



A faded treasure brought gloriously back to life would be an apt description of the parish hall at Brentwood Cathedral in Essex. This otherwise modest early Victorian building holds a special place in the history of Catholicism in Essex and its recent restoration has lovingly enhanced and revived it, placing it back at the centre of parish life.

Its roots date back to the era of Catholic Emancipation, which finally arrived in 1829. Some 15 years before, a wealthy Portuguese priest, Emmanuel Dios Santos, had established a chapel in nearby Pilgrims Hatch which attracted a growing congregation until his death in 1834 forced its closure. Other local Catholics worshipped in the private chapel at Thorndon Hall, the then home of the Petre family, key players in the history of Catholicism in mid-Essex.

With Fr. Santos and his chapel gone and the chapel at Thorndon Hall bursting at the seams it was decided to build a new church in the centre of Brentwood. Lord Petre (William, the 12th Lord) donated a meadow just beyond the great drive that led to Thorndon Hall, opposite the historic Brentwood School. He also made a substantial donation in the hope of enticing others to support the project. It appears he was disappointed in this regard as, apart from the Leschers family, no significant donors came forward despite an eloquent appeal circulated to the few Catholic churches already re-established in the south of England. Congregations were asked for contributions "by means of which they will afford the comforts of religion to the poor of a congregation deprived of their chapel.

"They will by act of Christian charity give to the well-disposed the opportunity of practising their religion relieved from the heavy disadvantages they at present labour under, and they will prevent the



dispersion of the flock, which there is reason to believe will be materially increased by the proposed erection, affording to its members a spiritual home as well as to those who, having strayed, desire to return to the pastures of their heavenly Shepherd.

"They will, it is confidently anticipated, not look upon this appeal and 'pass by' but will remember the favour so speedily conferred by our Redeemer on him of whom it was said 'He loveth our nation and hath built us a synagogue'."

Lord Petre ended up paying the bulk of the cost of building the church and the priests' house next door – back in use as such today.

The church, dedicated to St Helen, was consecrated on 26th Octo-



ber 1837 and immediately won wide praise as one contemporary account records: "The interior is fitted up with taste and elegance. The sanctuary is spacious. The tabernacle and altar are of oak, profusely enriched with gold and silver, and the carving inlaid with crimson velvet. The massive crucifix and candlesticks are gilt. The thick Gothic sanctuary rails and the fittings are of oak and the latter in the style of those in St John's Wood chapel". It seems that only the best would do for Lord Petre.

The only part of the building that was not viewed with such enthusiasm was a large stained glass window which tended to make the interior rather gloomy. Ironically, this window was one of the few features paid for directly by the people of Brentwood.

The church had a single nave and no side aisles. From the outside it had two squat crenellated towers, symmetrically placed on either side. One housed the sacristy and the other the choir vestry.

Brentwood was a rapidly expanding town and by 1858 the congregation had already outgrown this modest church. Plans were drawn up to extend it by adding aisles down either side and lengthening the building but these were abandoned in favour of building a completely new and much larger church next door. This church, in the Gothic revival style, was completed in 1861 and became the cathedral in 1917 when the Diocese of Brentwood was established. It has since twice been substantially modernised and extended: once in 1974 – of which nothing remains – and again rather more successfully by Quinlan Terry in 1991. A portion of the 1861 church remains, including the spire and one aisle and



one of the small towers was removed in the process. To balance up the front elevation, however, they built an arch on the opposite side that matched the new north side doorway: this can still be seen today and helps ensure a simple geometry to the front with its slim towers and steeply peaked roof.

It had been as a school for over 100 years with further, less successful, extensions at the back in the mid-20th century.

It was then handed back to the parish with the main hall – the original nave and sanctuary – becoming a parish hall and the north wing a separate parish club. When this closed down in the late 1990s the whole hall was in a serious state of disrepair and the entire building was closed down on safety grounds. It stayed this way for a few years while the inevitable debate about what to do with it and how to pay for it was conducted.

Eventually, it was decided to restore the whole building as a parish facility, additionally providing a much needed home for the diocesan archives. By this time the hall had been elevated to the status of a Grade II listed building. This meant that all the work had to be carried out in keeping with the original building. This turned out to be very expensive as all the 1950s and 1960s extensions were not only a mess architecturally but were also virtually beyond repair. They came down and the rear extension of the building was rebuilt in stone to match the original, housing new kitchens, toilets and storage facilities. All this work was carried out by the cathedral architects Quinlan Terry who also came up with an ingenious solution to the problem of housing the diocesan archives

without detracting from the parish usage of the hall. These have been accommodated in an additional floor built into a raised roof above the smaller hall on the south side.

The work on the hall took six months and it was re-opened in July 2005, quickly establishing itself at the heart of parish life. With two halls that can be used at the same time for different events, a well-equipped kitchen and a permanent sound system it is capable of hosting a wide range of events. It does, however, still convey some of the sense of grandeur that so impressed the visitors in the 1830s. Without the heavy stained glass that went early in its time as a school (some of which may have been re-used in the 1861 building according to contemporary reports), the main hall has a sense of space and light elegantly offset by three brass chandeliers donated by the current Bishop of Brentwood, Thomas McMahon that match those in the cathedral.

It is a building that has proved remarkably adaptable and has served the Catholic community in Brentwood well for 170 years. It again sits proudly at the heart of that community.

Raising the money

The biggest challenge facing the parish community – after all, it was their hall – was raising the money for what had become a very expensive project to completely renovate a listed building. The diocese was bearing the cost of the additional floor to accommodate the archives but this still left a huge £480,000 to be raised by the parish. The Diocese of Brentwood offered a ten year interest free loan to the parish if it could prove it could raise the £35,000 to £40,000 a year required to pay it off.

A fundraising team was brought together during 2003 and with almost £80,000 raised by the end of 2004, the go-ahead was given for the work to start. The fundraising efforts have continued with over £170,000 now raised. The wide-ranging programme of events has taken in sponsored cycle rides, half marathons, quiz nights, concerts, bazaars, auctions and race nights. Fittingly, one of the highlights of the fundraising year has become an evening of music and poetry at Ingatestone Hall, the current day home of the Petre family.

Full details of the 2008 programme and other ways of supporting the hall can be found on the cathedral parish website at <http://www.cathedral-brentwood.co.uk/>