

HISTORY OF ST JOAN OF ARC CATHOLIC CHURCH, FARNHAM, SURREY

The establishment of our church in Farnham owes much to the devotion of two French priests, [Father Mathieu Gerin](#) and Fr Etienne Robo.

The first place of worship for Farnham Catholics since the Reformation was the chapel at Frensham Place (now Edgeborough School) where the Woodroffe family welcomed local Catholics at the Masses celebrated by their chaplain, Fr Gerin, who had come to Farnham in 1888 to escape anticlerical persecution in France.

Before long somewhere larger was needed and Fr Gerin purchased a disused police station in Bear Lane. The upstairs was converted into the church of St Polycarp the first Mass was said there on St Polycarp's Day, January 26th 1890. Downstairs a school was set up. It soon expanded and later a purpose built school was built next door. In 1905 Fr Gerin was badly injured in a car accident in the Borough and had to retire. He was succeeded by Fr Charles Turner in 1907, followed by Fr Thomas McSweeney in 1909 and Fr Etienne Robo in 1913.

During World War 1 many visitors, refugees and soldiers swelled the congregation. In 1917 Fr Robo was called up to serve in the French army. He returned in 1919 and in 1922 in response to growing numbers he decided to build a bigger church and call it after St Joan of Arc who had been canonised in 1920. Cardinal Henry Beaufort (1377- 1447) had been the moving spirit at the trial of Joan of Arc. He had been present when she was burnt at the stake and her ordered her ashes to be thrown into the Seine. Cardinal Beaufort was a resident of Farnham -one of his principle residences was Farnham Castle. It was fitting therefore, as an act of reparation, that Farnham should be the place where a church was raised in her memory .A building fund was set up, and in 1923 land was purchased on the present site in Tilford Road. It was part field, part disused gravel pit which had become the town's rubbish dump, It took several years to level and it was not until 1928 that plans were drawn up, the choice of patron - St Joan of Arc approved and permission to go ahead given by the Bishop.

That same year Father Robo and a small band of helpers had organised a large-scale celebration in Farnham to mark the 8th centenary of the foundation of Waverley abbey by the Cistercians. The intention was to remind the public of the part the Catholic Church played in English life before the Reformation, but also to make local Catholics take heart, as they were small in number and isolated. No doubt it also helped gain support for the development plans for the local church. Cardinal Bourne, Bishop William Brown, eight abbots, 200 clergy, and 5,000 attended the Mass, which was sung in the ruins of the Abbey church.

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Take a minute to view St Joan of Arc -
Laying of Foundation Stone
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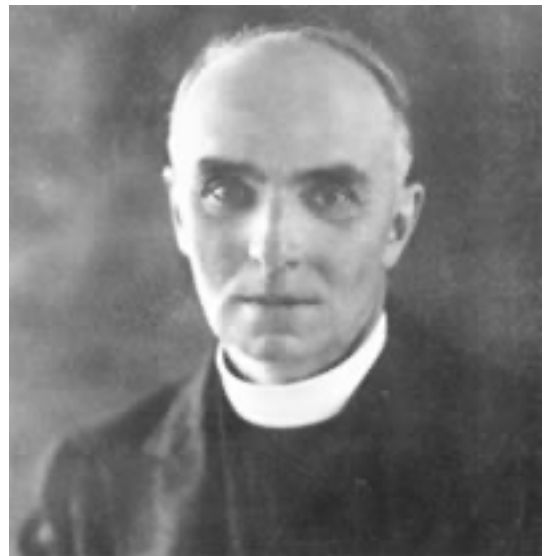
Completed St Joan of Arc Church

Plans for the new church were drawn up by its architect and benefactor, Col. J. E. Dixon Spain FRIBA. On May 23rd, 1929, the foundation stone was laid and one year later on the feast of St Joan, on May 30th 1930, the new church was opened. Two years later the Bishop of Southwark upgraded the church from being a mission centre, giving it formal parish status.

In 1935 the first Farnham born priest since the Reformation sang his first Mass at St Joan's - the newly ordained Rev. Patrick Smyth, son of Mr. and Mrs. Smyth of East Street. The second was the Rev. Charles V. Borelli, ordained in 1939



St Joan of Arc Church (2013)



Father Robo