

**September 1990 - September 2015**



**HOW OUR CHURCH CAME TO BE  
BUILT**

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Everybody knows the background. In 1954, coal was discovered near Cotgrave. Ten years later, Cotgrave Pit was opened. By mining standards it was a luxurious pit, with high ceilings, unlike the older ones where the



Cotgrave Pit, by Ron Martin, of Bulwell

men had to bend double to work. The opening of the pit meant that a tiny village suddenly more than quadrupled, as a influx of miners arrived from all over the British Isles: Scotland, Ireland, Wales, Durham, Northumberland, London. Many had been made redundant from places like Wallsend and Ashington. The

Geordies remember going to the shop to ask for bread buns for the men's bait. They were told in no uncertain terms that they wanted "cobs" for their "snap".

An estate of 400 houses was built for them but there were, at first, few other amenities. Hughie McIlveen had been made redundant three times. He had never been down any pit but applied to Cotgrave. When his wife saw it she wanted to go home. There were hardly any shops, with Nottingham an expensive bus ride away, and no work for the miners' wives. And, for the many Catholics among the mining community, no Catholic church. One miner's wife is remembered as saying, "I can't see where the bairns are going to school, and where we are going to Mass I can't imagine. I never saw such a Godless place in the whole of my life."

Schools will be mentioned later. As for Mass, at first, the miners and their families went over to Mass at Radcliffe. They did not have cars, so travelled all together in a hired Lamcotes bus. The driver was called Pete Gee. There were about forty people on the bus, and they had a weekly whip-round to pay for the hire. This all took place on Sunday afternoons, as they had been told by Father Wilson that Radcliffe Church was too small to accommodate them in the morning, so they would have to come at 5 pm, which they did.

However, Radcliffe was one community and Cotgrave quite another.

Not everyone went to Radcliffe. Some chose to go by bus to St Patrick's, which was then a large church situated behind where the garage on London Road roundabout now stands. Eileen Widdicks remembers sometimes going by bus to the Cathedral. They would arrive for the second half of one Mass, then catch the beginning of another before they had to leave to get the bus home.

The Anglican church was helpful and sometimes Mass was said at All Saints. But even so, all this was unsatisfactory, and the miners very much wanted their own church.



The charity shop

At that time, Bingham, Radcliffe, Cotgrave and Keyworth were all one parish. However, in 1973 they were split into two: Bingham with Radcliffe, Cotgrave with Keyworth. Father Wilson kept Radcliffe and Bingham, and Father Gilroy, who had spent many years in the missions in Sierra Leone, arrived to take charge of Cotgrave and Keyworth in October 1973, just before his birthday. It was a tough parish for a newcomer. There was nowhere for a priest to live, in either place. Father Gilroy stayed at Radcliffe for a while, with the priest there, then moved to St Hugh's, a junior seminary in Tollerton, closed in 1986. He had very few material possessions: to make this move he had to borrow a suitcase from Fr Monaghan of West Bridgford.



Father Gilroy wanted to say Mass for his new parishioners in the places where they lived. The Miner's Welfare had been erected, so he hired the Belvoir Suite, upstairs, on Sunday mornings. This arrangement has been described as the least spiritual setting they could possibly have had. It felt very makeshift with folding chairs. Outside you could hear games of football and whippet racing, along with some very choice language. People have described it as "like a farmyard out there". Then, inside and downstairs, were the Sunday Strippers who were lining up ready to go on stage as the Catholics went into Mass. Nora Laughton's son once ran off after getting locked in the toilets. His mother eventually found him on the stage in the middle of the strippers, who were even more embarrassed than Mrs Laughton was.

Yet the Catholic community made the best of their time in the Welfare. They remember Sister Anne-Marie teaching the children there for their First Communion. There are many fond tales of Father Gilroy. He was not materialistic, and was once offered trousers from the charity shop which could only be an improvement on what he had on. He was also a terrible driver.



Maureen Snowden remembers driving all the way up north with him in second gear. Tess Foster remembers him trying to go the wrong way on the Clifton flyover. But these memories came with much laughter and affection. He had time and kindness for everyone

The next stage in the story came from outside the parish. In 1974 the Presentation Sisters at Matlock, who had falling numbers, sold a convent, and donated the money to Father Gilroy. With it, he bought an acre and a half of land with a cottage, an orchard and sheep on it. There was also a derelict inspection pit, as there had once been a garage on the site. He sometimes said a house mass for the parish in the cottage, where he had moved in August 1974. It was very primitive: it had the original electricity, which had been condemned, and was so damp that plants were growing up the walls inside. There was no gas supply. Pat Christie, Tess Foster's sister, looked after him, and did the cooking on a two-ring calor gas burner. Father Gilroy, after his time in the missions, seems to have taken it all in his stride. Maureen Snowden remembers her mother Sheila Flannery doing his washing, and inviting him to Sunday lunch every week. As they were all about to start eating, he used to say, " In Sierra

Leone the rats were a delicacy". The miners set about renovating the house as soon as possible .

Father Gilroy liked gardening. The snowdrops, which are still there now, were planted by him. In 1974 the Catholics held their first garden party on the site. Father Gilroy sold some of the plot off , to become Risegate Gardens. The money was used for a deposit for the new church at Keyworth. Mass for Keyworth people was said in Mary Ward College, a Catholic Teacher Training College, closed in 1977. The site is now the British Geological Survey. At Easter 1984 work began on St Margaret's, Keyworth, which was opened that September.

But still no church for Cotgrave. Apparently the Coal Board had already offered a piece of land near the Precinct to Father Wilson to build a

church on but that came to nothing. No-one seems to know why. Perhaps it was too small.



Then a school on Parliament Street Newark, closed down, and the community were given an old hut, which had been two supplementary classrooms. The Cotgrave parishioners dismantled

it, and transported it to Cotgrave. It arrived June 19th 1976, in the middle of the long hot summer, and work began on the foundations. The men of the community who put it back together were: George ("Geordie") Phillipson, Alec White, John Flannery, John Conlin, Clay Thompson, John Christie, Ashton Turner, Bob Richardson, Hughie McIlveen. Another of them was George Askill who requested that his ashes be buried under the

foundations of the new church, and this was done. Tess Foster remembers her mother, Jane Parker, creosoting the outside of the hut despite being in her 70s. The original chairs for Cotgrave ( the ones that had the kneeler pads attached) were donated by the sisters at Mary Ward College after it closed. The hut was finished, and the first mass was said there on 5 December 1976. Maureen Snowden remembers one family who used to walk all the way to Mass from the Fosse every Sunday in all weathers, once the hut was built. An old cassette player was used for music, which often played the wrong thing. Then an old piano arrived from somewhere. A local pianist Mrs Goddard offered to play and is remembered as asking if it had been tuned recently.

The hut was not ideal. It was small, draughty and dingy. Young couples did not want to get married in it. People still wanted a church. There was constant fund-raising: the Catholic



community ran bingo for the village in a lean-to beside the house, and started the Charity Shop, which is still there today. They had a massive bottle into which people put money when they arrived at Mass. One Sunday the bottle was mistakenly left outside, and stolen.

At one point the hut was set on fire. It was clearly arson: newspapers had been put under altar and lighted. Fortunately, everything was saved and cleaned up. The Statue of Our Lady was cracked but survived, and is in the new church to this day.



Meanwhile, the Catholics in Cotgrave still had the issue for education for their children. The nearest Catholic school was St Patrick's at Wilford. This meant a long day for the young people, who caught a bus to Trent Bridge, and walked the rest, along the River Trent. George and Teresa Phillipson had a son who, while going to school with his sister, fell under a bus and was killed. His mother's hair went white overnight, and his

sister Joan became asthmatic as a result of the trauma. Teresa went back north when George died. Another lad, Alec, was hit by a bus while waiting at the stop on Colston Gate. He sustained permanent injuries to his legs.

The Catholics stood out from the other miners, and came in for a lot of mockery. People used to say things to them like, " Say one for me, Pope John". But they persevered, and eventually there was enough money to start work on the church. In 1989 the Bishop granted permission to build in Cotgrave. Stock Bros were approached to build it. On



September 8th the first payment on the church building, £380, was made. Cotgrave Pit contributed money towards it. Stock Brothers had also built

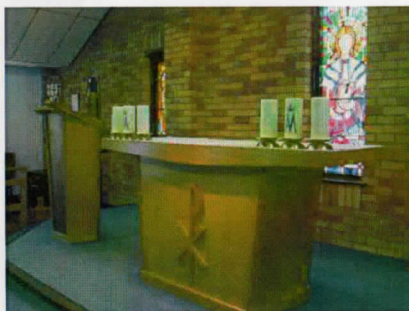


Keyworth, which had ended up with a very small kitchen and sacristy. Sister Beuno was very keen to be in on the design of Cotgrave, to avoid the same mistakes being made there.

Father Gilroy had been moved on, and did not see the building of the church, though he came back for its Solemn Blessing. The new priest, Father Stephen Foster, appealed from the altar for anyone who had expertise to help guide him through the process of drawing up the plans. Clare Bellis' and Helen Richardson's father, Tony Bullen, who had been Clerk of Works for Liverpool City

Architect's Department, had come to live near his daughters in Keyworth and was just the person to help. He had already assisted with the design of a new church in his former parish in Liverpool and was able to advise Fr Stephen where everything should go.

Father Stephen asked Ellen Douglas where she would like the sink, and she rejoined by asking if the sink was to be her place in the new scheme of things.



As well as helping with the plans, Tony Bullen was also a skilled carpenter. He made all the wooden furnishings for the new church which are still there today: the lectern, the altar, the tabernacle stand and the credence table, using oak reclaimed from the former friary at St Augustine's. Clare remembers the oak being stored in her garage which became his workshop. He was disappointed not to be able to make the seat for the priest and pews for the altar servers, but increasing ill-health prevented him.

Father John Abbott, was instrumental in Tony being made a knight of Saint Gregory the Great, in recognition for his work in the building of Our Lady of Grace church and his witness to the faith in his parish in Liverpool.

The hut had been in use for 17 years, but the new church was built in just 25 weeks. Sister Beuno remembers a trip with Father Stephen up to Ormsbys of Scarisbrick, in Lancashire, where they chose a tabernacle and crucifix for the new church. They got into a horrible traffic jam on the M6 on the way back and after sitting at a standstill for a long time, managed to pull off, only to be lost in the outskirts of Manchester.



The Bishop arrives

The Solemn Blessing of the new church, presided over by the Bishop, took place in September 1990.

From the recollections of Clare Bellis, Sister Beuno, Ellen Douglas nee Riley, Kate Flannery, Tess Foster, Ann Robinson, Myra McIlveen, Christine Murray nee Conlin, Maureen Snowden nee Flannery, Eileen Widdicks. Compiled by Anna Franks



**Banner, Our Lady's Cotgrave**

We have tried to use everyone's memories, as accurately as possible. We apologise for anything we may have left out, and for any errors.

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