

CATHOLICISM IN WOOLSTON AND RIXTON (1677-1985)

Woolston, three miles east of Warrington on the high road to Manchester, received its name from the first lords of the manor. It is a derivation of "sons of the wolf", and first appears in a charter dated about 1180. In the 15th century the manor was acquired through marriage by John Hawarden of Hawarden in Flintshire. Six generations later, Elizabeth daughter of Adam Hawarden, married Alexander Standish of Standish. Their descendants remained until 1870 when the hall was sold. An account of Woolston Hall can be found in Alderman Bennett's book on the old halls around Warrington. In this book we are told that the hall stood isolated among fields, and that it was eventually demolished only in 1947. In that same year, some timber from the priest's landing was made into candlesticks and presented to St Peter's in Woolston.

One of the connections with the English Martyrs was through St. Ambrose Barlow who had relatives hereabouts. One of these, Edward Booth, secured a place in the National Dictionary of Biography on account of his expertise as a



maker of watches and clocks. **Ambrose Edward Barlow, O.S.B.,**
(1585 – 10 September 1641)

He assumed the name Barlow and was ordained priest at Lisbon. After ordination he served the mission at Park Hall, Chorley and his published works varied from 'Meteorological Essays' to 'A Treatise of the Eucharist'. He died in 1719.

Domestically, Woolston was described as "fertile" yielding good crops of potatoes, turnips, oats, wheat and clover, with its marshy corners devoted to the cultivation of osiers for the manufacture of potato-hampers. Its inhabitants were employed entirely in agricultural labour and basket making.

From 1677 to 1831 a series of Catholic priests resided at Woolston Hall, all of whom were English Benedictines. One of these eventually restored Catholic life in Warrington, one commenced the Woolston Registers, one was removed to the Abbey of Lambeth following a charge of scandalous behaviour, and placed in solitary confinement, while yet another was of such interest as to merit much wider knowledge.

Three of the Vicars Apostolic gave Confirmation at Woolston Hall: Bishop Petre in 1755 confirmed 41 persons, Bishop Walton in 1774, 53 persons, and Bishop Gibson in 1784, 135 persons. According to tradition the chapel of the hall was hidden away in the eaves, but by the beginning of the 19th century it occupied an outhouse and was marked on contemporary maps as a Catholic chapel.

In 1588 Woolston Hall was subjected to a rigorous search and both Mr. and Mrs. Hawarden were reported as recusants and harbourers of seminary priests. A century later, in 1694, William Standish was arraigned on a charge of giving support to superstitious uses, for which some of his lands were seized. Still later in November 1777 the Warrington magistrates heard that "the children of Papists are often christened in their own house or taken to Woolston Hall." One specifically accused was Joseph Caldwell, a member of a famous local Catholic family. His ancestor, William Caldwell of Woolston, was reported in 1717 as a "reed maker and papist". Another kinsman, Gervase Caldwell, who died in 1760 aged 84 years, kept a school in his thatched cottage. A direct descendant Miss Edith Caldwell died in January 1983 aged 95 years, and is buried in St. Peter's graveyard.

The first Baptismal Register, commenced in 1771 by Dom. Thomas Turner, extends to 1834. Among its entries the name Caldwell occurs 80 times; the name Gatley appears early and persists to the present; the name of Briggs with twelve entries is not without interest. The most prolific of all were the Hankinsons, and in fact the first Register begins and ends with this family. They arrived from the Fylde about 1723, and one of their number, R.R. Michael Adrian Hankinson, O.S.B. (1817-1870), became Prior of Douai, and in 1863 Bishop of Port Louis Mauritius. Gillow described him as a happy mixture of firmness and affability, and gave vivid accounts of the epidemics and hurricane that tormented his episcopal career.

Some twenty five years ago, a caller at the presbytery tried to explain some dilemma to Fr. Joseph McNulty, himself an historian. Unable to free himself

from what must have been occupying his mind to the consternation of his visitor, he replied, "sixty-six Hankinsons buried in that churchyard". Dom. John Turner (1764-1844) also gave Woolston as his place of birth on entry to St. Gregory's, Paris in 1784. He was ordained in 1790, imprisoned during the French Revolution, but was spared for a long missionary career at Holme Hall, Yorkshire from 1815 to 1843. Honoured with the ancient title, Prior of Worcester, he died in retirement at Ampleforth Monastery.

When Fr. Richard Marsh, O.S.B. (1762-1843) arrived at Woolston in 1826 he carried a formidable reputation. As a young monk he had swum the Moselle to escape the Reign of Terror; he had later argued for compensation for exiled religious communities with hostile republicans; he had pleaded his own case in Rome when in conflict with his Benedictine brethren; he had been Prior both of Ampleforth and Douai; and his name had been on the Terna that elected Bishop Baines in 1823.

From the outset he advocated the separation of the mission from the dependence on any one family. In this he was not without reason, because, after the opening of St. Alban's Warrington in November 1823, Mr. Charles Standish of Woolston Hall had argued that a chaplain there was no longer necessary. The Vicar Apostolic then advanced £500 towards a new chapel and gave promise of £300 more, while many others sympathised. Then to everyone's dismay it was announced that the new chapel would not be at Woolston, where most of the Catholics lived, but miles away on the edge of Rixton Moss.

Rixton was not without a Catholic tradition. For two hundred years the Massey family at Rixton Hall had afforded shelter for mass to be offered secretly, as well as giving it's children to religion. Fr. Thomas Massey, S.J. came to the English mission in 1647 and his sister, two aunts and two nieces, went abroad to become nuns. The famous Returns of 1767 numbered Papists in Rixton as 41, and a letter from the Vicar Apostolic in 1825 complained about the neglect of the Rixton mission. Technically it was the responsibility of the Jesuits at Culcheth, but they had handed over to a French émigré, Fr. Lewis Richbeque, who was then occupied in removing the location to Croft.

The reason for the out of the way siting of the Rixton chapel is explained by Dr. Marsh's insistence that it should be, as far as it was possible, half-way between its neighbours at Warrington and Barton-on-Irwell. St. Michael's Rixton was opened on Easter Monday 1832 with the Vicar Apostolic presiding, a choir from Liverpool assisted and an air of rejoicing prevailed. But the Woolston Catholics

were furious at the distance and threatened to separate themselves, which they did three years later.

St. Michael's consisted of a house and chapel beneath the same roof. No architect is known, but it is so similar to that at Aberford where Dr. Marsh had supplied as a young priest, that some believe he designed it himself, a task not beyond his capabilities. The chapel was a rectangular room, with three many-paned windows facing southwards with three empty awnings opposite. There was a gilded wooden altar and a rear gallery on the parapet of which was inscribed the words of the Psalmist "In Thee My God Have I Hoped". Some of the old pictures from Woolston Hall hung in this gallery; otherwise all was quite unpretentious and economical.

In 1838 Dr. Marsh was given the ancient title of Abbot of Westminster, and although he had been provincial from 1806 to 1822, and President-General of the Benedictine Congregation from 1822 to 1826, and again in 1837, he remained faithful to his remote congregation at Rixton, and died there on the 23rd February 1843. After his death, his Benedictine successors at Rixton numbered four, and spanned another twenty one years.

A request was then made to Bishop Goss to allow Rixton to be served from Warrington, but this was firmly refused and the mission was transferred to the secular clergy. The number of parishioners remained extremely few; 16 in 1887, 18 in 1897, 26 in 1914. When Bishop Goss administered Confirmation there in 1857 there were two children only (both of them Hankinsons), and two more in 1861. In 1975 St. Michael's was suppressed and its title added to that of St. Peter's Woolston. Abbot Marsh's chapel was sold and converted into a private household.

Providence stood ready, with not one hand, but with two, to assist the dispossessed Woolston Catholics. On the one hand a pious wealthy layman, and on the other an influential ecclesiastic, Edward Statham was born in Warrington in 1767 and, his long life of 81 years was predominated by two factors; an aptitude for business that earned him a fortune, and consuming love of the Catholic faith. He kept a haberdashery shop in Elliot Street, Liverpool, and owned much property throughout South Lancashire, including a farm at Woolston. Called the Marledfield, it was managed for him by the two brothers James and Henry Hankinson. (A third brother was baptised Edward Statham Hankinson). Mr. Statham promised that if the Vicar Apostolic agreed, he would build a church for the Woolston Catholics. Bishop Penswick was old and failing, but his young co-adjutor, Bishop John Briggs had an immediate interest and

promised to secure them a priest. Bishop John Briggs was born in the neighbouring parish of Barton-on-Irwell in 1788. His family owned lands all along the Mersey almost to Warrington. There were numerous relatives and as has been stated the first Woolston Baptismal Register contains twelve entries under this same name. While the Bishop was a seminarist his father died and his other re-married one of the Hankinson brothers. As a priest John Briggs had served the Catholics of Chester, being elevated to the episcopate in 1833.

In Edward Statham's journal we read; "17 January 1833 Mr. Briggs was at my house in Woolston". "22 February I was at his house at Chester." "27 February sent him a long letter." The outcome of this was the building of St. Peter's Woolston. Mr. Statham handled all the legal and business transactions himself, and nothing escaped his observations from the provision of spare lamp glasses, to the reservation of his own grave in the churchyard. But he would never disclose how much he actually spent. His friend, John Smith of Liverpool was the architect though Edward Statham designed the windows himself. They contain 1765 separate pieces of glass, and his journal contains a sketch of one drawn in his own hand. The choice of dedication was his and the story is told in the second window on the West Wall of the church where St. Edward the Confessor is depicted placing his royal foundation, Westminster Abbey, under the patronage of St. Peter. Mr. Statham's private pew was beside this window in the second row centre on the right hand side. The foundation stone was laid by Mr. Statham himself on the 19th February 1834 and the church was opened on the 2nd July 1835 with Bishop Briggs presiding and Fr. James Crook offering the first Mass.

The original altar, in use until 1947, was flanked by portraits of SS. Peter and Paul by Henry Taylor Bulmer of Preston, whose "Adoration of the Magi" can still be seen at Upholland College. The bell, weighing 133 lbs has the inscription "Ruddell fecit 1834".

Of the families originally associated with St. Peter's mention must be made of the Norris's who farmed at Martinscroft. Rachael Norris who was born in 1750 and was buried in the present graveyard in 1849, must have witnessed every aspect of this history, from worshipping by stealth at the Hall to the realisation of Edward Statham's generosity. Mary Aloysia Norris became an Ursuline nun at Bristol, and a letter of hers dated 23rd June 1834 despatches "vestments and linen for the Woolston mission only". Another hand has added "Dr. Marsh took all ours to Rixton". From Orford came Ellen Atherton, a most faithful attender until her death in 1856. Other names include Barlow, Brimilow, Dumbill, Lyons, Marsh, Massey, Talbot and Winstanley.

From Lymm came Dr. William Brigham who attempted to found a mission there. After 1850 Cheshire was in the new diocese of Shrewsbury but the priest at Woolston had faculties there, and after saying his own Mass he was rowed across the Mersey to duplicate for the Lymm congregation. The venture died with Dr. Brigham and it was not until 1905 that Lymm became a Mass centre again. Thirty years ago there were people who remembered the Cheshire Catholics of the late 19th century, not only crossing the river by boat for Sunday Mass at St. Peter's, but on fine Summer evenings coming for Benediction too. Mention must also be made of Edward Statham's cousin Fr. Edward Kenyon who is buried in the graveyard. He ministered for many years in his native town of Manchester and later at Pleasington Priory. He retired to Woolston where he died on the 13th October 1837 aged 77 years. The backgammon table that he made for himself in his youth is still in the presbytery, but the portrait of Edward Statham himself, listed in an inventory of 1888, has vanished beyond trace.

Between 1909 and 1912 the church was re-benched and marbled, with new Stations of the Cross and decorative mosaics being erected. A new high altar in Italian marble and a new Lady altar was installed in 1947. Time was when St. Peter's was a secluded building on the bend of a country lane and made picturesque by a row of soaring poplars at the west end. But the advance of suburbs has surrounded it with many new houses. On account of dampness the original soft red brick exterior walls were refaced with a sturdy white dressing in 1974. From a population of one hundred and eighty six in the days of Mr' Statham and Bishop Briggs, St. Peter's now numbers over thirteen hundred parishioners.

At the beginning of 1985 the church was decorated and reordered according to the liturgical requirements of Vatican Council II, with a porch added at the back. This work was carried out by the main contractors McGoff & Byrne Ltd of Sale, Cheshire. The marble used for the altar, tabernacle support, and lectern is Italian Botticino, and the wood in the sanctuary area is Japanese Oak. This work was executed by Ormsby of Scarisbrick. Before the old altar was dismantled the papal motif was carefully removed and fitted into a wood and brass surround. This is now mounted at the entrance to St. Peter's school in Hillock Lane.