



March 1993



Dear Confrères and Friends,

FR THOMAS ERNEST BELL, SDB, 1907—1993

On Wednesday evening, February 10th, 1993, Fr Thomas Ernest Bell, SDB, died at St Gabriel's Nursing Home, Blundellsands, near Bootle. His body was received into the College Chapel, here at Thornleigh, Bolton on Monday evening, the 15th of February. The Funeral Mass took place on the following day, presided over by Fr Hugh Preston, the Vice-Provincial in the presence of Bishop John Brewer of Lancaster and a good number of confrères and Salesian Sisters. He was buried in the new Salesian plot in Astley Bridge Cemetery in the presence of his only surviving sister Mrs Mary Marshall and her family.

Fr Tom was born in Wigan on the 27th of May 1907 and baptized at St John's Church, Standishgate. He was brought up at Mount St Mary's College, Spinkhill, near Chesterfield where his family had settled and his father worked as a gardener. It was there that two future Salesians, W. Ainsworth and T. Bell met before either of them had entered the Salesians, through the friendship of their families.¹

Fr Tom entered the new Salesian Noviciate at Cowley near Oxford in September 1924 and became part of the extraordinary expansion of the Salesian community in the British Isles which marked the inter-war years. Under the impetus of Superiors such as Frs Francis Scaloni, Angelo Franco and Joseph Ciantar, the number of Salesian first Professions increased from 20 in the ten years from 1910-9 to 86 in the years from 1920-9.²

With a new studentate at Cowley and with a staff capable of responding to the increasing numbers of vocations, the Province was well on the way to a major development both in the missionary and educational fields. Fr Tom spent his early years as a Salesian training at Cowley until his final Profession in 1928. He then went to Battersea where he was stationed, apart from one year of theological studies at Shrigley, until he was ordained on the 25th of August 1938.

After his ordination he continued teaching in the school at Battersea and moved with it in its wartime evacuation back to Cowley. In 1943 he was appointed as headmaster at Chertsey for two years and then spent two long periods teaching at Battersea and Farnborough of 8 and 9 years respectively. He also served as Parish Priest at Chertsey (1966-7) and Rector at both Cowley (1967-70) and at Farnborough (1971-4).³

Fr Tom was essentially a very shy and private person. Despite his considerable height and his athletic ability, he was always very self-effacing and, therefore, found public offices such as that of Parish Priest and Rector a real trial. He accepted these appointments out of a deep sense of obedience and his very reluctance convinced his confrères that there was nothing in it for him in terms of personal aggrandisement.

His years at Cowley were very difficult ones, indeed, partly because of the impending closure of the School and the upset which that brought and partly because of Fr Tom's temperament. At Farnborough he had, likewise, to inherit a difficult situation in the community, not of his making, which was to some extent, the result of the unsettling years of the post-conciliar period.

Fr Tom suffered in these situations. At the prospect of his appointment to Farnborough in 1971, he succumbed to a severe attack of shingles, yet he did not complain loudly or refuse to accept this difficult task. One witness reflects that during this period at Farnborough where he taught Physics in the school, he breathed a spirit of calm confidence into his young pupils and was able to produce very good results with them.⁴

After various other short-term appointments his final years were spent very contentedly as Chaplain to the Salesian Sisters at Kendal. His constant availability and willingness to oblige, and his ability to keep his own counsel made him a valued chaplain and confessor not just for the sisters and visiting groups but also for the local diocesan clergy who were notably represented at his funeral.⁵

In the summer of 1992 after a difficult prostate operation Fr Tom suffered a stroke and needed nursing care. For such an independent and private person this period of paralysis and dependence was a real trial. Through the good offices of Fr Michael Duggan, the Rector of Bootle, Fr Bernard Higgins, was able to find a place for Fr Tom in the Nursing Home at St Gabriel's, Blundellsands, near Bootle. While he was there, the Bootle community showed enormous care and affection to him, visiting him 3 or 4 times a week, taking him out in the car and saying Mass for him. Fr Tony Frain and Bro. Chris Pilarczyk showed a special regard for Fr Tom in his last months and to them we are very grateful indeed.

It was while Fr Tony was saying Mass for Fr Tom and some of the residents that Fr Tom gave an impromptu sermon and evidence of his deep devotion to our Blessed Lady. Uncharacteristically he spoke up during the sermon to say to each of the residents present there: Yes and Our Lady is your mother and she's your mother, etc.

He longed to get out of the home and in the second week of February he found it impossible to resist a chest infection and he died having received the Last Sacraments from Fr Frain the previous day.

May his brave soul and the souls of all the faithful departed rest in peace. Amen.

W.J. Dickson SDB

1. W.R. Ainsworth: Funeral Sermon 16.2.93 (House archives)
Fr Ainsworth's uncle Tom Morrison was Music Master at Mt St Mary's.
2. W.J. Dickson: *The Dynamics of Growth (Roma, 1991)* p. 182.
3. SDB Archives, Stockport, Fr T. Bell.
4. Letter from former pupil at Farnborough in Archives.
5. Sisters' testimony, See Fr Ainsworth funeral sermon notes.