

Erdington Abbey

1850-1876-2001

Michael Hodgetts

Benedictine History Symposium 2001

ERDINGTON ABBEY, 1850-1876-2001

Michael Hodgetts

From 1876 until 1922, the arch-abbey of Beuron in Württemberg had a daughter-house in England at Erdington, four and a half miles north-east of Birmingham. The parish is still universally known as 'the Abbey', although it has been served by Redemptorists since 1922 and the claustral buildings were sold to a local school in 1994. The church itself celebrated its one hundred and fiftieth anniversary on 11 June last year: it was built by a wealthy Tractarian convert, Daniel Henry Haigh, on whose retirement in 1876 it was taken over by the Benedictines from Beuron. My parents were married there in 1934, and I have known it since 1942. So I was delighted when Abbot Scott asked me to mark the anniversary by a contribution to this Symposium.

Until the 19th century, Erdington was merely a hamlet in the huge medieval parish of Aston, which included all the countryside between Birmingham and Sutton Coldfield, seven miles to the north-east and for several miles to the east as well. There had been recusant gentry within three or four miles, but not in Erdington itself. About 1690 Andrew Bromwich established a Masshouse at (Old) Oscott, now known as Maryvale, three miles north-west, in Handsworth parish, which, like Erdington, is now a suburb of Birmingham. Even in 1767, however, only two Papists were reported in the whole of Aston parish, though in Sutton Coldfield there were thirty, and in Birmingham and Edg-baston, on the far side of it, there were well over three hundred. But by 1800 or so, there was one Catholic in Erdington, Mr James Wells, who lived at Short Heath House, what is now 136 Short Heath Road, about half a mile from the Abbey. He was one of the congregation at Oscott and is said to have been buried at Aston, though I could not find the entry (in a poor microfilm of a faded original). In 1820 George Wells (d. 1857) altered Short Heath House and fitted up a chapel there which was referred to as 'Erdington Chapel' in 1829. On Sundays, the family still had to go to Oscott, but on Tuesday or Wednesday a priest from Oscott would say

Mass and instruct the children at Short Heath House. By 1838, when the College moved from (Old) Oscott to New Oscott, about a mile and a half nearer to Erdington, there were six or seven Catholic families in Erdington.

In 1839 George Spencer, later the Passionist Ignatius Spencer, came to (New) Oscott and took charge of the Mass centre in Erdington. His surviving diaries run to 650,000 words but do not include his time at Erdington. But for a year or so, he seems to have said Mass at the house of Edward Walter Mackey (d. 1871), a painter who lived in Erdington High Street, had a studio in Birmingham, taught art at Oscott and is represented by portraits at Maryvale and in the National Portrait Gallery. In 1840 Spencer rented a disused Methodist chapel in Bell Lane, now Orphanage Road, which runs northwards from the High Street, equipped it with an organ and turned it into a Catholic chapel. In 1843 he was succeeded by Henry Pelham Heneage, another convert and a former diplomat at the British Embassy in Paris. Heneage was the first priest to live in Erdington, in a pair of cottages which stood close to the lych-gate of the present church and survived until 1928, when the materials were used as hard-core for the foundations of the Abbey Hall. In 1846 he built a chapel near by, at the High Street end of Bell Lane, which he dedicated to Our Lady & St Francis of Sales. Two years later, however, in 1848, poor health forced him to move to lighter work and he was succeeded by a third convert, Haigh.

Daniel Henry Haigh was a remarkable character who earned an entry in the *Dictionary of National Biography*. He was the son of a wealthy industrialist who lived at Brinscall Hall, Chorley, Lancashire, and from whom he inherited a large fortune. After studying at Oxford, he prepared for the Anglican ministry at St Saviour's, Leeds, a stronghold of Tractarianism, which he and the four clergy there all left to seek ordination in the Catholic Church. He was an authority on biblical archaeology, Anglo-Saxon antiquities, numismatics, runic literature and oriental studies; there is an appreciative obituary of him in the *Yorkshire Archaeological Journal* 6 (1879-80). During his year's retraining at Oscott he had already decided to use his inheritance to build a splendid church. He was ordained at Oscott on 8 April 1848 and immediately appointed to Erdington. On 26 May (the feast of St Augustine of Canterbury) he laid the foundation-stone of the church of SS. Thomas (Becket) and Edmund (Rich), two later archbishops of Canterbury. It was consecrated by

Bishop Ullathorne on 11 June 1850, the feast of St Barnabas the Apostle, which was also the dedication of the Anglican church in the High Street, opened in 1823.

The architect was Charles Hansom. Haigh might have been expected to employ Pugin, who did in fact design much of the plate. But Hansom was a friend of Bishop Ullathorne, who once said, 'Anything that Pugin can do, Mr Hansom can do better'; and he was perhaps more amenable to proposals from his client than Pugin would have been. His design at Erdington was inspired by the Decorated Gothic of the first quarter of the 14th century, with a broach spire and copious use of ball-flower, but Haigh was responsible for many suggestions himself: the *Warwickshire* volume of Pevsner (1964) says, rather unkindly, that the church contains 'too many of the good father's bright ideas'. The parts of the building are undeniably beautiful: the question is whether they make a coherent whole. As usual during the Gothic Revival, the chancel was much narrower than the body of the church; and, even after reordering, the sightlines are poor for most of the congregation, especially as the two large side-chapels now have to be used for additional seating, with benches facing inwards.. There was at least one change of plan during construction. There is a narrow passage pierced nearly all the way through the chancel arch from the organ chamber, which was clearly meant to lead to a rood-loft, such as Hansom provided about the same time at Woodchester in Gloucestershire. Why this was never built is unknown, but if it had been it would have given depth and interest to the rather flat and two-dimensional screen.

Haigh commissioned a remarkable collection of church plate which, like that at the cathedral, was designed by Pugin and made by John Hardman of Birmingham. He was also a great collector of relics, including an amice that had belonged to St Thomas of Canterbury and a fragment of the True Cross. These are still at Erdington, but an elaborate gabled relic-chest with scenes from the life of St Thomas of Canterbury painted by Dom Anselm Baker of Mount St Bernard's is now at the cathedral. A documented catalogue of the contents is needed: nothing seems to have been done in this direction since the Golden Jubilee pamphlet of 1900. Although Erdington was then a small country parish, Haigh established a choir there which regularly sang Mass and Vespers to plainsong, with the

cantors in copes: it was his ambition to make it a rival to those at Oscott and the cathedral. In January 1878, after Haigh's retirement but before his death, a ring of eight bells was given by Francis Genders, one of Ignatius Spencer's converts, who had gone to New Zealand for sixteen years and there made enough money to pay for them. Of about 5,500 churches in England with rings of bells only about two dozen are Catholic; the only other one in Birmingham is the cathedral. The first peal was rung on 15 January 1883; there is a method called Erdington Surprise Major which was first rung in this tower in 1954.

Heneage's chapel of 1846 was moved to a site behind the church and became the school. Inspectors' reports quoted in V.C.H. Warwickshire VI suggest that originally it had two storeys, of which the lower one was already in use as a school before the church was built. If it did, the floor between them was later removed. But Haigh continued to live in the cottages by the lych-gate, containing between them four rooms up and four down. Here he also used to take in orphan boys until homes could be found for them. For the silver jubilee of his ordination in 1873, the parish presented him with a purse of £60 and a beautifully illuminated missal (the Vienna edition of 1872) with oak covers in which were set relics of Saxon saints. Two years later, the silver jubilee of the church was marked by a week's retreat, three days of liturgical celebrations and an open-air dinner for the entire parish, followed by solemn Vespers.

By now, however, Haigh was nearly sixty and in failing health. He wanted an order, preferably the Benedictines, to take over his church, and it was just at this time that the monks from Beuron had to find a new home. Some went to the Tyrol, but at Whitsun 1876 Dom Placid and Dom Maurus Wolter, the brothers who had brought about the restoration of Beuron itself in 1863, visited Bishop Ullathorne at Oscott and Haigh at Erdington. On 14 October 1876 four priests and a lay-brother moved into the cottages (now to be known as the priory) and sang Compline in the church that evening. Haigh retired to Oscott, where he died two and a half years later, on 10 May 1879. He was buried in the south chapel, where he is commemorated by a brass in the floor.

Before deciding on Erdington, the monks had already explored the possibility of a

foundation at Uppingham in Rutland, which would have been supported by the Earl of Gainsborough. The intermediary here was W. H. James Weale (1838-1917), a London antiquarian and art-historian who lived in Bruges from 1855 to 1878. They had also had contacts with Sir Stuart Knill, who had become a Catholic while in Bonn, with Mr de Lisle at Gracedieu, and with Mr Bodenham at Rotherwas in Herefordshire, not far from Belmont. So Erdington was not the only site to be considered, and there were understandable hesitations about the eventual choice.

In 1848, the village had still been a single street about half a mile long, with a scatter of outlying farm-houses, and Haigh had built his church beside the hill at the north end, just beyond the village green. To the east of it was the road from Sutton Coldfield to Birmingham (now the A.5117); a hundred yards south was what was called Sheep Lane until 1862 and then became Station Road (B.4531); and a hundred and fifty yards west, after 1862, was the Sutton Coldfield (later the Lichfield) branch of the London and North-Western Railway. Apart from the church and the cottages, Haigh had owned four acres. Additional land was acquired after 1876, but even to the north expansion was blocked on the road side by a 15th-century timber-framed building, Wilmot House, and its garden, and on the railway side by a disused sandpit cut into the hillside and ending in an abrupt rise of forty feet. Moreover, the opening of the railway led to a rapid development of Erdington as a dormitory village, four stops from Birmingham, and to the building of large Italianate villas on the land for half a mile north of the sandpit and Wilmot House. (These were replaced in 1959 by a council housing development which includes tower-blocks of up to sixteen storeys; Wilmot House was demolished and replaced by an home for old people.) On the south (along Station Road) the available land was reduced by a Georgian farm-house, a row of 17th-century cottages (two of which still survive) and a pub, the Cross Keys, on the corner of Sutton Road and Station Road. So the property ended up as a rough parallelogram, about two hundred yards from east to west, rather more than that from north to south, and leaning towards the north-east. Since the church had been built about halfway along the axis from north to south, it and the churchyard, Calvary and school behind it came near to dividing the site into two. That did leave a hundred yards on the south side of the church for claustral buildings in the conventional position; and the church itself formed a

striking and dramatic composition when seen against the hill rising from the village. But it also meant that for effective purposes the monastic domain would consist of the southern four acres of an eight-acre site. This would have to be an Ealing rather than an Ampleforth. Moreover, only time would show whether the priory would attract English vocations or remain simply Beuron-in-exile.

The original four choir-monks were Dom Hildebrand de Hemptinne (later first abbot primate of the whole Benedictine order); Dom Placid Wolter (later arch-abbot of Beuron itself); Dom Leo Linse (later abbot of Fort Augustus); and Dom Leger Stocker. The lay-brother was a Bro. William. Within a few years, the community had more than doubled to eight choir-monks and three lay brothers: all in the cottages by the lych-gate. More room was urgently needed, and in 1879-80 the first instalment of the monastery was built, to designs by A. E. Dempster. As Prior de Hemptinne explained in a letter to *The Tablet* of 31 July 1880, to maintain the regular singing of the divine office in choir at least a dozen monks were needed; by 1881 there were eleven, but they also had the parish to look after and retreats to give. In addition, from 1881 to 1887 the cottage was used for a grammar school (the predecessor of St Philip's in Edgbaston, now a sixth-form college), with an English monk, Dom Wilfrid Wallace, as headmaster; and from 1883 onwards the community served the chapel of St Nicholas at Boldmere, two miles north, which had been built in 1840 by Wiseman when he was president of Oscott. The monastery was linked to the chancel of the church by a wide passageway, which blocked access from the road to the south porch. This was therefore closed and converted into a chapel containing relics of the English martyrs: from now on the parishioners used only the west door of the church, which they had to reach by a path on the north side.

In 1896, the same year as Ramsgate, the priory was raised to the rank of an abbey, though it was not to have an abbot until it was larger. In the same year, work began on the second section of the monastery, including the large square tower at the south end: the architect this time was Harry Haigh, the founder's nephew. In 1897, to mark the 1300th anniversary of St Augustine's mission to Kent, the magnificent reredos behind the high altar was constructed. Suitably, in view of the negotiations of 1876, one of the panels shows St

Benedict with St Placid and St Maur. The extension to the monastery was completed in July 1898, and on 3 September 1899 Dom Ansgar Hoeckelmann was solemnly installed by Bishop (later Archbishop) Ilsley as first (and only) abbot of Erdington. He had been a monk at Erdington from 1891 to 1895 and then prior of the abbey of St Martin at Cucujaes in Portugal. The ceremony, which was reported in great detail by the *Birmingham Post*, was attended by a great many civic and ecclesiastical dignitaries, including the arch-abbot of Beuron. On 29 December 1897, Thomas Campbell and Benedict Parker, the first two novices to be received at Erdington, were professed. Two and a half years later, the golden jubilee of the church and the Holy Year of 1900 were marked by three days of celebrations, beginning on 29 June, the feast of Saints Peter and Paul. The programme included solemn High Mass on each of the three days, pontifical vespers presided over by Bishop Ilsley, a garden party, a hymn written to the tune of *Men of Harlech*, a treat for the old people in the workhouse, and two plays performed by the school-children. One of these was an episode from the Elizabethan persecution and the other 'a sacred masque or allegorical drama representing the revival and progress of Catholicism in Erdington'. The tone of this was stiff, rather aggressive, and certainly not ecumenical, though many Protestants came to watch the celebrations.

The commemorative booklet published for the golden jubilee gives the daily timetable of services, which began with Matins and Lauds at 4.20 and ended with Compline at 7.40 (8.00 on Sundays). There was sung Mass every day, preceded by three parish Masses: all of these on weekdays, and the first one on Sundays, were said in the Blessed Sacrament (south) chapel. Every evening there was sung Vespers and two or three times a week Benediction as well. For a parish of 1100 people, this was, as the author wrote, a 'rare privilege'. What the musical repertory was is difficult to discover, and I am not even sure whether the parish choir that Haigh had founded to sing plainsong continued throughout the Benedictine period, or whether it was refounded after 1922. Certainly it lapsed during the Second World War and was formed again for Midnight Mass at Christmas 1945, by which time there was a substantial stock of Terry, Turner & Tozer and of the Downside editions of polyphonic Masses. I do know, from finding the marked copies in a cupboard in the chapel above the south porch, that at Christmas 1936 the choir sang Gounod's *Messe solonelle de*

Ste Cécile, which Fr Haigh would not have approved of. On this occasion the trebles were reinforced by women, who could not be tolerated in the stalls and therefore sang from the organ loft on the north side of the chancel. The then organ, which was replaced in 1952, certainly went back to the days of the Benedictines, and may have been the original bought by Haigh. There is no written record of it, and all that I can remember of it from when I was a choirboy is that it was a two-manual tracker instrument with yellowing keys and a Sesquialtera, and that the organist sat with his back to the wall between the two arches of the loft, so that the choir could not see him nor he them.

The monastic buildings of 1879-80 and 1896-8 formed a three-storey range fronting Sutton Road on the east with an extension at right angles which was intended as the first instalment of the south range. But the rest of the south range and the west range were never built. Instead, the quadrangle was defined to the west by trees, beyond which, at a lower level, was a large round lawn with an outdoor altar set into the trees and used for Corpus Christi and May processions. The trees and lawn were completely surrounded by a gravel path, which was used in the late 1940s by the servers and choirboys as a cycle speedway track. The south and west fringes of the site were occupied by outbuildings, a duckpond, a large barn and a field which is now the school playing field. Finally, to ensure privacy, next to the railway fence and extending rather further north than the church, there was an earth embankment planted with trees and with a paved path along the top which was known as the Abbot's Walk. The churchyard was extended towards the north, but there were no buildings on that half of the site until the new school was built in 1910, except for Brinscall House, a late-Georgian building close to Wilmot House, which had belonged to George Haigh, the founder's brother, but was not then part of the Abbey property.

For the first eleven years after 1876, successive priors of the community also acted as parish priests. But the double job became too demanding, and from 1887 to 1922 two monks in turn served as parish priests: Sylvester Schlecht from 1887 to 1895 and from 1899 to 1905, and Lambert Nolle from 1895 to 1899 (when Schlecht was prior) and from 1905 to 1922. As prior, Schlecht saw through the second phase of the building of the monastery, and the school extension, which was built in 1910 on the north side of the

churchyard, was in memory of him, as the foundation stone records. It was urgently needed as the average attendance had risen from 78 in 1869 to 208 in 1899. It was supposed to take 200 children, which meant 50 in each of the four classrooms. Nolle, apart from his parochial work, also lectured at Oscott on catechetics, liturgy and pastoral theology; he started the St Thomas's Association in 1897 and was active in local affairs, being largely responsible for the establishment of the technical schools close by. In 1909 he was one of the founders of the Catholic Social Guild. After leaving Erdington in 1922, he taught for a time in Jerusalem and then returned to the Birmingham archdiocese as chaplain to the handicapped school at Besford Court. He died in 1950 at Weingarten Abbey, aged eighty-five.

Among the English recruits to the community were John Chapman and Bede Camm, both of whom came to Erdington in 1895. Chapman, the distinguished New Testament scholar, later abbot of Downside, was reputed to have read all the 378 volumes of Migne, and certainly there is a set at Oscott, where he was a frequent visitor. He was novice-master and later prior. Camm, the martyrologist, was acting Catholic chaplain at Oxford in Hilary term 1906 and again in 1908, owing to the illness of the regular chaplain, Mgr Kennard. His most famous and bulky book, *Forgotten Shrines* (1910), was written at Erdington, and I presume that he was the author of the two plays for the Golden Jubilee of 1900. Dom Aidan Bellenger has written a witty account of him in *Studies in Church History 30: Martyrs and Martyrologies* (1993). Some of the illustrations in *Forgotten Shrines* were provided by the great photographic pioneer Sir Benjamin Stone (1838-1914), who lived a mile from the Abbey and was official photographer at the coronation of George V in 1911. He was five times Mayor of Sutton Coldfield and was Conservative M.P. for East Birmingham from 1895 to 1905. Camm, Stone and the Worcestershire antiquarian John Humphreys, later President of Birmingham Archaeological Society, formed an ecumenical partnership of a sort that was much rarer then than it is now, and whose most important result was the saving of Harvington Hall in Worcestershire, one of the 'shrines', during the 1930s. The Calendars of State Papers, publications of the Camden and Parker Societies and so on which the Abbey library bought for Camm are now in the search-room at Birmingham Archdiocesan archives and so still in use.

With the expansion both of the abbey and of the parish, Haigh's church was by now far too small. A photograph of 1899 or 1900 shows thirty monks, including Hoeckelmann in the centre, and ten bullet-headed young oblates, while the choir could only seat thirteen on each side. Although the abbot had only been installed in September 1899, the Golden Jubilee booklet of 1900 quoted a local newspaper report that the monks 'talk not only of extending the monastery, but of enlarging the church, or, rather, of building in addition to it a great abbey church'. Not long before his death in 1906, Thomas Garner (who had been present at Hoeckelmann's installation) designed a splendid new church in Decorated Gothic which would have been more than twice the length of Haigh's. It would have had twin western towers with a Galilee, an eight-bay nave, three-bay transepts with a central tower, and a three-bay choir. For correct orientation, it would have been built parallel to the existing church, on the north side, and linked to it by the south transept. A good impression of what it would have looked like can be got from the choir at Downside, which was also by Garner and of the same date (1902-5). The south transept would also have contained a gallery with a double-case organ similar to the one which Garner had designed for St Catharine's College, Cambridge, in 1891, though with rectangular towers instead of round ones and Gothic instead of Renaissance ornament. But the cost was prohibitive, though Garner did design the panelling for the abbot's chapel (now in the St Alphonsus chapel) and the festal red vestments and frontal, portraying Roman and English martyrs, which were made by the nuns of the convent at Southam and are still in use. This ambitious scheme marks the high point of the Benedictine achievement at Erdington and in retrospect the failure to proceed with it may be seen as the beginning of a decline: it was a lost opportunity which was not to recur.

With the approach of the First World War, what was still, after thirty-eight years, a predominantly German community was placed in an awkward position. Both Camm and Chapman moved to Downside in 1913, and when the war broke out Abbot Hoeckelmann was put under a form of internment at Colwich Abbey in Staffordshire, while an English monk, Dom Francis Izard, acted as abbot on his behalf. In 1917 the German monks decided that they would return to Germany as soon as the war was over. In 1919 twenty-

eight out of the total of thirty-nine did so and it became clear that the departure of the rest was merely a matter of time.

In 1917 the Redemptorist provincial, Fr John Charlton, suggested to the Abbot that the Redemptorists should succeed the Benedictines at Erdington. Hoeckelmann himself was enthusiastic, but the arrangement had to be approved by Archbishop Ilsley and by the Redemptorist Father General in Rome. Moreover, some of the diocesan chapter thought that two or three secular priests could look after the parish, in which case the monastery would provide fine premises for a school (the Benedictines had run a small aluminate there, and this was an idea which was to occur to others). Not until the end of 1921 could terms be agreed. But in March 1922 the remaining monks left for Weingarten, while at Erdington the Redemptorists took over the buildings and the parish.

They wanted the Abbey for their own students, who arrived in 1923. But it soon proved to be too small, and in 1926 the students moved again, to Hawkstone Park in Shropshire. I am not sure whether there was an unexpected increase in vocations or simply a miscalculation of the space. After that, the Abbey was a centre for priests giving missions and retreats all over the country, and during the 1930s also the novitiate for the lay-brothers. In 1933-4 a new sacristy was built, with woodwork by Bro. Aloysius (Frederick Winders), who then converted the old sacristy into what is now the chapel of St Alphonsus, using the panelling from the old abbot's chapel in the monastery. The new sacristy is on the south side of the church, with access to it through the south chapel, and occupies the plot where seven of the Benedictines had been buried. They are commemorated by an inscription at the west end of the sacristy: Bruno Baudri (1887), Wilfrid Wallace (1896), Silvester Schlecht (1905), Ignaz Trueg (1910), Willibrord Shurmann (1918), Joseph Wilhelm (1919) and Peter Nugent (1920). In 1936 a new building was begun for the Abbey school, which included a laboratory, a woodwork shop, a domestic science room, a fine gymnasium and a kitchen. From 1940 onwards, the school of 1910 was used for children from five to nine and the new one for the nine- to fourteen-year-olds, except for those who passed the 'scholarship' examination and left at eleven to go elsewhere.

In September 1950, just after the centenary celebrations, there was a major upheaval, when the missionaries were moved elsewhere to make room for the Redemptorist Juvenile, formerly at Bishop Eton, Liverpool. The English Redemptorists were under heavy pressure from the Father General in Rome to maintain their school, but the cost and manpower implications seemed insoluble at a time when Catholics were also struggling to cope with the financial consequences of the 1944 Education Act. However, Birmingham had only two Catholic grammar schools: St Philip's for boys and St Paul's for girls, both in Edgbaston, on the other side of the city. So Fr Wilfrid Hughes, the rector from 1945 to 1950, conceived the idea that St Thomas's senior school (now designated as a secondary modern and separate from the Abbey Primary) might become a bilateral school and so develop a grammar stream which could include the boys of the Juvenile housed in the Abbey. In this way two problems would be solved at reasonable cost. In July 1950 Fr Hughes was appointed provincial and given the opportunity to put his scheme into practice.

Unwisely, the move from Liverpool was carried through before Birmingham Education Authority had been fully briefed on the proposals. In 1953, after much argument and an inspection, the scheme was stopped: partly because it changed the agreed character of St Thomas's, and partly because the grammar stream, in its distinctive claret-coloured blazers, was never really part of it and excluded girls, as a junior seminary had to, although the rest of St Thomas's was mixed. From then on, the Juvenile boys formed a completely independent school with its own accommodation, first in the Abbey and then in a handsome brick annexe built in stages between 1951 and 1962 on and around the site of the former monastic duckpond. This was precisely what the Redemptorists had hoped to avoid: staffing caused problems for them, sporting facilities still had to be shared with St Thomas's, and public examinations were taken at the Dominican convent school of St Agnes, four hundred yards up Sutton Road. (It was noted one summer that the boys had mysteriously learned how to play tennis.) Only once, in 1964, did their numbers touch fifty, and the Juvenile closed in 1971. But it did leave behind a set of school buildings, which during the 1970s and 1980s were used as the distribution centre of Redemptorist Publications.

A major restoration of the church and monastery, including a new organ, was carried out by Fr Timothy Buckley, rector from 1986 to 1992. This work won a Civic Trust award, commemorated by a slate plaque in the porch of the monastery. But to pay for it, much of the Abbey garden had to be sold for sheltered housing. Soon afterwards it became questionable whether the monastery was economically viable, even apart from the fall in numbers which all orders had experienced in the 1960s and 1970s. Local sandstone is friable and costly to maintain; the long cloister, with stone floors and large windows, is expensive to heat; and in 1992 the distribution centre for Redemptorist Publications was moved to Chawton in Hampshire. It was even proposed that the monastery should be demolished, a proposal rejected by Birmingham City Council because it was a Grade II listed building. Instead, in 1994 it was sold to Highclare School, who had outgrown their existing premises a mile away and were looking for a larger building with some distinctive character. The sale also included the brick buildings of the Juvenate and the former St Thomas's school building of 1936-40, since in 1973 St Thomas's had been merged into a comprehensive, St Edmund Campion, on the site of the former Dominican convent and school. A reduced community of three Redemptorists moved into my parents' former house a hundred yards from the church; and the Abbey Hall was reconstructed and subdivided to create meeting-rooms, a shop and an office to replace the old Abbey Parlour.

All this may suggest that the Benedictine foundation at Erdington was a brief and unsuccessful interlude. Some parishioners always regretted their departure. Mrs Norah Barber, for instance, who was at the first performance of *The Dream of Gerontius* in 1900 and died in 1989 at the age of almost 107, looked back to the days of the Benedictines as to a Golden Age which could never return. Clearly, the Redemptorists could not maintain the *opus Dei*: it was not their particular ministry. Daily Vespers was replaced by Rosary, sermon and Benediction on Sundays. But, with a community of fifteen or more, and despite their commitments to missions and retreats, they could and did ensure that there was High Mass with deacon and subdeacon on all Sundays and holydays, and that the solemn observance of Holy Week included Tenebrae on the evenings of Wednesday, Thursday and Friday. Today the Catholic population of the parish is officially 3,300, but there must be

hundreds more who worship there at least occasionally, either because they still think of the Abbey as their mother-parish or because they are attracted by its beauty. I think that, even now, that is partly because of the Benedictine tradition. The Abbey itself is now a girls' school, and not a Catholic one. But the staff are aware of the significance and history of the building, and the girls, simply by being in it, become aware of a dimension of English and European history which otherwise they would only encounter in passing references in books. And the experiment may have lessons for the future. It seems likely that when Fr Haigh built this splendid and richly ornamented church for what was then a very small congregation he had in mind both the Northern pattern of very large parishes with chapels of ease and the Anglo-Saxon minsters, from which parishes in the surrounding villages were gradually hived off. Something like this has happened at Erdington: where there was one Catholic parish in 1850, covering much of the countryside included in the medieval parish of Aston, there are now ten. Within the next few years, it will become impossible for them all to have their own priests, and a structure of minsters and chapels of ease may again become inevitable. Apart from that, as Cardinal Hume showed, there is a need in the great cities for the experience of meditation and the *opus Dei*. An abbey in Birmingham could be needed again.

*

*

*

*

*

SOURCES

Printed

J. T. F., 'The Late Rev. Daniel Henry Haigh', *Yorkshire Archaeological Journal* 6 (1879-80), pp. 53-57, quoting also *The Tablet*, 24 May 1879

The Church and Abbey of Erdington: A Record of Fifty Years, 1850-1900
(Birmingham, *The Midland Counties Herald*, 1900)

A. E. Saxton, *Bygone Erdington* (Erdington, 1928)

A Short History of the Parish of St Thomas & Edmund of Caterbury, Erdington
(Birmingham, Eric S. Gould, 1950)

Beuron 1863-1963: Festschrift zum hundertjährigen Bestehen der Erzabtei St Martin
(Beuroner Kunstverlag, 1963), pp. 98-100

James Mythen, C.S.S.R., *Tamquam Lectissimae Plantae* (London, White Fathers Publications, 1971): a history of the Juvenate

Mary Barber, 'An Abbey Family', *The Abbey* [parish magazine], Autumn 1990, p. 17

Manuscript at Erdington

Erdington Catholic Association, Secretary's Minutes, 1873-6

Remadus Forster, OSB, 'Historical Notes on Erdington, Birmingham', undated

Press cuttings book, 1898-1908

Chronica Domestica (two vols., 1922-57, 1957-89)

Birmingham Archdiocesan Archives P.17

P.17/T1. 'Historical Notes on Erdington and the Catholic Mission', 10 pp., c. 1885.
Apparently a draft of Forster above.