

FEATURES / Catholic built heritage

English and Welsh Catholics are proud of their martyrs, and their churches often house their relics and commemorate them in sculptures, paintings and stained glass / **By ELENA CURTI**

Remembered in stone

PHOTOS BELOW AND RIGHT: ALEX RAMSAY © PATRIMONY COMMITTEE OF THE BISHOPS' CONFERENCE OF ENGLAND AND WALES



THE SMALL piece of slate displayed in front of the altar of St Joseph's, Pickering, is easily missed. It is, in fact, a precious relic, being the altar stone used by Blessed Nicholas Postgate to celebrate Mass. Though pitted and worn, it is possible to make out an inscription that ends "Martyred 1679". Postgate secretly ministered to Catholics for more than 30 years, roaming the North York Moors disguised as a pedlar. He was accused in connection with the fictitious Popish Plot, and put to death at York. He was 80 years old.

Martyrdom is an important theme in most Catholic churches but there are some that have special links with local men and women who gave their lives for the faith. They often house their relics and commemorate them in sculptures, paintings and stained glass. A number of North Yorkshire churches have associations with Postgate, the so-called Priest of the Moors: St Hedda, Egton Bridge, near Whitby, is close to his birthplace and St Anne's is in the village of Ugthorpe, where he lived during his ministry.

The builder of St Joseph's, Pickering, a gem on the edge of the North York Moors, took his inspiration from Bl. Nicholas. Fr Edward Bryan was a former Anglican from

Detail from the roundel at Our Lady Queen of Martyrs and St Ignatius, Chideock. Below, Our Lady and St Michael, Abergavenny

Tasmania, who arrived in 1901 determined to revive the Catholic faith in the area, where Catholics were very thinly scattered. Within a year, he had founded a school and opened a temporary chapel in a cottage. Though he lived very humbly, he must have been knowledgeable about art and architecture. He commissioned Leonard Stokes – then president of the Royal Institute of British Architects, and a Catholic – to build the pre-



sent church. He asked Eric Gill to design and carve a stone font. Gill was working on the Stations of the Cross for Westminster Cathedral at the time, but he accepted the commission. He carved the eight panels around the sides of the font, alternating figurative scenes with foliage and flowers. One panel portrays the Baptism of Jesus, another the Crucifixion. Less conventional is an image of Joseph holding the infant Jesus, the pair gazing into each other's eyes. They are in the carpenter's workshop, and Gill has lovingly carved the tools of Joseph's – and his own – trade. The fourth figurative panel depicts St Nicholas bearing a sack of toys and handing a doll to a small girl. Is this an allusion to this saint's namesake, Nicholas Postgate?

Another dedicated pastor martyred in old age, and a fellow victim of the Popish Plot, was St David Lewis. A Jesuit active for 30 years in and around his home town of Abergavenny, he was known as the Father of the Poor. St David was the last Catholic martyr in Wales, and was hanged, drawn and quartered at Usk on 27 August 1679. The southern Welsh borders were, in penal times, a Catholic stronghold to rival north-west England. Jesuit, Franciscan and Benedictine missions kept the faith alive, and Abergavenny is a good place to explore this rich history. A hidden chapel there, where St David celebrated Mass, has been discovered in the attic of an old house, Gunter Mansion. An appeal is under way for its restoration.

A SHORT WALK away is the parish church of Our Lady and St Michael, which reflects local Catholics' surging confidence after the restoration of the hierarchy in 1850. Here St David has a chapel dedicated to him with a fine wooden statue and a painting. The stained-glass window shows him in illustrious company alongside St Benedict and St Ignatius of Loyola. The church was built by the Benedictines, who employed as architect Benjamin Joseph Bucknall, a convert to Catholicism and pupil of Charles Hansom. Completed in 1860, the style is Decorated Gothic with a tall, six-bay nave and slim quatrefoil columns. The high altar features a gloriously elaborate, wedding-cake reredos with angels in attitudes of adoration before the Blessed Sacrament. Along the top, crowned by crocketed pinnacles, are the seven archangels named in the Talmud.

The village of Chideock in Dorset, close to the Jurassic Coast, was another pocket of Catholic resistance in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Here is a church lovingly created by a lord of the manor in memory of seven local martyrs.

Our Lady Queen of Martyrs and St Ignatius is in a quiet country lane almost hidden by trees. Completed in 1872, it is a weathered stone church with a small ribbed-terracotta and black-tiled dome, such as you might find in the Italian countryside. Catholicism survived the Reformation in the village thanks to the Arundells, the old Catholic family that lived in Chideock Castle. The Arundells sheltered priests smuggled in from the Continent

via the nearby harbour at Lyme Regis. Three of the martyrs were their chaplains while the remaining four either died trying to save them or were killed for their faith. An eighth man died in prison.

Chideock Castle was destroyed in the English Civil War, and the Arundells left the area. Then, in 1802, the estate was bought by Thomas Weld of Lulworth Castle, a family related to the Arundells, for his sixth son Humphrey. Humphrey Weld built a manor house, and converted a barn (where Catholics had worshipped secretly for many years) into a chapel. His son, Charles Weld, built the church – assisted by Charles Hansom’s brother, Joseph Stanislaus – incorporating the barn-chapel and reusing its Gothic altar. Weld created a shrine to the Virgin Mary in memory of the Chideock Martyrs. It consists of a gold baroque Madonna ascending into heaven, her feet supported by cherubs. Light streams down on the statue from a concealed window in the dome above.

Charles Weld also designed and painted the barrel roof, the sanctuary and the dome. Members of his family painted the images of the English Martyrs, including those of Chideock, above the round arches of the nave. Weld also carved the capitals of the columns with motifs including the crossed keys, the Sacred Heart and instruments of the Passion. The sacristy (the former barn-chapel) has wall paintings and decorations by Weld, and



St Joseph's, Pickering

a painting of five of the local martyrs by Francis H. Newbery, who was director of the Glasgow School of Art and mentor to Charles Rennie Mackintosh, before he retired to Dorset. A small rickety staircase led to the space where Mass was first secretly celebrated. The building is in trust to the Weld family, and run as a private church under the auspices of the Catholic parish of Bridport. It is cared for by a dedicated group of Friends.

TO VISIT St Etheldreda’s, Ely Place, central London, is to fall under the gaze of eight English Martyrs whose statues look down on the congregation from the nave walls. Painted in browns and greys, they blend into the very fabric of this building. The church is steeped

in stories of the martyrs. The building is close to the route many of them took to Tyburn while others were put to death nearby at Smithfield and Holborn. St Etheldreda’s was originally the chapel of the London palace of the Bishop of Ely; in 1874 it was acquired and restored by the Institute of Charity (Rosminians), and is one of England’s oldest Catholic churches.

The eight martyrs’ statues were sculpted in the early 1960s by May Blakeman while her husband, Charles F. Blakeman, a pupil of J.E. Nuttgens, made the striking west window depicting the first martyrs of the Reformation: three Carthusian priests of the Charterhouse monastery and two other priests. They stand beneath Tyburn Tree and from this springs Christ Crucified clothed in a robe in myriad shades of red. An account of the martyrs’ torture and execution appears on the left side of the window while Christ’s Passion is on the right. The window brings these elements together with the martyrs sharing Christ’s suffering and the glory of his Resurrection. It is a potent image which underscores the words of St Irenaeus in the second century: “The blood of the martyrs is the seedbed of the Church.”

Elena Curti is a former deputy editor of *The Tablet*. Her book, *Fifty Catholic Churches to See Before You Die*, is published by Gracewing, price £14.99 (Tablet price, £13.49).

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Brendan Walsh
The Editor

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