

## St Mary's Roman Catholic Convent & Orphanage

Over the years, two of the most frequent queries raised by visitors to the *Walthamstow Memories* site is 'Does anybody know where there was an orphanage in Walthamstow?' and 'Where can I find information about girls who were at St Mary's Orphanage?'



Because the story is bound up and entwined with St Nicholas Industrial School, St John's Industrial School, St Mary's, St Helen's and St George's schools and with St George's church,

in order to tell properly the story of St Mary's, it is necessary to learn about the history of the re-emergence of the English Roman Catholic church in the nineteenth century and specifically the growth of Roman Catholicism in Walthamstow. However, it is a history yet to be written.



St Mary's Roman Catholic Convent & Residential School was founded by Cardinal Manning in 1867 when he took on the lease of an old Walthamstow house that had previously been used as a private school. The purpose was to provide Roman Catholic education for 100 'poor' girls. The choice of location wasn't random. Only a few years earlier, Cardinal Nicholas Wiseman, the man

chosen by the Pope to lead the resurgence of Roman Catholicism in England, had lived next door at Walthamstow House.

In fact, at this time, the English Roman Catholic church was very keen to provide facilities for children so that they could receive a Roman Catholic education. Children, who might otherwise have been inmates in Workhouses

### *St George's Church, Shernhall Street*

Ten years earlier, in 1862, Cardinal Wiseman had opened the St Nicholas Industrial School for Boys in Shernhall Street by Church Lane (The present site of the Holy Family College) This institution later removed to Etloe House in Leyton and a few years later another St John's Roman Catholic Industrial School for Boys was opened on the site.

The problem was that many children of Roman Catholic parents were put into Workhouses but once they were there, they were given a Church of England education. Indeed, many Workhouses would not let Roman Catholic priests enter the Workhouses.



The English Roman Catholic church realised that they could overcome this problem by providing their own orphanages, industrial and other residential schools that were an alternative to Workhouse placements and that would provide the inmates with a Roman Catholic education.

Unlike most Workhouses that predominantly provided facilities for local people, the Roman Catholic institutions drew their inmates from a very large area. Analysis of the places of origin of the inmates at St Mary's and St John's shows that the children came from places all over the U and it is clear that the Roman Catholic church trawled Workhouses all over London and elsewhere for children.

Economically, the Roman Catholic church had a big financial advantage over the Union Workhouse s providers. Essentially, this was that their labour costs were substantially lower because most of the labour was provided voluntarily by different Roman Catholic religious orders. The Parishes that paid for the Union Workhouses were quite happy if they were relieved of the cost of Roman Catholic children in Union Workhouses

From 1865-67 St Mary's Convent Residential School and Orphanage was run by Dominican Nuns. They were followed by Nuns from the Sister of Mercy religious order. (Two of the Sisters served as nurses with distinction in the Crimean war and were honoured by Queen Victoria for their work) The Roman Catholic church purchased the site for £6,500 in 1885 so that the work could be continues. By 1901 the number of residential inmates had grown to 190 girls. In 1929 the Irish Sisters of Charity took charge of 200 children at the Residential School (Children's Home) The Children's Home was closed in the 1980's. Today, the site is occupied by the Roman Catholic school of Our Lady & St George

Unfortunately, it is extremely difficult to obtain information about the girls who were in the Children's Home up until the 1980's. Although, administratively, the Children's Home came under the Diocese of Brentwood, any existing records are held by the Diocese of Westminster.

**Bill Bayliss, October 2011**

A useful site that will give further information is:  
[http://olsgweb.org/history/documents/Schools%20History\\_100811.pdf](http://olsgweb.org/history/documents/Schools%20History_100811.pdf)