

History  
of  
St Andrew's Church  
Tenterden  
Kent  
in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century

## Chapter 1 – the beginning

In 1900 there was no Roman Catholic church in Tenterden, although there had been a Catholic chapel in the town between 1867 and 1877, when a Benedictine priory was established at Finchden Manor in the Appledore Road. The first Catholic church in Ashford since the Reformation had been opened in 1865 and one in Goudhurst in 1882, but neither was easily accessible to any Catholic living in Tenterden in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Tenterden was in the parish of Ashford and part of the Roman Catholic Diocese of Southwark, which at that time included not only London south of the Thames and Kent, but also Sussex and Surrey south of the Thames. It was a struggle to bring the Church back into the life of the people.

For a time before the First World War, assistant priests from Ashford came when they could to say Mass in Tenterden, presumably in private houses. In June 1913 the Catholic Missionary Society took a hand, arriving with a 'motor-chapel' to offer a week's mission to Catholics and interested non-Catholics in Tenterden Town Hall. The town authorities were afraid of anti-Catholic protests, but the vicars of St Mildred's and St Michael's and the Unitarian minister were all friendly and helpful and the meetings went ahead without disturbance. Yet again it proved impossible to sustain the mission, largely through the lack of suitable accommodation, and it was not until the 1920s that the break-through came.

In 1925 the diocese bought the land on the Ashford road where St Andrew's now stands and in 1926 Bishop Peter Amigo set up the Southwark Travelling Mission to look after the scattered population of the rural areas of the diocese. Father Arthur Dudley was appointed the first – and for three years the only – priest in charge of it based in Croydon, Surrey. He visited Tenterden in February 1927, said Mass for the handful of Catholics he found there and asked them to look around for any others living in the neighbourhood. By the end of the year the number had risen to 27 and Father Dudley decided to make Tenterden one of his first Mass centres in Kent. He stayed in each for about a week every quarter, visiting the known Catholics and (in Tenterden) saying Mass first in private houses and then in a room booked at the White Lion Hotel. At last the foundations had been laid for a permanent presence in the town.

Bishop Amigo then made an unexpected personal contribution: he sent a benefactress. Mrs Gertrude Julia (Nina) Barclay, a lady living in London, recently widowed, asked him where she could move to within his diocese, to foster the faith. Apparently she was rather taken back when he suggested Tenterden, but he insisted: *'You asked me ... I have told you ... I have nothing more to say'*. She accepted his decision and moved to Tenterden in July 1930.

At once she became a tower of strength. She bought the house at 39, Ashford Road, which she named after St Andrew, and built an extension for an oratory, with its own entrance. Father Dudley was delighted to bless and open it on St Andrew's day, 30 November 1930. Permission was given for Mass to be said there once a month, the African Mission Fathers from Ore Place, Hastings, supplying the priests. On the intermediate Sundays Mrs Barclay hired a bus to take the congregation to the Catholic church in Rye. When she moved to Heronden Hall in 1933, she turned the drawing room and library into a spacious oratory. It became the regular meeting place for Mass, by this time celebrated every Sunday. Ill-health had forced Father Dudley to retire from the Travelling Mission in 1931. Two years later his successor, Father George Winham, came to the conclusion that Tenterden could support a resident priest, if he also looked after the flourishing Mass centre at Northiam. He proved his



point by living in Tenterden for six weeks, serving both centres. During this time the average attendance at Mass at Tenterden was 43, at Northiam 20. Given the expectation of further growth, the Bishop appointed Father Hopetoun Currie to Tenterden, with responsibility also for Northiam. He had been born in India in 1896, the son of a Scottish tea planter. The family returned to Britain a few years later and settled in Sussex. Father Currie's time as a seminarian had been interrupted by his call-up for military service in 1916, but he resumed his studies after the war and was ordained in 1924. He arrived in Tenterden from Worthing in July 1934 and after a year was able to report the record number of 93 people attending Mass at the oratory in Heronden Hall.

## **Chapter 2 – the building of the Church and Father Currie**

Clearly the time had come to build a church. Designs were commissioned from Wilfred Mangan, an architect from Preston in Lancashire. Members of the congregation supplemented their weekly offerings with the proceeds of whist drives, dances and a garden fete; large donations were sent in by anonymous donors and – although funds were at least £1,000 short – building was started on 18<sup>th</sup> June 1935. Five months later it was finished and the church was opened on St Andrew's day, 30<sup>th</sup> November.

The ceremony was reported in the Kentish Express. Naturally Mrs Barclay was present and Shelia Kaye-Smith and her husband, equally generous benefactors to the oratory at Northiam. The Mayor and Mayoress of Tenterden were there with other members of the town council and their wives alongside numerous well-wishers, Catholic and non-Catholic alike, from the local community. Monsignor W F Brown, Bishop of Pella, and auxiliary bishop in Southwark, presided, blessed and opened the church. For the first time in Tenterden since the departure of the Benedictines, a solemn High Mass was offered. The celebrant, fittingly, was Father Dudley, assisted by Father Winham and Father H. Fincham (also of the Travelling Mission). The African Mission College at Ore Place provided the altar servers and the choir. Bishop Brown, in his sermon, spoke of the early struggles of the Catholics in Tenterden and expressed the hope that the various churches in the town would be able to work together 'in the one great cause'.

Looking back, Mrs Barclay described her years at Tenterden as the happiest of her life as a widow. Her mission achieved with the opening of St Andrew's and approaching her 70<sup>th</sup> birthday, she sold Heronden Hall and moved to the Isle of Wight to be near her son and sister. However, in 1940 she went back to London, living there for the rest of the war and for some years after, until old age and ill-health forced her to move to a nursing home in Haslemere, Surrey, where she died in 1957. Father Currie asked his parishioners to remember in their prayers one so influential in promoting the Catholic faith in Tenterden.

Father Currie remained in charge of St Andrew's for almost 50 years, until his death in 1984. The church, although in use from 1935, could not be consecrated until it was free from debt. The debt on the church itself was paid off in July 1944, but £850 was still owing on the presbytery, 41, Ashford Road, where Father Currie lived with his mother and brother. The total debt was settled in June 1949, just in time for Father Currie's silver jubilee of his ordination. The Bishop of Southwark consecrated St Andrew's on 18<sup>th</sup> July 1951. It was not, however, for another four years that Tenterden became a parish and Father Currie was formally inducted. Then in 1965 the Diocese of Southwark became an Archdiocese and parishes in the counties of Sussex and Surrey were removed to form a new Diocese of



Arundel and Brighton. Canon Currie, as he had become, announcing the change, expressed the fear that it might mean the loss of Northiam. He need not have worried. He continued to say three Masses every Sunday morning – two at Tenterden and one at Northiam – as did his successor as parish priest, Father Hagreen.

This was the heart of their ministry, to bring Mass and the sacraments to the Catholics of the area. In his early years Father Currie had also to cope with the practical problems of the Second World War. On 10<sup>th</sup> September 1939, a week after the declaration of war, he instructed the congregation to remain in church if the air raid warning sounded and not to go home until the all clear. (In June 1940, the Bishop reversed this decision: Mass could be suspended and the congregation sent home). On 1<sup>st</sup> September 1940, indeed, the 11a.m. Mass at St Andrew's could not be said because of an air-raid. Two weeks later at the height of the Battle of Britain, Father Currie advised his Tenterden parishioners to come to the early Mass as it was less likely to be interrupted by enemy action. Happily St Andrew's remained untouched until 1944, when it was damaged by a bomb, and was never forced to close. A parishioner remembered German prisoners of war attending St Andrew's. The Mass in Latin was, of course, familiar to them, but Father Currie, when they were present, repeated the Epistle and Gospel in German as well as in English for their sake. In May 1945 *Te Deum* could at last be sung in thanksgiving for victory in Europe.

After the war the spirit of renewal within the Catholic Church began to find expression. Fasting from midnight before receiving Holy Communion, the old rule for communicants, was reduced by papal decree in 1953 to fasting from food for three hours and drink for one hour (later altered to one hour for food and drink). The purpose – to encourage more frequent communion – was rapidly achieved, with effects on the lives of Catholics as momentous as any changes introduced after the Second Vatican Council, which opened in 1962. One of the first of these was the ending of compulsory Friday "fish days", now replaced by acts of penance individually chosen. Other changes were more controversial, especially the introduction of Mass in English. Canon Currie, who had explained it to his parishioners several times in the late 1960s, was still troubled in 1970 by the number of Latin enthusiasts at St Andrew's and, especially, at St Teresa's, Northiam. He pointed out that a certain amount of the High Mass was still sung in Latin, and that the 'language of the church' would not be entirely lost. But, although the Archbishop in 1973 gave permission for a weekly Mass of the new rite in Latin, it never formed part of the regular Sunday services. (Just over 30 years later the old Tridentine Mass returned to St Andrew's as an extra Mass one Sunday a month for the benefit of the Latin Mass Society and anyone else still unhappy with the new order of service). In 1976, when communion in the hand was allowed as an alternative to reception on the tongue, Canon Currie did not expect many to take advantage of the innovation, although he pointed out that communion in the hand had been the custom during the first eight centuries of the Church's history.

An underlying theme of the renewal was the greater involvement of the laity in the life of the Church. On the instruction of the Archbishop, Canon Currie in 1970 formed a Parish Advisory Council, made up of representatives of different groups within the parish. A few months earlier, he had remarked on his growing difficulty in getting round a parish of 150 square miles to meet the people, and the new Parish Council, which met four times a year, no doubt helped to keep him in touch with the concerns of his parishioners as well as to make his own views known. He was anyway careful to keep the parish informed, through his weekly notices, of any significant events. In February 1971, he announced that the diocese has bought 45, Ashford Road, next door to St Andrew's, and intended to sell 41, Ashford Road.



Canon Currie moved house in August 1971, but lamented that St Andrew's, free of debt for so many years, now owed £3,000 on the new presbytery. However, with the aid of anonymous benefactors, the debt was paid off in December 1975, as he informed his parishioners, *Deo Gratias*.

Relationships between the churches also developed, if slowly. In 1949, when Tenterden celebrated the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the grant of its charter, Catholics were not allowed to attend a joint service to mark the occasion. Instead, the Deputy Mayor and Mayoress came to Mass at St Andrew's. In January 1964, the non-Catholic clergy of the town, knowing that Catholics could not attend joint services, asked if they might bring some of their congregations to a weekday Mass during the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity. Canon Currie willingly agreed and urged his parishioners to make their visitors welcome. An invitation to other churches to come to St Andrew's during Unity Week became the norm, although the form of service varied. Canon Currie was also keen for Catholics to attend any inter-church debates which were arranged. In 1973, when the topic for discussion was whether denominations were still necessary, Father John Jukes, (who became Bishop in 1980), came to put the Catholic point of view. In 1976, Canon Currie appealed for a good attendance at a debate on 'I believe' by a panel of speakers from the different churches, including a Catholic, and again, in 1978, at a scriptural discussion. But by then he had come to the sad conclusion that ecumenism was on the wane in this part of the country.

Nevertheless he did what he could. When St Mildred's celebrated its 800<sup>th</sup> anniversary in 1980, he personally created a floral display for the flower festival with the caption 'The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church'. In 1981, he called for a worthy contingent from St Andrew's to join the Good Friday procession of witness in Tenterden. On 11<sup>th</sup> October 1981, after urging parishioners to learn the new setting of the Latin creed to be sung that day, he said: 'we do not want to be tied down to the same thing all the year round – nor indeed do we want to become reactionaries'. These were almost the last words he wrote for his weekly notices. Before the end of the month he suffered a severe stroke and was removed to hospital. Although he appeared at first to be making some progress, he never recovered sufficiently to return to Tenterden.

Canon Currie suffered a severe stroke in October 1981, and died in March 1984, just three months short of the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of his ordination. When he reached the golden jubilee of his priesthood, in June 1974, the celebration had included a party in the Town Hall. His parishioners had been able to thank him for what was already an exceptionally long period of service as their priest. His Requiem Mass was held at St Andrew's, with the Archbishop of Southwark as principal celebrant. So many priests and lay people attended that a marquee had to be put up in the grounds to shelter the overflow congregation. Canon Currie was buried in Tenterden cemetery, near to his mother and brother.

### **Chapter 3 – the Father Hagreen Years**

Father John Hagreen was soon appointed to take over at Tenterden and Northiam. During the war he had served with the Royal West Kent Regiment and had been on active service with the 1<sup>st</sup> Army in North Africa. He had been seriously wounded in 1943 and invalided home. After recovery he returned to military service in England until he was demobilised in 1946. He had decided by then to train for the priesthood and was ordained in 1952. He came to Tenterden from a parish in Brixton, less conscious, it seems, of the contrast this meant in his own life than of the difficulty his new parishioners might find in adjusting to a new parish



priest after so many years. In his first newsletter, in June 1984, he wrote of the need for change: 'without change there is no possibility of growth'. But he promised to consult the parish as widely as he could and the changes, when they came, were fully explained. As, for example, in December 1984, when the diocese ruled that communion in both kinds could be allowed at weekday Masses (later extended to Sunday Masses, when lay ministers of the Eucharist were available to assist the priest with the chalice). Father Hagreen also stressed the importance of visiting parishioners at home and asked for help in locating them in this large rural parish. Later he held weekly discussion classes during the winter months for Catholics and non-Catholics wanting to deepen their knowledge of the Catholic faith. These mixed-group meetings became the normal vehicle for the instruction of would-be converts. The restoration of the permanent diaconate in the Catholic Church after more than 1,000 years enabled St Andrew's to welcome its first married deacon, Derek Ockenden, in 1989.

On Father Hagreen's arrival in Tenterden, one major project remained to complete the reforms envisaged by the Second Vatican Council: the physical re-ordering of Catholic churches. The priest was no longer to pray with his back to the congregation, but to stand behind the altar, facing the people. At St Andrew's the high altar stood against the end wall and could not be brought forward. Canon Currie had solved the immediate problem by introducing a plain wooden altar, placed towards the front of the sanctuary, suitable for the new liturgy. But something more permanent was needed. In March 1985 Father Hagreen was able to announce that the way ahead had been found. Canon Currie in his will had bequeathed £30,000 to St Andrew's and £10,000 to St Teresa's. Invested by the diocese, the money would produce interest for the parish and also form the basis for a loan to cover the cost of re-ordering the two churches. Father Hagreen, the son of a craftsman and himself involved in workmanship and design, was clearly just the person to carry through the project at St Andrew's in collaboration with the architect, Gerald Murphy. Plans for the interior of the church, together with a new porch, were approved in July 1986, and early in 1987 St Andrew's was closed for the work to be carried out. For ten weeks the congregation moved to the Unitarian Meeting House for the Sunday Masses, before returning to St Andrew's on Palm Sunday, 12 April. Bishop John Jukes dedicated the new altar on 27 May. The choir was augmented by members of the choirs of St Mildred's and St Michael's, who sang two Latin hymns during the distribution of communion. At the end of the service the Bishop blessed a plaque inscribed:

*In gratitude remember*  
CANON  
HOPETOUN CURRIE  
*Founder Rector & Benefactor*  
1934-1984

Father Hagreen, in his Sunday newsletter, apologised for the time it had taken, but recorded his satisfaction that the interior was, liturgically, 'almost exactly according to the text-book'. However, the building work was not yet over. Within the next few years St Andrew's acquired a much needed parish room, added to the side of the porch, and a new presbytery within the grounds of the church, replacing 45, Ashford Road, which was sold. As Father Hagreen looked towards the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of his ordination in 1992, his thoughts turned to the fading memories of the early years and he asked Meg Ryan if she could find out more about Mrs Barclay. Her research brought the benefactress back to life for a new generation. Father Hagreen then added a plaque in St Andrew's balancing the one to Canon Currie:



*In gratitude remember*  
GERTRUDE JULIA (NINA)  
BARCLAY  
*who brought daily Mass back to*  
*Tenterden*  
*1869 - 1957*

Devoted as he was to his own church, Father Hagreen was also an enthusiast for ecumenism. He had not always been, he told his parishioners within weeks of arriving in Tenterden. The Second Vatican Council had changed the mind of the Catholic Church on its relationship with other churches, but he was still wary about it. It was his time in Brixton, working with the ministers of the other churches, that taught him to appreciate the insights and riches of the other Christian traditions. In Tenterden, he soon found opportunities to work for the cause. In October 1984, he drew the attention of the parish to an ecumenical debate arranged by the Council of Churches. That November he announced that the second Mass at St Andrew's on Remembrance Sunday would start ten minutes later than usual so that he could take part in the town's service at the war memorial. On one Sunday in December, the evening service at St Andrew's was cancelled to allow everyone to go to the carol service in Biddenden's Anglican church. As the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity approached in January 1985, Father Hagreen urged parishioners to get involved in all the joint services and not confine their attendance to St Andrew's own ecumenical service.

As he began, so he continued. In 1992, he signed the covenant which established Churches Together in Tenterden, replacing the old Council of Churches. When the Catholic Bishops' Conference of England & Wales published a long statement on the Church's social teaching, *The Common Good*, in 1996, he led a group that held a series of meetings to discuss it; and framed relevant questions to the parliamentary candidates, running up to the general election of 1997. Then he invited all the candidates to an open meeting at St Andrew's to make their views known and to answer questions. A man of intellectual energy, he liked to encourage discussion of matters of general interest to Christians. Even a serious heart attack did little to curtail his activities. But eventually the time came for him to retire in November 1997, at the age of 78. Canon David Trustram wrote an appreciation in St Mildred's Parish Magazine under the title 'John Hagreen - Ecumenist', paying tribute to him as a man utterly committed to Christ and 'a true fellow-traveller with all the other clergy for 13 years'.

Father Hagreen spent most of his retirement as Chaplain to St Andrew's Convent, Edenbridge, although he was soon called back to a farewell party at Great Maytham Hall, Rolvenden, to which his friends of all denominations were invited. He remained in touch with the parish even when he moved to Sevenoaks, after the Convent had to close its school and old people's home, and could no longer justify a Chaplain. He lived in a flat attached to St Thomas's church, Sevenoaks, and gave valuable assistance to the parish priest. But the years had taken their toll and he died in May 2003. His Requiem Mass was held at St George's Cathedral, Southwark, with the Archbishop as principal celebrant. Canon John Bailey, Father Hagreen's exact contemporary in the priesthood, recalled in his address how they had celebrated their Golden Jubilee together the previous year, and spoke of Father John's love of the Scriptures and his spiritual strength, nurtured by prayer. Father Hagreen was buried in the churchyard beside St Teresa's church at Northiam.

The history of St Andrew's in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century may not be well known, but it deserves to be remembered by the people of Tenterden.

.....and now we move forward into the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.....

Helen Miller  
St Andrew's Day 2005