

RECTORS OF ST. MARY MAGDALEN'S

Do not forget those who have had charge of you, and preached God's word to you. Remember how they lived, and imitate their faith.—St. Paul to the Hebrews.

Father George Alfred Oldham, M.A.

Founder and first Rector of St. Mary Magdalen's 1861-1875

GEORGE ALFRED OLDHAM was born in Tooting in April, 1820. He first commenced the study of engineering, but after a year's trial he abandoned this career and decided to devote himself to the Anglican ministry. He entered at Trinity College, Cambridge, took his degree and was ordained Deacon in 1846. That same year he accepted the curacy at Hove where he remained for four years. In 1850 he went to Godshill in the Isle of Wight as incumbent of that little parish. After three years on the island he became curate at Dorking, and here he stayed another three.

At Dorking Oldham had as Rector the Reverend W. H. Joyce, who was Vicar of Dorking 1850-1870 and who, while he was at Oxford, came under the influence of John Henry Newman in his Anglican days. Joyce was a leading figure in the Oxford Movement at the stage when it reached the parish churches. The English Church Union—an instrument of the Anglo-Catholic movement—held some of its early meetings in Dorking Vicarage.

It seems that it was in this atmosphere that George Oldham grew uneasy about his faith and his position as an Anglican minister. He resigned his curacy in 1856 and went for a time on the continent. While abroad he gave himself to the study of the history and doctrine of the Church, and the result of his enquiries was that he became a Catholic. Now anxious to become a priest, he entered Oscott College in the Midlands in May, 1858, and was ordained on April 4th, 1860.

Just over a month before his ordination, Bishop Grant had separated the western part of Brighton from St. John the Baptist's and had made it into a distinct

Mission. Over this new Mission he placed Father Oldham as its first Rector. When informed of the appointment Father Oldham had misgivings as to the wisdom of the choice: for four years he had been an Anglican curate in Hove, and the whole of that former parish lay within the area the Bishop was entrusting to him. He feared it would be extremely difficult and



Father Oldham

delicate for him to come back as a Catholic priest. He placed the whole problem before Dr. Grant. The good Bishop weighed the difficulties and sought local advice, and fortunately decided that he should accept the appointment. And so Father Oldham came to Brighton. It

was June, 1860, and he took up his residence in Oriental Place. Apart from a house, he had a vast area to administer, a chapel in a privately owned house as his only Mass centre, a growing Catholic community which was comparatively poor, and a site for a new church in Upper North Street on which there was at least £600 debt.

For a year he ministered from the tiny chapel in Sillwood Lodge, but started to improve conditions from the very first. Six months after his arrival he laid the foundation stone of St. Mary Magdalen's church, and on July 22nd, 1861, feast of St. Mary Magdalen, the first portion of the church was opened. It consisted of only the present sanctuary and side chapels. The altar was placed against the south wall of the Lady Chapel, and the congregation was accommodated on what is now the sanctuary and the Sacred Heart Chapel. On this occasion Bishop Grant sang Pontifical High Mass, Father Oldham acting as Master of Ceremonies. From this date Upper North Street became the Mass centre, and the little chapel of St. Mary and St. Nicholas ceased to be used as a place of worship.

Seven months later the nave of the church was ready. On February 27th, 1862, to mark the occasion Bishop Grant sang a Pontifical Mass, and Canon Oakley preached the sermon.

After the opening of the nave there was an interruption of work on the building for two years. Then, the early months of 1864 saw the church being completed. The nave was extended some 33 feet, and the tower and spire were added. A tower Father Oldham had looked forward to from the beginning, not only as a pleasing external feature but also as providing a home for a bell: "I should be glad to have a bell or bells to call us to Worship, and to ring out the sweet sounds of the 'Angelus' which have not been heard in this town since the period of the so-called Reformation; and, above all, to note the moment when the Eternal God comes down upon the altar". The solemn open-

ing of the completed church took place on August 16th, 1864. Bishop Grant once again celebrated Pontifical High Mass, and Archbishop (later Cardinal) Manning preached an eloquent sermon. The total



cost of the new church was about £14,000, and of this sum Father Oldham himself had contributed the greater portion.

When the land adjoining the church to the west came up for sale Father Oldham acquired it as his own private property. Shortly afterwards he gave it to the parish, and on it he built a school largely at his own expense. The school began in January, 1871, in a makeshift building. The present building was finished and opened two years later, January, 1873.

St. Mary Magdalen's, Brighton, was Father Oldham's sole pastoral charge as a Catholic priest. Although burdened with debt and constrained through circumstances to shoulder practically the whole financial task of building up a parish and giving it a church and school, in the midst

of such monetary concerns he was most assiduous in caring for the spiritual welfare of his parishioners. To every aspect of the priestly life he carefully attended. As one born out of the true fold, he realised deeply the disadvantages of our separated brethren and was most energetic and fearless in furthering the spread of the Catholic Faith. To the members of his own flock he was a devoted and kind father, unsparing of himself, and a liberal friend to the poor. A marked characteristic of him was his affectionate attention to the old and the infirm. A small item which indicates his devotion to prayer is that he established the Apostleship of Prayer in the parish in the year 1866, the centre at St. Mary Magdalen's being one of the oldest in the country.

On April 12th, 1874, Father Oldham baptised for the last time. His health was now failing, and for a year Father Neil Crispin had been with him as his assistant priest. In early October, 1875, he was in an advanced state of cancer of the tongue and throat. As a last desperate effort to save his life, two critical operations were performed. They both proved unsuccessful, and Father Oldham died at his residence, 14 Montpelier Terrace, on October 18th, 1875. He was 55 years of age.

He had expressed the wish to be interred beneath St. Mary Magdalen's church. Unfortunately he had not made any preliminary arrangements, and at his death it was impossible to obtain the requisite permission from the Home Office in time for his burial.

On October 22nd, Bishop Danell sang his Requiem Mass, after which he was laid to rest in the Brighton Extra-Mural

Cemetery on the Lewes Road. Moving demonstrations of sorrow were displayed by the congregation during the Mass and especially as the body was borne from the church. When the funeral reached the cemetery a large number of parishioners were waiting there, and "they flocked around the grave, to witness the last of a friend they had loved so well, and so deeply respected".

During his latter years at Brighton his sister died, leaving Father Oldham the whole of her property, which was considerable. From this source he distributed once more with his accustomed generosity: £300 to St. Mary Magdalen's (this sum was devoted to the building of a permanent presbytery); £2,000 to the Brighton Blind Asylum in the Eastern Road; £1,000 to the Sussex Eye Hospital; £6,000 in honour of the Sacred Heart, to be applied to a Mission at Hove as a thank-offering for his reception into the Catholic Church, and as being near the scene of his former work as an Anglican minister.

Father Oldham's only extant sermon is one which he preached in St. Mary Magdalen's in January, 1867. It is an appeal to share the financial burdens of the parish with him. He tells his parishioners why they should give. In doing so he unintentionally lays bare the motives of his own generosity:

"People will give in their own way. It is not always the most perfect way, but it is a way always pleasing to God if it has His honour in view."

"Inestimable is the spiritual blessing of conversion to the Faith. How foolish it is to spend so much money on self and the world, when there are *such objects* on which to spend it."