

Dear Confreres,

The Community at Blaisdon, grateful for your prayers and condolences for

FATHER THOMAS AUSTEN BRICKNELL. S. D. B.

wish to share with you some of the memories of his life and to give thanks and praise to God for sending him to us as His priest.

Thomas was born of John and Jane Bricknell in Pendleton, Manchester on March 4th 1901. He was baptised four days later in Salford. He was also confirmed in the Faith at Salford.

After leaving school, the young man Thomas, worked as a painter and decorator. When he was seventeen he considered becoming a priest. He discussed his hopes with his parish priest, who gave him every support. With his advice he contacted Fr. Lester, who was well-known for encouraging young men like him in their vocation. With Fr. Lester's help he began his studies in Latin and Greek, the beginning of a long association and great love for the Classics. He also began a life-long interest in Church History.

By 1922 Thomas' desire to become a priest had strengthened to the point where Fr. Lester suggested that he contact the Salesian Provincial, Fr. Scaloni. He was accepted as an aspirant at Chertsey in 1922 and in the following year completed his novitiate at Cowley. He made his first profession in September 1924. He stayed on at Cowley until 1932 pursuing his ecclesiastical studies and then teaching. Bro. Thomas was always a keen student with a clear mind, forming habits of thoroughness and dogged persistence in his search for knowledge, which he never lost. This thoroughness applied also to manual work in which he made good use of his painting and decorating skills, being asked to go over to the house in Warrenstown, as part of a team to prepare it for the first intake of agricultural students.

Father was ordained at Womersley in 1932 and subsequently taught for periods at Oxford, Shrigley and Battersea. Being a naturally shy person his immediate reaction could seem quite brusque and abrupt, but to those who knew him well, he was a warm and engaging personality with a very ready wit. He suffered for many years with a hearing disability, a hard trial indeed for one who had so much to give as an interesting conversationalist.

When war broke out in 1939 Fr. Bricknell surprised his companions by volunteering to become a chaplain in the army. He served in North Africa and with the Fifth Army in Italy. During these years he formed firm friendships which flowered into a correspondence with a content of deep spiritual advice and help. This exchange lasted for the rest of his life. From his correspondence one learns of a very deep devotion to Mary, Help of Christians and Don Bosco.

After the war Father returned to the Province to teach Church History to the theologians and whilst at Blaisdon he continued to serve H. M. Forces at the R. A. F. camp at Innsworth.

A further aspect of Father's life that underlines his quiet unassuming goodness was his work for the Carmelite Sisters at Kirk Edge in Sheffield. Over a span of thirty-five years he spent any free time available during his holidays acting as chaplain to them. But more than that, he also spent practically every working day in the Convent and its grounds cutting the year's supply of wood, tending the garden and repairing and re-painting the Convent property.

Father continued his lecturing to the theologians when they moved to Beckford and Melchet Court. His novel and sometimes un-authorodox approach added colour and humour to their life. When the English Theologate closed in 1962 Father retired to Blaisdon. However, he remained as active in the apostolate as possible spending long periods of time as chaplain to the Sisters in Andover and continuing his work with the Sisters in Sheffield during the Summer recesses.

His last years at Blaisdon were happy ones. He loved to walk the lanes with the animals and was always ready to engage in interesting conversations. His impish sense of fun emerged more fully as his quizical look surveyed the changing scene – and he loved to stand and banter as he passed cryptic judgement on "new ways". He contributed where he could in his own way to Community life. Until the very final years he could be seen with his bowsaw over his shoulder making his way into the woods to provide fuel for ourselves and for old-people around. He also insisted on serving and clearing the community table.

As with so much of his life his prayer was quiet and unassuming – fed by deep reading of spiritual books. He was saying Mass on December 20th when he had a stroke. He was given the Last Rites while still conscious. Shortly after reception into hospital he had a second stroke which rendered him unconscious. He remained in a coma for a week, cared for all the time by his confreres and he passed quietly to God on the morning of December 27th. He is buried among the hills and woods at Blaisdon overlooking the Severn Valley where he loved to wander.

We recommend his soul to the charity of your prayers.

Yours sincerely in Don Bosco.

Fr. John Kavanagh. (Rector)