

Chapter 2 - LIFE HERE IN THE TIME OF FR. FIRTH, LATER CANON FIRTH

The new rector was Fr. Richard Firth, once again a man born in Ireland who had received his training at Upholland Seminary. His story is best told in his own words which come from a published interview he gave to a member of staff in his retirement home in Dublin.

I was born on 19th May, 1919. I'm in my 96th year now. I will, please God, celebrate 70 years as a priest this May 26th. My mother, Ellen Morrissey, was from Ballyloobey, Co. Tipperary. For many years I used to visit my relatives in Tipperary. My dad was George Firth from Waterford city, a Master Mariner. Both my parents were devout Catholics. My mother, Ellen, died in 1936, when I was only 17 and my dad, George, a Sea Captain, died in 1971. He was over 90.

My father's ship, the 'Innisfallen', was sunk by a German mine leaving Liverpool for Dublin in 1940. My sister Maura was on board, along with her friend, going home for their holidays. Four of the crew were drowned and my father was badly wounded but he eventually got off the ship by tug boat.

I had three sisters: Maura, and twins, Alice and Eileen. Eileen became a Daughter of Charity and psychiatric nurse but died aged only 24 in St. Vincent's hospital in Fairview (Dublin). Alice was single and lived in the family home in Clontarf where I always stayed when in Ireland.

I went to primary school in the Holy Faith Convent in Clontarf. At age 9, we moved to Liverpool and I went to a Jesuit college there. When I was 12, I joined St. Joseph's Seminary in Upholland, Lancashire. I was ordained in Holy Cross College, Clonliffe Road (Dublin). (We were the first group of priests to be ordained after the war.) Then I returned to England.

I served in many parishes including St. John's in the Liverpool diocese, where both Anfield and Goodison Park are situated, which football fans will know are home to keen rivals, Liverpool and Everton. I also spent 10 years as a Port Chaplain in the Apostolate of the Sea. I

served in the Royal Navy Reserve also and saw many ports abroad as well as serving as Chaplain on educational cruises on the P&O line – all of which I thoroughly enjoyed.

My final position was for 26 years as Parish Priest in Chorley with which parish I still have strong connections. I spent 11 years in retirement there until December 2012 when I collapsed on a visit to Dublin and ended up in Beaumont hospital. I consider myself blessed that I got a bed then in Nazareth House where I still say 10 am. mass every day using my trusty Kindle on which I also read my daily prayers.

I loved golf and played a lot on my many holidays home to Ireland eg. in counties Clare, Sligo and locally in St. Anne's and Royal Dublin. I always kept in touch very well with my family and friends in Ireland. I was still driving until I was 84 but I stopped then before I was told to!

I feel very well-looked-after in Nazareth House and appreciate how hard all the staff work. I like the food and enjoy reading, DVDs, CDs and Lyric FM on the radio. I especially love the Rosary and usually say the complete 20 mysteries every day. I'm very interested in technology including using my own laptop to Google things and I like to use You Tube as well. I enjoy regular outings and visits also and, thank God, I still have a great zest for life and a good sense of humour."

Fr. Firth's own account sums up the gentle, kindly and holy man that he was.

But what of the events during Fr. Firth's 26 years as our Parish Priest. For much of the time life went on much as it had for many years. May processions, with the crowning of the statue of Our Lady, and Corpus Christi processions in late May or in June took place every year. Many people belonged to one of the guilds or other organisations linked with the church. Here at Weld Bank in the 60s and 70s there was a Men's Guild and a Women's Guild and the Knights of St. Columba though I believe that the Guilds of the Children of Mary and of St. Agnes' came to an end in the late 60s. The Saint Vincent de Paul Society had been started in the parish way

back in the early 1940s and continues to this day. By the time of Fr. Firth's coming to the parish, there was also a Young Wives' group.

New heating system for the church

New heating was installed in the earlier years of Fr. Firth's time in the parish with box-like radiators along the outer walls of the church. Initially, it was planned to move the benches back, close to the walls, but it was found to be more convenient when it was possible to access them from both ends and they have remained like this ever since. It was probably around this time that the old lino flooring which covered the aisles was replaced with tough green carpet tiles, all no doubt intended to keep the place warmer.

Weld Bank gets a high quality organ

The old organ at Weld Bank was quite a powerful instrument but its 'pedigree' might be said to be that of a mongrel with bits and pieces put together over the years. Quite early in Fr. Firth's time, a new organ was installed. The decision had been made by Fr. Croghan, but, probably due to the various pressures of organising both his retirement and the bicentenary celebrations, he had omitted to tell our long-serving organist, Mr. Wulstan Barton but 'word had got round' that we were to have a new organ and Wulstan was able to try out this type of organ as it happened to be identical to the one in Hollinshead St. United Reform Church. He then went to see the one that we were to buy which was located in Bourne Primitive Methodist Chapel at Middleton-in-Teesdale. It had been built by Harrison of Durham, regarded as one of the finest organ-makers and would be an asset to Weld Bank. However, as the organ was in a rather dilapidated chapel, it was feared that it might harbour woodworm. Already, in the late 1950s, much work had been done to eradicate woodworm at Weld Bank and it was imperative that it was not re-introduced. Therefore, Wulstan wrote to Walkers, the company handling the sale, and obtained a written guarantee that it would be treated against woodworm before being transferred to Weld Bank. It needed some repairs but eventually, in about 1975, we acquired a church organ of a very

high quality which Wulstan Barton played for many years. He had begun to play the old organ at the age of 15 and this service to the church continued for 66 years. He recalls how he only failed once to turn up for an occasion when the organ was required. This was one Tuesday evening at the end of Quarant' Ore when a Benediction service was held and Wulstan forgot about it as his first grandchild had been born and he had spent the evening cradling the new baby in his arms. His long service was recognised in 1987 when Bishop Hitchin, a Chorley man, presented him with the *Bene Merenti* medal.

The new cathedral and the Pope's visit to Liverpool

The North West of England was traditionally a stronghold of the Catholic faith and yet, for many years it lacked a Cathedral. However, from only about 20 years after the Roman Catholic Relief Act of 1829, as the members of our faith increased in numbers, the need for a focal point for the Archdiocese had been recognised and plans were made to build a cathedral in Liverpool but only the Lady Chapel was completed in that century and this eventually became the Church of Our Lady Immaculate. Then, a hundred years later, Sir Edwin Lutyens was commissioned to submit a design which was accepted. Lutyens' plan was for a grandiose Romanesque structure of which the crypt was completed but after the war, as costs escalated, it was realised that the Archdiocese could not afford to continue with the building. A scaled-down design was prepared by another architect, Adrian Gilbert Scott but, by the 1960s, this design also was deemed too costly and a competition was held to get a design which would cost no more than £1,000,000. The chosen winner was a design by Sir Frederick Gibberd. The cathedral was built on top of the Lutyens crypt in less than five years and was opened in 1967 – a remarkable achievement when one considers the hundreds of years it took to build the cathedrals of old. This new cathedral reflected some of the ideas of Vatican II by being 'in the round' and thereby intended to allow the laity to be more connected with the mass being said in the centre. For the people of Weld Bank, Liverpool was sometimes felt to be a rather distant place but they were still supportive of the collections made for the Cathedral and contributed to its costs. One method of contribution was by donations for entries to the 'Golden Book' whereby, for a small sum,

names could be inscribed in a memorial book which would be kept in perpetuity in the Cathedral and can still be viewed there on certain days of the week. Some 14 years after its opening, in 1982, Pope John Paul II visited the UK and said mass in our new cathedral. This was a major event for all Catholics of the Archdiocese and a coach party went from Weld Bank to join in with the celebrations there. (*any photos?*)

Two Weld Bank boys ordained as priests

The 1980s saw two Weld Bank boys ordained priests. In 1980, Fr. Stephen Cooper's ordination was held here with Archbishop Worlock presiding and then again in 1985, Fr. Ian O'Shea was ordained. Both priests are now serving in the Liverpool diocese.

Many repairs needed to the church building

In the mid 80s, Fr. Firth was faced with some serious concerns about the fabric of the church. Jack Critchley, who had looked after the clock and had worked on the bell in his earlier years, had noticed some cracks in the higher part of the tower. A structural engineer was called in who confirmed that there was some movement and recommended that stainless steel rods be fixed in the bell chamber to stabilise it. In the various inspections at this time the further problems of dry rot, wet rot and furniture beetle were also found and contractors had to be brought in to remedy all of these issues. However, by 1990, there were further repairs required – this time to the roof and plasterwork and this came at a time when churches were being re-ordered.

Weld Bank is 're-ordered'

In the post Vatican II years, there had been increased focus on the involvement of the congregation in worship. Initially the focus was on having the mass in English and on the priest facing the people. In Weld Bank church, we had a stylish wooden altar which allowed for this. However, in the quarter century following Vatican II, the Catholic Church in the UK seemed to

become focused on greater communality between priest and people and this was expressed in the layout of churches by removing altar rails and pulpits which were seen as divisive. It was also felt that the importance of the Sacrament of Baptism should be recognised by having the baptismal font in a prominent place near the altar, rather than, as had been traditional for centuries, in a separate room known as a Baptistry. In 1990, discussions were afoot to determine what form the re-ordering of our church should take. A Parish Liturgy Group was formed and it was decided that there should be a general meeting of the parish. There seemed to be a good deal of opposition to the changes, (a vote was taken which went against removing the altar rails) but the changes, including the removal of the altar rails, went ahead anyway and the church was re-ordered over a period of months in 1991-92. During this time, Sunday masses were said in the school hall and then, once the work was complete, we returned to our church which had been despoiled of much of its grandeur. The marble altar rails and gates had gone as had the gold leaf decoration on the three panels behind the main altar. The pulpit had been cut in half so that it was actually rather too low to be of much use. (A large, modern book rest had to be added later.) Thankfully, the main altar was untouched. Instead of our stylish wooden altar, we found a very small altar made from the lower half of the pulpit. The baptistery floor had been levelled whereas, previously, there had been a sunken area around the font but the lovely mosaic wall-covering in the baptistery, which had only been installed in the 1960s or 70s, was retained. This space now became a useful room for parents with young children. The walls around the altar looked rather bare as the gold leaf had been painted over but, as usual, among peace-loving people, the changes came to be accepted by most, though a handful of people never returned to the church.

The parish club and the women's guild

In these years our community still had a parish club in Ash Grove which was a popular venue on Saturday evenings. The bowling green was in use and the centre was used particularly by the men's and women's guilds. The Women's Guild had served as a much-needed social outlet for many women who, in the post-war years right through to the 21st century, found a welcome break

in the weekly domino and, later, bingo evenings. However, in addition to socialising, the women worked very hard to raise funds for the church. In the earlier years they would hold a ‘Sale of Work’ usually in November and Jumble Sales at other times in the Parish Hall. There were Bingo drives and ‘Meat’ bingos where they obtained various cuts of meat at reasonable prices and these became the prizes. The President of the Women’s Guild was often the driving force behind their efforts to raise money and I recall Mrs Berry, Teresa Iddon and Doreen Harvey serving in this role as I’m sure did others. The efforts of these women should not be forgotten for, as a parish, we were able to pay for the many church repairs and the re-ordering without incurring an ongoing debt and this was largely due to the fund-raising of the women’s guild. There was a spiritual side to the guild also and the ladies had a monthly mass, after which they all stayed to recite prayers. Occasionally, they would have a retreat, often at the Cenacle Convent in Liverpool. The guild failed to attract younger women who undoubtedly wanted a different kind of social gathering, though, as mentioned above, there was, for a time, a ‘Young Wives’ group. As the years went on the numbers in the Women’s Guild inevitably dwindled and it was very moving at funeral services to see the last few of this guild make a ‘guard of honour’ in the church porch to pay their last respects to a deceased member.¹

Celebrations for Fr. Firth’s Golden Jubilee

On 26th May, 1995, the Weld Bank community celebrated the Golden Jubilee of Fr. Firth’s ordination. There was a small tent in the church gardens from where it was intended to serve drinks, sandwiches and cakes but, at the same time, the church was open with Exposition of the Blessed Sacrament. Fr. Firth asked that people should spend a few minutes ‘with the Lord’ before coming to celebrate with him – and they did, with many parishioners and schoolchildren coming along. What they didn’t know at the time was that the catering was not all that it should have been as the caterer’s van had been broken into overnight and the party food had been stolen! So, some snacks had to be prepared rather quickly for the occasion. In the evening, a party

¹ The Women’s Guild of the Blessed Sacrament had been founded in 1928 and in 1978 the women celebrated their 50th anniversary. See photo of commemorative card.

was held at the parish club and the photos show people and priest having some fun. (See *photos*)

Fr. Firth retires

Although, it is standard practice now for many priests to retire at 75, Fr. Firth continued as the rector of Weld Bank until he was 81, retiring on 1st September, 2000. However, he didn't go very far even then, just retiring to a flat near to St. Mary's church and would frequently come back to concelebrate mass with his successor, Monsignor McKenna. He was also often to be seen taking a stroll around Chorley and thus he remained a part of our community for a good many more years after his retirement. When he had first arrived at Weld Bank, he had brought along his housekeeper, Miss Lily Lowe, who was helped in her work by her sister, Nancy, but these two good ladies had both died and thankfully the role was taken up by Mrs Clare Meredith. Clare, although not resident in the presbytery, cared for Fr. Firth in his later years as parish priest and continued to do so when he had retired.