

St. Mary's Catholic Church, Ryde.

St. Mary's Church in Ryde on the Isle of Wight is one of the foundation churches of the Diocese. The church is unique in many ways. Firstly, although it is popularly known as St. Mary's, its actual dedication is the Church of the Sorrowful and Immaculate Heart of Mary; the first church in England to bear this title. Secondly, built in 1846 it is one of the finest early Victorian Catholic churches in the south (remember that 1840s Catholic churches are quite rare). Thirdly, it is prominently and most conveniently situated in Ryde High Street. Not only is it the only church and the most interesting and attractive building in the High Street; it is also older, and more conveniently situated, than the Anglican Parish church. Furthermore, not only is it open every single day for parishioners and visitors, but a visit to the church will show that it is rarely empty. One will find ladies cleaning the brass, flower arrangers, schoolchildren on a guided tours, visitors casting their eye over the ornate carvings, artwork or furnishings or people kneeling in prayer or lighting a votive candle.

St. Mary's uniqueness and grandeur is due largely to one person, Elizabeth, Countess of Clare (grand daughter of the last Duke of Ancaster). Having gone on the "Grand Tour" of Europe in 1841 and becoming a Catholic in St. Peter's in Rome, she returned to Ryde and used her considerable wealth to build the church that we have in Ryde today. Designed by Joseph Hansom (of Hansom cab fame), the church has some fine stained glass windows (designed by Nathaniel Westlake), and a beautiful Lady Chapel and Shrine of Our Lady, with a Pugin altar and murals which depict scenes from the life of Jesus and Mary and decades of the rosary. This is one of the finest Lady Chapels in the Diocese. Another feature is a private family chapel, situated above the sacristy, built originally for the foundress. The chapel with its own altar, statues and stained glass has seating for about twenty people. It is almost a church within a church and very popular with visitors. Mass is offered here at various times in the year. Beneath the church, the crypt has been renovated as a shop, tea room and mini museum with exhibits illustrating the Catholic history of the Island. It is the only "open" church crypt on the Island; thus giving a service not only to parishioners, but also the wider community of Ryde.

The church has provided a home for the Extraordinary Form of the Mass for almost twenty years; long before Pope Benedict's "Summorum Pontificum", which lifted restrictions on this Form of the Roman Rite. This should not suggest that the parish is backward looking. A look at the church noticeboard or the parish website (www.stmarysryde.org) will show that the parish is a hive of activity with many small groups and societies meeting together, sharing their Faith and giving witness to the Gospel message. Prominent among the groups is the Island Catholic History Society. With over 120 members it is one of the largest in England. Such diverse groups as the Legion of Mary and the Justice and Peace Group, together with the Faith Study and Centering Prayer Groups make a valuable contribution to Catholic Parish Life. Passing of the Faith is paramount and there is a well organised Children's Liturgy Group which meet every Sunday and two choirs and an instrumental group that sing a variety of Mass settings to enhance the Liturgy.

The parish today encompasses the whole of the north east of the Isle of Wight and is the largest on the Island. Continually planning for the future the parish is arranging a Flower Festival and Exhibition in August and a pilgrimage to Walsingham in the Autumn. On the practical side, a new parish hall adjacent to the church, has just been opened. The present parish priest, Fr. Anthony Glaysher, is sensitive, not only to the needs of the parish, but also the history and tradition of the church. He is already looking ahead to the 150th anniversary of the consecration of the church in two years time, and he hopes by then to completely redecorate the interior of the church and provide a new Confessional.

The parish benefits considerably from the two Benedictine abbeys at Quarr and St. Cecilia's. Although autonomous, they are power-houses of prayer within the parish and provide a peaceful monastic atmosphere for people to worship Almighty God. Finally, within the past few months, the parish has had the honour to welcome members of the Ordinariate, established by Pope Benedict. Bringing their Anglican Patrimony into the Catholic Church, they have added an extra dimension to St. Mary's Parish life and strengthened our witness to the Faith.

