

## **A Jewel in Wigan's Crown.**

St. Patrick's Parish.

Tom Walsh.



Miss Egan , long time head teacher of the boys school and a lifelong parishioner. her entire school life was devoted to the parish spending 38 years at the school; she always referred to St Patrick's Parish ' A Jewel in Wigan's Crown ' others would describe it as ' Thee Parish '. However, it is described there is no doubt that ' St. Pats ' is much loved parish with a fearlessly proud congregation. This became apparent when in the recent past the parish was part of consultation on the reorganisation of the parishes of Wigan. Thankfully, St Patrick's was spared, the steadfastness of congregation played no little part in its survival and under the outstanding leadership of Fr. O' Shea the parish goes from strength to strength. Josh Marshall was also inspirational in the dark days.

It is difficult for people with no connection to the parish to understand how all-consuming the parish family was to every aspect of life, everything seemed to revolve round parish life; particularly so before television and other means of entertainment. The social side of life also was taken care of by ' The Club ' with its 2 billiards tables, concert nights, and of course bingo ' The Nolan's ' were regular artists when they were at the outset of their careers .

When the club first opened it was a Mens only club, when the new club opened that rule was relaxed and women were 'allowed in ' at weekends. Later ' The Mother's ' would hold social evenings they raised many thousands of pounds for the parish. Father Lappin often was bowled over by the amounts they donated to the parish

I have recently been given access to the minutes of the club 1946 - 1960 they make fascinating reading .an example on 5th of June 1955 - The committee decided to buy the piece of land in Wellington Street for £20 allowing the new club to be the full length of the spare land , incidentally the minutes were scribed are signed by John Mc Dermott headmaster of the school and the voice of Rugby League in Wigan , older readers will remember him as an outstanding commentator on Wigan's matches.

After the tumultuous events of the past few years it was felt that a potted history of the parish would be appropriate . I have relied heavily of the research carried out by two stalwarts Colin Blake and Gerald Fairhurst R.I.P. and all the contributors to the wonderful and well written book 'with the sub title ' it's warmth undiminished ' published in 1997 to celebrate 150th anniversary of its foundation.

In the forward to the book Fr. William Naylor P.P. writes " As for you dear readers, may I invite you to take some pride in this story but not to stop at that. History continues day by day. Your

forefathers made you what you are; your children's children will be what you make them. Treasure your Faith, that they, too may enjoy ".I think his words are well worth repeating .

St Patrick's was not a parish when it was opened in 1847, it was a church of ease served by the clergy of St Mary's Mission (until a change in Canon Law 1918 Catholic Parishes were referred to as Missions)

The then parish priest, Fr. Middlehurst died only two months after the opening of St. Patrick's. He was succeeded by Fr. William Wells and entries in notice books of the time show St. Patrick's was still under the auspices of St. Mary's. In October 1848 St Patrick's baptismal records begins; it is reasonable to assume that this was when it became a parish in its own right .



To digress briefly, from being a church of ease at its inception, St. Patrick's 110 years later had plans to build a church of ease itself. The longest serving and much loved Parish Priest Fr. James Lappin (1953 -1985) applied for planning permission to build a church on land adjacent to Lamb Street, Whelley . A tentative name had been chosen, St. Bridget's, in the end the plans floundered, as things transpired it probably a blessing that they did.

Father Nugent a curate, at St Mary's was promoted to become first parish priest, he was to go on to found the Nugent Care Society , which still carries out invaluable work today. The work that he carried out among the poor of Liverpool is impossible to overstate. I think it's fair to say that Wigan's loss was Liverpool's gain. He died 1905. A statue of Fr. Nugent can be found in St.Johns Gardens Liverpool.

After Fr Nugent's short tenure St. Patrick's, was once again fortunate by the appointment of his cousin, Fr. Hugu McCormick who would serve the parish for 26 years, he saw the parish through difficult days of the cotton famine 1862-1865. He was held in such esteem that when the new girls school was built in 1928, 53 years after his death the school was dedicated to his memory. An unusual aspect of the 'new' school was the senior girls playground was on the roof, it was designed thus because of the lack of space; it was certainly a novel use the land available. A street that ran parallel with the church also bore his name; I was fortunate to spend my childhood in 'McCormick Street 'and whilst they were basic houses, outside toilets etc, I would have not wanted my earlier years to be spent anywhere else in the world! In Wigan Cemetery there is a very impressive memorial to this obviously well respected priest, it was funded by public subscription ,which must have taken a herculean effort in those straitened times.

Including the present incumbent St.Patrick's has had 15 Parish Priests, the people of the parish are rightly proud of all the holders of the office. A particular place in older members memories is held for the longest servicing, Fr. James Lappin, who was a curate for 4 year before his 32 tenure as Parish Priest. The parish has also been blessed with well over 75 curates, the longest serving of these was Fr. Thomas Carney (1912-1928). It would be remiss not to mention Fr. Joseph Burns (1977-1986) the last curate; he worked closely with Fr Lappin, they could fairly be called ' The Dream Team ' so well did they work together.

St Patrick's has rich history and has provided Wigan with many Councillors and Mayors. In the WW1 Wigan's (Wigan Brough) only recipient of The Victoria Cross was a former pupil of St.

Patrick's School, Thomas Woodcock V.C. The parish lost many parishioners in both world wars ,  
May they Rest in Peace .

The Darkest Day in its 172 years existence was undoubtedly 18th August 1908 , The Maypole Pit  
Disaster , 75 men were killed , 20 of whom were members of St. Patrick's congregation, many of  
these were part of the Irish Diaspora . One of the three survivors was also a member of the parish ,  
Mr. Edward Farrell , many of his descendants still live in the community today.

On the Sunday following the disaster a Requiem Mass was said for the dead. Dr. O'Dohaghue  
delivered the address. His remarks echo down the decades, he spoke of " THE VOICES OF THE  
DEAD CRYING OUT FOR PRAYERS " who could not be have been moved to tears by such a sermon  
!

On a brighter note the parish boasts many achievements; building six schools, the present primary  
school received OUTSTANDING on its last Ofsted inspection. Also building the largest church in  
Wigan which opened on the 18th March 1880 at a cost of £8000. (£905,000. today's equivalent)  
this in the difficult times of the late nineteenth century no mean feat .

Many sporting successes not least the wining The Daily Dispatch Shield in 1926 ( I ought to declare  
an interest, both my Dad and Uncle were part of that team ) which laid the foundation for ' St.  
Pats. ' Rugby Club which has a 'rugby worldwide' reputation, known from Fiji to Australia to New  
Zealand. The parish is rightly proud that the present Chairman of Wigan RLFC Ian Lenagan is a  
former pupil.

Please God St Patrick's celebrates its bicentenary in 2047. I would like to attend although I would  
be 102, highly unlikely, but you never know!