

## SECTION 'I' – WELCOME TO OUR PARISH

The enduring image of Catholicism in Bury St Edmunds shows its survival through times of persecution and adversity. However, St Edmund's Church has shown itself as a place where people can gather and worship, this being apparent in the following extract from the book *Suffolk Summer* by John T Appleby:

*'On Sunday the 24<sup>th</sup> June (1945) I met Bernard Cox in Bury St Edmunds and we went to High Mass at St Edmund's together. As a Catholic, it always did my heart good to contrast the large crowds at St Edmund's with the mere handful of people who attended the Church of England services. The Catholic congregation showed a heart-warming vigour and vitality, with troops of soldiers clattering in, rosy-cheeked young men in the Sunday best, and swarms of children all over the place, as against the staid, decorous and superannuated few who showed up at St James' and St Mary's ...'*

Whilst the pattern of religious life and Church services may since have altered, parishioners have continued to profess their faith in a manner that not only meets their inner needs but with openness and example. The Church has gelled well with other local faith groups to the extent that services of a joint nature sometimes occur, voluntary groups work together, clergy deliver a common message. But the 21<sup>st</sup> century brings new challenges – an ever-increasing secular approach and sometimes apathetic attitude across society, extremist attitudes and a declining number of vocations to the ministry.

In looking to the future, it is important to learn from the past. Reading the historic events set out in this chronicle will show that there have been testing times, perhaps causing clergy to wonder where the next batch of parishioners will spring from. New faces have appeared in our congregation – the beet sugar factory provided an annual influx of Irish workers; families of those displaced by the Second World War settled in our midst; air bases brought servicemen and their kin to our Church; our hospital and care industry brought in skilled workers from Asia and Eastern Europe; the town's economy attracted those with business acumen.

History has shown the strength of our diversity, evidenced in the following small selection of comments (obtained in 2016) from people who have moved to our parish.

### **Michael John Franklin (Christened Mieczyslaw Frackiewicz)**

The story of Michael John Franklin (known as John) was included in the 2016 version of *Years of Faith* but for the following reasons it had to be significantly amended in 2019 because of extraordinary events.

John was born in Poland and was Christened Mieczyslaw Frackiewicz. As a young man he was planning to study in Warsaw to become a doctor. World War II completely changed his life. In 1938/39 the Russians marched into his home-town, rounded up all the young men and took them to Siberia to work on building the railways. Communism ripped the Catholic Church from people's lives and denied education to those who had wanted to become politicians, doctors, church leaders etc. Life in a labour camp in Siberia was harsh with extreme cold, little food and sleeping in railway carriages with straw as blankets. This resulted in many men perishing under such terrible conditions. John's ambitions of becoming a doctor were shattered.

In 1941 whilst the Nazis were occupying western Poland and driving forward across the Country, Stalin granted a one-off amnesty for Polish citizens deported to the Soviet Union. The evacuation of the Polish people from Siberia lasted from March to September 1942, allowing the formation of the Polish armed forces, the purpose being to join the Allied forces to fight Hitler.

John joined the Polish forces in 1942 and travelled through Uzbekistan, Persia (Iran) and Africa to reach the United Kingdom. He elected to join the Royal Air Force and undertook training to perform the role of radio operator. In August 1944 he was assigned to Squadron 304, initially as part of the crew flying Wellington bombers over Germany and later undertaking reconnaissance missions focussed on anti-submarine warfare. He was decorated with four medals. Many Polish people died fighting for Britain between 1939 and 1945.

At the end of the War the boundaries of Poland were redrawn and territories in the east were lost and became part of the sovereign regions of Belarus, Ukraine and Lithuania. The area of Grodno in Eastern Poland where John was born became part of Belarus.

The displaced Poles settled around the world including the UK, where the 1947 Polish Resettlement Act allowed people connected to the armed forces to stay and work. John was discharged from the RAF in 1947 but a discrepancy in his date of birth was discovered because although his true date of birth had been recorded by the RAF, a document 'In Lieu of Birth Certificate' was sent from Elk in Poland to RAF East Wretham showing John's date of birth as 7 November 1921 which was then transferred to his discharge/resettlement documents. Facing an uncertain future, he was obliged to adopt this date of birth in order to move on with his life whilst holding the hope that his faith as a Catholic would one day resolve matters. He had lost his family in Poland, he had no original documents (which may never have existed), he could not return to his homeland and he had to make a new life for himself in a foreign country. He was obliged to make use of his adopted new name of Michael John Franklin and the 'lieu of birth certificate' to complete the process of resettlement.



He was demobbed in 1948, gained British Citizenship under his new name and settled as a businessman to live in Bury St Edmunds where he married and had two daughters. He forged strong connections with the Church in Bury St Edmunds and made a processional cross which is still in use.

He employed a Polish investigator to try to find documentation on his but to no avail. However, his faith was not in vain. In May 2019 he was contacted and visited by a representative of the Polish Embassy in London. He wanted to hear about John's history and his experiences in the Polish Forces and British RAF. This resulted in John receiving a comprehensive set of documents dating from 1942 reflecting his service and training history from both the Polish Forces and RAF. This was the first time he had seen these documents. What it highlighted was that all the documentation confirmed his genuine birth date as 3 November 1919.

John's family sought further clarification as did the Polish Embassy and the authenticity and provenance of the documents was confirmed, including photographic evidence of John joining the Polish forces.

The significance of this story is that John attained the age of 100 years two years earlier than people expected, celebrating it at Mass at St Edmund's Church on 3 November 2019. As he explained, "*St Edmund's Church holds special memories, especially when I see that processional cross. It is a place where I can reflect in God's presence on the experiences of my life.*"



Following Mass John was able to share his story and enjoy celebrations in the Crypt organised by the Polish community.

### **Christine Mason**

Bill and I had been married for 15 years having met in Walsingham, Norfolk when he was Assistant Priest at the Anglican Shrine there. We married in 1972 and had three children Lucy, Ben and Joseph (who has Down's syndrome). For all of our first 15 years of married life we lived in Kedington near Haverhill in Suffolk where Bill was Rector. We were very happy there with the children growing up and Bill working successfully with the village community.

However, in 1987 after 33 years as an Anglican minister, Bill felt called to become a Roman Catholic. As a family we all discussed this and decided that for all of us this would be the right thing to do.

Bill resigned his position at Kedington and we moved to Bury St Edmunds and began worshipping at St Edmund's. The children and I were received into the Church in August and Bill in October. At the time of our move we did not imagine that Bill would continue in any form of ministry and I returned to work as a residential social worker.

Fr John Drury was parish priest at St Edmund's and it was his suggestion that Bill should consider going forward to Catholic Ordination. He consulted Bishop Alan Clark who agreed to recommend Bill as a candidate for Ordination. It was just becoming possible for married men who had been ministers in the Anglican Church to be considered for Ordination.

Altogether the process took five years and involved a lot of pressure on the family. We were helped by the St Barnabas Society who provided practical help and also employment for Bill.

Finally Bishop Alan Clarke phoned to say permission had been obtained with the condition that Bill should spend some time at Seminary; Bill went to Womersley where the future Bishop Peter Smith was Rector.

Bill was ordained Deacon, on 14 August 1992 at Walsingham. St Edmund's sent a coach of people to support him and we were very pleased that the Priestly Ordination took place at St Edmund's on 3 April 1993. All the family took part – I read, Joe was boat-boy, Lucy and Ben provided brass backing for the music.

Fr Bill made history as the eleventh Anglican Minister to be Ordained as a Catholic Priest.

We were all made to feel very welcome at St Edmund's both before and after Bill's Ordination. Bill sang with the choir and Lucy and Ben sang, played and served in the Church.

After Ordination Fr Bill assisted at St Edmund's and supplied for many parishes in the Diocese. He was also Chaplain at the West Suffolk Hospital and Hospice and served as a Chaplain to RAF Honington and Marham and assisted at the Army Camp at Bassingbourne.

He worked at St Edmund's with Frs Murray, Barnes, Shryane and Hackeson. Following retirement, he sadly died on 31 October 2017 and is buried in the Churchyard at Kedington.

**Mercy Thomas**

I am from Kerala in South India. In 2005 I was amongst a group of 19 people who came to Bury St Edmunds to work at West Suffolk Hospital. My family came with me. My husband and I are strong Catholics, so wherever we go our first priority is to find a Catholic Church. When the preceptor took our group to show us the town, we asked him about the Catholic Church and he showed us where it was and we noted the Mass times. On our first Sunday, with the help of road map we walked to the Church. In the beginning it was difficult because we were strangers and we couldn't fully understand the local accent. We met Father Philip who was a very welcoming and supporting priest. He accepted us and made us feel part of the parish. Although we are part of a small community within the Church, we enjoy parish life.

Our sons Joshua and Jerome made their first Holy Communion in this Church and soon after that they started altar serving. My older son was also confirmed at St Edmund's. They are both altar servers and serve every weekend; they are also both readers. Father Philip encouraged my husband and I to join the Eucharistic Ministry. We are so happy for the opportunity given to us to serve the Church as a whole family. We are far away from our home town but being welcomed and involved at Church makes us feel at home. Father Philip supported and encouraged us to start Malayalam mass and Catechism. He accepted all our invitations to participate in our community events.

My son Joshua did a 40 miles sponsored walk to raise money to attend the World Youth Day. The support from Fr Mark, Catherine (the parish secretary) and all the parishioners was amazing – without this he could never have done it. We, especially our children, really enjoy coming to the Church and being part of the parish. We are very thankful to Father Philip, Father Mark and all the clergy and parishioners for all their love and support but, most importantly, for accepting us as a part of the community.

**Rose-Anne Payne**

In 1978 I moved to Ipswich from Glasgow and met my husband there. I moved to Bury St. Edmunds on 4 July 1979 (my husband says it was the day he lost his independence!).

When you move away from family and friends it can be quite a daunting prospect meeting new people. It is made easier when you yourself have a family as you can meet new people at the schools and youth clubs etc, but I moved to the parish in 1979 and didn't start my family until 1984. So I feel it is very important to be a 'welcomer' at Mass. I like to offer a warm welcome and smile to everyone but especially to those who are new to the parish, or just visiting the parish. As I was told a long time ago, "A smile goes a long way" and I like to make people feel as welcomed as I did, when I moved to the parish all those years ago.

**Maria Velarde**

Around the year 2000 I arrived in Bury St Edmunds excited that I would be working at the hospital but dreading what might lie ahead since I had left my home Country in the Philippines. Although I was

apprehensive I believed that the good Lord would lead me through my new life in England. The first thing I did was to try to find the Catholic Church so that we could thank God that we had arrived safely at our destination. We did not know Bury St Edmunds and we ended up at the Methodist Church by mistake. I was wondering why everyone was dressed up nice and glamorous! A nice lady who was approachable asked if we were looking for a Catholic Church and we all said 'yes'. She kindly directed us to St Edmund's Church and we managed to find our way there. I believe it was the Blessed Mother Mary guiding the way to our destination because when we arrived at the Church everyone made us welcome. God is good all the time and I know that he wants us to be part of this wonderful community.

### **Regina Collender**

My husband, David, moved to England in the spring of 1988. I visited him for Easter and had my first encounter with the late Fr John Drury. He spotted me after mass and welcomed me to St Edmund's. When I returned for a second visit in August, he had remembered me and wished me "*Auf Wiedersehen,*" and also provided me with some English material for our wedding in Germany. We lived out of town for the first two years but soon got to know our regular 'neighbours' at the eleven o'clock mass. Once our first child was born I had time to get involved in more parish activities. Faith 2000 with weekly talks in the Crypt was very informative and got people talking to each other and forming friendships. I was elected to the parish council and enjoyed my three years, again becoming involved in more activities. Although our children only joined the Catholic school pyramid in St Louis, they knew many other children and enjoyed their special time on Saturday mornings, preparing for their first Holy Communion. As a regular weekday mass attender I got to know a range of people and many I would regard as my English 'relatives'. Even though there are three masses with as many different communities and sometimes little time to have a chat after the service, I always experienced St Edmund's as a very welcoming parish. There is a great variety of nationalities but our common faith makes it feel like a very big family. I remember many a time when we were saying the Rosary on a Saturday morning. There was only six or seven of us, but we were representative of five continents. I'd recommend any newcomer to just approach one of our 'welcomers' at Mass or have a chat with the parish priest. There is a whole range of clubs and activities on a weekly basis and the Church cleaners, flower arrangers, choir members etc are always looking for more support.

A common theme is that, irrespective of their background, people have always been welcomed by our congregation. This is at the heart of our religious beliefs and is not an attribute that rests in its history – whoever you are a special welcome awaits you at St Edmund's.

### **Andrzej Wiecha**

My wife Wiesława and I were both born in Pyrzyce, a small town in the north-west of Poland. She is the youngest of eight and I am one of five siblings. We married in 1997 and have two daughters, Martyna and Wiktorja.

In Poland I worked in a warehouse handling general stock and Wiesława worked in a shop and then for an inkjet recycling company. We had enough money for our everyday needs but for anything else

it was a struggle; conditions were much better than in Communist times, but still difficult. We felt that there were better opportunities elsewhere and decided to investigate with the help of a friend who put us in contact with his friend in Bury St Edmunds.

In 2006 I came to Bury St Edmunds and was able to find work and was provided with accommodation and transport to my job at Linton. After 3 months I was given a contract but then had to find housing and my own transport. I had only intended to come for a few years, but in 2007, after discussing it further with the family we decided we should be all together. So in July, after the girls' schools had finished for the summer the rest of my family came.

We were able to rent a house. We had to send Martyna to St James's School for two years and Wiktoria to St Edmundsbury but they both transferred to St Louis when places became available as we wanted them to have a Catholic education. The girls were worried about coming as they were quite young and everything was a bit strange, but we managed to help them through.

I found St Edmund's Church quite quickly; this was important to me as it was near Easter. This is a very important season for the Polish people. The Parish Priest was extremely helpful and put me in touch with people who could help. My English was not very good so someone who could translate for us all and help to fill in forms was a great help.

In return I have helped at Masses and done some maintenance work in the Presbytery and the Church. We now have our own Mass in Polish once a month which we all like. It reminds us of Poland.

As time passed I decided it was time to settle down and so after 3 years in England we bought our own house and I changed jobs. I now work in a hotel in the town as the maintenance man and I have renovated parts of it. Wiesława worked for a food processing company for five years before setting up her own cleaning business.

We have no regrets that we came to England. We have much more in the way of luxuries that we would not have been able to afford in Poland and the girls are doing very well. We have no idea what will happen in the future as it may largely depend on what the girls decide to do.

The English people in Bury have been very welcoming and helpful to us all, as have many Poles. This has made things, for us, much easier. We are very grateful.

### **Oscar Lyons**

At the point of writing this in December 2023, I am 18 years old. I am a person of mixed heritage; my Mum is Mexican and my Dad is English.

I've always been a Christian. As a young child, I went to Mass regularly with my parents and two sisters. Looking back, I don't think we were really believers – we didn't really understand the message of the gospel. By the time I entered secondary school, we were going to Mass less and less, until we stopped going altogether.



This went on for a few years. About 5 years ago, this changed. My parents experienced a reawakening of their Christian faith. This sparked a change in me around the same time. The role models in my life saw something meaningful in Christian belief. I wanted to see it too.

So, I began exploring my faith spiritually, emotionally, and intellectually. This prompted me to study RE at A Level. Being in a class where people don't believe the same as me has helped me learn how to explain and debate Christianity. This process of learning is ongoing for me; the more I study, the more I realise how persuasive belief in Christ is. I am eager to continue exploring once at university.

In the Summer of this year, I was fortunate enough to attend World Youth Day, a global gathering of young Catholics which took place in Lisbon. This had a profound impact on me – I saw Christ in others, and I think they saw Him in me. I came back from it a changed person.

I now go to Mass every Sunday with my family. My Dad and I both volunteer as part of the Church's Music Group, providing music for Sunday Masses. We love it! St Edmund's Church is a place of welcome and friendship.

My faith means so much to me now. It is my grounding, the source of my strength. Whether I succeed at something or completely muck it up, I know that I am valuable simply because God loves me, because 'I am fearfully and wonderfully made' (Psalm 139). My faith inspires me to strive to be a better person, and to deepen my relationship with Christ, to know Him more intimately. My calling is to go out into the world and testify to this good news. God-willing, this is what I will do.

On Pentecost Sunday 4 June 2017 the Church was full when parishioners wearing their national dress joined together to celebrate their unity in diversity, the idea of Fr Alvan. Mass began with a procession of the different national groups into the Church, including groups from Poland, India, Philippines, Ghana, Vietnam, Germany, Italy, France, Spain, Mauritius, USA, South Africa and Singapore. The photograph depicts some of those present who afterwards enjoyed a truly international feast in the Crypt.





A period of six years further on, Pentecost 2023 was celebrated in similar vein:



The lunch afterwards in the Crypt showed the mix of diversity and happiness:







From the past, the future will bring us new experiences, fresh challenges and continuing change. The parishioners of the future will prove that the past has served as a template on which Catholicism in Bury St Edmunds will not only survive but thrive.



**The Church of St Edmund King and Martyr circa 1915**