

# ST JOHN'S, EASINGWOLD

## A SESQUICENTENARY 1833-1983

**E**ASINGWOLD is one of the oldest Catholic missions in the district, and had cards fallen a different way at the time of the French Revolution, Easingwold rather than Ampleforth might have become a well-known monastic name. The celebration to mark the one hundred and fiftieth anniversary of the opening of the Catholic church in that town, while in one sense no more than the human fascination with round numbers – would not the 153rd anniversary have been scripturally more complete? – is in another sense an important realisation that much has happened, that much has been achieved, and that there is much for which we should give thanks to God. And it is a celebration in which the whole town can readily share, the more so because of the especially good ecumenical spirit fostered by the respective recent ministers. When the then parish priest (Fr Denis Marshal) published his *Brief Sketch* in 1945, he subtitled it 'A Story of Struggle and Achievement', and that phrase is perhaps a synopsis of the whole history of Easingwold, for it has never been important or famous, nor achieved any distinguished sons: York has its Constantine and Guy Fawkes, Whitby, Captain Cook and Coxwold, Laurence Sterne, but Easingwold remains quiet, attractive and undemonstrative.

It is nonetheless an interesting subject of study. From a religious point of view the story of the growth of mission into parish (canonically achieved on 25 October 1918), based on very little resource and support, is indeed a story of both struggle and achievement: but on a wider view, the history of the town, and indeed the question of why it is there at all, and why it has its present curious shape, is indeed intriguing, but one whose study is much inconvenienced by the thinness of the evidence. It has not been – at least until recently – an Easingwold custom to set up monuments or write things down, nor to behave in a way which induces any contemporaries to do so. It is therefore necessary at times when evidence fails to speculate, and in what follows I shall cheerfully do so.

The Salvin family had a branch at Easingwold in the eighteenth century, and for a time they had a Franciscan chaplain, Fr Yates, at the Manor House, and, perhaps following him, a monk of Lamspringe in Germany, Fr Laurence Hardisty. As there were only twelve papists in the town in 1735 – it is interesting that there were any – and ninety-six in the Coxwold returns to the Archbishop of York, it is unlikely that the chaplains had heavy work; but the figures probably reflect the distribution of Catholic families in the area, namely Fauconbergs (Newburgh), Fairfaxes (Gilling), Cholmeley (Brandsby), Stapylton (Myton) and Barton (Whenby). The Earls of Fauconberg were of the Bellasis family – a descendant, Fr Miles Bellasis, formerly of Ampleforth, is now at St Louis Priory in Missouri – and were sometimes Catholic and sometimes not. One married Cromwell's daughter in 1657, but the next maintained at least two chaplains, both monks of St Gregory's (now Downside) in the early years of the eighteenth century. They were followed by a secular priest from the College at Douai and perhaps two Franciscans (Osmotherley was at this time a Franciscan centre). Conforming Fauconbergs had no chaplain but seem to have allowed one, to function on the estate, perhaps discreetly supporting him: Mass was said for a time at Angram Hall, a farm house still standing near Husthwaite, and there are at Easingwold now a chalice and vestments which date from this time and were almost certainly used there. Fr Anselm Bradshaw looked after Angram 1770-1734, followed by a priest coming over from Osmotherley. Then Fr Jerome Coupe, who was chaplain at Brandsby Hall, took care of the mission, but in 1794 the

Angram farm passed to a non-Catholic, and at the same time Fr Jerome was sent away from Brandsby to make room for an exiled French priest who could tutor the family in French: thus does the tail Education wag the dog Religion. The Fauconberg estate manager would not allow him to settle on any Newburgh land, so he bought a cottage at Crayke to which he added a chapel room, and the next year built one (says Allanson) at Oulston. The Cholmeleys, however, still paid him for supplying the Brandsby congregation: perhaps they did not like French sermons. It is unlikely that he actually built a chapel at Oulston: Chapel House is still there, the third house on the south side of the green, and a Douai priest had used it, and died there, in 1755. Perhaps he followed Fr Moore. Fr Denis Marshall says that the Crayke cottage is the last on the left on the Brandsby road. Both Bishop Baines and Archbishop Ullathorne started their pastoral work on the Easingwold mission: in fact Ullathorne seems to have been the first 'helper' priest for Easingwold (1831). He went further than those who have followed him: after a spell in convict Australia, he finished as Newman's Archbishop in Birmingham. At one time his grandfather had kept a shop at Easingwold.

The next priest at Crayke was Fr Cyprian Tyrer. He bought the property in Long Street, Easingwold, which consisted of a house, several outbuildings and nearly two acres of ground. From its shape, and that of the adjoining farm, it had probably been originally a field, one of those (maybe) enclosed in 1630. It could not have been enclosed under the 1808 Easingwold Enclosure Act because the same plot and buildings – the description in the deeds is identical, although no plan is given – changed hands by a conveyance of 1760, now in the Abbey archives. The house (without its wings) was completed by 1830, perhaps further from the road than the original buildings, and was let for a time to a Dr Hall, possibly William Jones Hall, one of three medical doctors mentioned in 1834 (Cowling p118). If Mass was said in the house, in the same room we now occasionally use, the doctor may have been a papist; the let was to recover some of the capital cost. It is not clear how the previous buildings were laid out, though traces of a gateway halfway up the drive, where the path passes through the hedge, suggest that it was where the church now is, and there was (and is) a stream across the site, now culverted, but showing briefly under the 1871 school building, recently let for much the same reasons as Fr Tyrer's. It may come from Spring Street. The present outbuildings were clearly once stables, and the brickwork and windows still appearing, together with the description in the conveyance mentioned, suggest that part at least was erected by the middle of the eighteenth century, but perhaps not before the new road was built under the Act of 1753 (inference: see below). No account suggests where Mass was said in Easingwold before the house was built, or bought, but presumably in a Catholic household. The presence of a right-of-way down the west side of the property, now a rather narrow path, but with the piers on the Priory side of the outer wall, suggests that the origin of the path was a 'balk', a peice of land left at the side of a field to allow access to other fields. A glance at the map suggests the possibility that the path, or track as it may have been, continued in a more or less direct line towards Tollerton (on the then York road) and Newton-on-Ouse, at one time having wharves like those to found now near Micklegate Bridge in York: the present curved course of the A19 would in that case represent a diversion. It is also a possible interpretation of a photograph taken from the air in 1953 that the fields or strips in question, with a corresponding track, continue on the north side of Long Street, which is therefore a subsequent construction. The relevant Turnpike Trust was established by the act of 1753: the break-up of this field into house-plots may date from this time.

The Church, originally dedicated to Saint Austin (Marshall), has long been dedicated

to St John the Evangelist: the change may have been made when it was 'reopened' after the Stapylton altar was built in 1870: no one seems to have recorded the fact. It was the first building to be built by the architect Charles Hansom, who also designed the College building of 1860 at Ampleforth. His brother invented the Hansom cab. Both architect and builder (the father of Fr Paulinus Wilson) came from York. Charles was also engaged to build St Anne's, Edge Hill (Liverpool), for long an Ampleforth parish, which included an ornate rood-screen (1845): this was moved to Easingwold in 1892 by Fr Jerome Pearson, who had served at St Anne's. It was 'boldly removed' by Fr Vincent Wace in 1964: the figure on the big wall crucifix is the only part remaining. The two iron brackets which held the side curtains were added to the 1870 altar, and had originally fulfilled the same function in the monastic church at Ampleforth, also by Hansom (1856). This altar, now only used for the tabernacle, was given in 1870 by Mrs Stapylton of Myton Hall.

The School building, later the Hall, dates from 1871. The Sisters of Mercy came from Rouen in 1905, exiled by the same French secular laws which sent the monks of Solesmes to the Isle of Wight, and those of St Edmund's to the present Douai Abbey. The nuns, a number of whom are buried in the cemetery, set up a school in the large building opposite Wilson's garage, once a coaching inn and now flats: they remained till 1948, when they returned to Rouen on the Education Authority withdrawing support for the primary school. Since 1965, the Bar Convent, York, have filled the need for teaching the Catholic children.

Fr Denis Marshall's *Brief Sketch* gives a list of missionaries and incumbents which contains one or two points of interest. The eighteenth century Franciscans at Osmotherley seem to change very frequently (eleven men between 1773 and 1800): this may reflect the involvement of some of them with the early Methodists. The Baines episode in the 1830's – when the young Bishop Baines 'stole' most of the Ampleforth community for his foundation at Prior Park – seems to have rocked the boat: Fr Cyprian Tyrer had two turns, separated by Fr Alban Caldwell in 1831, and a gap in 1833, which may have been why Ullathorne was supplying. For six years a monk of St Edmund's held the mission: otherwise it remained with the Ampleforth community to the present time, with the notable exception of Fr Augustine Dowding of Downside, who covered the forty-two years to 1877 and is buried in the cemetery. Perhaps it was he who changed the church dedication.

The parish is very nearly coterminous with the Norman (and Shakespearean) Galtres Forest: it covers the villages of Shipton, Sherriff Hutton, Dalby, Brandsby, Yearsley, Husthwaite, Coxwold, Oulston, Carlton, Myton, Helperby, Brafferton, Aldwark, Tollerton, Alne, Stillington, Sutton-on-the-Forest and Crayke: all are no more than eight miles from Easingwold, which is the natural, but minor, centre of the district. It is however entirely dominated by York and has been so more or less since Roman times. Before that the tendency was more for travel to be east-west (and even in Roman times people went to Malton to cross the Derwent on their way to the Humber fords at Brough, and so to Lincoln), and this change in pattern of communications accounts in part for the mixed nature of the road network in our area, and the apparent discontinuity between the axis of a village and the roads to it, for example east-west villages on a north-south road like Stillington or Sutton-on-the-Forest. The point of this speculation is that two questions hover about Easingwold as a place, and so about the mission that has come to be there: why is it there, and why its curious shape?

When William I established Galtres Forest he put a strong restraining influence on agricultural development: further clearance was not allowed – the 'waste' must be preserved for royal sport. The Romans had a road from York northwards via a small guard station at

Raskelf: meditation on the present road layout suggests that it may have followed the route Bootham - Skelton - Tollerton - Brafferton - Topcliffe, separated from A1 route by the uncrossable Ouse and Swale. There was also perhaps (according to Everest) a Roman route Brafferton - Raskelf - Easingwold - Stillington - Sheriff Hutton - Malton. As there was a villa at Ouston (York Museum) and a high route along the western escarpment of the moors to which a connection came down by Oldstead, there may have been some junction near the present town. The site is also on the edge of high ground and on the spring line (on about the 30m contour) with some hill to shelter it (where the water tower is). It may in consequence have been a natural clearance or a disused place of settlement which the Easings may have thought attractive: their settlement name suggests that they were English, although those who made the adjacent Uppleby were Norse. A similar juxtaposition occurs in the case of Brafferton (OE) and Helperby (ON) which have grown together, or Thirsk and Sowerby. But the original church is right at the north end of the town, near an apparent crossroads, well away from 'High Street' (Uppleby), the market square (a village green!) and the more recent development of Long Street (once Low street). The A19 is essentially an eighteenth century turnpike, but it may not have been as old as it looks. Opposite the Roman Catholic church the curve of the houses suggests that it has been straightened. The path besides St John's links directly with the A19 south of the town, which was perhaps originally a route to the port at Newton-on-Ouse. The alignment suggests this, and it would have been natural to make use of this route when the turnpike was made from York to Northallerton (1753) (Cowling p84).

Possibly more significant is the aerial photographs of the town, which show what looks like a field pattern on which the southend of Long Street has been imposed: which suggests that the route through from west to east must have gone through the town. It also suggests – but no more than suggests – that there was originally settlement about the crossroads at the Raskelf end. On the other hand the present church property seems to have had its present shape in 1760: it is unlikely that that end of Long Street had only just been made, but if the church track was in use before 1823 it need not have been in operation.

Presumably the settlement of Uppleby was not placed on 'Water Tower Hill' because they wanted water, and shelter: that they were thereby near an existing English settlement appears not to have worried them. Perhaps (for Northumbria was a cradle of Christianity) Easingwold Christians had learnt to live peaceably in the earliest days. The first settlement (Easingwold) would have been on the rising ground near the church cross-roads and so is some little distance from Uppleby. The market (still on Friday) dates from a grant of Charles I in 1639, but actually set up in 1646 (Cowling p73,4).

It is possible that the upper part of Easingwold near the church was abandoned as a site at the time of the Black Death (1349): or it may have been destroyed by the Normans in the eleventh century, the church (an older one) perhaps being spared. At any rate it is an observable fact that the church is in the one place and the town in another. The street pattern bears some resemblance to the casual field pattern associated with Norse settlements (eg Brandsby: Everest p.24) while the fields south and east of the town suggest suggest the more organised strip pattern ususally associated with English settlements (eg Tollerton). It is of course impossible to be sure when all one can find is a series of small pointers: but details build up an impression.

The centenary of St Johns was celebrated in 1930 to mark the founding of the Church. Since 1913 an admirable Log Book containing earlier material has been maintained in the parish, and although many of the details ('today we purchased two new candlesticks') are not,

probably, of any great historical significance, unless in many centuries time such a statement becomes the only known reference to candlesticks, nonetheless the record is a valuable one and should be encouraged in any parish. The celebration on 21 September was marked by a High Mass (with a choir from Ampleforth) and the singing of Vespers in the evening. Fr Hilary Willson was then in charge and may be suspected of writing the very detailed historical account in the *Yorkshire Gazette* of 27 September 1930, and the gap between Mass and Vespers was conveniently filled by luncheon for the whole party at Stillington Hall. Matthew Liddell clearly had a good sense of community celebration.

The war years brought the usual problems: there were no bombs but instead there were for a time up to 600 evacuees, mainly from Hull, distributed round the villages. This meant that several priests had to be brought out from Ampleforth to say Mass for them: to some extent it was a revival of the eighteenth century situation. There was also on 30 December 1944 a substantial earthquake. After the war there was some growth in the parish because of the new housing to the east of the town and because Easingwold became (and is to some extent still) a commuter town: York is only twenty minutes down a good road. And the A19 has grown steadily in importance, as a route between East Yorkshire (Selby to Hull) and Teesside, Tyneside and Scotland: the best local route to Scotland is A19 - Tyne Tunnel - Morpeth - Coldstream - Edinburgh: *experto crede*. Easingwold is thus more lively than for a long time. And the County has sited the main secondary school in the town, so that traffic lights are necessary to control the crossing in Long Street where the old south bound track winds down the Church ground. Thus do modern feet follow an ancient route.

When one considers the rather casual way in which it happened that Fr Bolton moved from Gilling to Ampleforth and how it seemed convenient to make a temporary exchange with the recently homeless St Laurence's Community – they were taking an option provided by one of four chaplaincies in the neighbourhood – it becomes clear that had Fr Coupe been thrown out of Brandsby sooner, it might have been Easingwold and not Ampleforth which became the College. This is not fanciful. President Brewer regarded the two missions as an origin equal and parallel, and so described them in an explanatory letter (from 'Brown Edge', then as now the monastic heartland) to Fr Augustine Dowding (15 May 1843). 'The two missions of Ampleforth and Easingwold were established by the chaplains of Lord Fauconberg and Lord Fairfax.' It might have proved very suitable: a former Abbot of Easingwold would have become Archbishop of Westminster, and access to the College would have been much easier. The site is a good one: but the monastery would have been undoubtedly colder without the great hill to shelter it.

*Fr Anselm Cramer 1983*  
*Minor changes 2005*

*Note on sources:*

GC Cowling, *History of Easingwold and the Forest of Galtres*, nd, pp210.

MR Everest OSB, *The Forest of Galtres*, thesis 1955 (Ampleforth Abbey Archives)

RD Marshall OSB, *A Brief Sketch of the Origins of St John's Catholic Church Easingwold near York*, 1945

A.Allanson OSB, *Biography of the English Benedictines*, ed A. Cramer & S. Goodwill, 1999 (Saint Laurence Papers IV)