

Ecumenical Marian Pilgrimage
VISIT TO HERON'S GHYLL
19TH MAY 2102

Esme Howard

The history of this church is a microcosm of 19th-century Catholic revival in this country. It is closely linked to the Fitzalan-Howards not only as founders of the parish but in the wider context of that revival.

As a parish that no longer has a school and is stuck in the countryside more or less equidistant from Uckfield and Crowborough we are doing rather well. Our registry of parishioners shows year-on-year growth in numbers, to a level now of perhaps 120; and because we have one of the few Catholic churches in these parts that has a pleasing architectural appearance and a traditional atmosphere to go with it, we seem to attract itinerant worshippers. Besides our Sunday Mass, Fr. Stephen celebrates two well-attended weekday Masses here and our car park has actually had to be enlarged in recent years. I like to feel, in other words, that we are here to stay.



In 2004 we celebrated 100 years of this church's consecrated life. We were joined by Edward, the present duke of Norfolk, whose forebear Duchess Minna, wife of the 14th Duke of Norfolk, was our founder. We are blessed to have this place. And it is fitting, on special occasions such as today's pilgrimage, to call to mind how our church and parish came into being.



I share with Eddie Norfolk a family notorious for its rather bloody relationship with the Tudor and Elizabethan courts but which boasts, in addition to our colourful rogues and courtly sycophants, two cardinals and one canonised saint. Saint Philip Howard, like the other English martyrs, was at the vanguard of the counter-reformation in this country, and the story of his death as a prisoner in the Tower of London in 1595 is very moving. Fast forward three centuries and one finds the second of our two cardinals, Cardinal Edward Howard, playing his part (alongside the 14th and 15th Dukes of Norfolk in particular) in championing Catholic emancipation in England. Cardinal Edward received his hat in 1877, and Newman, receiving his two years later, actually read his famous *biglietto* in Cardinal Edward's apartments in Rome. For just one decade, there were three English cardinals – Manning, Newman and Howard. The Howards, in other words, had some standing in church circles.

I need hardly remind a gathering such as this that the religious climate, in which Heron's Ghyll came onto the map as a small new Catholic place of worship in Victorian times, remained religiously and politically sensitive. Newman had aroused Catholic aspirations with

his high-profile conversion in 1845, just two decades after John Keble's famous speech on national apostasy which, in Newman's understanding, had sparked the Oxford Movement and in which he (Keble) posited that Anglicanism, never mind Catholicism, was in a parlous state across the nation and under threat from state secularism. Whilst there were inevitable concerns in this country about the 'romanisation' of Anglicanism in the wake of that conversion, there was also a certain amount of shoulder rubbing. It's ironic to think that today, more than ever perhaps, we fellow Christians once more share the challenges of state secularism.

A word now about the 14th and 15th Dukes of Norfolk who were associated with this parish. Both, it must be said, worked tirelessly towards an enduring Catholic identity in this country and did so discreetly, bearing in mind certain lingering currents of official hostility. They managed this without fanfare while attending to their public and social duties and stewarding their estates. Of more importance, however, they showed care for the poor and disadvantaged. That emphasis on the poor, not least the many deracinated Irish families living over here after the Famine, but lacking a nurturing and influential church to support them, was one of the spurs to Catholic revival in England in the Victorian era.

The 14th Duke, Henry Granville Fitzalan-Howard, known as Fitz, had a more nuanced understanding of the Catholic position than his predecessor did. He became a friend and admirer of Newman and keenly supported the Oratorians and Catholic causes in general. He was only briefly in the saddle as Duke but is remembered as being a particularly faithful expression of mid-century Catholic revival in England. Since my wife and I became parishioners here, now some 16 years ago, I think often of Fitz's wife Lady Augusta Lyons, known as Minna, who acted as his secretary and was also a devout person.

When Fitz died in 1860 thought had to be given as to where she, with her large family, might live? For some years, as far as we know, she remained at Arundel. The records show that, in 1874, Heron's Ghyll House and its properties were acquired by her son Henry, the 15th Duke, for £27,000. The estate had become quite grand in the ownership of the Victorian writer, Coventry Patmore, who, incidentally, employed John Francis Bentley, designer of Westminster Cathedral, to modernise the residence for him. The house now became the Dowager Duchess Minna's home. And the first thing she did, when she got here, was to endow a small chapel where Masses, which had first been said in one of the rooms of the house in 1866, could continue to be celebrated by a permanently employed priest.

Following Minna's death in 1886, the property passed to her grandson James Fitzalan-Hope. James, just 16 at the time, was the only surviving son of Fitz and Minna's eldest daughter Victoria who married James Hope-Scott, an Anglo-Catholic tractarian, ecclesiastical lawyer, friend of Newman and like him a convert. To begin with, Heron's Ghyll house was let to a physician called Edward Stewart. However, in 1891 when James Fitzalan-Hope reached the age of 21, he took responsibility for the property and in 1895 decided to replace the chapel with a new Church. He employed the prolific Catholic architect Frederick Arthur Walters (1849-1931) to design it, and the building opened two years later, on 22nd September 1897. The consecration took place on 7th September 1904, and we have a photo in our hall to prove it. (Walters, by the way, also designed the abbeys of Ealing and Buckfast).

It is proper here to acknowledge that St Mary's in Crowborough was built on land donated by James Fitzalan-Hope in 1894. It opened one hundred years ago as a chapel-of-ease for its mother church here at Heron's Ghyll, whose then rector, Fr. Emile Burt, was a man of faith and vision in the mould of Duchess Minna. (Although I have yet to uncover the historic detail, one learns of strong links between Heron's Ghyll and Uckfield, whose church of Our Lady Immaculate and St Philip Neri was built in 1885 though demolished and rebuilt in 1957. Today, Uckfield and Herons Ghyll are, of course, sister parishes.)

James Fitzalan-Hope was elevated to the peerage in 1932, as First Baron Rankeillour of Buxted. He died in 1947, and is buried in the cemetery, to my right, under the tower. The estate was sold in the 1930s, and occupied as Temple Grove Preparatory School. Once based in Eastbourne, it was by all accounts a good school, whose alumni included Harold Macmillan and Sir Douglas Bader. It closed in 2004, and the buildings are now residential apartments.

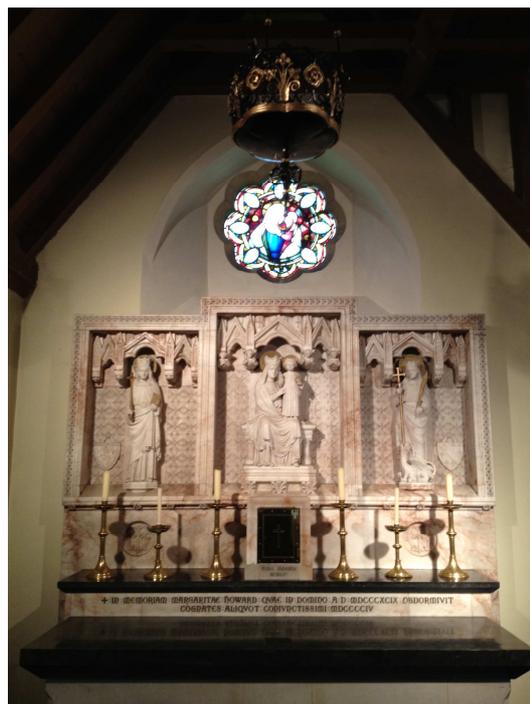
In the context of Roman-Catholic and Anglo-Catholic revival, based as this was on our common apostolic and patristic heritage, we bear in mind today the almost parallel history of St Mary's in Buxted, consecrated in 1887 and built by the priest-architect Fr. Wagner, which you will visit this afternoon after refreshments in our hall.

Notwithstanding the impact of Newman's quite controversial conversion, there is little secret that many Catholics of the late 19th century, not least the 15th Duke of Norfolk, greatly regretted the divisions between the Roman and the Anglo-Catholics. True, the 15th Duke was taken up with substantially rebuilding and refurbishing Arundel castle; however, on his coming of age, he built the impressive neo-Gothic Arundel Cathedral, now dedicated to St Philip Howard. He founded the Catholic Union in 1870, helped save the Venerable English

College in Rome which had already been rebuilt by Cardinal Philip Howard in the late 17th century, and as the leading Catholic layman in the land, and here is my point, he also played a conspicuous part in the perfectly ecumenical work of 'normalising' relationships between the English court and the Vatican. Beyond that, in helping to rebuild an acceptable Catholic identity in this country, he used his influence to bring about the elevation of Newman (so much loved by the Anglo-Catholic community) to cardinal.

Turning now to the features of St John's, with the notable exception of this pulpit on which I am standing, carved in Holland in the 16th century, the church bears as one would expect many a footprint of the Norfolk and Fitzalan-Hope families. The baptismal font, for example, was a gift from Lord Rankeillour's first wife; the west window was a memorial to his youngest sister, Theresa (Sister Theresa of St. Philip), a Carmelite nun, who died in 1891. The chapel of Our Lady, to the left of the High Altar, is itself a memorial to James Fitzalan-Hope's aunt, Lady Margaret Fitzalan-Howard. The two coats of arms in the west window are, on the left, that of the Dukes of Norfolk and on the right, that of the Hope family. Recognition of Duchess Minna, foundress of the original chapel and indeed of our parish, is observable in the east window, behind the High Altar. The inscription, beneath the depictions of the Risen Christ in the centre, of St Peter to the left and St John to the right, reads:

*Pray for the soul of Minna Duchess of Norfolk of this mission:
the foundress, in whose memory her children commissioned this window.*



Finally, a word about how our patron saint has been honoured in this place. A rather ferocious looking eagle has always stood guard over the porch whilst a tiny, rather subdued specimen sits at the feet of the evangelist in the stained-glass image behind the high altar. In early 2008, the parish and its friends, among them the Norfolk, Rankeillour and Howard of Penrith families, contributed to a fund that enable us, after we had exercised the requisite due diligence before the Historic Churches Committee, to commission Marcus Cornish to make a sculpture of St. John.

This imposing work, cast in clay, now occupies a prominent position on the back wall of the nave. Bishop Kieran Conry of this diocese presided over the dedication ceremony in January 2009. Members of Michael Rankeillour's family joined us in numbers. The image has an appropriately iconographical and visionary quality – John depicted as a young man in awe of his own vision, the eagle enveloping him so that the two become one. I like the rugged quality of that earthly Patmos to which the evangelist is bound, his work still to be done; and the way it contrasts with the sense of transcendence that is conveyed as the deliberately outsize eagle prepares to carry John's first chapter to the heights.

It is a powerful evocation and the artist's first venture into religious art. I worked quite closely with Marcus on the conceptualisation and development of the piece and I know that his inspiration, like the burgeoning of holy places in this corner of East Sussex, was the result of dedication and prayer.

