



**Parish of
St George and the English Martyrs
Shoeburyness**

A short history of St Audrey's Convent,
and its role in the building of St Gregory's 'Chapel of Ease', Thorpe Bay

2 October 1913: St Audrey's Convent, situated at the junction of The Broadway and Johnstone Road, Thorpe Bay, was opened as a children's holiday home by the Convent of Mercy, Walthamstow, which had charge of St Mary's Orphanage which they conducted on behalf of the Westminster Diocesan Education Fund. The nuns were forbidden to build or open a school on this site under the terms of the purchase. By the early 1920s St Audrey's was principally a holiday and rest home for nuns of various religious orders.

31 August 1916: The Archdiocese of Westminster (the Diocese of Brentwood was not erected until 1917) leased to the Sisters of Mercy for 999 years a plot in The Broadway (to the north [left-hand] side of St Audrey's Convent and forming the right-hand portion of the present-day St Gregory's plot). The nuns had been refused this strip of land by the vendors, but when the vendors sold the larger plot to the Archdiocese, which intended to build a parish church to serve the proposed Thorpe Bay mission (i.e. parish), the Archdiocese duly leased part of their land to the nuns. However, this lease of the strip of land immediately adjoining St Audrey's was not to be granted until the nuns erected a convent chapel on this land (contributing at least £500 towards this building, which would serve as a chapel-of-ease for local Catholics and as part of a permanent parish church which would be built on the adjoining larger plot owned by the Archdiocese).

1 September 1916: Conveyance of whole of the present-day St Gregory's site from Sir James Henry Stronge Bart. Of Tynan Abbey, Co. Armagh, William Van Sommer of Arundel Street, Strand, and John Marcus Poer O'Shee of Birdhill, Clonmel, Co. Tipperary (Trustees of Ynyr Alfred Burges, a minor, viz. The Burges Estate) to Cardinal Bourne and others (i.e. Archdiocese of Westminster).

1 March 1918: Conveyance of freehold land in The Broadway, Thorpe Bay, from the Archdiocese of Westminster to the Diocese of Brentwood (erected in 1917). The Deeds were handed over to the Diocese of Brentwood on 20 March.

However, owing to the First World War, the nuns never built a chapel.

Autumn 1919: Abortive proposal that the Dominican Order should take on the proposed mission at Thorpe Bay.

1920: Chapel within St Audrey's Convent was opened to local Catholics for Sunday Mass.

Summer 1924: The Sisters of Mercy at Walthamstow, having sought to find another convent to assume responsibility for St Audrey's, placed the property in the hands of an agent, viz. Mr George F. Grover, Architect & Surveyor, of The Broadway, Thorpe Bay, with a view to its sale. The nuns did not consider the convent to have been a success, spiritually or socially.

27 June 1925: Mother Etheldreda, Superior of the Convent of Mercy, Walthamstow, wrote to Bishop Doubleday of Brentwood: the Bishop had said that if St Audrey's Convent was to be sold, a temporary chapel for local Catholics would have to be erected on the land adjoining the convent. The Bishop wanted to have a chapel in Thorpe Bay before the nuns sold their property. The nuns, for their part, were ready to make a contribution for the building of such a chapel from the proceeds of the sale of the convent.

9 July 1925: Bishop Doubleday discussed the problem with Mr Grover and on the same day wrote to the Reverend Mother at Walthamstow. The Diocese of Brentwood would in due course erect a small chapel on the site it owned in The Broadway, but in the meantime Mr Grover would propose to the purchaser of St Audrey's (Mrs Burleigh Bruhl of 12, Clifftown Parade, Southend-on-Sea, who was offering £2,700 and who intended to open a school) that the Diocese continued possession of the nuns' chapel at St Audrey's until the beginning of 1926 (this was duly agreed). However, now that the nuns were selling St Audrey's and were effectively going back on their promise to build a chapel (to the building fund for which local Catholics had contributed), the Bishop proposed that they ought to give £500 from the proceeds of the sale of St Audrey's towards the erection of a chapel-of-ease by the Diocese.

November 1925: press advertisement stated that from May 1926 a girls' college would be opened at Thorpe Bay in the building known as St Audrey's Convent. The Parish Priest of Shoeburyness, Father William Toft, visited the Reverend Mother at St John's Wood (the Mother House of the Walthamstow Convent of Mercy) and was told the sale was not yet completed. On 22 November 1925 a meeting of the Catholic parishioners at Thorpe Bay expressed the strong desire that, if possible, the property should be acquired by the parish. A proposal to that effect was submitted to Bishop Doubleday. Meanwhile, in the same month, the nuns agreed a sale to a Miss Hudson.

18 January 1926: Catholic parishioners at Thorpe Bay petitioned Bishop Doubleday to establish a parish and to build a church there, even a temporary one.

25 March 1926: Sisters of Mercy gave up possession of St Audrey's and the adjoining strip of leased land.

25 August 1926: Agreement between Father Toft (Parish Priest of Shoeburyness) and Messrs Marshall & Smith of Milton Road, Grays, for erection of a church in The Broadway to the designs of Mr George Grover, for the sum of £1,033.

December 1926/January 1927: St Gregory's Chapel-of-Ease, The Broadway, opened.

March 1927: St Gregory's registered as a place of worship.