The Shefford Catholic Mission

1728-1823

REGINALD ATKINSON

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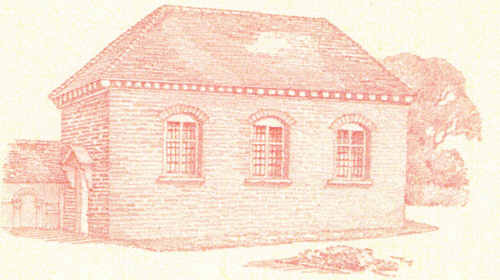

An account
mainly for its parishioners
of today

REGINALD ATKINSON
(Parish Priest 1959 – 1966)

1978

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I am indebted to Seminary Priests (S.P. *in the text*) *by Godfrey Anstruther,* O.P., *Vol. IV, and to the Northampton Diocesan Centenary Souvenir* (N.D.C.S.) *for most of what is factual in this account; and to my friends: Denis Gilmore, for leading me to the approximate dating of the Chapel, and Dudley Brown, for the title-page drawing which brings into perspective the original architect's design for it.*

R.A.

THE string of small places in mid-Bedfordshire which lie between Woburn and Old Warden have a common situation deep in the little hills called the Greensand, a ridge which rises at the west to about 500 feet and falls along an easy day's walk to low-lying land spreading eastward with the river Great Ouse. From the crest of it the Dunstable Downs to the south, and on the river plain to the north the tall chimneys of the brick yards, are clearly visible. In a low fold of this Greensand, just above the confluence of the Hiz and the Flit, tributaries of the Ivel – itself a tributary of the Ouse – Shefford (sheep-ford) took its rise. Into the last century this place seems to have been hardly more than an outpost of the neighbouring village of Campton, which once had within its boundaries a Gilbertine priory. It was transport along the canal system which contributed much to Shefford's predominance over its parent place. It became a terminus whence coal was carted to many of the Greensand villages; and when the railway came to it, so did the travellers. The Shefford of today is still the 'place between three bridges' – the now-demolished railway arch and the two river bridges. In North Bridge Street, High Street and South Bridge Street are most of the shops. The timber-framed house which is now Barclays Bank, the old Fire Station and the house where Robert Bloomfield[1] lived are grouped in a quaint mixture of styles, and at the three-way junction is the Parish Church. Remarkably, a good deal of the frontage available in this area has been built up by Catholic enterprise. Of varying storeys, under broadening gables along the greater part of the southern side of the High Street, the walls of the Old Seminary, the Convent, the Church of

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1 He wrote the poem called the 'Farmer's Boy', which gave to farmers the popular name: Giles.

St. Francis of Assisi, St. George's Presbytery, and the now-abandoned Home for Boys[2] (with its river meadow behind) still stand for the sign of a 250-year-old mission.

There is no entry in S.P. covering the earliest years of this mission. It is to the testimony of the Rev. Henry E. King (*Ancient Catholic Mission*, 1897) that we turn for the first recorded references to Catholic penal activity in Shefford. They are two handwritten notes which had survived to his day:

> 'Mary, ye child of a travelling woman, baptized 1728'
> 'buried a travelling boy who died 1728'.

Traditionally it has been held that a Catholic priest lived at the house of William Noddings, a butcher in the High Street, who died in 1743. Although the inscription 'May he rest in peace' was engraved on his headstone at Campton, it is not certain that William Noddings was a Catholic. The settlement, however, by deed at a later date, of the whole family property on the priest resident in Shefford has clearly established the link between this family and the mission from the beginning. It is only the first of the priests now listed who could have lodged at the Nodding's house during William's lifetime, and he only for four years. This list, compiled from S.P., accounts for forty-seven out of the ninety-five years under review.

Thomas Whitaker *(alias* Martin) 1738–42
James Angel 1747–50
Stephen Vezzosi *(alias* Robinson) 1773–81
Christopher Taylor *(alias* Nicholson) 1791–1812
John Potier *(alias* Jenison) 1812–23

For an alias the two last listed used their mothers' maiden names. The maiden name in the Vezzosi marriage was *Robertson*, but for his alias the priest chose the slight variation of *Robinson*. No alias is recorded for James Angel; and Thomas Whitaker's has no direct family association. It is under the priests' real names that the details in S.P. are given.

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[2] The Northampton Diocese Catholic Welfare and Protection Society, the new administration set up towards the end of the '39–'45 war by Fr. Edgar Hardwick (1908–71) with Fr. Wilfrid Johnson (Scots College, Rome) as his 'aide', to continue the work of the old charity, has only its administrative centre at Shefford now.

Before setting down the brief account of each of these priests, mention should be made of the several colleges abroad where they could have been trained. It so happened that with the exception of John Potier, who was at Douai in France, all were at the English College, Rome. Other English Colleges had been founded during penal times: at Valladolid, Madrid and Seville in Spain; and at Lisbon in Portugal. Late in the 18th century the Douai College came to England, and settled partly at Old Hall, Ware, in Hertfordshire, and partly at Ushaw College, Co. Durham. The English Colleges at Rome and at Valladolid still remain among the choices which a diocesan bishop can make in deciding where to send his students. Several priests trained at Valladolid who have served the latter-day Shefford acknowledge the earlier Roman provenance, whilst Douai is again represented by the present parish priest, Father George McCann, who trained at Ushaw College.

Thomas Whitaker was born in London on January 6th, 1702. Converted to Catholicism in 1724, he entered the English College at Rome in 1726, and was ordained priest on March 13th, 1729. After a period as confessor to the Benedictine nuns in Brussels he was at Shefford 'by 17 Nov 38, and is recorded as having also looked after Hyde and Newbury in Berkshire'. Since he died at Woolhampton at the age of 76, with explicit details in his will for the poor of that mission, it is clear that many years of missionary work followed the four-year start made in Bedfordshire under the roof, as we may presume, of William Noddings at Shefford.

The intervening gap between Thomas Whitaker's departure from Shefford and the next known appointment to the mission coincides with an ecclesiastically recorded payment of £4 made twice to John Poulton 'due to Shefford', in 1744 and 1745. But these, and £2 'paid to Mr. Poulton for Mr. Beveridge at Shefford' are all that suggest any connection of this priest with the mission. His Northamptonshire parents were Ferdinand, of Desborough, and Juliana Garter of Brigstock. He died in London in 1748.

The parents of James Angel were both Catholics and he was born in Essex on February 20th, 1720. After ordination in Rome, four days after his twenty-first birthday, he came that same year to England, and worked at Fawley in Berkshire before arriving at 'Shefford, Campton, Beds' in 1747. He was there for three years and died at East Hendred, Berkshire, after a further twenty-five years on the mission.

There is little doubt that Stephen Vezzosi, the next of the priests recorded to have been at Shefford, will have used the alias which derived from his mother's maiden name. Indeed, it was to Mr. *Robinson* of Shefford that Richard Haskett, ordained in 1720 and dying in 1774, left £4 in his will. It is this name which diverts our attention for a moment to Shefford's neighbouring Mass centre at Turvey. The patronage there in the early 18th century was of Anastasia, married to the third Earl of Peterborough, whose maiden name (or stage name, for she was a well-known Catholic actress) was also Robinson. The possibility is not to be overlooked that here was a family connection which may have accounted for, if not the inception, the survival at least of the mission at Shefford, when all other centres in the county no longer operated. Although Robinson was not the maiden name of the priest's mother, those details which are to hand about his early life seem not to preclude his being well connected collaterally. The preliminaries to Stephen's parents' marriage appear in the Guildhall ms, as follows:

> 'appeared personally Michaelle Archangel Vezzosi of the parish of St. James, Westminster, M'sex, bachelor aged 27 and he alleged he intends to marry with Anna Robertson of the same place aged 22 years and a spinster. Prayed leave to be married in the chapel of Lincoln's inn, London or St. Clement Dane, London'.

Michaelle it was who had a hand in the escape of the Earl of Nithsdale from the Tower in 1716, and later became valet to Bonnie Prince Charles. At the intervention of the Prince three sons of the marriage were entered at the English College, the eldest at the tender age of nine, but Stephen, born in Etruria in 1716, at the age of twenty-one. He was ordained on February 2nd, 1744, and after a long term as confessor to the English Carmelites at Hoogstraet, near Breda, came to England in 1761. It was at Shefford that his thirty-seven years as priest, abroad and at home, were to be concluded, for there he died eight years after his coming, in 1781.

Ten years elapsed before the arrival at Shefford of Christopher Taylor, a priest ordained from the English College, Rome, on March 1st, 1760, who was already past sixty when appointed to the Bedfordshire mission. By the time he had died, in his eighty-third year, the great advance by which Shefford came to have the

first of the new Catholic public places of worship in the county had been made. The drive behind the enterprise – a matter to be taken up again later in this account – seems to be reflected in the record we have of this priest's keen interest in all that the Greensand country had to offer, for in 1812 the executors of his will – Henry Clarkson of Blunham, farmer, and James Coney, at 479 the Strand, London – came upon the following:

> 'Executors rummaging my premises will find a gun, a bow and arrows, a measuring wheel with a Gunter's chain and arrows, a long spying glass, a cane including a sword, several walking sticks, with fish rod and tackle and some snuff boxes, medals etc. all of which I leave them'.

John Potier, whose parents had been married at the Portuguese embassy in 1751, was born in 1758, and after three years at Sedgley Park School, Staffordshire (founded in 1763), went to Douai, where he was ordained on June 14th, 1783. His teaching post at Old Hall, Ware, leading to his appointment as chief master in 1792, show that he was among the first of the staff of the transferred seminary from Douai. In 1812 he started a preparatory school at Puckeridge, Standon. Foreshadowing events which make the greater part of its subsequent history, in 1812 he took the boys with him to 'Shefford, Campton, Beds', and it was there that he died on March 1st, 1823, to be buried at Standon.

Beyond the written record little remains which could help us to reconstruct the precise environment of these missionaries. The rebuilding since their day of Shefford parish church, of which only part of the tower now survives from the 14th century, suggests that they might have seen it in a ruinous condition. There are still houses in the High Street, notably the fine brick and timber one on the north side of it, and on the south, close to the later Catholic development, a low-storied building now converted into a shop, which may have been standing then. Although they lived successively through the times of John Wesley, the beginnings of the Industrial Revolution, the coming of the steam engine, the American War and Waterloo, we are left with the feeling that then, more than in our day, it was the smaller world which counted. The full spate of the little Shefford rivers which, as we suspect, attracted many a fly on Mr. Taylor's rod was but part of the local catholicity

which, failing elsewhere, here was surviving. The note of incredulity which a century later shows in the pages of King's *'Ancient Catholic Mission'*, when he says 'In 1792 we find the Rev. Christopher Taylor actually proposing to build a Chapel at Shefford' is for us less pronounced who know that among his effects were 'a long spying glass' and 'a measuring wheel with a Gunter's chain'. The Chapel[3], the shape of which we know only from a contemporary watercolour, had no more than such a building's basic requirements: rectangular walls, three tallish windows in each of the longer sides, a pitched roof and a canopied doorway. If average conjecture be true the site of the Chapel is that of the present sacristy, the exterior wall of which has a marked difference between its lower and upper bricks, while two of its windows are spaced in the manner of the early illustration. Although the event takes us well beyond the scope of this account it may be recalled that probably the last episcopal ceremony to have taken place in this Chapel was the ordination to the dioconate of John Ashmole, a student of Shefford Seminary, who became Monsignor towards the end of a long term as Administrator of Northampton Cathedral, and died on April 3rd, 1938.

About a community with no great resources a puzzle confronting us is: Who paid for this Chapel? Of priests who have built many churches in the clouds few are they who see the last of real debts. In the days when the Shefford enterprise went forward Catholic worship was to be found at the cost only of some travel, where there was relative security, and then mostly at the embassies in London or on the estates of Catholic landed gentry. Yet, apparently under no patronage, a chapel is built at Shefford. Here a brief survey of how the county was served elsewhere for Catholic worship could possibly throw some light on this obscure point. Not far away were Catholic gentry at Houghton Conquest on the river plain where Normans had built their stronghold. At Weston Underwood, just beyond the county boundary, was the Throckmorton family. At Turvey, on the banks of the Ouse seven miles upstream

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3 In 1791, the year of the Catholic Relief Act, Catholic chapels became legal on registration. The celebration of Mass was forbidden in any building possessing a bell or steeple. In 1793 a Catholic chapel was opened at Monmouth. Iron grills show quite clearly inside the windows of the architect's design proposed for the chapel at Shefford.

St. Francis Home, from the Seminary side of the gate.

from Bedford, lived successively but intermittently, first the Mordaunt family, giving shelter from 1625 for six years to Bishop Richard Smith 'whence he travelleth in his coach with four horses accompanied with nine or ten priests', then the second Earl of Peterborough converted in 1687, who died ten years later, and finally Lady Anastasia, who left Turvey in 1735 after the death of her husband. Seven miles to the east of the county town lived the Hunt family, at Chawston near Blunham. All these places were within twenty miles of Shefford. A bishop on his visitation of them, travelling roughly in a circle, would cover a distance of about ninety miles. Geographically they all lay along the upper reaches of the River Ouse, though this common link seems not to have been reflected in the attitude towards Catholics of the local populations. The poet William Cowper, though he could write 'in Mr. Throckmorton we have a peerless neighbour', nevertheless had to report that the Catholics 'have lately received many affronts from the people of this place (Olney) on account of their religion'. On the other hand that Catholic activity at Shefford without which something essential to its character would seem to be lacking marks the place where alone in Bedfordshire a Mass centre was maintained into the 19th century. The home of the Throckmortons, which also kept the Mass until the building of the church at Olney in 1900, was in Buckinghamshire, but it is a trusteeship of this family which leads us at least to the promise of one source of income for Shefford.

In a letter dated 1802 to the Vicar Apostolic of the London District a succeeding baronet writes: 'Mrs. Noddings . . . settled her property upon Sir John Throckmorton, fifth baronet of Weston Underwood, in trust for its income to be paid to Mr. John Barnwall during his life, and after his death to his successor and successors as long as he or they shall continue to reside at Shefford'. It is known that John Barnwall was buried at Kingscliffe, a Northamptonshire mission, on February 11th, 1782, and it must be presumed that he was at Shefford either just for one year after Vezzosi's death (though it is a mystery then why he should have been buried at Kingscliffe) or between 1750 and 1773. There is no mention of this priest in S.P. Already an income, transferred from Edward Hunt's fund for the support of a priest at Chawston because the chaplaincy there had lapsed, was coming to Shefford. Bishop Talbot had bought the land on which the chapel was to be built. Mention has

been made of the resources which might have come from Turvey through a possible family connection. But it is at the end, as at the beginning, of this mission story that we encounter the name of Noddings.

It was their house which gave the first shelter to a missionary priest. It was upon the foundations of this house, incorporating part of it possibly, that the presbytery of 1884, with its flamboyant facade, was built. It was their endowment, we may presume, which Christopher Taylor nurtured. Finding at Shefford 'a tiny congregation of only five or six', he extended his cure of souls 'to Blunham and Hitchin, in both of which places there was but a single Catholic family, and Southill and Biggleswade, and Warmington in Northamptonshire, thirty-six miles away' (N.D.C.S.). My flock is 'small', he wrote in 1791, but 'it is too big for my bedchamber'. So he set about building the Chapel, this doughty Yorkshireman who, in order to supplement his slender means, could well have set up a 'fur and feather' stall in the Friday Market.

Curiously the last date given in the list of the Shefford priests here recorded, of the death of John Potier in 1823[4], coincides with the year in which a stage coach first plied between Bedford and Hitchin. Although the return from Hitchin was delayed each day until 9.0 pm, and would therefore have served Shefford well, *The Umpire* was not on the road in the days of our early missioners; and five years were to pass before *The Times* would leave Bedford daily at 8.30 am, and return from London at 8.30 pm. How then did the missioners travel? (other than when accompanying the bishop). Not only the way in which the missioners visited their scattered flocks, but how they kept in touch with each other raises the point of the distance which separated them. A review of those missions which were within reach of Shefford without a prolonged journey will tend to single out the ones which in later years were to be incorporated into the same diocese. Shefford now is on the southern border of the Northampton diocese, so our attention naturally turns northwards.

Buckden, once in Huntingdonshire, associated with Katherine of Aragon on account of her residence there at The Towers, now a retreat centre of the Claretian Fathers, would have been in touch

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4 The year also in which Robert Bloomfield died.

with Shefford by an easy day's ride along the Great North Road (A1). In 1785 there was a three-way correspondence between Bishop Talbot, Francis Fortescue Turville of Bosworth Hall, Leicestershire, and the resident priest, in which a context suggests Buckden as a place where an energetic missioner was needed. Wishing to remove Mr. Potts, the chaplain (ordained 1778), the bishop wrote to Turville (away from home): 'he has so little to do there and is so very much wanted elsewhere'. He went on to propose for Bosworth in the place of Mr. Potts a 'Mr. Bishop (ordained 1783), who I am informed has a great deal of good nature and is very desirous of pleasing. He being likewise a musician is a circumstance that I thought might render him more agreeable to you'. Meanwhile Mr. Potts, evidently knowing what was in the wind, wrote to Turville requesting his intervention to prevent the removal taking place, and in a second letter, reporting the good news that he is allowed to stay at Bosworth, took the opportunity of asking for an increased allowance for tea at breakfast, since he had only 'the old college fare of beer bread and butter'. In the end it was Mr. Bishop, professor of music, who went to the mission which extended from Buckden to the small towns and remote villages along the river Ouse to Earith, to Vermuyden's new landscape and beyond: that 'elsewhere', we may presume, 'where Mr. Potts was so very much needed', but relieved not to go. Other priests known to have served at Buckden were John Roe (ordained 1778) who went there two years later and stayed for four, and one of the two James Taylors listed in S.P. who arrived five years after his ordination in 1783, but stayed only for a few months. Against the years of their appointments the brief list for Buckden covers only a decade:

1780 John Roe
1785 Francis Bishop
1788 James Taylor

A further ride along the Great North Road beyond Buckden would have brought the Shefford traveller to Wansford at the crossing of the river Nene, and, by the Roman road branching to the west of that point, to the large village of Kingscliffe in Northamptonshire. Ordained at Valladolid in 1799, William Hayes spent fifty-one years at the riding mission based on this village, where there is a memorial inscription above his burial place in the church-

yard. S.P. states that, although a wooden shed in the yard of the Golden Ball is traditionally the chapel used by this priest, in the census returns of 1851 it is described as 'an upper room in the minister's house'. A small, hip-roofed wing at the back of a stone-built house still standing in the main street near the ford by the church might possibly be this. *Salamanca* was the horse which carried Mr. Hayes over an area in and out of the Rockingham Forest such as we may only guess at: to Oundle, to Harborough, to Kettering, to Oakham, to Stamford, to Peterborough.

Although care has been taken to recount accurately the broken record of the first hundred years of this outlying London Vicariate mission, of which the Registers have not survived, the introduction of something of the flavour of the period, as of the locality, has been attempted. The following anecdote, quarried almost unbroken from S.P., combines possibly both the atmosphere and the circumstances for bringing this account to an end.

English sermons not being allowed in the embassy chapels, Bishop Challoner used to preach in the Ship Inn in Turn Style, the proceedings being disguised by tankards of beer. There he was quick to notice the piety of the pot-boy, one James Archer. This lad went to Douai in 1780. Later his diminutive figure in a long brown overcoat, shabby broad-brimmed hat, and boots a 'world too wide for him' was familiar and much loved in London. His sermons were printed in many volumes and several editions, and according to his contemporary, Charles Butler[5], were in demand even by Protestants. It is in a letter of James to Bishop Poynter written on June 3rd, 1807, that our interest is aroused:

> 'I am just favoured with your kind letter and am sorry to have to inform you that having lately been very ill and not yet recovered I am ordered to live for six months to come upon milk and vegetables in the country, and have made an arrangement with Dr McQueen in Beds to go to his house next week in order to begin that plan where I have engaged to stay for a fortnight . . .'

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5 A conveyancer of Lincoln's Inn, he was the moving spirit of The Catholic Committee formed in 1787 to work for the passage of the Catholic Relief Act. After the passing of the Act he became the first Catholic barrister to practice in England since 1688. His home was in Red Lion Square, London.