

Some Parish Personalities

(Past and Present and in no particular order)



Miss Julia Egan.

Miss Egan attended St. Patrick's Girls School as a young girl. She went on to study at the Catholic Teacher Training College at Southampton, obtaining her Teacher's Certificate in August 1918. She commenced her teaching career at St. Patrick's Girls' School in September 1918 and in 1943, she was appointed head of the Junior Boys' Department. She remained in this post until her retirement in 1956. In addition to being a much-loved and competent head, Miss Egan was a very talented musician and was for many years the organist at St. Patrick's. She was noted for her devout faith, attending mass daily all her life but she had no trace of sanctimoniousness about her.

A great lady and a credit to St. Patrick's.

Mr. John Harte

Mr Harte attended St. Patrick's Boys' School from 1925 to 1936. He was an altar boy for ten years. He served for six years in the Royal Air Force. On being demobbed, he joined the C.Y.M.S. and later entered local politics becoming a councillor in 1952. In 1967,



he became Deputy Mayor to another parishioner, Mr. Frank Connolly, and in 1971, he became the Mayor himself. He resigned from the council in 1972 due to throat cancer. During this time, he had also been a magistrate and a manager of his old school, St. Patrick's.

Mr. Harte successfully battled his cancer and today regularly serves at the weekly morning and other masses, showing that he has lost none of his expertise as an altar boy.

Tom Killeen

Like Thomas Woodcock before him, Tom Killeen was a soldier who distinguished himself in battle, in his case, in the Second World War. Though he did not win the V.C., he was "mentioned in despatches" which is in itself a decoration.

Tom earned his two mentions in despatches in June 1944, not long after the D-day landings. The first was for his part in destroying a Tiger tank and two self-propelling guns. The attacks were carried out at close



range with grenades as the unit had no anti-tank gun. Tom's second heroic act came shortly after, when he single-handedly cleaned out a nest of enemy snipers who were hiding in a church.

After the war, Tom stayed in the Army and attained the rank of Sergeant-Major. In his youth he attended St. Patrick's School and was a noted rugby player.

Joe Egan

One of the most famous sons of St. Patrick's. Captain of the well-nigh invincible Wigan team of the forties and early fifties. Captain of the Great Britain R. L. team. Coach of Wigan in their successful side of the late fifties and early sixties. Coach of Leigh and Widnes in addition, and the first Rugby League captain to receive the Challenge cup from a reigning monarch (King George VI in 1948) and winner of practically every honour in the game.

Joe Egan was very nearly Pat Egan. He was born on St. Joseph's Day, March 19th, 1919, and thus had the same birthday as the V. C. hero, Thomas Woodcock. Had he been born two days earlier on St. Patrick's

Day, his parents would have called him Patrick.

In his early years, Joe lived in Anderton Street and attended St. Patrick's School in the 1920's. He was too young to feature in the great St. Patrick's rugby teams of that era, but no doubt they played their part in inspiring him. When he was old enough, he played for St. Patrick's and here is the great man in the famous black jersey of the "Pats".



Father James Lappin

Father Lappin's association with St. Patrick's was so long and of such a deep attachment that we can claim him for our own even though he was not St. Patrick's born.

He was the longest-serving parish priest of St. Patrick's and to many he came to symbolise St. Patrick's. Very little can be said about this much-loved priest that has not already been said. He served the people of the parish for thirty-six years with piety, wisdom and good humour.

Fr. Lappin was educated at the Christian Brothers' School in Belfast and studied for the priesthood at All Hallows College, Dublin. He was ordained there in 1933.

His first church was St. Anne's, Bradford where he went in October, 1933. In March, 1934, he moved to Sacred Heart, St. Helens where he remained for the next fifteen years.



Father Lappin demonstrates "diavolo" to a young parishioner

He came to St. Patrick's in April, 1949 and exactly four years later he became our parish priest. He held that position for 32 years which was the longest tenure of any of our parish priests. He died in office on the 28th February, 1985.

His great friend and associate Mr. John McDermott described him as "a man of great compassion, prayer and meditation, a kindly man, a beloved priest." He was exceptionally well-read. His entire life was dedicated to his parishioners. He paid particular attention to the sick and elderly but also to the young. He appears consistently on photographs with sports teams and produced the successful Youth Club play, "The Monkey's Paw".

"Ask him the time and he will tell you how to make a clock".

Canon Dagobert Sommer



The high altar in St. Patrick's is rightly much admired. Few parishioners know however, that it is dedicated to the memory of man of a nation with whom this country has fought two wars in living memory.

Dagobert Sommer was born at Marsch near Cologne in Germany in 1838. He was educated at the University of Bonn and ordained in 1862. He became secretary to Cardinal Melchers and seemed destined for a glittering career. He may well have attained the red hat of a Cardinal himself, but fate intervened.

In the 1870's, the German Chancellor, Otto von Bismark launched a fierce campaign against the Catholic Church in Germany, called the "Kulturkampf" or "Culture Struggle". It was in fact, a very serious persecution of the church. Cardinal Melchers was arrested and imprisoned but Fr. Sommer escaped to Holland with some extremely important documents. In retaliation, Bismark's government issued an order of banishment against him. He could not return to his native land.

He came to England and was accepted for the Liverpool diocese by Bishop O'Reilly in 1877. From mixing in the high politics of Europe, he now found himself a simple curate in a Liverpool parish.

Germany's loss was St. Patrick's gain. He was transferred to Wigan in 1884 to become rector at St. Patrick's. It is difficult at this distance of time to appreciate how much this talented priest did, not only for St. Patrick's but for the town of Wigan.

He was an expert in education and became a dominant voice on the Wigan School Board and later the Education Committee. Yet in spite of his background, he never seems to have lost the common touch. He greatly extended the schools at St. Patrick's, especially the Boy's school. Who knows how much our schools benefited from his expertise. Two of his nieces, Agnes and Paula became teachers at St. Patrick's.

He became Dean in 1897 and Canon in 1907, the only one of our parish priests to be so elevated. The circumstances of his death and the great grief of the parish have already been recounted.

It had been his greatest wish to see a new high altar installed. This was not to be, but when it was installed two years after his death, it was dedicated to his memory.

Mary Griffiths



Mary Griffiths on her one hundredth birthday.

At the time of writing, there is at least one parishioner still with us who knew both Canon Sommer and Father Lappin. This is Mrs. Mary Griffiths of Acton House

who was born Mary Penman on 8th August, 1897, the year of the Golden Jubilee and who is at the age of 100, the oldest living parishioner of St. Patrick's.

In 1909, the year of Canon Sommer's death, she was in her twelfth year and was attending St. Patrick's School. When Father Lappin died, she was in her eighty - eighth year .



Mary Griffiths at twenty - one years old.

On 9th December, 1918, Mary married Thomas Carney of St. Patrick's and had six children, five of whom survive. These are John, Winifred, Mary, Kathleen and Teresa.

Her first husband having died, Mary married again in 1955 to Stanley Griffiths. Fr. Lappin officiated at this marriage.

Mary has lived in Acton House for more than 30 years and is now housebound, but she has not seen a doctor for two years and refuses to take tablets for headaches and other pains. She has a half of grapefruit for breakfast.

Mary's great-great-granddaughter Katie Underwood is currently attending St. Patrick's School.

Mr. John McDermott

When Mr. John McDermott died on the 28th September 1985, the Wigan Observer announced his death as "Voice of Wigan dies". The Observer was referring to

The technique he developed in these years carried over into his video commentaries. If you were watching one and shut your eyes, you could still follow every detail of what was going on (try doing that with Eddie and Stevo and see where it gets you!).

"Mac" also had a fine singing voice and was a talented amateur actor. He performed several roles with local societies.

In his long stint as headmaster, he came to personify St. Patrick's. He was a unique character and a warm and generous man.

Father Hugh McCormick

Unfortunately, no photographs exist of this legendary parish priest of St. Patrick's but there are still reminders of his time among us. At one time, he had no less than three memorials. The first was the memorial cross erected over his grave. The second was McCormick Street and the third was the Girls School which was demolished in 1975.

The first is still there and in good condition but McCormick Street is gone. (To replace it, we got McCormack Drive not Mc Cormick Drive).

Fr. McCormick had arguably the most difficult task of all our parish priests. In his day, conditions of hygiene which would have been taken for granted even at the turn of the century were non-existent. Poverty and disease went hand in hand.

In addition to this, from 1861 to 1865, the effects of the American Civil War had to be faced. It is perhaps surprising to learn that this war created more hardship in St. Patrick's than both World Wars combined. The Cotton Famine caused by it bore heavily on the Scholes area and on St. Patrick's.

If Fr. Middlehurst created St. Patrick's and Fr. Nugent got it off to a good start as an independent mission, it was Fr. McCormick who welded it together and gave it a recognisable identity of its own.

We are told that he was of had a bright genial disposition and had a cheery smile. In the words of a parishioner, "He always had the confidence of his flock, and nothing ever gave him more pleasure than to be among them".



Mr. MacDermott in typically relaxed pose.

his role as the commentator on videos of Wigan Rugby matches in his later years. It did also mention that he had been headmaster of St. Patrick's for some considerable time.

The Observer of earlier days would have told us how after qualifying as a teacher at St. Mary's College, he came to St. Patrick's in 1947 and immediately made an impact. It was not the normal thing in those days for teachers to talk to pupils about their own experiences but ex-pupils of Mr. MacDermott tell of how he would talk of his war-time service in the far east and when he had them enthralled, lead into the lesson he wanted to give.

Apart from being a gifted teacher, he was an excellent rugby coach and his first team at St. Patrick's in 1947, never conceded a try. He coached many other successful sides but always maintained that his first was his best.

Long before the days of video-tapes, he was doing commentaries on Wigan matches for local hospitals

Mr. Frank Regan



Mr. Frank Regan joined the staff of St. Patrick's Boys' School as a pupil teacher in 1904 while Canon Sommer was parish priest. He retired in 1952 as head, just before Fr. Lappin became parish priest.

In 1907, he obtained his Teacher's Certificate at St. Mary's College, Hammersmith. His first full teaching post was in Halifax, but he returned to St. Patrick's in 1910 and in 1924, he became headmaster of the Boys' School. He was therefore the head when the great rugby triumph of the "Daily Dispatch Shield" occurred.

Mr. Regan was a talented musician and at one time was the musical director for both St. Patrick's and St. Joseph's Operatic societies. In his later years he played violin with the Wigan Orchestral Society. He played the organ at various churches in Wigan.

He had a keen interest in Rugby but his favourite game was golf.

He was a familiar figure at the Whit Walks, for many years being Chief Marshal of the St. Patrick's contingent.

Agnes Wynne

Agnes Wynne for many years played a very important part in the lives of parishioners from the 1930's to the 1960's. She was the "Knocker - up" who roused the



slumbering population of St. Patrick's to go to work.

Older parishioners will no doubt remember Agnes tramping the streets around the church accompanied by a large dog.

Agnes was a parishioner and her children (now senior citizens) still attend at St. Patrick's on occasion.

Mr David Lawson

Mr. Lawson was Deputy Head to both Mr. Regan and for short time to Mr. McDermott, before becoming Deputy Head at the St. John Fisher School.

He coached extremely successful Rugby teams at St. Patrick's and at least one of his proteges (Ted Toohey) went on to win international honours. Many others won county and club fame. He also coached youth club teams.

Mr. Lawson also organised summer camps for both the school and the youth club and assisted in swimming galas organised by the Wigan Schools Swimming Association.

St. Patrick's Players, the drama group of the late forties and early fifties. They are both now members of the 150th. Anniversary Committee.

Miss Helen Underwood



"Nellie" is still very much with us to-day at the "young" age of 80.

She attended St. Patrick's Girls' School from 1922 to 1933 and then attended Fenham College, Newcastle from 1935 to 1937 when she qualified as a teacher. She taught for some years in Coventry before returning to teach at St. Patrick's Girls School in 1943. She was Deputy Head of the School when it became a Mixed Junior School.

In her youth, Miss Underwood was a keen athlete and in 1962, she was a founder member of Wigan Harriers and their first treasurer.

This has only been a representative sample of parish personalities across the years. Many more were deserving of inclusion but time and space and in some cases lack of information prevented it. Among other names, we could list at least three mayors of Wigan: J. McQuaid, F. Connolly and B. Coyle. Other prominent local councillors like D. Rourke and Aldermen Higham and Mannion. Teachers such as Miss W. Lythgoe and Mrs "Mamie" Dickinson. Sportsmen who achieved success, the list goes on and on.