

Vice-Province of Gt. Britain & Ireland

A Brief History

The Vice-Province of Gt. Britain & Ireland was formally established in 1942, although its roots stretch further back to the end of the 19th Century. In 1891, the Daughters of Wisdom came to England to find a refuge from the anti-Religious laws then in force in France. With them came two Montfort Missionaries: Fr. Antonin Lhoumeau (who later became Superior General) as chaplain to the Sisters, and a coadjutor Brother to help the Sisters establish themselves in Romsey in Hampshire. Some years later, when the Montfort Missionaries were seeking a safer place to build an ‘Apostolic School’ to replace the one in Pontchâteau that had also been badly affected by the French laws, Father Charles Ponduran advised Father Lhoumeau (now the Superior General) that there was some land at Romsey where such a school could be built. So it was that in May 1910, **Montfort College** in Romsey opened its doors to more than 60 students, not to mention the staff. It remained the principal Apostolic School for the French Province until 1927, when the one at Pontchâteau was able to be reopened. At that point, it was the intention of the Superiors in France to close Montfort College and withdraw from England. However, there were already quite a number of English boys wishing to enter the congregation, and there had already been some who had gone to France to make their novitiate; and so (largely due to the persuasive voice of the Belgian Father Matthieu Moors) it was decided to keep the College going to prepare English boys to enter the Montfort Missionaries. The following year, on the staff at Montfort College was the first English Montfort Father, Fr. Carter, who later left the congregation.

Montfort College was the only residence of the Montfort Missionaries in the British Isles until the outbreak of the second World War. Those who graduated from the College went to France to make their novitiate and their priestly studies, and most were then appointed to Montfort College or to the Shire mission in what is now Malawi. But when German troops invaded France in 1940, it was decided that the English students in Montfort-sur-Meu, together with their English mentors, should return to England. They caught the last boat sailing for England from Saint-Malo on 16 June 1940, arriving at Montfort College before dispersing to their various homes while some other accommodation could be sought for them. Those English novices who were at Chézelles did not fare as well — they were captured by the Germans and interned for the rest of the war, apart from two who were able to claim Irish citizenship, and who were released, to spend the rest of the war in Montfort-sur-Meu.

A temporary home for the scholastics was found just outside the village of Chipping in Lancashire, where, at **Leagram Hall**, on 24 September 1940, the English scholasticate was established with 43 scholastics (32 of whom were those who had escaped from France). But it was not until 1942 that another building was found in which to establish a novitiate — this was St. Joseph’s in **Ashurst**, near Southampton, about 6 miles from Montfort College. With the establishment of a novitiate, the way was open for a Province to be established, which, due to the difficulties of communication in wartime, was to be more or less independent of the mother-Province, France, though it was officially at that time a Vice-Province. The Vice-Province was formally established on 6 April 1942. The first Superior was Fr. Peter Ryan, one of the first English professed members of the Congregation, whose 6-year term of office was twice renewed in following years, so that he was Provincial for 18 years in all.

In 1945, a missionary residence was acquired in Horsforth, **Leeds**, in Yorkshire; then in 1948 another missionary residence was opened in **Liverpool**. The house in Liverpool is still ours,

though the house in Leeds closed sometime in the 1970s. But over the years, many missionaries passed through both residences as part of the mission teams preaching itinerant missions all over the country, as well as many retreats for communities of Religious Sisters. Montfort House, Liverpool, was also the centre for the magazine, '**Queen and Mother**', from the opening of the house in 1948 until the demise of the magazine in December 1969. '**Queen and Mother**' was first published in January 1937 from Montfort College, then later from St. Joseph's, Ashurst until 1948.

In 1964, the house next door to Montfort House in Liverpool, called '**Sandymount**', was acquired from a Catholic former sugar-manufacturer, and was opened as a Retreat Centre, which it has remained until the present day. For much of the time it was managed and run by the Montfort Fathers themselves, with the collaboration of (at various times) the Daughters of Wisdom, some lay individuals, a Charismatic group, and more recently a Catholic couple.

Meanwhile, the house in **Ashurst** served as the Province's novitiate from 1942 until the 1980s. When this use was finished, it became a pastoral and retreat centre, for a time confided to the management of a group of Dominican Sisters (with, for much of that period, a Montfort Father as a co-director). For a few years it served as a 'Retreat' for asylum-seekers and refugees, largely from Eastern Europe and the Middle East, under the care of some members of the Province with the collaboration, for a time, of the Daughters of Wisdom. It then reverted to being a pastoral centre for a number of years.

A more permanent location for the English scholasticate was found in 1946 — at **Church Stretton** in Shropshire, where St. Mary's Scholasticate was the formation centre for several generations of Montfortians, until, in 1968, under pressure to find a more academic priestly formation programme than the Vice-Province itself could supply with teachers, a move was made to **Heythrop Park** in Oxfordshire, where the English Jesuits had their own scholasticate. The Vice-Province joined with a few other congregations in creating a combined scholasticate on the Jesuit campus, and we built a brand-new college to house our scholasticate there. However, two years later, the Jesuits, in the search for affiliation with a recognised university, decided to move to London. The Vice-Province bought a house in **Highgate**, North London, called 'Cromwell House', from where the scholastics (numbering up to 17 or 18 in some years) went to, first of all, the Jesuit-led Heythrop College (affiliated with London University), and later to the Missionary Institute London in Mill Hill, a combined effort of several missionary congregations, and affiliated to Catholic University, Leuven, in Belgium. As Cromwell House began to be too small to house all the scholastics, a new house in London (at **Hendon**) was acquired in 1978 to house the Philosophy students, who also attended the MIL. Then in 1982, Cromwell House was sold, and all the scholastics moved to **Homerton**, in the East End of London, where the Vice-Province had recently taken on the administration of the parish of Our Lady and St Dominic, and where the accommodation was sufficient also for the students. This house remained the student-house until the mid-to-late 1980s, when all the students moved to a new house acquired in **Cricklewood**, North-West London, and then towards the end of the 1980s to the house in Hendon.

Meanwhile a house was opened in Scotland, at **Barrhead** near Glasgow, in 1960, and one in the Republic of Ireland in 1965, at **Monaghan**. Both of these houses were in part a response to vocations coming from Scotland and Ireland, and both were initially seen as 'hostel-seminaries', that is houses where candidates for the Congregation could be housed and given a specifically Montfortian formation, while going to local Catholic schools for their academic education. Both houses flourished as such for some time, but eventually became more retreat and pastoral centres, and home to itinerant missionaries. The house in Monaghan was closed

in 2002, and that in Barrhead shut down in 2006, since which dates our presence in Ireland and Scotland has largely been confined to the preaching of missions and retreats there.

In 1978, an era ended when Montfort College in Romsey was finally closed after 68 years of existence, due to a dearth of vocations and new ideas about the formation of candidates for the religious life. There had long been a myth that when the statue of St Louis Marie over its main door left its niche, the college would close: in 1976, the statue fell, probably hit by lightning; and two years later, the college was indeed closed! For its last year it had been used as the location for the novitiate, but that was just to keep it occupied while a buyer was sought. It became the headquarters of a construction firm, then later was converted into apartments, the name 'Montfort College' being preserved, and more recently a small plaque has appeared on its gatepost bearing the insignia of a cross surrounded by the letters 'St. L of M'.

During all those years, too, the **Provincial residence** was re-located several times. It began at St. Joseph's in Ashurst, but was later transferred to Liverpool, which remained the Provincial residence until about 1979 or 1980, when the Provincial of the day felt that it would be important to have the Provincial residence in the capital, and a house was acquired in **Kilburn**, London. The provincialate was transferred from there to Cricklewood about 1988 (the house in Kilburn being sold), and then to a new house built in the grounds of the property at Hendon in 1991. At about that time, the parish in Homerton was relinquished, and the parish-priest and one or two others moved to take up residence in Cricklewood. In 1997, the number of scholastics having dwindled to zero, the whole property in Hendon was sold, and the Provincial residence moved back to Liverpool, where it remained until 2009, when Fr. Ronnie Mitchell was elected Provincial and opted to stay on in Ashurst. He remained there until his sudden death in 2012, and the present Vice-Provincial resides in Cricklewood.

In the course of its history the Vice-Province has had nine **Provincial/Vice-Provincial Superiors**: Fr. Peter Ryan (1942-1960); Fr. John Blaney (1960-1964 - when he was elected to the General Council); Fr. Wilfrid Jukka (1964-1970); Fr. Frederick Matthews (1970-1982); Fr. Samuel Erskine (1982-1991); Fr. Robert Douglas (1991-2000); Fr. Frederick Scragg (2000-2009); Fr. Ronnie Mitchell (2009-2012); and Fr. Kieran Flynn (2012-present day).

In line with the old Constitutions, the care of **parishes** remained a delicate question for many years, although the parish of **Romsey** was cared for during many decades by the Montfort Fathers, right up to 2006, even if they did not have the formal title of parish-priest. Over the years, a number of parishes were placed in the care of individual Montfort Fathers, including one in March, Cambridgeshire in 1943. Also Montfort Fathers from St. Mary's Scholasticate in Church Stretton cared for the Catholics in various outlying parishes in the area: Plowden, Craven Arms, Much Wenlock among others. Then, when the scholasticate moved to Oxfordshire in 1968, the Province was asked to take on the care of **Ludlow** parish in South Shropshire, along with Craven Arms and Cleobury Mortimer. We continued to care for these areas until at least the mid-1980s. Other parishes that were looked after by members of the Province over the years were: St Thomas More, **Twyford**, Berkshire (1967-1982), and St Paul's, **Woodridge, Australia** (1973-1989). As mentioned already, the Province took on the care of the parish of Our Lady and St Dominic in **Homerton** in 1982, and continued that charge until about 1991. The Province also took on the care of **Totton** parish (where Ashurst is situated) for a few years in the 1980s and 1990s, and the parish in **Gateacre** in Liverpool for several years.

Over the years, from even before the Vice-Province was established in 1942, our entity has sent members to serve in **other parts of the world**: many have been missionaries in **Malawi** (from 1941, at least, we have always had missionaries in Malawi) and more recently in

Uganda and **Kenya**; we lent two confreres to help in the formation of new Montfortians in **India** (both of whom served as novice-masters) and also some in the **Philippines**; while for 16 years we supplied men to work in **Australia** (1973-1989). We also lent some of our members to the **United States** Province, one of whom stayed there until he died in 2000. Two members of the entity served on the **General Council**, while others worked for the Congregation at large as Secretary General, translators, and even novice-master in a short-lived International bilingual novitiate.

From starting out as a Vice-Province in 1942, our entity became a fully-fledged Province on 12 July 1960, but, with declining numbers, on 17 October 2006, at the request of the Provincial Chapter, it was down-graded to a Vice-Province once again. At our height, we numbered more than 70 religious, but we are now just 12 in the British Isles, all over 70 years old with two exceptions; with three members seconded to the Anglo-African General Delegation, making a total of 15 in all.

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