

THE DIOCESE OF LEEDS IN THE SECOND WORLD WAR 1939-1945

As the nation commemorates the 75th anniversary of the end of the Second World War, Fr Nicholas Hird and Dr James Hagerty recall life in the Diocese during the conflict.

The Diocese

At the outbreak of war in September 1939 the Diocese of Leeds stretched from Settle in the north to Sheffield in the south, and from Goole in the east to Halifax in the west. Basically, it covered the old West Riding of Yorkshire.

Bishops had to provide priests, churches, schools and welfare services for their huge and largely urban congregations. 293 priests served the Diocese of Leeds and its Catholic population of 156,000; 237 were diocesan priests and 56 were from religious orders. There were 119 churches, 52 convents, 92 schools, and 18 charitable institutions including homes and hospitals.

Much work had been done by Bishop Joseph Cowgill during the inter-war years but Bishop Henry Poskitt's efforts to advance Catholic interests were inevitably affected by the war. No work on new schools or charitable homes could start and only St Joseph's, Thorne, St Nicholas, Gipton, Christ the King, Crossflats, and St Patrick's, Shire Green, Sheffield, were the churches opened during the war.

Bishop Poskitt's Response to War

Bishop Poskitt came out strongly for the destruction of Nazism and the reconstruction of post-war British society according to Christian principles. He saw the war in terms of a pagan world and Great Britain sliding towards Godlessness. He identified non-religious state schools as 'Godless' and in the increasingly secular state, he said, children have no fixed moral principles. His warning was stark:

Soldiers may die on the battlefield for the defence of our Christian civilisation, but the education system of the country is destroying the very principles of that civilisation in the hearts and minds of its children.

The Bishop was particularly committed to the Sword of the Spirit movement and to Catholic Action. By 1943 there were many Catholic organizations throughout the diocese emphasising social and political action supported by prayer and study. Bishop Poskitt took the lead in their endeavours through his presidency of a Diocesan Executive.



Bishop Henry Poskitt, Bishop of Leeds

Church services were affected by the war. In an *Ad Clerum* of 20 November 1939, Bishop Poskitt stated that 'there shall be no Midnight Mass at Christmas this year in any of the Churches of the Diocese'. Permission was given, however, for Midnight Mass to be celebrated in the chapels of Religious Houses, provided that no one was present from outside the resident community.

Evacuation

In the early months of the war over 32,000 children were evacuated from Bradford, Leeds, Sheffield and Rotherham – areas considered vulnerable to German air raids – to more rural areas within the Diocese. Other children were evacuated to Yorkshire from southern England. Bishop Poskitt tried to ensure that Catholic children were placed with Catholic families and received a Catholic education and spiritual care. He tried desperately to document the movement of Catholic mothers and children but local authorities were concerned more with the safety of evacuees rather than their religious needs. A great deal of work was thus placed upon priests in reception areas. By Christmas 1939, however, many evacuees had returned home.

Another type of evacuation was experienced in May 1940 when the British Expeditionary Force was evacuated from the beaches of Dunkirk. Thousands of soldiers were sent back to centres all over Yorkshire. In Leeds and other cities, they stood on street corners looking exhausted and wearing torn and dirty uniforms.

The Diocese under Attack

Normal life was disrupted throughout the war. Families were affected by evacuation, the death of loved ones on active military service, and the destruction of their property and businesses. The industrial cities in the Diocese were bombed. Houses, churches and schools were damaged and people were killed.

German air raids highlighted the need to protect church buildings. In early 1941 a call went out in St Paulinus, Dewsbury, that ‘12 young men over 16 years [were needed] to volunteer to watch and protect in case of fire / incendiary during air raids our church and school. This Government order is compulsory.’ The response cannot have been very good as it was subsequently announced that ‘we want more men as watchers and fire-fighters.’

On the night of Sunday 3 August 1940, from 10.33pm until 3.00 am the next morning, over a hundred bombs fell on Bradford. One casualty was the recently built St Peter’s Church on Leeds Road. A bomb passed through the roof causing a crater 8 feet deep and 20 feet in diameter. Parts of the solid oak pews were found embedded in the remains of the roof

structure. Nearby, an unexploded bomb, just outside the convent, meant that the nuns had to be evacuated in the early hours, but despite all the terrors of the night, Mass was celebrated early next morning by Fr Charles Daly.



The bomb damaged St Peter' Church, Bradford, August 1940.

In December 1940 Sheffield and Wakefield were bombed and St Vincent's Church and Girls' School in Sheffield were severely damaged. The church was re-opened on Easter Sunday 1942.

St Wilfrid's Church, Sheffield, was also damaged and on the night of 29 April 1942, five sisters at the Bar Convent, York, were killed during a German 'Baedeker' air raid which were intended to destroy England's historic cities. In August 1942, Kirkstall Forge, a major industrial installation in Leeds, was bombed and five workers were killed.



The bomb damaged St Vincent's Church, Sheffield, December 1940

Military Service

As in the First World War, Catholic men served in the military but this time as conscripts rather than as volunteers. The names of the dead were added to the many First World War memorials that had only recently been erected in churches and schools after 1918. The boys' schools suffered many losses.

Diocesan priests served as military chaplains and also as Officiating Chaplains to the many Army barracks and Royal Air Force stations across the Diocese. An American Hospital was opened in Harrogate. Priests were not excused civilian duties. Many acted as Air Raid Wardens and Fire Watchers and had also to comfort bereaved families and endeavour to sustain morale.

Many veterans of the First World War and men in Reserved Occupations served in the Special Constabulary and Home Guard or 'Dad's Army'.

A Leeds VC

On 12 August 1943, twenty-one-year-old Flight Sergeant Arthur Louis Aaron was the captain and pilot of a Stirling bomber that took off from RAF Downham Market for a raid on the Italian city of Turin. During the raid his aircraft was attacked and Sergeant Aaron was shot in the face and arm. The navigator had been killed and many of the crew were wounded. Sergeant Aaron's subsequent leadership earned him the Victoria Cross. The citation ran:

Flight Sergeant Aaron was assisted to the rear of the aircraft and treated with morphia. After resting for some time, he rallied and, mindful of his responsibility as captain of the aircraft, insisted on returning to the pilot's cockpit where he was lifted into his seat and had his feet placed on the rudder bar. Twice he made determined attempts to take control and hold the aircraft to its course but his weakness was evident and with difficulty he was persuaded to desist. Though in great pain and suffering from exhaustion, he continued to help the crew by writing directions with his left hand.

Eventually the plane, still carrying its bombs, reached Bone airfield in North Africa where Fr Aaron died nine hours after landing. Air Chief Marshal Arthur Harris of Bomber Command

wrote to Sergeant Aaron's parents: 'In my opinion never, even in the annals of the RAF, has the VC been awarded for skill, determination and courage in the face of the enemy of a higher order than that displayed by your son on his last flight.'

Arthur Aaron was baptised at St Mary's, Knaresborough, in 1922. A Requiem Mass was offered for the repose of his soul at St Anne's Cathedral, Leeds, in the presence of the pilot's family and civic dignitaries.



The Schools and the War

The war had a huge impact on the Diocesan schools. While younger children and their teachers were evacuated, former pupils donned military uniforms. The boys' grammar schools and mixed elementary schools provided manpower for the armed forces while former pupils of the girls' grammar and elementary schools served as non-combatants in the uniformed support services, civil defence agencies, and in armaments, munitions and other factories.

St Bede's new school in Bradford was due to open in September 1939; instead it was occupied by the Duke of Wellington's Regiment. Over 800 boys of the school served in the forces. 700 former pupils of St Michael's College, Leeds, served in the military.



*Lieut. Joseph McEvoy, old boy of St Bede's Grammar School,
KIA, Dec. 1942*

At Work during the War

The textile mills in the Diocese worked at full stretch producing military uniforms and other war materials. Manningham Mills in Bradford made material for parachutes, David Brown of Huddersfield manufactured Spitfire gears, Broadbent's of Huddersfield made midget submarines, Jowett's motor company of Bradford expanded its factory to increase output and the AVRO factory at Yeadon built Lancaster bombers. Many of the new workforce were women. One in ten of the men who were conscripted for military service were sent down the coalmines and became 'Bevin Boys'. South and West Yorkshire had many coalmines. Meanwhile in the extensive rural areas of the Diocese farmers and the Land Army produced food for a population dependent on rations.

A Parish in Wartime

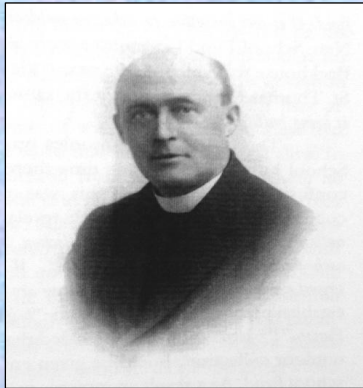
Our Lady and St Paulinus, Dewsbury, was typical of many industrial parishes within the Diocese and like other communities it suffered from dislocation and death during the war. The Parish Priest, Fr William Hayes, tried to ensure that Catholic life continued as usual within the restrictions of emergency regulations and wartime disruption. Services were conducted as normal and the school grew with the arrival of Belgian and Czech refugee children but the loss of young men to the forces placed a huge strain upon families. The thoughts of parishioners were always with their loved ones serving their country and Mass was frequently celebrated for the safe return of those directly involved in the conflict or for those who had been killed, were wounded, or were missing.

Churches as well as other buildings had to comply with government regulations regarding black-out curtains and blinds. To this end appeals for funds were made. Having spent £35 on the blinds for St Paulinus' Church, Fr Hayes was quick to highlight the slowness of parishioners to respond to his request for funds: 'We have received £15 from CYMS towards the church blinds also £2 from a parishioner making in all £17 toward £35 expended. There remains £18 further to be contributed by the Parish which so far has contributed nothing. This is definitely their business as the church is the Parochial Church.' Clearly frustrated, he later announced that there was '£12 still required to pay for the church black out; [with] no contribution towards this end for weeks.'

In an effort to contribute to the war effort, parishioners raised money for the Red Cross, War Weapons Week and the RAF Benevolent Fund. The children also raised money for war charities while in an attempt to have rare moments of enjoyment, the Catholic Young Men's Society organised occasional dances and, with the Mothers' Union, entertained Catholic soldiers billeted in the town.

Despite their own limited means, Sunday congregations were asked to continue to be financially generous to good causes. When a special collection for the work of the Red Cross was poorly supported, due to three quarters of the regular congregation not attending Mass on account of snow on the Sunday morning the collection was taken, those who did not attend were called to make donations to the fund through weekly Outdoor Collections.

The end of the war in Europe was announced in May 1945. At St Paulinus, the May Procession was described in the local newspaper as ‘a brilliant spectacle’.



Fr William Hayes, Parish Priest, St Paulinus, Dewsbury

Catholic Refugees and Prisoners of War

In the summer of 1940, along with others, Catholics were called upon to prepare for an influx of refugees. In Dewsbury, where Belgian refugees had found sanctuary during the Great War, congregations were informed that the refugees would be mostly Catholic. Within a week the parish had responded by advertising a social evening for parishioners the proceeds of which would be given to the Local Refugee Fund. Refugees arrived in the Diocese from Germany, France, Belgium and western and central Europe. They had nothing and many were housed and schooled within Catholic parishes.

As the war progressed a ministry was provided to prisoners of war. For example, Fr Kaesan of the Sacred Heart Church, Leeds, ministered to German prisoners at Post Hill Camp, Pudsey and there were camps at Butcher Hill and Farnley in Leeds. Italians and Germans were imprisoned at Overdale in Skipton.

Towards the end of the war substantial numbers of Latvian, Ukrainian, Lithuanian and Polish refugees arrived in the diocese. They quickly established their own communities around their priests and eventually opened their own churches. In 1984 the Polish community of Sheffield erected a memorial plaque in St Marie’s Cathedral to those who were killed in the war.

The Diocese at the End of the War

The number of priests in the diocese had increased to 340 with 276 from the diocese and 64 from religious orders. The Catholic population stood at 161,998 and the number of parishes remained at 127, but the number of charitable homes and institutions had risen to 20.

The Diocese and its people had suffered extensive material damage; many lives had been lost; many families had experienced severe hardship and would continue to do so as post-war austerity began to bite. Bishop Poskitt now had to lead the Diocese from war into peace and with his priests and people confront a bewildering range of personal and institutional problems.

War Memorials

Parishes and schools throughout the Diocese remembered those who had died in the war. In many cases, names were simply added to the recently erected memorials to the fallen of the First World War.

40 parishioners of St Paulinus, Dewsbury, gave their lives on military service in the Second World War with most, 14, dying in 1944. 76 former pupils of St Bede's were either killed in action or died of wounds. 33 former students of De La Salle College, Sheffield, lost their lives in the war. 55 former students of St Michael's College, Leeds, were killed in action; others were reported missing or wounded.



Second World War Memorials, Killingbeck Catholic Cemetery, Leeds

Acknowledgements

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Further reading

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