

CHURCH OF ST PAUL BEDFORD

BEDFORDSHIRE

Proposed Memorial to the Community of St. Etheldreda.

Statement of Need

Proposal :

The proposal is to install a memorial to the Anglican sisterhood community of St. Etheldreda who were active in Bedford between 1871 and 1984 who ran a Sunday school, night schools, guilds and meetings and orphanage, as well as nursing the poor and during the black smallpox epidemic of 1871 – 1872.

The proposed memorial is to take the form of a mosaic icon of the Blessed Virgin Mary and Christ Child. The theological emphasis being on the “eleousa” (loving kindness), through her left hand she offers an element of the “hodegetria” (she who points the way). The lettering is the contracted form of the Greek: “Meter Theou”, (Mother of God).

The memorial is proposed to occupy the external vacant niche on the east end of the Chancel.



1. Why is it thought to be necessary to erect another memorial ?

- i. The current perception of many people today is that all orphanages/children's homes run under the supervision of religious groups, were places of misery and abuse. This perception needs to be rebalanced. It is important that the work of the Anglican sisters' legacy of love, compassion and understanding, covering one hundred and fifty years in Bedford, is known and remembered.
- ii. It is an important part of the history of 'Victorian' Bedford. This is recognised by a "civic" memorial, "blue plaque," on the outside of the former chapel in Bromham Road but the church's role also needs to be recognised.
- iii. The evidence for the "legacy of love" generated by the sisters' work is that the "children" wishing to return "home" to see the sisters did so. These children continue to bring not only their children, but their children bring their children as well. It is a wonderful expression of enduring love and thanksgiving, which speaks volumes.
- iv. The desire to "return" is common to all, but when the last sister has been "promoted to glory," the "big house" on Bromham Road, the house in Conduit Road and Paddock House in Milton Keynes will all be occupied by strangers, where will the children return to? The answer is most likely St. Paul's Church.

The sisters are buried in the church yard close to the proposed memorial and most of the children would have attended services in the church. The church may be locked or being used – increasingly, people may be reluctant to enter a church for any number of reasons. An outside memorial/focus, all can visit at any time, in any way or condition, to remember, give thanks or just to 'talk' to the sisters. The proposed image of the ever-loving Mother of God may help.

- v. The proposed memorial is a private, personal gift of thanks for one hundred and fifty years of care given by the sisters; this included caring not only for the donor, but also for their parents and grandparents, all of whom lived in Bedford. This is probably a unique record of service stretching back from Sister Hazel to Sister Fanny – support provided from the inception of St. Etheldreda (St. Eths.) to the demise of the order.

- vi. The memorial is not intended to impact on or inhibit any future memorial that the St. Eths.Trustees may wish to commission. The trustees have affirmed their willingness for this memorial to be sited as proposed.

2. Why the memorial at St. Paul's Church ?

- i. The community of St. Eths owes its inception to two notable and inspiring incumbents of St. Paul's Church:
 - (a) The Revd. John Donne who arrived in 1824 and his successor:
 - (b) The Revd. Michael Ferree Sadler, appointed in 1864. (1819 – 1895).

Although Sadler left in 1869, his incumbency, being very brief compared with that of his predecessor's exceptionally long one, none-the-less, achieved much. (He was a national figure in Tractarian theological circles and a prolific writer; he took part in the Gorham controversy with his "The Sacrament of Responsibility" 1851.)

Both were representative of the Evangelical and Tractarian revivals in the Church of England at that time and their respective service at St. Paul's wonderfully prepared Fanny Eagles (1830 – 1907) for her future, religious life as Sister Fanny; a life which would impact not only on St. Paul's and Bedford, but also the wider world. Her legacy – the St. Eth's sisters – would endure to the present day.

The last, remaining sister is an honorary priest attached to St. Paul's church.

- ii. Following the deaths of her brother, father and finally, in 1866, her mother, Fanny Eagles felt able to enter one of the newly formed Church of England sisterhoods. It was her vicar, the Revd. Mr. Sadler, who persuaded her to remain in Bedford and work amongst the slums of the parish.
- iii. This cannot have been an easy decision for any, young, single girl who was used to the "polite society" of Bedford. After training to be a nurse in a fever ward in London, she not only returned to work amongst the very poor and deprived, but also had to face not only the "polite society", but the extreme protestant prejudice of the predominately non-conformist town.

- iv. The newly formed community with the curates of St. Paul's Church, ran the usual Sunday school, night schools, guilds and meetings as well as nursing the poor; but it was through their exceptional and courageous work during the black smallpox epidemic of 1871 – 1872, when two hundred and eighteen people died, that the community secured not only acceptance, but the admiration, respect and love of the people of Bedford.
“They went where no one else would go.”
- v. This devotion attracted the attention and patronage of Mr. Anthony Gibbs (1812 – 1907) of Tyntesfield Park, Bristol (now in the care of the National Trust.) He was a munificent benefactor to numerous church and educational projects at this time. His recognition of the work of the St. Eths community was significant and his financial contribution transformative, securing the future of the community.
- vi. It was soon after 1872 that the sisters took in their first child. This “orphanage” work would become their chief concern and only ended in 1984 when the “big house” in Bromham Road was sold and the sisters and four remaining children moved to Conduit Road.
- vii. In 1934 the sisters in Bedford had become part of the Deaconess Community of St. Andrew's (CSA) with its motherhouse in London. In 1946 the name was changed from Diocesan Deaconess Children's Home and Orphanage to St. Etheldreda's so that children no longer had to say that they came from The Orphanage. In 1969 the Deaconess Community of St. Andrew's voted to withdraw its work from Bedford but the three sisters there (Sisters Joyce, Muriel and Hazel) asked to be released from CSA for a period of years as they regarded their work with the children as their personal responsibility; it was agreed that this should be a period technically known as ‘exclaustration’ under the authority of the Bishop of St. Albans. The report in 1972 stated that “*Many of the children entering St. Etheldreda's, the majority placed by Local Authorities, came from non-existent or broken homes. Their emotional and psychological needs were great, and children care, by the 1960s, was a profession requiring staff with skill and specialised training.*” The sisters went on training-courses, and staff with various qualifications continued to be employed. A separate adolescent unit was built in the grounds of the Bromham Road house in 1976 for four teenage children plus one member of staff to provide suitable transition towards independent living.

- viii. In 1992, the sisters left the house in Conduit Road, moving to Paddock House, initially alongside the Society of the Sacred Mission in Willen, at Milton Keynes; however, Sister Muriel remained in the parish, living and assisting at the Christie Almshouses which are administered by the church through an independent charity. After some ten years, she joined the other sisters to live permanently at Paddock House.
- ix. There is a memorial window to Sister Fanny in St. Paul's Church by Clayton and Bell, 1908 (north east clerestory). The memorial window to the Revd. Mr. Sadler (Clayton and Bell, 1897) is below that of Sister Fanny.

Note:

The present proposal is for a memorial to the community of St. Eths.

Please see: "A tree in whose shadow you can rest," "Call Sister Fanny" – The Annals of St. Etheldreda's, Sister Hazel, 2019.

3. Site of memorial.

- i. In the opinion of both the PCC and the church architect, the interior of St. Paul's Church has sufficient memorial tablets, windows and other forms of memorials. It seems to all that it is so appropriate that "something" should be commissioned outside the building to reflect the outreach of the sisters' work. They were not an enclosed community.
- ii. The site chosen is at the east end of the churchyard and where a section of the existing ground, around the Barnard Cross, has been reserved for the interment of parishioners' ashes. It is a special, quiet place for remembrance, reflection and thanksgiving as it is away from parked cars and points of entry. In addition, beneath the east walls of the chancel and Trinity Chapel, the ashes of Sisters Joyce and Muriel are interred. It is also intended that Sister Hazel's ashes will join them. David Farnborough, a former Bishop of Bedford, also chose this spot for the interment of his ashes.
- iii. During the great fabric restoration undertaken by the Revd. Nicholas Coulton in the 1980s, the old cement rendering was removed from the wall below the east window of the chancel. This necessary action revealed two, curious, empty "niches" – one on the south and one on the north

side. No one seemed to be able to ascertain their function or age. The one on the north side was in very poor condition and the then church architect, Mr. Victor Farrer, decided to wall over it. The one on the south side was left, but a cheap iron grille fixed over the aperture. Unfortunately, this rusted, allowing and encouraging the depositing of litter which was difficult to remove. The present church architect, Mr. Michael Dales, has removed the grille and walled over the aperture, leaving a shallow recess surrounded by the existing stone architectural frame.



- iv. It is felt by all, including the artist who has visited the site, that this empty frame provides an ideal setting for the proposed memorial.

- v. The proposed memorial is to take the form of a mosaic icon of the Blessed Virgin Mary and Christ Child. The theological emphasis being on the “eleousa” (loving kindness), through her left hand she offers an element of the “hodegetria” (she who points the way). The lettering is the contracted form of the Greek: “Meter Theou”, (Mother of God).



Artist's sketch



Watercolour representation

- vi. The concept, design and materials chosen are unusual for an Anglican parish church and require the highest possible design and craft skill. It is believed that James Blackstone and St. Dunstan's Icons have the necessary skill and experience to achieve a remarkable and unique work of art, worthy of the community of St. Eths. and a grade one building.
- vii. Details of their work in several cathedrals – both Anglican and Roman Catholic – in Great Britain and other international commissions will be provided in a separate paper, prepared by James Blackstone.
- viii. The commissioning of bespoke, contemporary works of art for St. Paul's Church has a long tradition. The Very Revd. Nicholas Coulton was

responsible for the much admired two sets of engraved glass doors and over door at the west end, by David Peace and Meinrad Craighead. The Revd. John Pedlar introduced the memorial to Dorothy Porter by the Welsh artist, Ieuan Rees and the BBC Memorial in the Trinity Chapel by the Cardozo Kindersley Workshop. This imaginative memorial in the Trinity Chapel extends out into the churchyard by the entrance to the chapel. Both link the church with the wider community and history of Bedford. The proposed memorial will continue this. If it is ever thought to be necessary, the proposed memorial could be removed without significant damage to the grade one structure.

4. Installation of memorial

- i. The memorial of glass mosaic would be mounted upon an aluminium backing sheet secured within the niche before the last outer edge mosaic pieces are fitted to cover the fixing.

The existing cill of the niche would be dressed with a slight fall to facilitate rainwater run-off. The head would be dressed to form a drip.

The existing brick gully which runs the length of the chancel east wall would be cleaned and repointed.

The rosemary bushes which line the gully and keep people back from its edge would be trimmed and supplemented to form a low hedge barrier to the height of the niche cill.

The entire installation is reversible if it's removal were desired in the future.



