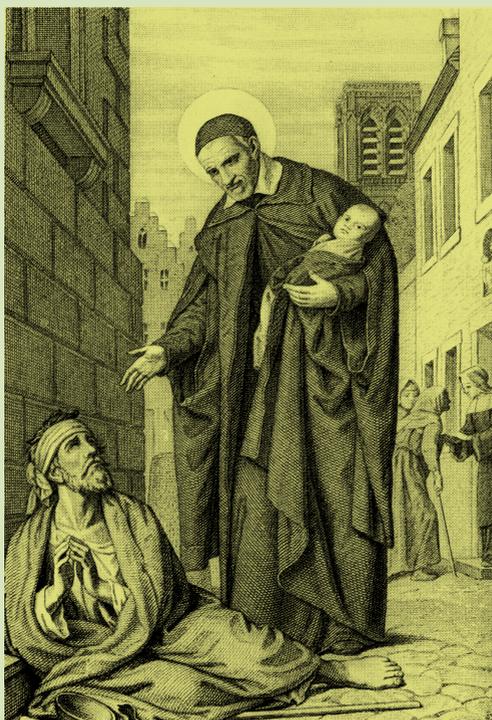


A History
of the Parish, and Roman Catholic Church
of
SAINT VINCENT DE PAUL,
KNUTSFORD, CHESHIRE
1985-2020
An addition to the previous history by AE Harris
DRAFT

Rev. John Joyce



This book is Dedicated to all Priests and Members of the Parish both past and present.

Father John Joyce has provided the core content of this history.
To add other perspectives additional input has been added from:

- Stuart Jones (the section on the 2020 pandemic)
- Other contributors being invited

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This book is available to download from the Parish Website -
<https://stvincentsknutsford.org/parish-history> .

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Foreword

“A solid people with style.....”

ON my retirement as parish priest, I have been aware of the momentous change that has taken place within the Church and indeed within society over the last half century. Remembrance is the daily task of the Church. It is central to its worship and its living. The Eucharist is key to its life and its worship. Retirement also brings about a good deal of nostalgic potential. I have been asked to bring up to date the inherited history of the parish produced by Bert Harris in 1985. Between that year, and the current one, which is about to conclude as I write with the pandemic of Coronavirus still prevalent and threatening, both at home and throughout the world, a brief history of those 35 years or so will inevitably be nuanced by my personal witness to the life of the parish but also by those most influential individuals who breathed life into the parish too in that period.

I'm Father John Joyce and I was appointed parish priest from late August 2001 until my recent retirement on 1st October 2020. The intervening years essentially cover the ministry of my illustrious predecessor, Canon Joe Cahill and my own ministry at St Vincent's. I arrived in the Parish on Tuesday 28th August 2001. I said Mass on the Wednesday evening, and one parishioner reported that 'the new priest is here. I could hear him clearly from the altar. He's gone on holiday!' – That report was conveyed by Mrs Joan Harris, Bert Harris's sister-in-law to her daughter. That Wednesday evening, I met Marjorie Sharkey as I returned with a friend to the presbytery from fish and chips in La Belle Époque, "The most expensive fish and chips in Cheshire!" exclaimed Marjorie, never one to mince her words! One of the many early lessons which I learned following my arrival in Knutsford was the close social interaction in the community. This was evident in any circle or group of people from those who attended the many local coffee shops to those who supported the faith communities in the Town. More of that later!

John Joyce,
Parish Priest
2001-2020

Canon Joe Cahill

IT is not difficult to imagine the scene. From its long and familiar social history, conveyed in literature by Elizabeth Gaskell and portrayed on television in Cranford, Knutsford is a very special place indeed. So we pick up where Bert left off in 1985. Bert (Albert) Harris wrote the History of the Catholic church in Knutsford upto 1985.

The parish had seen the replacement of the 'new church of 1927' with a modern, octagonal structure on the same site and it became a familiar landmark in the town, adjacent to the Town entrance to Tatton Park. Canon Joe Cahill had arrived in Knutsford in 1980 from All Saints' Ashton on Mersey, Sale. Quickly he set about developing the parish on a number of fronts. The Church was changing. For many, this change brought excitement and delight, but for some only regret and anxiety. This is not the place to make judgements but rather to acknowledge how change was coming and how it could be managed. The seeds of change had been sown during the Second Vatican Council in the early 1960's and the fruits of change were filtering down to parishes, not only in large cities but also in local market towns such as Knutsford.

Canon Joe was going to prove a master helmsman in this task of linking the principles of Lumen Gentium (The Council decree on the Church) with Gaudium et Spes (The Church in the Modern World). The first established the principles and the second built the bridges into the local communities; one without the other becomes like a ship without a captain. He had inherited a small parish with a big heart! He loved it and his parishioners loved him. He brought with him his housekeeper, Margaret Langdon, and together, they established the foundations of their new pastoral area.

He was a master at building bridges and establishing firm foundations, together with his parishioners. Initially he had the difficult decision about whether to retain the current church building or to replace it. The decision to replace it, and the design of the new church, as given by earlier in this history, also provided the parish with numbers of individuals who became central to his oversight of the parish. A Christmas Fayre was planned together with many particular groups who supported parish life. These groups retained a legacy in many cases up to the present day, confirming the foundations upon which they were laid. Central to everything to do with parish life, there were two areas above all which were recognised as pivotal to parish development; the Liturgy and the Education of children and young people. It was these two pillars upon which the parish

developed and thrived under the ministry of Canon Cahill.

With the new church now fully functioning, the Primary school on one site at the other end of the Town on Manor Park, the presbytery retained, the parish thrived. The parish room was retained on the corner of Queen Street and George Street, and Mass attendance grew substantially. With a very healthy parish now fully equipped to face a changing world too, several aspects of church life developed. The parish recognised the importance of developing relationships ecumenically and fraternally in the Town.

These more obvious extensions of church life were built upon the contemporary good will and efforts of people of all faiths and none who would have already known one another locally and socially. The local church also strengthened its links and involvement in civic matters too. Parishioners would often meet in Booths café after Sunday Mass and more than church newsletters were exchanged! Many parishioners became actively involved in local ecumenical church groups, prayer groups and days of Recollection during Lent and Advent.

The two major developments in the Parish were the Primary School, children's education, and the Liturgy. It would be amiss to ignore these areas of church life without the significant influence of Canon Cahill during these years. From conversations held with him, he recalled his own training for the priesthood during the early 1950's. Following his ordination, he recognised aspects of his training which were in need of development. One of these was the refreshing discovery of the role of the Scriptures in prayer, liturgy and devotions. He had attended an in-service training course which had been led by Father Raymond Brown, a Scripture scholar from the United States. This event had a deep influence on him. Brown was inspirational and it left a profound sense of wonder in the mind of Knutsford's parish priest. It affected his preaching, his view of Liturgy and his personal spiritual life. Brown has left a legacy of enormous learning to those who have followed him.

The second significant area of development in the parish was the role of the education of children and young people. The parishioners recognised that the school in any parish has the capacity for outstanding opportunities to enable everyone to grow in faith and in service. The school proudly referred to as a 'mini university' and in a colloquially affirming way of the children in the school as his 'scallywags!'. St Vincent's produced some wonderful scallywags over the years and it was always a real pleasure to see them on their return to their roots throughout the year and especially at Christmas time.

Pastoral and lay involvement went hand in hand with these opportunities. In the Liturgy, the advent of Readers at Mass, and Ministers of the Eucharist, first distributing Holy Communion to the faithful, but also subsequently regularly taking Holy Communion to the sick and housebound, at home or in care

CHAPTER 2. CANON JOE CAHILL

homes, together with a long tradition of loyal and superb Altar Servers brought great blessings to the parish and its community. In harmony with the liturgical involvement of the laity the parish was also blessed by the support of a strong musical tradition.

The choir was formed under the leadership of Marjorie Sharkey and musically supported by David Tredwell and continues to this day bringing joy and inspiration to congregations on Sundays, at Sacramental celebrations, in Holy Week and Easter and at more solemn occasions throughout the year. In education, the outstanding Staff in both our primary school, and St Nicholas High School, its Secondary associate school, along with Governing bodies of active and dedicated individuals ensured that the parish was both guardian and custodian of a real treasure.

Canon Cahill was very much involved in Diocesan life too throughout his period of life in Knutsford. He was appointed a Canon of the Cathedral chapter, and also joined the Diocesan board of Finance and Planning, and was asked to chair a working party to draw up plans for Diocesan development and planning into the 21st century. Some of the decisions and recommendations of that working party remain evidenced today.

Never one to sit back and remain satisfied with the status quo, in late 1999 the Canon set about his next project. The old parish room referred to earlier and just up the road at the top of George Street was becoming in need of serious repair. He consulted his trusted cohort of parishioners and a decision was taken to review the whole project. In a nutshell, the best course of action would be to replace the hall with a new building if at all possible. It would be expensive and would take a significant amount of planning. Quickly, talks ensued and a brave decision was taken following the Canon's opportune conversation with Rose Manning. Rose observed that it would be really helpful if any new building could be linked directly with the current church. A relatively small garden was the only place possible to do such a project, determination was to bear fruit. It would need planning permission, adequate funding and lots of goodwill to achieve this.

In short, with the wonderful support of Councillor Bert Grange, the Cheshire East Council and the Diocese, the parish set about the task of another new building. The old hall was sold, for housing development, and Pozzoni Architects produced plans for a new parish room alongside the Church and presbytery in the restricted garden space. The costs were met by the sale of the old building and the hall opened for use by the parish in September 2001. This facility would prove to be an enormous asset in subsequent years. The new housing at the top of George Street retains the parish association as Vincent Court.

Never one to rest on his laurels, the new parish room project provided another opportunity. The new Church built and opened in 1982/3 had a sanctuary area

which whilst plain and simple was in need of a revamp. The Canon always considered it to be a 'step too low'. So that was fixed! As the new building work was in progress, another gem was produced! Through the gracious generosity of the Irish Cross and Passion sisters, he had been given a stained glass window from a closed convent church in Ireland. Typical of the man, he drove over, retrieved the window, in several pieces like a jigsaw, and returned with the same in the boot of his car.

The window was reset in a purpose build alcove behind the sanctuary which was raised by a further step to enhance the church. A new lectern was added to replace the temporary wooden structure which had been in place since the church opened. The stained glass is a contemporary design by the Harry Clarke-school of stained glass, depicting the crucified Christ flanked by Mary and St John. Its deep colours add enormously to the interior quality of the building. In the following years, a new Organ was installed to support the Liturgical music and new lighting around the interior walls of the church.

In 1997, his housekeeper, Margaret, died unexpectedly. This, together with his own health led to his request in 2001 to retire from active ministry in the parish. And in August 2001, he retired to his bungalow in the village of Plumley, in St Vincent's parish where he was adopted as 'the Bishop of Plumley'. Canon Cahill continued as Parish priest throughout the 80's and 90's and saw in the New Millennium. He remains one of the longest serving parish priests in active ministry in St Vincent's parish. In 2009, following years of retirement, in which he was happily seen regularly back at the parish, he moved back to his home place in Durrow, Ireland. He died after a very short illness on 29th March 2011 and is buried in Durrow cemetery. A Memorial Mass was celebrated for the repose of his soul in St Vincent's on 14th April 2011. May he rest in peace.

The bricks and mortar of the Canon's work remain in evidence of his ministry. But it would be too simple to state the obvious. What remains unseen is the enormous influence he had upon the lives of so many people. We owe him an enormous debt of gratitude. When Father Cahill came to the parish, it was in debt, the church building was in a state of collapse, and the school had been threatened with closure, due to lack of numbers. How different it was when he retired. It is very difficult to express adequately the influence that he had on the parish throughout his ministry but it is evident in the very stones upon which the parish was built and in the lives of its people.

Father John Joyce



Figure 3.1: Father John Joyce

It was the 8th May 2001 that Bishop Brian Noble invited Father John Joyce to follow Canon Cahill as parish priest of St Vincent's Knutsford. At the time he was quite taken aback! First, because he was surprised at being invited, and second, he had no idea of the Canon's intention to retire. Father John was sorry to hear of his ill-health but arranged to see him on 13th June at St Vincent's. He looked so poorly. There were many who thought he wouldn't live beyond the summer. He's made of stronger stuff than that! Father John's visit that day was memorable too. Fr Cahill reminded him that he had already got his name into the history of the Parish (see p.64). They went to the Bridge hotel in Prestbury to continue their recollections. On August 28th Father John arrived to take up his new appointment, excited and a little nervous too.

Father John's personal recollections of Knutsford were fairly remote ones. He used to drive past the town on his journeys back to Shropshire and over to the Wirral during his time in Macclesfield. He can remember thinking "I wouldn't mind living in Knutsford!". And so it came to pass! In May 2001, Bishop Brian Noble invited him to move to St Vincent's as parish priest. He was to spend almost two decades here very happily. When asked to add to the Bert Harris history he noted that his accounts are going to be very personal ones but in order to be as objective as it's possible to be in a sort of autobiographical setting, his memories are invariably linked to numbers of individuals who were to be an enormous influence upon me during those years. Many of them are no longer with us and have left their mark on the parish by lives of dedication and selfless

efforts on behalf of others.

You will deduce from what has already been written, that St Vincent's Primary school has played a significant role in the life of the parish. From the days when its very existence was under threat from falling roles and lack of support, the parish primary school grew and flourished in the two decades that Father John covers. Canon Cahill told me that if there was one decision above all others that he never regretted, it was the appointment of Mrs Roisin Moores as head-teacher in 2000. By a small co-incidence, Roisin was one of the few people Father John knew before moving to Knutsford. She taught in All Hallows' Macclesfield. She oversaw the school grow in reputation and in numerical terms during her headship. In that task she was ably supported by two wonderful chairs of Governors. Mr Tony Weir, supported by his wife Margaret, was a stalwart of the parish and saw the school succeed and progress. He was followed by Mr Damian Grieves whose personal dedication and outstanding selfless support continued to school's development in reputation and size. I learned much from listening to them! They were wise and they were astute.

The major changes in the school during this time were the building of two new classrooms, making the school a single form entry of seven classes to its capacity of 210 pupils. In 2019 the Pre-school building, previously a static mobile unit, was replaced by a splendid new structure which opened after Christmas in January 2020. None of this was possible without significant fund-raising throughout the year and many parents and parishioners gave their time readily and willingly. As I write, I am conscious of so many of them, but in particular I would like to pick out one, the late Helen Wickham who was inspirational in her support for the school. Helen died on the 27th April 2020 in a tragic road accident and is so greatly missed.

In terms of the wider parish, perhaps the most significant areas of development and witness came through the changes and celebrations relating to the Sacraments of the Church. Groups and parents, teachers and the priest were to see each Sacramental area with its own dedicated teams and Liturgies. To mention three: Baptism, Confirmation and First Sacraments of Initiation, Penance and Eucharist. The celebration of the Sacrament of Baptism has become a much more significant event both in family life and in the life of the parish. It remains, of course, special to the particular family, but it is now also not unusual for Baptism to be celebrated during a Sunday Mass and this is particularly welcomed by parishioners who might otherwise not have an opportunity of sharing in such a celebration. St Vincent's has been fortunate in having several parishioners active and supportive of these Liturgical events.

The Sacrament of Confirmation has been an annual celebration and what began with a Deanery event, in Macclesfield Leisure Centre in the early 1980's was

replaced here when the Deanery structure was altered to a smaller grouping of parishes and was based in one of our Churches. St Vincent's shared the celebrations with St Benedict's Handforth, St Teresa's Wilmslow and St Pius, Alderley Edge. Summer celebrations gave witness to lively liturgies and social gatherings for candidates and families. They are a valuable opportunity for young people witnessing to their faith and the part they have within the parish community.

The celebrations of First Sacraments of Penance and Eucharist also were going through a period of adjustments during this time. In St Vincent's these occasions were often transformational within families and within the parish community. They had a long and continuing influence throughout the parish. Historically, preparations for the Sacraments rested with the Parish; in practice, this often meant that the organisation remained primarily within the school framework. Given the extensive geography of the parish, encompassing many villages and local communities, it is not any surprise that a proportion of the Catholic community benefited from many schools within the parochial boundaries. In light of this, and given the willingness of the school community to engage with the wider public, efforts were made to bring together all those who would be wishing to celebrate first Sacraments in any given year. Parish catechists, teaching staff, the parish priest and the wider community all made great efforts to build upon this task. The blessings which followed were extensive. Relationships flourished and continue to do so.

The parish room is frequently used to host and support these events. In addition, the facilities provided by the parish room also allowed many groups and organisations to establish a base in Knutsford. Children's parties, social events, slimming clubs, U3A groups, and many others continue to benefit from the parish room.

None of this would have been possible without the support and skills of parishioners. On the administrative front, a parish finance committee was established in 2012 to oversee and support the parish priest in the administration of the parish. Nick O'Brien and David Perls were already experienced in School Governing and joined the team. We remember with gratitude those members of the committee who have since died, especially Frank Sharkey, Edwin Wood and Martin Butterfield.

3.1 The 2020 Pandemic

In 2020 parish life experienced its most significant disruption for many years. The global Covid-19 pandemic resulted in the church being closed for two months (including over Easter) for the very first time as a result of national lockdown re-

strictions. Parishioners quickly found different churches around the world that had the ability to live stream masses and listened to those.

After the full lockdown was over there were still many restrictions on public worship. The church first opened for private prayer on 12 July (after closing on March 23rd) when ten people were allowed in at any one time. The week after the church reopened for Mass on Wednesday's and Sunday. Parishioners had to book attendance at Mass on a web-site and we were restricted to 17 Households at each Mass (later increased to 23). The church looked different as well with a new one way system and pews marked as being available (or unavailable) for seating. The doors and windows all had to be open to ensure good airflow - which was find in the summer but less good in winter. As well as fewer people in church at mass there was no singing and everyone was wearing a face mask. Father John and Father David were very appreciative of the help from a new cadre of church stewards who helped with the new arrangements.

The restrictions were still fully in place when Father David Long took over as Parish Priest. A challenging time as he could not easily meet his new parishioners.

Many parishioners were still watching Mass on live streams from other churches. In November, thanks to a generous loan of some equipment we were able to set up a live streaming service from St. Vincents. This proved very popular but a bit 'Heath Robinson' with occasional problems with no sound and no pictures which required some rapid troubleshooting. Father David, with support from parishioners, made the decision to get a commercial live streaming service installed from Church Services TV. This went live in December 2020 and is already proving very popular in the parish and further afield.

At the time of writing parish life is still heavily restricted due to a national lockdown. Everyone looks forward to 'normality' returning.

Postscript

On October 1st I relinquished my position as parish priest and moved into retirement to the village of Appleton Thorn, in the parish of St Monica. The new parish priest is Father David Long and I'm sure he will enjoy Knutsford and St Vincent's every bit as much as I did. May the parish thrive and flourish in the years ahead and when you read this, please pray for all associated with St Vincent de Paul, Knutsford past and present. God bless you all!

Father John Joyce
February, 2021