



A SHORT HISTORY OF ST. DUNSTANS
WEST HOATHLY.

(The writer is indebted to Lady Wilkinson who was one of the founders of St. Dunstans)

Early on in the second world war a R.C. Primary School from the Lavender Hill, South West area of London, was evacuated to West Hoathly village, together with its teachers. Among its pupils was the son of Mr and Mrs O'Connell who are still living at West Hoathly. The teachers and pupils used the village hall for lessons, and for Mass on Sundays.

Mass continued to be said at West Hoathly after the war, mostly only on alternate Sundays, and it was served from the Haywards heath parish. When Dora Wilkinson and her family arrived in Sharpthorne, they used to attend Mass in the hall, but it was rather disedifying because the hall had always been used by a Club on the Saturday evening, and those who attended Mass had to kneel on the dirty floor amidst puddles of beer and debris; so they all took with them old newspapers as kneelers. A group of them used to meet and arrange to get there early, so that they could clear up the hall before Mass.

They then started to arrange fund-raising social events in the hall which were well attended, and they decided to go ahead and find a suitable place for a permanent chapel. They had to deal with the then Parish Priest of Haywards Heath, Father Waugh, who told them that some people in Horsted Keynes were already pressing him to start a Mass Centre there. He explained that he could only manage to serve one centre and he fancied West Hoathly where there was already Sunday Mass, but in no way could it become a liability to the Haywards Heath parishioners; so if they moved quickly and 'went it alone' he would look after them.

They therefore bought three cottages for about £500.00; and after a lot of struggle with planning permission, the work of conversion began. One of the cottages had been the butcher's shop, and all three had been condemned because they had no essential services.

Once things had started, the people of Horsted Keynes became very loyal and staunch supporters, and others from Ardingly and Turners Hill began to come to Mass at West Hoathly. They kept their own bank account and everything was paid for - never a loan.

When Father Waugh of Haywards Heath died and Father Byrne took over, he found the group rather independent. They always kept the collection money and used it for the running costs of the chapel; so Father Byrne had to fall in with their rather unorthodox methods. It is interesting to note that when, shortly after the Vatican Council, English was introduced and Mass said facing the people, the people of St. Dunstans were one of the first groups to entertain these changes; and Lady Wilkinson often wonders what the then Bishop would have said. At any rate, he was pleased to hand over the small parish into the care of the Worth Abbey monks.

When this change came about, the small group of parishioners thought that they should regularise their proceedings; and so all the monies - there were no debts - were handed over to the Abbot and to Father Jerome who was to be the first Parish Priest, much loved by all.

Since 1965 the priest in charge of St. Dunstans has always been one of the monks from the Abbey, and it is most encouraging to see how much co-operation has developed with the local churches since those early days.

Father Kevin