

~ Opening of the High Altar, 1885

On June 18th 1885, the Whitehaven News carried the following report on the opening of the High Altar at St Mary's R.C Church at Cleator:

'On Sunday last, at Eleven o'clock Mass, there was a crowded Congregation, including numerous visitors from a distance at Cleator Catholic Church, on the occasion of the solemn opening of the magnificent new Altar and Reredos which had just been presented to the Church. The Celebrant was the incumbent, the Rev J.O Burchall; deacon, the Rev Dunstan Flanagan; sub-deacon, the Rev Basil Feeny; master of ceremonies, the Rev Lawrence Farrent; leader of the choir, the Rev Placid Corlett. The music was Mozart's No. 13'

'Mr J.B Senior was the organist and the choir was supported by an orchestral band. The music was very creditably rendered and altogether the music was very impressive. The preacher was the Right Rev. J.A Hickery, O.S.B. Ormskirk, Lancashire. Before commencing the sermon the preacher said: "My dear brethren, I have to thank your good Fathers for having inviting me to Cleator to preach to you this morning. I thank them because I not only feel it a pleasure, but I consider it an honour to preach to so large a congregation. It is not only a pleasure but also an honour to speak in such a fine Church. It is not always that a poor Priest has a fine Church to speak in; and also particularly on so auspicious an occasion as this the opening of this your magnificent new altar. It is also another source of gratification to me and it is this; it is not unknown to you and it is known to me, that this magnificent new altar is the gift of one donor; and I have much pleasure in the name of your good Father's and my own, in publicly thanking the giving of this gift and I pray God to bless him, bless him now and for ever". The preacher took for his text the 11th and 12th verses of the 25th chapter of Leviticus'.

'In the evening, the Rev. Basil Feeny O.S.B. of Workington, preached to a large congregation. The Rev Father selected as his text these words from the 11th chapter of St. Luke: "And it came to pass that he was praying in a certain place, when he ceased, one of his disciples came to him and said 'Lord, teach us also to pray'. "The preacher urged the view that the altar and reredos being for the glory of God should teach them to elevate their hearts to God, and they did this in the Catholic Church chiefly by prayer. They, as Catholics, claimed to have two chief sources of holiness, which were prayer and the frequentation of the sacraments and the one could not be without the other. He exhorted them, therefore, to make use of this altar and reredos to centre their thoughts on Almighty God'.

The Whitehaven News continued the report with a description that it had given in the previous week's paper:

'We gave a description of the altar and reredos in our last issue, but it may be briefly repeated in order to embody some further information that has come to hand. They were the gifts of John and Helen Cooney of Cleator Moor. The altar, though not so large and imposing as that at the Whitehaven Catholic Church, is a beautiful example of the Gothic or ecclesiastical style of architecture, of which there are no greater exponents than the Pugins. It was gratifying to observe that the judgement of the architect in the matter of decoration had not been clouded by any extravagant gaudiness. The purity of the conception was not hidden by gilding, nor was the general outline effect detracted from by an attractive background. All this left in simplicity, the only warmth of colour coming from the brass candlesticks and the bouquets of flowers that adorned the altar. The altar is of Caen stone a fine white material obtained from Normandy. It is supported by four shafts of Serpentine and Devon marbles, with carved capitals and bases'.

'The super-altar marbles are rouge and black antique. The tabernacle is of marble with repousse work by Hardman of Birmingham. The groups and statues of the reredos are carved in Caen stone, by the skilful chisel of Mr A.R. Wall, sculpture, Cheltenham. Quite recently Mr Wall has created altars at the following places: High altar at Grange-over-Sands, high altar and two side altars at Bolton-Le-Sands, high altar at Stafford, high altar at St Joseph's at Exeter, high altar and Our Blessed Lady's at St Peter's Leamington, high altar at Abergavenny and St Benedict's altar at Coventry - the firm has also in hand the Dr Milner memorial, marble altar for Dean Duckett of Wolverhampton and a marble chapel and altar for Lord Clifford of Chudleigh; and they executed all the sculpture and carvings at St Cuthbert's College Church, Ushaw; and St Gregory's Monastic Church Downside'.