

PARISH GUIDE TO THE CHURCH AND SHRINE OF ST MARY THE VIRGIN, BUXTED

In his book on the life of Father A. D. Wagner, Parish Priest of St Paul, Brighton, Father Hamilton-Maughan records that he built St Mary's, Buxted, in 1886. It is, in fact, the only 'country Sister' to the stately Wagner churches in Brighton!

Since the 1830's, the old village of Buxted around the Park had fallen into decay, isolating the Parish Church of St. Margaret the Queen, which stands in the Park. There was, therefore, need of a new church to serve the new Buxted, as it developed to the east of the Railway. Thus; Buxted has two Parish Churches – the fine old 13th century building of St Margaret the Queen, and the beautiful little Church of St Mary the Virgin, built in the Sussex style, and designed to promote in full the Catholic Faith and Worship, to which our Anglican Formularies commit us.



St Mary's, 100 yards from the High Street along Church Road, stands on rising ground, approached by a gravel drive, with Parish Hall and Vicarage on either side, forming a complex. A flight of steps lead up to the main entrance door at the base of the tower. The tower and walls of the church are in Sussex flint, with turret and roof of red tiles. On the West wall, under the great window, is the magnificent Calvary,

with figures of Our Lord on the Cross, with Our Lady and St. John standing below on either side. Above is a pent roof awning, whilst at the base is a beautifully tended rock garden, the whole forming the Buxted War Memorial to the fallen in the two World Wars.



Having climbed the steps to the Church door, look behind for a moment at the wide view over the undulating Weald in the direction of Haywards Heath, whilst southwards, on a clear day, the range of the Downs may be seen in the far distance. To the north is Ashdown Forest, hidden by the west end of the church.

The tower itself contains bell chamber (but only one bell), Organ loft, and entrance porch within the main door. Here are the usual notice boards, tract case and hymn book shelves. To the left, at right angles, is the entrance arch to the Nave of the Church; in front, the entrance door to the side Chapel.

The first object to meet the eye as one passes through the arch into the Nave is the beautiful gilded statue of the Title Saint – the Blessed Virgin Mary. There are only two stained glass windows in the main church that of St Agnes set in the north wall,

near the Font, and in memory of Agnes Greaves, died 20th November, 1920; and that of St John the Evangelist in memory of Fr John Bagot de la Bere, Vicar from 1890-1908, and his wife. This is also set in the North wall, near the Pulpit. On the right hand front pillar of the nave stands a beautiful gilded figure of the Sacred Heart of Jesus formerly on a stand, but now set on a stone plinth, constructed in memory of Freda Treherne, with an inscription on the sides, *Ora pro anima Freda Treherne, in Sacro Corde Jesu*. Around the walls hang a very beautiful set of the Stations of the Cross, in relief.

Under the west window, with its seven tinted-glass lights, stands the octagonal stone Font. Originally it stood at the entrance to the Walsingham chapel, a more appropriate position for the Baptistry, being close to the entrance door.

From here, as one turns east, attention is focused on the beautiful Rood Crucifix, hanging from the ceiling, and the High Altar beyond, mounted on its three steps, and clearly visible from any part of the Nave of the Church. Above the entrance arch on the south side is the Organ Loft, with a recently acquired two-manual pipe organ, supplied by Henry Groves & Son of Nottingham.

In 1956, alterations and additions were made to the east end of the Church, and a new door and extension to the vestry, necessitating the building up of a portion of one of the windows on the North wall. Plans were drawn up to the specification of W.H. Coleman, Esq., Architect, and the work carried out by the Woodhouse Building Company.

Already the choir stalls had been removed, providing a more spacious Sanctuary, and the former mural paintings of the saints and angels around the walls of the Sanctuary were painted over with an application of cream wash. The former reredos behind the High Altar, with its tableau of the Ascension of Our Lord, flanked by riddel curtains, was replaced by a tall dossal curtain and tester, fixed to the east wall, which has no window. Against this dossal hangs a large Altar Crucifix, given by Canon Gibbons, and flanked by six silver candlesticks. In the centre is the

Tabernacle, with double doors, and before the Altar is a sanctuary lamp, suspended from the barrel roof.

The wooden pulpit of fine craftsmanship, the work of a Buxted man, and lectern are those originally in the church.

In the course of years there have been many gifts, some from anonymous donors, including a fine wrought iron flower stand for the Sanctuary, and a pair of Churchwardens staves, with beautiful silver crown and white mitre caps. Both these gifts were in thanksgiving for ruby wedding anniversaries.



THE WALSINGHAM CHAPEL

On the South side of the church, a carved wood screen surrounds on two sides the most interesting feature of the church. Father Wagner had this Lady Chapel built at the same time as the church, and deliberately made the measurements to coincide with the mediaeval Holy House at Walsingham, built in response to a vision granted to Richeldis in the time of King Edward the Confessor, this Holy House being of the same measurements as that of the Holy Home at Nazareth. The ancient shrine of Walsingham was destroyed in the XVIth century, so this little Buxted Lady Chapel

became the first restored Holy House and precursor of the revival of devotion to Our Lady of Walsingham in England.



It is known that Father Wagner, one of the great leaders of the Catholic Revival in our Church as he was, naturally had a great devotion to Mary, and he was certainly a pioneer in reviving her title of Our Lady of Walsingham, even though he may not have realised it at the time. It seems that, during the early years in the history of St. Mary's Church, the significance of the little chapel was not realised; but God was working through persons concerned, through Father Wagner onwards, to forge a remarkable chain of events.

Father Wagner was succeeded at St. Paul's, Brighton by Father J. E. Halliwell in 1902. To him came Father Charles Edward Roe as Curate over fourteen years, during which time Father Roe became acquainted with a young layman in Brighton, Alfred Hope Patten. In 1917 Father C.E. Roe was appointed Parish Priest of St. Mary's Buxted, where he took a great interest in the unique Lady Chapel. When in 1919 Alfred Hope Patten, then a Priest of five years standing, came to assist him at Buxted for a year, Father Roe told Father Hope Patten that in the Lady Chapel at St

Mary's a Screen was placed where it was, in order to make that part of the Chapel beyond to the east window correspond with the dimensions of the Holy House of Our Lady at Walsingham, destroyed in the reign of Henry VIII. This aroused Father Patten's interest in the once-famous Shrine at Walsingham. Then came a remarkable sequence of events. Father Roe's brother, Canon Gordon Roe, had recently been appointed Rural Dean of Walsingham, and wrote to his brother regarding the appointment to the vacant Living of Walsingham asking if he could suggest a suitable priest. Father C.E. Roe at once suggested Father Alfred Hope Patten, and he was accepted and appointed, with the results that, through the Providence of God, he restored Our Lady to Walsingham once more. There is not the space here to record all that this resolute and devoted priest accomplished in setting up the image of the Mother and Child, so familiar to us now, in rebuilding the Holy House within a fine Pilgrimage church, etc., but the influence of Buxted St. Mary's upon all this is clear for all to see, and, when Father Roe died, a memorial brass was set in the floor of the Shrine Church at Walsingham, just in front of the Master's Stall. This has an engraving of Father Roe in Mass vestments, and bears the inscription: 'Of your charity, pray for the soul of CHARLES EDWARD ROE, M.A., Member of S.S.C. and S.K.C.M., Priest Associate of the Holy House, Parish Priest of St. Mary's, Buxted 1917-1935. Died 4th August, 1940. Jesu mercy. Mary help.'

Meanwhile St. Mary's Buxted revived the Walsingham devotion in Sussex. On 18th December, 1932, a year after the opening of the Shrine church at Walsingham, an image of Our Lady of Walsingham, carved in Oberammergau, and identical to the restored image at Walsingham, was dedicated, and enthroned above the Lady Altar. The Rosary was said daily at 6pm, the hour at which Rosary and Intercessions are offered at Walsingham. Gradually, pilgrims began to come to Buxted, •but, after Father Roe, difficulties were experienced in maintaining the devotion on the same scale. A succession of faithful priests saw that Our Lady at Buxted was not forgotten, and the pilgrimages, which had become spasmodic, have now been revived, with the blessing of our Bishops, and a large Pilgrimage, organised by United Catholic societies in the Diocese is due this October (1982).

The Walsingham Chapel is enclosed on two sides by an oak screen, and on the other two sides, oak panelling covers the wall to a height of some six feet. The Altar, with silver Crucifix and candlesticks (which have to be removed when the Church is left open in daylight hours) is set on a step (predella) and the Blessed Presence of Our Lord in His Sacrament dwells in the Tabernacle set in the wall above. (The Blessed Sacrament is usually reserved on the High Altar over the Sunday).

The East window, behind the Walsingham statue, shows the Annunciation, the Archangel Gabriel announcing God's plan for the Incarnation to Blessed Mary. On the south side of the little sanctuary is a window depicting the Nativity, Christ in the manger at Bethlehem watched over by His Mother. This is in memory of Father Mackreth. Two other windows illuminate the chapel on the South side - the one showing St. Elizabeth with the child John Baptist, in memory of Margaret Bagot de la Bere, the other depicting Christ the Good Shepherd, in memory of Father John Bagot de la Bere.

A fixed pricket stand (no longer in use) bears a framed card with the Walsingham Prayer set out, and, nearby, a pricket stand is usually ablaze with votive candles, testifying to the prayers offered up to God in union with Our Lady in this holy place.

In conclusion, then: 'may Nazareth in Sussex, standing as a witness to the doctrine of the Incarnation in the Southern Counties, become known and loved, and draw many to visit this shrine who are but seldom able to take the Walsingham Way.'

NAZARETH IN SUSSEX

By Fr Michael Gidgeon

Walsingham Review, August 1982

In the floor of the Shrine Church [at Walsingham], just in front of the Master's stall, there is a memorial brass with the picture of a priest and this inscription:

**Of your charity pray for the soul of
CHARLES EDWARD ROE
M. A. Member of S. S. C and S. K. C. M.
Priest Associate of the Holy House
Parish priest of St. Mary's Buxted 1917-1935
Died 4th August 1940
Jesu, Mercy Mary, Help.**

This brass marks a link between Walsingham and the Sussex village of Buxted. The story of this link deserves to be widely known as a striking example of the hand of God slowly but surely accomplishing His will.

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In the early 1880s Fr Arthur Wagner, Vicar of St Paul's, Brighton, who had already built several churches in the town, decided to build one in Buxted. There seems to be no record of the reasons for his choice nor for the building, on the south side of the church of St. Mary, of a chapel whose measurements are those of the mediaeval Holy House of Our Lady of Walsingham. Of this decision, Fr Colin Stephenson wrote:

A possible explanation is that Wagner was a great friend of Dr Neale of East Grinstead, who was a great antiquarian and would almost certainly have followed the excavations at Walsingham in 1856 with great interest. It may well have been his influence which caused Fr. Wagner to make this gesture towards the ancient shrine of Mary in England."

Whatever the human explanation, St Mary's, Buxted, and its 'Walsingham Chapel' were built and consecrated on St Barnabas Day, 11th June 1887. There they stood, waiting for thirty years, until in 1917 Fr Charles Roe arrived as Vicar. He had been curate to Fr Halliwell, Fr Wagner's successor at St Paul's, Brighton, where he had come to know a young layman, Alfred Hope Patten. In 1919 he invited Hope Patten, now a priest, to be his curate at Buxted.

Now comes the part of the story which is, to those who hear it for the first time, the most astonishing. Fr Roe of Buxted had a brother, Canon Gordon Roe, who was Rector of Blakeney and Rural Dean of Walsingham. In 1921 he wrote to his brother at Buxted asking him to suggest a suitable priest for the vacant living of Little Walsingham. Fr Hope Patten's name was suggested, the living was offered and accepted, and he moved to Walsingham with results that need no telling here.

So Buxted played its most important role in the revival of devotion to Our Lady of Walsingham. On 18th December 1932, a year after the opening of the Shrine Church, an image of Our Lady of Walsingham was set up in 'the Walsingham Chapel' at Buxted. There (to quote from a leaflet *Nazareth in Sussex* written, presumably by Fr Roe, in 1934)

Daily in that Shrine is said the Rosary at 6 p.m., in conjunction with the devotions made at that hour in Walsingham. May Nazareth in Sussex, standing as a witness to the doctrine of the Incarnation in the Southern Counties, become known and loved, and draw many to visit this Shrine, who are but seldom able to 'take the Walsingham Way'.

Fr Roe's hopes have never been fully realized, for when he retired in 1935, the Walsingham Devotion at Buxted began to decline. The Chapel with its image has remained, however, known and visited by a few, a silent witness to the truth that "God moves in a mysterious way His wonders to perform."

Occasional pilgrimages have been held during these years, including one in 1981 by the Ecumenical Society of the Blessed Virgin Mary. This year, 1982, sees the Jubilee of the setting up of the image of Our Lady of Walsingham at Buxted. To mark the anniversary and, in thanksgiving for all that Walsingham has come to mean in the life of the Church of England, an attempt is to be made, with the help of the parish priest and the support of the Diocesan Bishop, to revive the Walsingham Devotion at Buxted. May it be for the honour of Our Lady and for the good of the Church in England, her Dowry.