little early, within my terminal leave: technically, I am still a soldier and shall be so until 2 Jun inclusive. Friday is therefore my first day as a civilian. If euphoria causes me to misbehave, please bring me home, put me to bed, and be gentle with Saturday's reveille.

As might be expected, soldierly efficiency was soon applied to licking the parish paperwork into shape. Parish registers were updated and visits scheduled to all parishioners. The parish's filing system was re-organised on military lines - if it could be filed, Father filed it, preferably in triplicate.

The church and the presbytery were beginning to suffer from the shortcomings of 1960's building design and were in need of renovation, particularly the heating system. Fr Mead was just the person to organise it. Given the penchant for DIY which he displayed after leaving the parish we must be grateful he didn't buy a set of plumber's tools! The opportunity was taken to knock down the odd wall in the presbytery and to upgrade facilities and parishioners were not surprised to discover that once again the church's coffers were verging on empty.

Younger parishioners will remember the children's masses at that time. These were held infrequently but Fr David took enormous trouble over them. He would group the children together in the front pews and speak directly to them. Two masses come to mind. In the first he put on his vestments one by one before mass and explained why he wore each of them. After mass he questioned the children about what he had told them. They remembered everything. In a similar exercise he produced "my portable church". This specially designed box contained every item needed to say mass and had been made for use during his service in Northern Ireland.

Some parishioners were concerned that Fr David's nomadic army lifestyle might occasionally have led him to under-value their attachment to the fabric and customs of the church that they had attended for decades. Change is never easy for anyone. Fr Mead's brisk, chirpy bonhomie was (and presumably still is) balanced by a quieter side most in evidence in his gentle approach to the sick and bereaved and in his skill in helping those on the margins of the parish. Fr David's taste was for a quieter, more contemplative mass. He had felt called to the idea of setting up a small retreat and in 1997 he decided the time was right and set off for the wilds of the West Country.

So it was that in 1997 we were informed that our new parish priest would be Father Andrew McGann, a Mill Hill Missionary 'on loan' to the diocese. Having an old-fashioned notion of missionaries we awaited our new 'fire and brimstone' priest with some trepidation. Well, how wrong could we be?

After only a few hours in the parish one lady had decided that "He's a pussy cat". I doubt that 'pussy cat' was one of the phrases he had in mind when Fr Andrew asked

what I intended to write about him. “What do you think I should say?” I asked in turn. His reply was typical, “There is nothing to say, I’m just bland.” Well, how wrong could *he* be?

Father Andrew is totally unflappable, sailing through the trials and tribulations of parish life with generosity and unfailing good humour (well, almost unfailing!). He has a never-ending fund of jokes, mostly one liners – and mostly terrible! He also has a tendency to throw quotations in Latin, Spanish and Dutch into the conversation. This can be disconcerting if you’re not sure whether you’re supposed to understand them. Now, on principle, I always demand a translation.

He is an armchair sportsman, golf being his favourite game, but he will welcome you cheerfully when you ring the doorbell - even if the champion is on the eighteenth tee. “No, it’s alright, I wasn’t really watching it.”

He is a man who seems at ease in any company and who has a knack for making those around him feel at home. A personal memory is of a large family gathering to which Father Andrew was invited. I planned that he should sit with my husband’s rather staid brothers and sisters but he had other ideas and settled himself in the midst of the Irish nieces and nephews – potentially a much more rowdy bunch! As the evening wore on, laughter continually floated up the room. A new and appreciative audience had been discovered for his jokes. Their verdict was “we had a great ‘craic’, he’s grand altogether, so he is.” Father’s verdict on the Ruane clan remains unrecorded.

Does this paragon have any faults? He believes that wheels, once set in motion, will continue to move under their own momentum. He has taken some time to grasp that like ‘the mills of God’ the wheels of Eynsham grind slowly. This *laissez-faire* philosophy can leave parishioners irate and gasping for breath if, as occasionally happens, it leads to an under-estimation of the time and effort it takes to organise something. Invariably things do get done and the unruffled Fr Andrew’s beatific smile seems to say “I told you so”.

A notable event during recent years was the Millenium. The upkeep of our church continues to be an ever-present task and as part of the Millenium celebrations an opportunity was taken to do various outstanding tasks, including improving the lighting in the church.

The parish has always been generous in supporting various large charities but wanted, in addition, to offer on-going help in a more focussed way – to *see* it make a difference. Fr Andrew had once worked in Cochabamba, Bolivia and was able to set up contact with a charity in Cochabamba looking after and educating the large number of desperately poor ‘street children’. This project has proved rewarding for all involved and we look to continue to build new bridges between our communities.

In 2003 we were pleased to welcome the Archbishop of Birmingham, Vincent Nicholls, to officiate at Sunday morning mass. The visit was informal, only two days notice was given and few parishioners knew of the visit until the Archbishop appeared at the door of the vestry. It was a very happy and memorable occasion. Later the same

year the parish has received a Diocesan Visitation which involved many parishioners in preparations of both a practical and spiritual nature. These included the compilation of a Parish Profile. This offered us an opportunity to take stock of our community.

As part of the groundwork for the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the foundation of the parish, a parish mission was undertaken. Two Mill Hill missionaries, who had trained for the priesthood, with Fr Andrew led us in a spiritual exploration of our parish and, building on the work done in the Parish Profile, helped us to focus on the possibilities for future development.

Then in 2004, much to our surprise, Fr Andrew announced that for health reasons he had decided to retire and would be moving to Burnley immediately after the 75th anniversary celebrations. So a few days after these celebrations we welcomed a new priest to St Peter's, Fr Paul Chamberlain. The first highlight under his leadership was in 2005 when we welcomed our Archbishop again along with our fellow Christians from Eynsham and other visitors to celebrate the Millennium of the foundation of Eynsham Abbey. However, given poor health, the dual task of being our Parish Priest and running the Diaconate Training Programme for the Archdiocese was just too much for Fr Paul and within the year he moved on, and once again we wondered who would replace him. In celebration of the 75th anniversary of the parish, 1929 – 2004.

We were glad therefore to hear that he would be replaced by Fr. Martin Flatman who was already known to the people of St Peter's because he had helped Fr McGann and Fr Chamberlain in the parish on a number of occasions. He arrived in October 2005, and like Fr Chamberlain was called upon by the Archbishop to do two jobs. However, unlike Fr Chamberlain who often had to travel to Birmingham for his duties, Fr Martin's other job as the continuing Chaplain of Oxford Brookes University only required him to commute to Oxford, making him easily available both to us and to students and staff in Oxford. The other new experience for St Peter's was that Fr Martin had a wife and a grown-up family, as he was one of the married Anglican clergy who had become Catholics in the mid 1990's. Each of them, after a three year part-time period of re-training, had then been given a dispensation by the Pope to be ordained as a priest without the normal obligation to celibacy.

Fr Martin's first task was to complete the work of repairing the Church roof. Fr Paul had already led the Parish in raising the money and engaging the builders, and so the work was soon put in hand and the water that had been dripping into parts of the church for many years was no more. He was then able to renew the lighting and provide new outside lighting and signs so that people could find the church more easily in daylight and at night.

A year later, he was faced with the need for a complete renewal of the roof of all the other parts of the St Peter's complex and a new pitched roof was put on the Presbytery and Sacristy in the Autumn of 2007. Meanwhile Fr Martin was assiduous in his advertising of the church not just in Eynsham but in all the villages served by St Peter's so that many more people now know where their local Catholic Church is even if they never visit it. He also worked hard to keep in touch with all Catholics in the Parish whether they came to Mass or not by sending them Christmas and Easter Cards.

We can be grateful that each of our priests during those 75 years has taken the parish to his heart and helped to shape and guide it. We may also, in retrospect, be grateful for the difficulties encountered over the years in the building of the church in which we are now privileged to worship. The challenges and setbacks faced by each generation brought our community together and helped to strengthen our faith and sense of purpose.

Our parish has come a long way in almost 80 years since we were founded, and it is hard for most of today's parishioners to imagine the problems which have been overcome on that journey. Some of us remember the last days of the 'little wooden hut'. One or two can remember beyond that as far back as the building of the wooden church and these parishioners had the privilege of knowing all of our parish priests.

We are a small parish, but a lively one, with lots of activities run by the parishioners. Good work by many different priests and laity over the years have meant that those who come to Mass still represent a good cross-section of people of all ages and backgrounds. We have a small but lively group of children and young people, and with new young families moving into the area it will be interesting to see how we move forward based on the nearly 80 years of splendid work. To those future generations we can only say:

*St Peter's, Eynsham is a very special parish. Please look after it well!*