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A Short History
of

***St. Peter's
Church
Woolwich***

by
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A SHORT HISTORY OF ST. PETER'S CHURCH WOOLWICH

PREFACE. This account is not intended to be a definitive parish history but merely an outline of the story of the growth of the Catholic Church in Woolwich since 1792. For this account I have drawn upon the archives kept at Archbishop's House, Southwark, the records kept at St. Peter's and the early history given in instalments in the St. Peter's Magazine by Fr. Bovington between 1936 and 1939. This pamphlet I dedicate to the memory of all the Priests who have served the Parish since its foundation.

PART ONE UP TO THE BUILDING OF ST. PETER'S

In the 18th century Woolwich was a large village in the county of Kent with a fair sized dockyard. The army were in the process of moving in and before the end of the century Woolwich was starting to grow quite fast. The dockyard was enlarged, the arsenal started and the headquarters of the Royal Artillery and Royal Military Academy were being built up.

The Catholic faith had been proscribed in England since the time of Queen Elizabeth I, but some families retained their faith throughout the years of persecution. Locally there was a "Catholic House" at Well Hall belonging to the Roper Family, descendants of St. Thomas More through his daughter Margaret. In 1733 however, the Ropers were forced to sell up and any local Catholics would have needed to go to London to find a Priest. In 1767 the Churchwardens of each parish in the Anglican diocese of Rochester were asked to make a return of all known Papists (Catholics) in the Parish. At Woolwich only one person is returned as a Catholic, a poor labourer whose name is not known.

From about 1770 onwards Woolwich started to grow fast and Irish labourers were brought in to build the arsenal and dockyard. In 1792, the first permanent mission was set up in the area at Greenwich. It was only in that year that the Government for the first time allowed Catholics to open their own chapels. The Greenwich Chapel was situated at the foot of Maze Hill in a road known as "Clark's Buildings". This was hard by the Royal Hospital, a forerunner of the Present Chelsea Pensioners' Home for retired soldiers. Apparently there were many poor Catholics living there. The Missioner had a wide area to cover stretching over to Dartford, Sidcup, Eltham, Lewisham and Deptford. The registers of Baptisms which are still to be seen at Our Lady Star of the Sea Parish, show that most of the Baptisms performed were in fact of Woolwich people. The Missioner used to advertise in the "Laity's directory" (a forerunner of the modern Catholic Directory) for financial help from wealthy Catholics.

Round about the turn of the century a large number of French Catholic prisoners of war were taken to London and imprisoned on old hulks by the shore of the Thames. A certain number of French priests exiled by the revolution saw to their needs. It was indeed a visit by Fr. Stephen Green, the Greenwich missioner to