

Introduction

The history of the resurgence of the Catholic faith in Kilmarnock is part of a broader tale of migration and aspiration amongst a hard-pressed people. Catholicism had not disappeared from Scotland entirely after the Reformation for significant pockets managed to cling to life in the north-east of the country, as well as in the Western Isles. The story in the Lowlands, however, was very different with the 'old' faith all but eradicated. From the final years of the 18th century onwards, and with a particular rapidity at the time of the Potato Famine in the 1840s, Catholicism saw its number of adherents expand at a spectacular rate as thousands of Irish refugees sought new opportunities for work and sustenance.

Served by priests only occasionally when circumstances and resources permitted during the first couple of decades of the 19th century, in August 1822 a group of Catholics sought the appointment of a resident priest to the Kilmarnock mission. A letter to Bishop Alexander Cameron requested that a pastor be sent to the town with the particular remit of drawing 'lukewarm individuals' back to the fold. However, a priest, in the person of Rev. William Thomson (d.1859), was not sent to Kilmarnock but to Ayr where, in 1827, St Margaret's became the first Catholic church to be opened in Ayrshire since the Reformation. (St Margaret's is now the cathedral church of the Diocese of Galloway.) Rev. Thomson was expected to serve Ayr, Kilmarnock, Girvan, Maybole, Ballantrae, Colmonelle, Irvine, Kilwinning, Dalry, Saltcoats and Ardrossan. Given such extensive responsibilities, it is a wonder that Rev. Thomson was able to relate to his bishop in 1841 that 'those at the Kilmarnock end are served every second and often three Sundays out of the four'. As he got older, those exertions must have taken their toll on him.

By the 1840s, the number of Catholics in Kilmarnock had grown to such an extent that, once again, application was made for a resident priest. A petitionary letter, signed on behalf of certain members of the community by Patrick McCue (a twenty-year-old cobbler and chair of an abstinence meeting-group), was sent to Bishop Andrew Scott on 6 March 1841 with the news that the community was prepared to 'deposit their collections in the Bank' as preparation for the arrival of a 'resident clergy man'. A week later, an even more robust letter was sent by McCue to Bishop John Murdoch, threatening to withhold all monies from any priest save a newly appointed resident priest for the town. In passing, McCue mentioned that the Catholic community in Kilmarnock numbered '1200 souls'.

Foundations (1844-78)

A decision, finally, to appoint a resident priest to Kilmarnock came in 1844 with the arrival of Rev. Thomas Wallace (1844-53; b. 1810, Askeaton, County Limerick). The immediate cause seems to have been sheer force of numbers: the building of the new railway line, including the major task of constructing a viaduct through the town, had occasioned an influx of Irish labourers. Initially, Rev. Wallace had no church in which to celebrate liturgies and the community continued to worship courtesy of accommodation provided for hire at the George Hotel (now a furniture retailer in Portland Street) or in a loft above a stable at the Turf Inn (in the Cheapside).

Nevertheless, Rev. Wallace's arrival coincided with the purchase of the ground on which a church would be built. The previous owner of the land was Robert Crawford (d. 1846), bookseller and generous benefactor of the Kilmarnock Library. Crawford sold what was effectively the most conspicuous position in Kilmarnock at that time and such a spot ensured that the church building, as it rose from its foundations, could be seen from all perspectives by the town's inhabitants.

The architect of the church, Mr McIlroy, hailed from Glasgow; so too did the master-builder, Mr Gallocher. Besides their names, little more can be determined for certain about either man. Local folklore in Kilmarnock, passed down through the generations, would have it that St Joseph's was designed by the same architect responsible for St Mary's Church in Hamilton, opened in 1846. In any case, it is possible that McIlroy was himself a builder-to-trade and that he and Gallocher, in taking on the task of constructing St Joseph's, simply worked from a template in a trade book. The style was described as 'neo-Gothic' though the exterior is generally unadorned. Perhaps the most remarkable feature of the building is its height with tall, slender pillars supporting the exaggerated and pointed vaulting.

It was decided to name the church after St Joseph. Such a dedication was not common in this period and it may have been prompted by the receipt of a statue of the saint or some other related religious artefact during the construction of the church. In any case, whatever the reasons for the choice of patron, St Joseph's was finally opened and solemnly blessed on 13 June 1847 by Bishop John Murdoch, Vicar Apostolic of the Western District in Scotland (an ecclesiastical district pre-dating the restoration of dioceses in 1878). The choir of St Andrew's, Glasgow, (now the cathedral in Clyde Street), travelled to Kilmarnock for the occasion and there is mention in reports of a 'small but very powerful organ' (perhaps a reed organ) having been purchased by the congregation and providing accompaniment. The Catholic population was now estimated to be around 3000, with about 1700 residing in Kilmarnock itself.

The cost of the construction of the church was some £3000 (the equivalent of a not insubstantial six-figure sum today). Debt was an unavoidable reality for the community and, with a testimonial from Bishop Murdoch, Rev. Wallace was obliged to journey beyond Scotland in search of additional funds. It is known for certain that he was in London in 1849, even being mentioned in the pages of the Catholic periodical, *The Tablet*, in its edition of 31 March of that year. Significantly, it is noted in Bishop Murdoch's letter of reference for Rev. Wallace that the numbers of Catholics in Kilmarnock had diminished since the opening of the church; hence the need for Rev. Wallace to seek financial aid in other parts. It would seem that many Irish labourers (navvies) had moved on from the town with the completion of the railway viaduct. There is even a hint in Bishop Murdoch's text that St Joseph's might need to be closed. Rhetorical perhaps, designed to engender pity and stimulate generosity, but the bishop's words are a reminder of just how transient Catholic communities were in the first half of the 19th century.

[The earliest known image of St Joseph's dates from only eleven years after its opening. The church is clearly identifiable, situated on its lofty position overlooking the town, as part of the frontispiece of the Second Edition of *The History of Kilmarnock* by Archibald McKay, published in 1858: <https://archive.org/details/historykilmarno00mkagoog/page/n8>.]

Rev. Wallace was transferred to the mission of Old Cumnock in 1853. A parchment presented to him in December of that year was effusive in praising his achievements in Kilmarnock: 'When you first became our pastor a small room gave accommodation to the few faithful souls living here when assembled to hear divine service but now how different is the case when a large church erected to the glory and honour of God by your indefatigable, untiring and unceasing exertions, can be twice filled in one day.'

Wallace was replaced by a 27-year-old Scotsman, Rev. John McLachlan (1853-67; b. 1826, Glasgow), a move which was not unanimously popular amongst the Catholic community in Kilmarnock. The circumstances of Wallace's removal were still being argued about in

newspapers, specifically the Glasgow Free Press, as late as 1864, particularly in the aftermath of Wallace's death in Cumnock in April 1863. The principal gripe appears to have been that the Irish Rev. Wallace had not been well treated in light of all the burdens he had had to bear as founder and builder of St Joseph's. The allegation was that the Scottish Rev. McLachlan had been provided with a prime mission only three years after his ordination. For critics of the move, it was a clear case of episcopal favouritism on the part of Bishop John Murdoch. Such tensions in the Kilmarnock community were part of a wider context of perceived on-going rifts between certain representatives of Irish and Scots clergy and peoples – a tension partly dissipated with the appointment of neither an Irishman nor a Scotsman but of an Englishman, Charles Petre Eyre, as archbishop in Glasgow in 1869.

Despite the arguments played out in the press, there can be little doubt that Rev. McLachlan gained the respect of the greater part of his community. He was instrumental in the establishment of a branch of the Catholic Young Men's Society in 1855 (sharing with St. Mary's, Greenock, the distinction of being the earliest established branches in Scotland, only six years after the foundation of the Society in Ireland). This Society – known colloquially as the CYMS – caught the mood for self-improvement which was such a feature of Victorian society, complete with reading-rooms and 'circulating libraries' (wherein books, being 'circulated', were loaned and returned). The Society also promoted talks or readings (delivered by local members as well as by external speakers) which covered many aspects of faith, history and culture with the purpose of preparing laymen well for the 'inquisitions' of their workplaces on matters of religion. The first meeting of the St Joseph's branch took place on 14 October 1855.

Rev. McLachlan also oversaw the introduction of a branch of the St Vincent de Paul Society (SVDP), founded by Frederic Ozanam for charitable purposes in Paris in 1833. This Society aimed (as it still does) to encourage the sanctification of its members through provision of alms and aid to the poor. The St Joseph's conference of the Society was established in 1864, initiated in large part by Mr William McCaffrey (1832-96).

Finally, Rev. McLachlan was responsible for the opening of a new school of one storey facing onto College Wynd, close by the Laigh Kirk in the centre of the town. (Rev. Wallace had initially hired a teacher named William Lennox who was still in post in 1855.) This school, with some modifications over the coming decades, remained the primary location for Catholic children's education until the opening of new premises at the beginning of the next century.

Rev. McLachlan was transferred from St Joseph's to St Mirin's in Paisley in early 1867. The Kilmarnock Standard of 16 March stated that he had 'laboured here for about thirteen years and acquitted himself with such modesty and discretion as to win the esteem of all classes and sects.' Indeed, this compliment seems to offer an authentic glimpse of Rev. McLachlan's ability to impress as he was destined to become the first Bishop of Galloway at the restoration of the Scottish hierarchy in 1878.

None of the priests who followed Rev. McLachlan had long incumbencies. Rev George John Smith (1867-69; b. 1840, Cuttlebrae, Banffshire) had the charge of the mission for two years during which the landscape around the church began to change as the new Kilmarnock Infirmary buildings took shape, effectively 'boxing-in' St Joseph's and removing the clear view of the church sitting on its promontory which had previously been such a feature of the town's skyline. (The hospital was demolished with the moving of the Infirmary to Crosshouse in 1978; a housing estate is now situated where the old Infirmary once stood.)

Smith's successor, Rev. Donald Carmichael (1869-72; b. 1833, Tomintoul, Banffshire), continued to encourage the activities of sodalities which provided outlets for the popular pieties of laypeople, amongst them the Confraternity of Our Lady of Mount Carmel (commonly called the Brown Scapular) and the Living Rosary (groups of fifteen persons taking it upon themselves to come together to say the whole rosary of fifteen decades every month). It is also interesting to note that Rev. Carmichael is the first priest-in-charge to be recorded as having to deal with decay in the fabric of the building. The whole exterior was re-pointed and crumbling masonwork carefully filled in where required.

Rev. Peter Forbes (1872-77; b. 1843, Tomintoul, Banffshire) attended to renovations on the school in College Wynd. This was partly in response to the Education (Scotland) Act of 1872 introducing, for the first time, compulsory primary education for all children. Meanwhile, the social life of the community continued apace, with a report in the Kilmarnock Standard concerning a New Year entertainment in January 1874 which provides the first known mention of St Joseph's Choir (though not in a sacred setting in this instance but in relation to providing 'a number of glees' for the festive occasion).

The last of this relatively fleeting succession of priests-in-charge (or 'missionary rectors' as they were then termed) was Rev. Hugh MacDonald (1877-78; b. 1838, Inverness). Also sent to Kilmarnock around the same time was the first recorded assistant priest (or curate) to minister at St Joseph's: Rev. Alexander Mackintosh, a native of Arisaig. Very little is known of the activities of both priests though it may well be that Rev. MacDonald was sent to Kilmarnock with a view to attempting to balance the mission's books. In any case, a new era was about to emerge in the life of the Catholic Church in Scotland and a new priest was to take over at St Joseph's in 1878 and remain there for the next twenty years.

Consolidation (1878-1953)

The first act of the new pope, Leo XIII, in 1878 was the restoration of the Catholic hierarchy in Scotland. St Joseph's now found itself in the new Diocese of Galloway with its bishop resident not in Glasgow, as previously during the old vicariate, but in Dumfries. That same year, Rev. David Hasset Power (1878-98; b. 1840, Rathgormac, County Waterford) was appointed to Kilmarnock. His apparent urbanity was such that he was able to demonstrate the importance of personality in forging positive relationships with others beyond his own community. He was the first Catholic to be elected to Kilmarnock's School Board (a creation of the 1872 Education Act) and was even invited to deliver the Vote of Thanks at the end of the prize-giving in Kilmarnock Academy in 1885.

Two assistant priests of the Power era stand out for different reasons. The first, Rev. Michael Hickey (1885-86), would go on to have something of a maverick career, including becoming Professor of the Irish Language at the seminary in St Patrick's College, Maynooth, in 1896. The second, Rev. Patrick English, arrived at St Joseph's in 1891 but, tragically, died in 1893, aged 26, having contracted typhoid. It is said that his funeral on 13 September 1893 witnessed the greatest single gathering of Catholics in Kilmarnock at any point throughout the entire 19th century. Many townspeople came out of their homes to watch the vast procession make its way to the new cemetery in Grassyards Road. Visitors to the Kilmarnock Cemetery today can still visit the young County Limerick-born priest's grave and behold the impressive Celtic cross memorial stone erected there, paid for by the congregation of St Joseph's by way of the penny collections of the Father English Memorial Fund. (The cross was cleaned and re-erected in 1996.)

The Golden Jubilee of St Joseph's occurred in 1897 but there is very little information regarding any special events which may have taken place. What is certain is that, in his final years in Kilmarnock, Dean Power (as he had become in 1891) applied a great deal of his energy to a project to enlarge the presbytery and add to the decoration of the church. A new baptismal font was purchased as well as several works of art, including a huge painting of the crucifixion which dominated the wall behind the high altar.

Dean Power departed for the mission in Stranraer in January 1898. He was replaced by Rev. John Woods (1898-1903; b. 1855, Dalbeattie, Kirkcudbrightshire), a reserved, scholarly individual by all accounts, who would eventually depart St Joseph's in 1903 to become Rector of the Scots College in Valladolid, Spain. During his time in Kilmarnock, the convent of the Poor Sisters of Nazareth (Nazareth House), situated just a brief five minutes' walk from St Joseph's, was formally opened in 1902 after various re-orderings (the Sisters having originally arrived in the town in 1890).

Short though his stay in Kilmarnock may have been, it can be surmised that Fr Woods was a key figure in supporting the purchase of a major addition to the church. A fund for a brand new organ was established during his time and, in March 1902, it was announced by the coordinating committee that a contribution of £153 towards its cost had been received from Andrew Carnegie, the Scots-American industrialist and philanthropist. The choir gallery in the church was reconstructed in anticipation of coping with the weight about to be placed upon it. Remarkably, the organ committee was far-sighted enough to commission Harrison and Harrison, the distinguished Durham firm of organ builders, with the task of providing the instrument. The organ, inaugurated in 1903, remains in use to this day and retains its historic importance as a rare example of a Harrison and Harrison organ of that period in a Catholic church.

Fr Woods' biggest undertaking, however – and surely a matter of some anxiety for him – was the building of a new school for the Catholic community, located in Elmbank Drive at a cost of £7420. This was before the Education (Scotland) Act of 1918 had taken Catholic schools into the state system and, therefore, the monies had to be found by the Catholic community itself. In 1909 the debt on the school still stood at £3329. (This building would survive to become St Columba's Primary School in the 1950s before being closed and demolished in the early 21st century.)

The reward of presiding at the opening of the completed new school would not be reaped by Fr Woods, however, but by his successor, Canon John J. Sheehy (1903-37; b. 1859, Airdrie). From the outset of his long incumbency, Canon Sheehy maintained an advocacy of a particular passion of his: namely, the beautification of the 'house of God'. By 1906, two new marble holy water fonts had been erected. The stone of the main altar had been renovated with its front painted and picked out in gold. The walls of the sanctuary were partially redecorated. A new Lady Altar followed in 1907. A statue of the Sacred Heart, the work of Beyaert of Bruges in Belgium, was added later, as were (in 1909) a new oak side altar, a massive oak pulpit, a sanctuary chair, a crimson sanctuary carpet and myriad brass fittings. By 1913 the facade of the church had been restored to something approaching its former glory, tiles laid in front of the altar, and electric lighting installed. Stained glass windows are alluded to in the Kilmarnock Standard of 6 December 1913 and may be a reference to the installation of the first of the beautiful lancet windows which are still so prominent a feature of the church. However, the only explicit references date from the period of the First World War when the Glasgow Observer relates that the St Patrick window was blessed in March 1915 and the window

presented by the Children of Mary (Our Lady with cherubim at her feet) blessed the following month.

After the First World War, a War Memorial Committee was set up to coordinate collections with the goal of purchasing a suitable memorial for those of the community who had lost their lives in the conflict. The result of those efforts was eventually hoisted high above the front of the sanctuary in October 1920: a Calvary scene with central crucifix and Mary and St John on either side. (The Calvary remained in place until 1970 when it was removed: the figures of Mary and St John were disposed of; the crucifix is now situated in the porch of the church.)

In sum, it has been estimated that, by 1934, Canon Sheehy had spent around £25,000 on improvements to both the church and school. Ultimately, his was a legacy of paintings, stained glass, statuary, wall decoration, and other ecclesiastical fittings and artefacts (so generously donated in many cases by members of the congregation) which made of St Joseph's a model of artistic and aesthetic expression of the theology and worship of the period. When bedecked with a multiplicity of candles and flowers for a devotion such as 'Forty Hours', the church was strikingly 'beautiful' in the eyes of beholders.

The devotional life of the congregation during the Sheehy years continued to develop, with the establishment of new sodalities such as the Immaculate Conception in January 1919 and the Legion of Mary in 1936. At the same time, the social life of the community took on a new focus with the purchase of the Norfolk and Parochial Halls in Wellington Street. For several decades (essentially until the lure of television caused people to remain in their own homes), these halls were the centre of people's social lives, with billiards, shows and other entertainments predominant. Excursions were also arranged from time to time, such as the parish outing to Doonfoot (by Ayr) in 1933.

Monsignor Sheehy (as he became in 1935) was the first 'Administrator' of St Joseph's to die while still in post. (Parishes in Scotland were not canonically restored until 1946 though the term 'parish' may be used for convenience's sake when writing about the period beforehand. Until 1946, priests were appointed as administrators or missionary rectors of missions.) His successor, appointed in January 1938, was Rev. Michael Carey (1938-51; b. 1871, Leitrim, County Clare). He became Canon Carey in May of the same year. He could be something of a strict taskmaster with his curates, two of whom are remembered in particular for their selfless contributions to the life of the parish: Rev. Patrick Young (1940-52) and Rev. Philip Brady (1943-53).

The Second World War saw the parish having to cope with swelling numbers of evacuees from the Hutchesontown, Garngad and Provanmill districts of Glasgow. Such was the influx that, for a time, Mass had to be arranged not only in the Parochial Hall in Wellington Street but elsewhere, including in the parish hall of the Church of Scotland in Symington (see Glasgow Observer editions of 15 and 22 September 1939). At Christmas 1943, prayer cards were sent out by the congregation to members of the community serving in the armed forces: 'As the dawn of peace appears over the distant horizon, our prayers arise for your safe and early return from home or foreign stations and we hope that the Mantle of Our Lady of Aberdeen may protect you from all spiritual and material dangers until you reach the peaceful haven of St Joseph's.'

With the end of the war, the parish began preparations for what was a most significant milestone in the life of the Catholic community in Kilmarnock: the centenary of the opening

of the church. The actual date of the main commemoration was 15 June 1947 when Bishop William Mellon of Galloway celebrated Pontifical High Mass in the church. A telegram was received from Pope Pius XII: 'The Holy Father lovingly imparts his apostolic blessing to the parishioners, past and present, of St Joseph's Church, Kilmarnock, on the happy occasion of the centenary of the parish.' Interestingly, the telegram was signed by the Papal Sub-Secretary of State, Monsignor Giovanni Battista Montini – the future Pope (now Saint) Paul VI.

The sodalities of the parish were prominent during the centenary celebrations, little knowing that (with hindsight) they were enjoying their period of greatest impact on the life of the community. Each Sunday of the month, a sodality would have a day when its members were expected to turn up with the appropriate dress and regalia and take their seats in a section of the church specially sectioned off by a pole with the crest of the sodality attached. These were known as 'Monthly Communions'. In 1947, the first Sunday of the month was set aside for the Women's Branch of the Sacred Heart Association and the School Girls; the second Sunday, the Boys' Guild and the School Boys; the third, the Children of Mary and the Guild of the Immaculate Conception; the fourth, the CYMS, the Men's Branch of the Sacred Heart Association and the SVDP. Annual retreats became part of the activities of such sodalities. After the arrival of the Passionists to Fatima House, Coodham, in 1949, retreats were predominantly held there.

At the end of this long period of consolidation of the Catholic community in Kilmarnock, stretching from the arrival of Rev. David Power in 1878 until the celebration of the church's centenary and the final years of Canon Carey, it is fortunate indeed that a visual record has survived of the highpoint of the sodality experience in the parish. Filmed in 1950 by Hurlford-based Bert Mocogni, St Joseph's Church, Kilmarnock provides colour images of the interior of the church (its altars) before capturing the full panoply of the Corpus Christi procession of that year. The entire congregation is seen to progress from the church to the grounds of Nazareth House where a service of Benediction was held. The film represents a veritable time capsule of a world now disappeared – a world in which the Church could truly have been described to inhabit one's entire life experience, from cradle to grave, courtesy of its schools, sodalities and social and recreational arrangements. The film is now preserved as part of the national archive of moving images: <https://movingimage.nls.uk/film/2880>.

Challenges (1953 – Present Day)

Canon Carey died, still Parish Priest, on 20 May 1951. His successor, Canon William J. O'Connor (1952-53; b. 1881, Cahir, County Tipperary) was short-lived, retiring to Ireland in ill health only some months after his appointment. He was a man described as having an 'old world courtesy' about him. As well as his short period as Parish Priest, he clearly also had fond memories of his time at St Joseph's as a curate many years before (1915-22). He left instructions that, at his death, his body should be brought back from Ireland to Kilmarnock for burial. These instructions were followed in August 1959 and he lies in the Grassyards Road cemetery next to Monsignor John Sheehy.

The years 1947-48 had seen the implementation of changes in the ecclesiastical geography of Scotland with a number of parishes in North Ayrshire being transferred from the Archdiocese of Glasgow to the Diocese of Galloway. The priest destined to succeed Canon O'Connor was providentially a curate in Ardrossan (one of the parishes transferred to Galloway) at the time of these changes, making him available for a move in 1950 to St Patrick's, Auchinleck, as Parish Priest. In 1953, Rev. Matthew Littleton (1953-77; b. 1903, Dangan, County Clare) received his bishop's notice of transfer to St Joseph's where he was to remain for twenty-four

years. Canon Littleton (as he became in 1966) was a larger-than-life character and tales about him remain legion amongst those who can remember him. A hurley player as a young man, he retained an 'up-and-at-them' approach to life. It was a common sight to see him in a boiler suit with pickaxe, hacking away at some part of the church avenue which required repair. At the funeral of a Polish parishioner in the early 1970s, the lectern collapsed beneath him as he brought his fist down during his homily to emphasise that 'Poland will rise again!'

The Littleton years saw the continuing growth of Kilmarnock's population and the increasing recognition that St Joseph's alone could not cope with the numbers of Catholics. As a result, three new churches would be opened in this period. The first, St Michael's in Shortlees, was opened in September 1953 (named in honour of Canon Michael Carey under whose stewardship the new church had first been mooted). The second was Our Lady of Mount Carmel in Onthank in May 1963. The efforts to raise the monies necessary for the building of this church were intense, including the running of what was reputed to be the most successful bingo operation in the West of Scotland with bus-parties attending from miles around. The fact that the bingo cards used were purchased from a firm in Littleton, Colorado, may have been a good omen, for Fr Littleton handed over the church to the diocese without a penny's debt – a matter of record of which he remained very proud. The third church to be opened was St Matthew's in New Farm Loch in April 1977. Mirroring the St Michael's gesture of 1953, the new St Matthew's was named in honour of Canon Littleton who, indeed, managed to attend the opening Mass, not knowing that he had only a few more months to live. He knew the first Parish Priest of St Matthew's very well: his longest-serving curate, Fr Patrick McSorley (1960 and 1962-74).

Without question, the greatest challenge to face Canon Littleton was responding to the changes in the wake of the Second Vatican Council (1962-65) and the advent of the New Rite of Mass in November 1969. Throughout 1970-71, the interior of St Joseph's was reconfigured along lines which sought to serve as a model for the conversion of an 'old church' into a 'modern Vatican II church'. The ornate High Altar was taken down and replaced with a much simpler, plain altar at the front of the sanctuary where the priest would now celebrate Mass facing the congregation. At the same time, the side altars to Our Lady and St Joseph respectively were dismantled, the pulpit (which had been situated outside the sanctuary) was removed, the altar-rails were discarded, and the baptismal font at the back of the church was substituted by another placed just outside the sanctuary. A moderately abstract figure of the resurrected Christ replaced the First World War memorial Calvary as the dominant feature of the sanctuary itself. The exterior of the church also received attentions with the original main entrance of the church closed off, replaced by thick glass (still in place, visible in the porch), and a new main entrance constructed just around the corner (still situated there today). These changes occasioned modifications to the porch area with the moving of the steps up to the organ gallery from one side of the church to the other. In all of this, Canon Littleton acted in good faith, prompted to action by the circumstances of his time.

In April 1975, Canon Littleton received the singular honour of being created a Freeman of the Burgh of Kilmarnock, alongside the Rt Hon. William Ross MP and Rt Hon. John Scott-Ellis, Ninth Baron Howard de Walden and Seaford. He interpreted this act of the civic authorities not just in personal terms but as an honour extended to the entire Catholic community. While in failing health for much of the time which followed this occasion, he remained in harness as Parish Priest (though latterly the reality was that the administration was being undertaken by an experienced assistant priest, Fr Samuel McGinness). He initiated the building of a new hall in the grounds of the church and, indeed, was fond of inspecting the works during his last days.

He died on 9 August 1977, aged 73. His grave, too, can be found in Grassyards Road beside his predecessors, Monsignor Sheehy, Canon Carey and Canon O'Connor.

With the arrival of Rev. Denis Quinlan (1977-2007; b. 1932, Cork City) to take on the mantle of Parish Priest in September 1977, the history of St Joseph's enters an era of living memory for many of those who now sit in the church's pews. Perhaps at the forefront of those memories is the recollection of Fr (later Canon) Quinlan overseeing preparations for the marking of the 150th anniversary of the opening of the church in 1997. Much had already been done in the years leading up to that celebration. The new hall was opened in 1978 and over the next couple of decades a range of changes were made to the church itself: an extension was added to the main entrance; the interior was completely repainted; a carpet was laid out to cover the entire floor area (the aisles had previously been tiled); new lighting was installed; a side door to the church on the priest's sacristy's side was closed up (it only dated from 1970) and an alternative side entrance created at the altar-servers' sacristy's side. In 1994, the sanctuary area was completely transformed yet again, with a new marble altar, lectern, presidential chair, baptismal font, paschal candle stand, and plinth (upon which was placed a new tabernacle). The entire interior of the church was painted once again, resulting in a distinctive colour scheme. Over those same decades, two successive new sets of Stations of the Cross took their place around the church: the first set, purchased in the early 1980s, lacked figurative representations of the scenes of the Passion and, consequently, never managed to capture the devotional imaginations of many in the congregation. This set was, in turn, replaced in 1995 by the Stations to be seen to this day in the church. Made in Italy, these Stations were a return to a familiar style with the scenes represented by figures skilfully worked in wood, gilded in gold and silver.

The 150th anniversary itself was a time during which there was much shared pride in the inheritance of the present congregation of St Joseph's, reflecting with gratitude on the efforts of so many people over the previous fifteen decades. There was a programme of events over the week preceding the actual date of the anniversary, including a ceilidh, a concert featuring school pupils, and a Festival of Flowers (on the theme of the sacraments) which brought many visitors to the church. A majestic new stained glass window, designed by Mr Paul Lucky of Glencairn Studio, Kilmaurs, was unveiled and can still be seen in its central position behind the pipes of the organ. The Mass of Thanksgiving took place on the exact date being commemorated: 13 June 1997. Principal Celebrant was Rt Rev. Maurice Taylor, Bishop of Galloway, and he was joined by many priests of the diocese, including former assistant priests of St Joseph's, as well as by Fr Quinlan himself. A significant feature of the Mass was that it was one of the first occasions on which the new Galloway Mass by (now Sir) James MacMillan was sung, with the composer and his wife in attendance. St Joseph's Choir represented the parish's strong choral roots, accompanying the liturgy with a series of modern motets (by Noel Rawsthorne, Colin Mawby and Alan Viner) as well as memorably singing the Gloria from the Credo Mass by Mozart in a short ceremony at the conclusion of the Mass. Undoubtedly, there were a few lumps in throats as the strains of Dear St Joseph, Pure and Gentle concluded the liturgy. The music rose up with the hopes and thoughts of all in attendance, looking back on relatives departed, missing friends, memories of a community tried and tested.

It is now almost a quarter-of-a-century since the great celebration of 1997 and it is hard to believe that the 175th anniversary of the opening of St Joseph's is only a few years away – in 2022, to be exact. The community of St Joseph's parish remains as committed as ever to cherishing its venerable old church building, vibrant still through its living members. Canon Quinlan retired in 2007 (he died in Kilmarnock in 2015), handing over the reins to Rev. Stephen

Latham (2007-16) who, in his turn (on moving to St Quivox, Prestwick), passed the baton to the current Parish Priest, Rev. Stephen McGrattan (2016-). The fabric of the building, its furnishings and artefacts, will continue to require loving care and attention over the years ahead. Challenging though this can be, not least financially, it can nevertheless be deemed a privilege for current-day parishioners to be custodians of such a historic building which has not only been integral to the life of members of its own congregation but also, let it justly be asserted, has played its part in shaping the modern history of Kilmarnock. This latter fact was recognised in the gracious awarding of a blue plaque by the Kilmarnock and District History Group as part of the Kilmarnock Heritage Walk Millennium Project for the year 2000. The plaque still adorns the entrance to the church – a proud and eloquent gift to St Joseph’s which, in the final analysis, has been the spiritual home and formative inspiration of so many who over the decades have made such positive contributions as citizens to the town of Kilmarnock, to Scotland and, indeed, to the wider world.

This summary of the history of St Joseph’s draws on material in the following work:

McCluskey, St Joseph’s Kilmarnock 1847-1997: A Portrait of a Parish Community, (Kilmarnock: St Joseph’s Church, 1997). ISBN 9780946356195.