

Village Echoes

The Roman Catholic Church in Goudhurst (Church of the Most Sacred Heart) was established in the early 1880s as a result of the arrival in the parish of Miss Sophia Dashwood, a 50 year old spinster of independent means. Miss Dashwood was one of eight children of Admiral William Bateman Dashwood and had, in fact, been baptised into the Church of England in 1830. It is thought that she, and at least one of her sisters, converted to the Catholic faith after the death of their father in 1869 had left them financially independent.

She moved into Oakleigh House (nowadays known as Pinehurst) in West Road, Goudhurst towards the end of 1880 and was described in the local press as “a kind – hearted lady who receives crippled children into her home and has them educated into the tenets of the Catholic faith”. Before coming to Goudhurst she had run a similar establishment near Arundel in Sussex. The 1881 census taken in April that year shows that the “school for cripples”, as it was known, comprised about 20 female “boarders” aged between 5 and 19 years of age, as well as Miss Dashwood, a governess, a matron, a cook, one other servant and one visitor. With the exception of one female pupil teacher who was blind, all the other boarders are described as “scholars” and “cripples”. Whether the school was actually for children who were physically disabled or were just in poor health and thus unable to attend a regular school is not known.

Local people were able to attend services in the small wooden chapel which was erected in the grounds of Oakleigh, access being through a door in the brick wall which surrounded the property. Miss Dashwood’s time in Goudhurst was relatively short, for she left the village at some point between 1885 (when she contributed £5 to the money being raised for digging the well on the Plain) and 1891 by which time she was living in Slindon, near Arundel, where she died in 1917.

Following her departure from Goudhurst, the chapel was dismantled with the intention of re-erecting it in Beresford Road. However, this never happened as it was found more convenient to use the Catholic Day Schoolroom in Beresford Road instead. According to the Goudhurst Coronation Book of 1937 (page 593) this latter building had been built at the expense of a Mrs Palmer and her daughter during the 1880s.

The entry under Goudhurst in “Historical Notes on English Catholic Missions”, published in 1907, states that in 1905 the Catholic population of Goudhurst was then about 30 and goes on to list the names of the first four priests i.e., A. Cumberlege, E. Palmer, John Brady, and George Evelyn Mendham. Of these four, Father Mendham, is the one about whom most is known and he well may form the subject of a Village Echo at a future date.