The dioceses of England and Wales 1850-2000

Dr Margaret Turnham

1850 The Restoration of the Hierarchy

In 1850, after petitions from both clergy and laity and lengthy negotiation carried out by Nicholas Wiseman, Pope Pius IX finally agreed to restoring a normal diocesan hierarchy by means of the bull *Universalis Ecclesiae*.

Considering the actual condition of Catholicism in England, reflecting on the considerable number of the Catholics, a number everyday augmenting, and remarking how from day-to-day the obstacles become removed which chiefly opposed the propagation of the Catholic religion, We perceived that the time had arrived for restoring in England the ordinary form of ecclesiastical government, as freely constituted in other nations, where no particular cause necessitates the ministry of Vicars Apostolic.[1]

The former London district was divided into two with the area north of the River Thames becoming the Metropolitan See of Westminster and the area south of the river becoming the diocese of Southwark. The use of rivers or other geographical features was and still is a common method used by the Vatican to define boundaries for the reason they are not subject to much change. In total there were twelve suffragan dioceses created under the primacy of the Archdiocese of Westminster. It is important to note that these were new dioceses different in area and name to those lost during the Reformation which became Anglican sees. In the North of England, the Northern District became the diocese of Hexham[2] and Yorkshire became the diocese of Beverley. The Lancashire District was divided into Liverpool and Salford dioceses and in the Midlands became the dioceses of Nottingham and Birmingham. From the Eastern District the diocese of Northampton was created, and the Western District was divided between Clifton and Plymouth. Wales was divided between two dioceses Newport & Menevia and Shrewsbury. (See Fig 1and Table 1) The eight Vicars Apostolic were appointed as diocesan bishops and some also assumed temporary jurisdiction as Apostolic Administrators over the remaining five dioceses until appointments were made during 1851.

The Religious Census 1851

Soon after the Restoration of the Hierarchy, on Sunday 15th March 1851, the first and only Religious Census was carried out in conjunction with the decennial census of population. During the preceding weeks enumerators had sought out every place of worship in England and Wales, together with number of people it could seat. The Returns themselves were submitted by the clergy. The results stunned the government for it

[1] Universalis Ecclesiae

[2] In 1861 the name of Newcastle was added to Hexham in recognition of its growing importance in the region and also where the Cathedral was sited.

revealed that religious practice in the Country was much lower than expected and the exercise was never repeated.



Fig 1: Catholic England and Wales 1850[3]

[3] Beck G., *English Catholics 1850-1950* (1950 London)

Diocese	Area by Counties (as defined before boundary changes of 1972)	Area in Sq. miles	General Population
Westminster	Metropolitan London (N), Middlesex, Hertfordshire, Essex	2192	2,414,299
Southwark	Metropolitan London (S) Surrey Kent Sussex Hampshire IOW Berkshire Channel Isles	5859	2,245,021
Northampton	Northamptonshire Buckinghamshire Bedfordshire Huntingdonshire Cambridgeshire Norfolk Suffolk	20247	1,509,369
Nottingham	Nottinghamshire Derbyshire Leicestershire Rutland Lincolnshire	5495	1,214,538
Birmingham	Warwickshire Staffordshire Worcestershire Oxfordshire	3543	1,539,645
Shrewsbury	Cheshire Flint Denbigh Caernarfonshire Anglesey Merioneth Montgomery	4312	1,072,752
Newport & Menevia	Monmouth Hereford Glamorgan Carmarthen Pembroke Brecon Radnor Cardigan	5609	883,706
Clifton	Gloucestershire Somerset Wiltshire	4117	1,116,739
Plymouth	Devon Dorset Cornwall	4945	1,106,066
Liverpool	Lancashire (Hundreds of West Derby Leyland Amounderness Lonsdale	1115	886,567
Salford	Lancashire (Hundreds of Salford Blackburn)	566	1,180,834
Beverley	Yorkshire (North Riding East Riding West Yorkshire)	5648	1,789,047
Hexham	Northumberland Durham Cumberland Westmorland	5097	969,126

Table 1: The Areas of the new dioceses 1850[4],[5]

[4] Hughes Philip "English Catholics in 185O" in Beck G., *The English Catholics1850-1950* 42-81

[5] Key: Areas shaded red were mainly industrialised and those shaded green were on the whole rural. Obviously, some areas were mixed such as Cumberland and Wiltshire. London was a commercial centre of small businesses.

Diocese	Chapels	Priests	Catholics at Mass	Irish born	% of Irish in general pop.
Westminster	46	94	30,028	86,508	3.6%
Southwark	57	67	15,307	38,394	1.7%
Northampton	26	27	3,092	5,494	0.4%
Nottingham	42	39	7,779	10,764	0.9%
Birmingham	81	96	20,611	30,305	20%
Shrewsbury	35	33	10,284	28,422	2.7%
Newport &Menevia	18	22	4,942	18,248	2.06%
Clifton	31	35	5,857	9,494	0.85%
Plymouth	29	24	2,492	7,397	0.67%
Liverpool	84	113	69,783	112,875	12.7%
Salford	32	37	33,029	79,635	6.7%
Beverley	61	69	20,629	43,682	2.4%
Hexham	51	57	17,049	41,640	4.2%
Totals	**539**	**713**	**240,882**	**512,585**	**4.5%**

Table 2: Numbers of Catholics in each diocese 1851[6]

The statistics from the 1851 Religious Census do require a degree of caution regarding their interpretation, in particular those from the Protestant denominations, where the patterns of worship gave the opportunity for attending more than one service. As far as Catholics were concerned it was extremely unlikely that more than one Mass would be attended. However, there were other problems regarding attendance at Mass one of which was the availability of a nearby Mission, especially in the rural areas. A good example of this can be seen in the diocese of Northampton, which was primarily rural but also an area that never forgot its Parliamentarian Protestant sympathies. There was only one Catholic chapel each in Bedfordshire, Buckinghamshire, and Cambridgeshire. In Huntingdonshire there was no Mass provision whatsoever and most Catholic practice was concentrated in the counties of Norfolk and Suffolk. The number of "Irish born", which was counted in the Decennial Census of the same year probably included a high percentage of Catholics, but there would have been Protestant Irish among them for they too sought work in England and Wales and the famine was no respecter of religion.[7]

It can be deduced then that the Religious Census gives a limited snapshot of the availability and take up of Catholic practice at a certain point in history. But there is another more important picture that was revealed by the concomitant Decennial census and is reflected in the make up of the new dioceses as shown in the colour coding of Table One. 1851 is regarded by historians as the moment that England and Wales moved from being primarily a rural agricultural economy to an Urban Industrial economy.

[6] Hughes Philip, *op. cit*.

[7] For further discussion of the Census in regard to Catholics see Hughes Philip, op. cit.

Early Boundary Changes

Were the new bishops happy with the extent of their new responsibilities? The bishop of Liverpool was not happy that the Hundred of Leyland was assigned to Salford, and in the period that he was its Apostolic Administrator persuaded the Holy See to redraw the boundaries in Liverpool's favour.

Shortly after his consecration in 1861, the second bishop of Beverley, Robert Cornthwaite informed the Holy See that in his opinion the Beverley diocese was too large and should be sub-divided in light of the rapid expansion in the Catholic population and the growing number of clergy and parishes in Yorkshire. It was to remain a subject of discussion between the Bishop and Rome for more than fifteen years until, in December 1878, Pope Leo XIII decreed that Beverley should be divided in two: the North and East Ridings to form the new Diocese of Middlesbrough and the Diocese of Leeds to comprise the whole of the West Riding. It was not a division that favoured the new diocese of Middlesbrough both financially and in terms of priests and it struggled to survive until well into the twentieth century.[8] The diocese of Leeds, in 1878 had 69 chapels and churches with 66 priests and a population of 94,000. Middlesbrough had 39 priests, 36 churches and chapels and a population of 34,000. It took Cornthwaite until 1884 to make the financial settlement due to Middlesbrough from the diocese of Beverley. During his time as Bishop of Beverley, Cornthwaite made sure that most young priests were assigned Missions in the West Riding to where he also moved his Cathedra. This meant the diocese of Middlesbrough inherited a very aged presbyterate that resulted in over 51% serving the diocese for less than five years. One, the only young priest became its bishop, Richard Lacy who ruled for fifty years, the others either died or had to retire through ill- health. It is worth noting that the priests in Beverley had proposed a different division that analysis has shown was much more equitable in terms of parishes and priests and of the age range of priests.[9] It remains a shame that they were ignored.

By 1882, it was decided that the diocese of Southwark that stretched from London to Bournemouth and encompassed the Channel Islands and the part of Oxfordshire south of the River Thames was too large for one bishop. The decision was made to create a new diocese from the western area of Southwark incorporating the counties of Hampshire, South Oxfordshire, Berkshire, and the Channel Islands. (See Fig 8) The area was almost co-terminus with the Anglican diocese of Winchester, but there was a convention that Catholic dioceses did not take the titles of extant Anglican dioceses and so it was decided that the Cathedral would be in Southampton and the parish church was designated as the pro cathedral pending a new build. However, there was resistance from local Protestant landowners who were reluctant to sell prime land for a Catholic cathedral. Additionally, Southampton's growing importance as a maritime centre had caused local land prices to soar, especially in the inner-city area where many small plots

[8] See Turnham, M.H. *Catholic Faith and Practice in England 1779-1992* (Boydell and Brewer 2015) also "The Division of Beverley 1878 A Distasteful and Painful Affair" in *Recusant History* 2014

[9] See Turnham, M., *The Division of Beverley*

with multiple owners made it hard to find a parcel of suitable land. Attention turned to Portsmouth where the local priest had just secured a large plot of land near the city centre with the help of a large donation from the Duke of Norfolk. Instead of a parish church it was a new Cathedral that was built and the new diocese took the name of Portsmouth. The Cathedral was opened and consecrated in 1887 and completed in 1906 (with further additions being made during the 20th Century.

In 1895, a beginning was made to sort out the situation in Wales, which was felt to be unsatisfactory. The diocese of Newport and Menevia was divided into two vicariates and a year later, the Vicariate of Newport became a diocese centred on Cardiff and its boundaries redefined so that it comprised of the counties of Glamorgan, Monmouth, and Hereford. Menevia became a diocese in 1898 with its Cathedral being situated in Swansea.

The Erection of New Provinces

In the early part of the new century, there was a flurry of activity emanating from the Holy See. In1908, Pope Pius X issued the Constitution *Sapienti Consilium* that reorganised the Roman Curia in order to streamline and modernise its governance for the twentieth century. It had particular significance for the Church in England and Wales as it declared that although it was a non-Catholic country, it did have an established Hierarchy and therefore was no longer considered mission territory under the jurisdiction of *Propaganda Fide* and able to manage their own affairs.[10] In 1911, a further change was enacted by the Apostolic Letter *Si qua est* which erected the new provinces of Birmingham and Liverpool in addition to Westminster. Birmingham Province was assigned the Suffragan Sees of Plymouth Clifton Newport Menevia and Shrewsbury whilst Liverpool was assigned the Suffragan Sees of Leeds, Middlesbrough, Salford, and Hexham & Newcastle. It had long been felt that such a division would need to be made at some point but the bishops had delayed fearing it might bring a sense of disunity especially if it meant as in the pre-reformation period, a division between North and South. This was avoided by arranging for three Provinces rather than the York/Canterbury division and the making of a grant in the Apostolic Constitution that gave preeminence to the Archbishop of Westminster by making him the senior Archbishop, permanent chair of all meetings of the Hierarchy and their representative in all dealings with civil authorities. In 1916, Pope Benedict XV issued the decree *Cambria Celtica* erecting the Cardiff Province, comprising the Metropolitan Archdiocese of Cardiff with the Diocese of Menevia as a suffragan see. The Archdiocese of Cardiff would care for the Catholics of South Wales and Herefordshire, and the Diocese of Menevia would care for the North. The final action from the Holy See in this period was the promulgation of the Code of Canon Law in 1917 and came into force in May1918. From penal times, the English Catholic Church had developed a system of missionary districts that depended upon the presence of a priest rather than physical boundaries, and as such were more fluid than

[10] Scotland and Ireland were similarly released

strictly defined, geographical parishes. The new Code mandated the transition of these missionary districts into canonical, territorial parishes with appointed parish priests who possessed secure legal rights but also required them to maintain official registers of baptisms, marriages, and confirmations. It also gave local congregations a permanent, legal status and was something the priests had expected and wanted since the hierarchy had been restored.

The Early Twentieth century

The transition from missionary districts to settled parishes coincided with the post-World War I era, which was a period of rapid municipal expansion and into which the Church significantly expanded its presence away from the inner-city and industrial hubs created by the Industrial Revolution. The first new diocese to be founded in the Twentieth century was Brentwood which was carved out of the Archdiocese of Westminster after years of negotiation and serves the traditional county of Essex. In the Northwest of England, the Diocese of Lancaster was established in 1924, carved out from territory from the Archdiocese of Liverpool and the Diocese of Hexham and Newcastle. It encompasses the historic counties of Cumberland and Westmorland as well as the two northern Hundreds of Lancashire. The diocese includes the city of Preston, which has a very high Catholic population due in part to the fact that the Reformation never took hold there.

1950 The Centenary of the Restoration

The Centenary of the Restoration of the Hierarchy in 1950 was marked by a week-long series of events culminating in a huge rally and open-air Mass at the Wembley Stadium. It was estimated that 100,000 Catholics attended and as well as Mass and a historic pageant, a special English- language message from Pope Pius XII was broadcast. Key to the celebration was the growth from 800,000 Catholics in 1850 to 3,000,000 in 1850.

Fig.2 and Table 3 illustrate this growth when compared to the earlier figures. Wales, for example had seen an increase of nearly 100,000 Catholics and the diocese of Northampton which in 1850 had a county with no Catholic presence (Huntingdonshire) could boast that there were now four. The greatest growth was, of course, still in the industrial heartlands and large urban conurbations that had developed. But the nature of the immigrant worker was changing. In 1850, it was mainly Irish workers, but by 1950, they were joined by a large number of Poles and other central Europeans who either could not or did not want to return to their native land after the war and George Beck notes that in 1950, there were 92 Polish priests looking after their welfare.[11] There were also migrants from another part of the world heralded by those arriving from the Caribbean on ships such as *HMT Empire Windrush* responding to an invitation from the

[11] Beck G.A op. cit. p589. He also estimates the numbers of this group to be around 200,000.

UK government to help rebuild Britain after the war. Many of these settled in the Southeast of the country, there to be joined by arrivals from Northern England at the start of a slow population shift from the north to the south that carried on into the next century.

Diocese	Date	Parishes	Diocesan priests	RC population[12]	% of pop	General Pop
Westminster	1850	164	431	315,000	7%	5,000,000
Brentwood	1917	57	94	82,260	4.7%	1,759210
Nottingham	1850	90	141	67,745	2.6%	2,653,757
Northampton	1850	79	116	59,252	2.9%	2,033,185
Southwark	1850	204	471	200,000	4%	5,000,000
Portsmouth	1884	18	13	55,000	3.6%	1,509,272
Birmingham	1850	220	330	239,712	6.7%	3,595712
Plymouth	1850	86	118	33,275	No record	No Record
Clifton	1850	85	105	52,260	3.3%	1,564,034
Shrewsbury	1850	76	140	102,250	7.7%	1,331,706
Liverpool	1850	178	501	423,392	17.8%	2,374,824
Salford	1850	160	420	315,00	11.6	2,711,215
Lancaster	1924	89	160	113,548	12.8%	887,007
Leeds	1878	141	284	179,000	5.3%	3,354,395
Middlesbrough	1878	74	139	95,256	9.4%	1,012,857
Hexham & Newcastle	1950	148	329	247,234	11.0%	2,242,700
Cardiff	1896	85	114	93,829	5.3%	1,772,289
Menevia	1898	61	64	20,003	2.1%	932,480

Table 3: Catholic Statistics 1950[13]

[12] Based on Easter duties.

[13] Figures taken from www.catholic-hierarchy.org (accessed 02.06.2026)

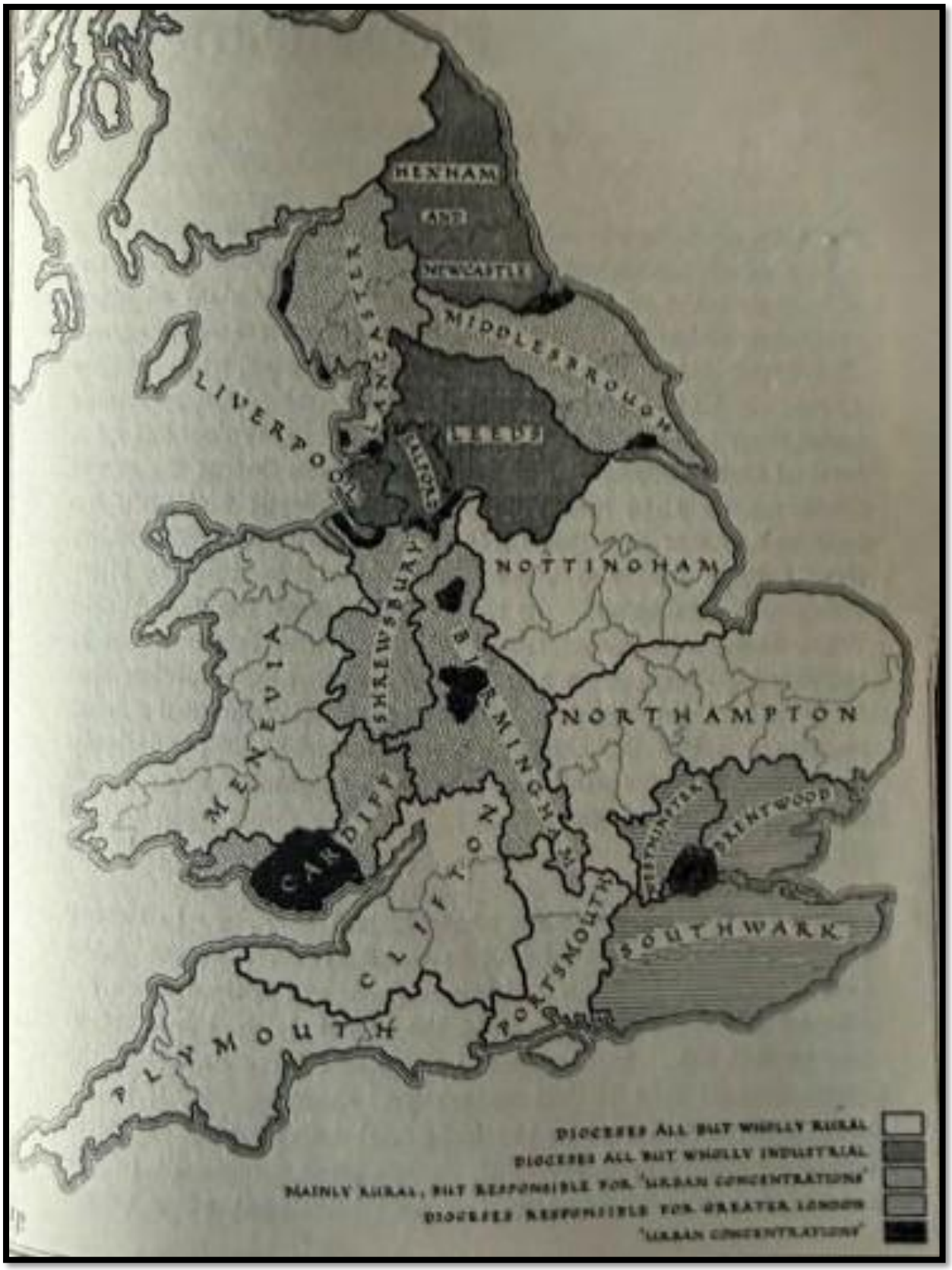


Fig 2: England and Wales Dioceses 1950[14]

[14]Beck, G.A. ed. Based on map p409

The Later Twentieth Century

With the significant expansion of the Catholic population in the diocese of Southwark, it became too large and widespread for one bishop to administer it effectively. As a result in 1965, Pope Paul VI carved out the county of Sussex and the part of Surrey outside of Greater London to form the new diocese of Arundel and Brighton. At the same time, he elevated the diocese of Southwark to an Archdiocese and created a new Province with the Suffragan Sees of Portsmouth and Arundel and Brighton.

Just over ten years later in 1976, Pope Paul VI created a second new diocese by dividing the diocese of Northampton and creating a new diocese of East Anglia comprising the counties of Norfolk, Suffolk, and Cambridgeshire together with the Soke of Peterborough. The diocese of Northampton was geographically the largest of those created in 1850 and unwieldy to manage with the area that was to make up the new diocese being remote from its centre. It also had its own cultural identity and characteristics and a strong sense of its Catholic history that was not present in the rest of the diocese. Unusually, the new See was given a regional title rather than taking the name of its See city, which was Norwich.[15]

During the 1980's there was a move towards having smaller units, with two new dioceses being created. There was also some minor juggling of boundaries such as the two parishes in York that were part of the Leeds diocese were moved into the Middlesbrough diocese, so for the first time in one hundred years, the city of York was united under one bishop. The first new diocese was created in 1980, by Pope John Paul II which was the diocese of Hallam. Based upon the city of Sheffield, it encompassed from the diocese of Leeds the new metropolitan county of South Yorkshire [16]and Bassetlaw deanery from the northern tip of Nottingham diocese. Its title was taken from Hallamshire an ancient name for the Sheffield area. In 1987 Pope St John Paul II divided South Wales in two. The Archdiocese of Cardiff took responsibility for the Southeast portion and Herefordshire. The Southwest of Wales was a new Diocese but taking on the old name of Menevia, with the Episcopal Seat being in the city of Swansea and North Wales became the Diocese of Wrexham.

[15] Norwich was already the title of an Anglican diocese, and the Catholic Church does avoid using their titles although the courtesy is not returned.

[16] Set up in 1974 as part of local government reorganisation

Diocese	Date	Area Sq. Mls	No. Parishes	Diocesan Priests	RC pop	% of pop	General population
WESTMINSTER	1850	1,403	206	297	450,240	8.9%	5,033,930
Brentwood	1917	1,532	82	115	225,700	8.2%	2,789,000
Nottingham	1850	5,000	108	130	155,000	3,4%	4,500,000
Northampton	1850	1320	70	92	182,500	8.7%	2,089,307
East Anglia	1976	4850	50	96	108,000	4.3%	2,487,200
SOUTHWARK	1850	1200	179	274	367,530	8%	4,610,910
Arundel&Brighton	1965	1930	91	134	178,075	5.4%	3,310,715
Portsmouth	1884	2448	87	115	235,000	6.2%	3.800,000
BIRMINGHAM	1850	3373	224	214	443,300	8.9%	4,993,000
Plymouth	1850	4954	60	102	69,100	1.8%	3,847,700
Clifton	1850	4215	104	104	173,000	6.5%	2,664,300
Shrewsbury	1850	2369	92	141	189,827	9.9%	1,923,400
LIVERPOOL	1850	450	140	215	505,000	27.4%	1,841,000
Salford	1850	620	145	251	294,000	10.5%	2,800,000
Lancaster	1924	1100	107	95	101,700	8.3%	1,232,000
Leeds	1878	1900	108	187	168,000	7.9%	2,115,000
Middlesbrough	1878	1,500	66	54	97,700	7.4%	1,317,135
Hallam	1980	1,030	60	65	60,188	3.8%	1,569,000
Hexham &Newcastle	1850	3,258	133	116	220,077	9.3%	2,323,200
CARDIFF-MENEVIA	2024	1,183	59	62	131,280	8.4%	1,556,940
Wrexham	1987	3,228	41	38	33,879	4.6%	742,600

Table 4: The state of the Catholic Church in England and Wales 2024[17]

[17] Statistics taken from the annual returns each parish must submit each year

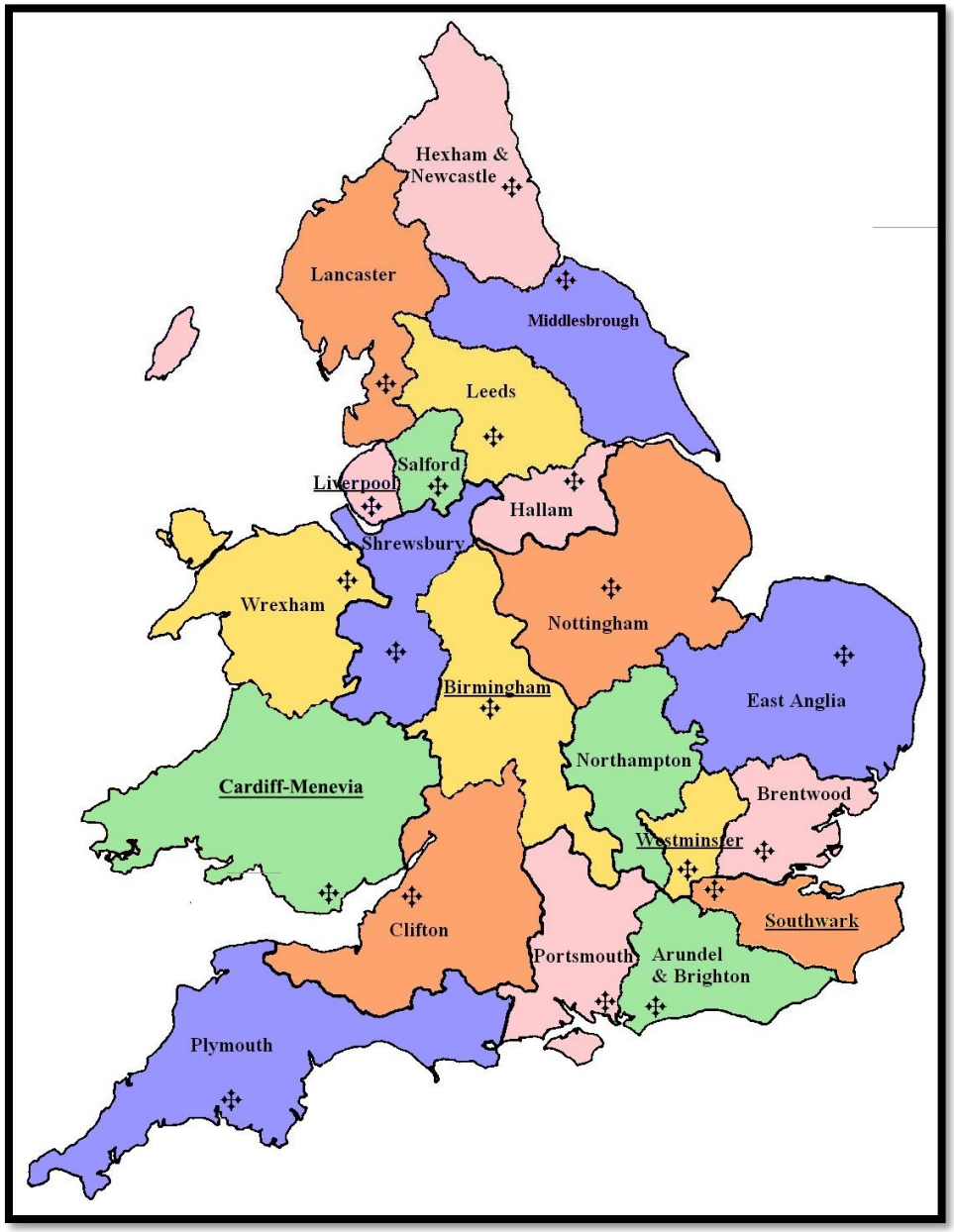


Fig 3: The dioceses of England and Wales 2024

A new Future?

With an estimated total of around 4million adherents that make up 7% of the total population in England and Wales, the Catholic Church on paper has made considerable progress in the 175 years since the Hierarchy was restored. But a comparison of the statistics paints a different picture showing an inconsistent picture around the country, and that the Catholic share of the population has fallen. (Table 5).

Diocese	RC 1850	RC 1950	General 1950	RC 2000	General 2000	RC 2024	General 2024
WESTMINSTER	30,028	330,000	5,000,000	460,000	4,435,000	450,240	5,033,930
Brentwood		73,665	1,759210	210,000	2,659,000	225,700	2,789,000
Nottingham	7,779	84,035	2,653,757	124,328	3,560,000	155,000	4,500,000
Northampton	3,092	54,965	2,033,185	173,215	1,800,000	182,500	2,089,307
East Anglia				85,000	2,500,000	108,000	2,487,200
TOTALS	**40,899**	**542,665**	**11,446,152**	**1,052,543**	**14,954000**	**1,121,440**	**16,899,437**
SOUTHWARK	15,307	230,000	5,000,000	387,695	4,048,900	367,530	4,610,910
A&B				153,639	3,020,000	178,075	3,310,715
Portsmouth		87,100	1,509,272	211,000	2,694,51	235,000	3.800,000
TOTALS	**15,307**	**317,100**	**6,509,272**	**752,334**	**7,338351**	**780,605**	**11,721,625**
BIRMINGHAM	20,611	222,757	3,595712	288,197	5,353,390	443,300	4,993,000
Plymouth	2,942	33,275		65,980	2,048,220	69,100	3,847,700
Clifton	5,857	57,250	1,564,034	136,290	1,958,687	173,000	2,664,300
Shrewsbury	10,284	105,400	1,331,706	189,154	1,832,900	189,827	1,923,400
TOTALS	**39,694**	**418,682**	**7;991,452**	**697,631**	**11,193,197**	**875,227**	**13,428,400**
LIVERPOOL	69,783	423,292	2,374,824	488,057	1,100,000	505,000	1,841,000
Salford	33,029	315,000	2,711,215	302,750	2,250,000	294,000	2,800,000
Lancaster		111,464	887,007	114,528	1,021,215	101,700	1,232,000
Leeds	20,629[1]	178,000	3,354,395	157,957	2,000,000	168,000	2,115,000
Middlesbrough		95,118	1,012,857	84,104	1,143,000	81,500	1,317,135
Hallam				67,598	1,500,000	60,188	1,569,000
H & N	17,049	247,234	2,242,700	233,109	2,200,000	220,077	2,323,200
TOTALS	**140,490**	**1,370,108**	**12,582,998**	**2,353,438**	**11,214,215**	**1,446,665**	**11,628,335**
CARDIFF-MENEVIA	4,942	93,344 21,350	1,772,289 932,480	79,191 28,260	1,596,200 611,679	131,280	1,556,940
Wrexham				33,161	692,500	33,879	742,600
TOTALS	**4,942**	**114,694**	**2,704,769**	**140612**	**2,900,379**	**165,159**	**2,299,540**
% of population	**4.5%**	**6.8%**		**8.6%**		**7%**	
		2,763,249	**41,234,643**	**4,091,223**	**47600142**	**3,924,631**	**55,977,337**

Table 5: Population statistics[18],[19]

There was a clear population drift from Wales and the old northern industrial heartlands to the Southeast and the two large commercial centres of Liverpool and Manchester in the North-West that became more pronounced at the start of the new century. Historically, the numbers of Catholics in Wales have always been relatively low and in 2022 it was announced that the Archdiocese of Cardiff and the Diocese of Menevia were to be united '*in persona Episcopi*' (in the person of the archbishop) and in September 2024 they became one diocese under the care of Archbishop the Cardiff, becoming known as the diocese of Cardiff-Menevia.

Pope Leo XIV has also asked the people of Yorkshire to consult on the future of the three Yorkshire dioceses. In December 2025, it was announced that the retirement of the bishop of Middlesbrough had been accepted under Article 401 of the Code of Canon Law and the bishop of Leeds appointed as Apostolic Administrator to consult on a way forward for the two dioceses to work together. Just a few few weeks later in March 2026,

[18] 1850 Statistics refer to the diocese of Beverley

[19] Statistics taken from Beck op. cit. and Catholics in Numbers https://www.crs.org.uk/catholicism-in-numbers (accessed 04.06.2026)

it was announced that the bishop of Hallam had resigned on grounds of ill health and again the bishop of Leeds was appointed as Apostolic Administrator to work towards reuniting its two parts with their original dioceses.

What must be of great concern to the bishops is the steep decline in Mass Attendance (Table 6), especially between 1950 and the year 2000 and again is more noticeable in the North rather than the South. Sociologists such as Michael Hornsby-Smith and Stephen Bullivant have put forward explanations for this decline including secularisation and the loosening of community ties, and their work is noted below.[20]

Year	Mass Attendance	RC Population	% Attending Mass
1950	**1,552,850**	**2,763249**	**56.2%**
2000	**1,013,500**	**4,091,223**	**24.7%**
2018	**712,284**	**4,000,000[2]**	**17.8%**
2022	**503,008**	**3,920,631**	**12. 8%**
2024	**575453**	**3,924,631**	**14%**

Table 6: Mass Attendance[21]

[20] For example, Hornsby-Smith, Michael, *The Changing Parish* (1989 Routledge) *Catholics in England 1950-2000* (2000, Bloomsbury) Bullivant, Stephen *Mass Exodus (*2019 Oxford)

[21] Exact figures for 2008 and 2022 estimates of Catholic population are not available at the time of writing (June 2026)

Diocese	2018	2022
Westminster	127,340	90,202
Brentwood	41,740	30,230
Nottingham	30,730	23,200
Northampton	26,934	20,262
East Anglia	18,037	16,685
Southwark	80,178	57,360
Arundel & Brighton	29,471	25,789
Portsmouth	33,303	25,501
Birmingham	57,711	37,117
Plymouth	12,702	10,307
Clifton	28,460	18,898
Shrewsbury	26,864	17,657
Liverpool	43,265	25,207
Salford	37,384	24,104
Lancaster	15,209	11,279
Leeds	25,768	18,392
Middlesbrough	13,158	8,039
Hallam	10,163	7,636
Hexham &Newcastle	30,433	17,991
Cardiff	12,322	8,395
Menevia	5,970	4,643
Wrexham	5,142	3,702
Total	**712,284**	**502,595**

Table 7: Mass Attendance and the effect of the Covid Pandemic 2020-2021[22]

The major historical event of the twentieth- first century to date (2026) undoubtedly was the Covid Pandemic 2020-2021. Churches were closed and restrictions placed on numbers able to attend Mass when the churches were allowed to reopen. It was not until 2022 that they were eased. People were slow to return, and it seems that many never did return. Some dioceses particularly in the North-East such as Hexham & Newcastle saw their numbers almost halved. (See Table 7) Stephen Bullivant conjectures that those who wished to return to Mass after the Pandemic probably had returned by 2022 and that the Pandemic was a key moment for the church as it "helped clear out some of the natural decline" – people who would have drifted away over the next few years anyway.[23]

It seems clear that the bishops and the Vatican have some hard decisions ahead on how to organise the church in England and Wales for the rest of the twenty- first century and beyond. One aspect of the thinking that has not been discussed in this article but is there in the statistical tables and that is the drop in vocations to the priesthood, which affects the number of parishes a diocese can provide. In turn, that affects the viability of a diocese as those in Yorkshire and Wales are finding. Catholics across the country are getting used to the idea of their parishes being merged, will they also need to become used to the idea that dioceses are merged or reunited? Only time will tell.

[22] Statistics taken from Catholics in Number (see above)

[23] Catholic Review 17.02.2025 www.catholicreview.org/uk-mass-attendance-jumps (accessed 04.06.2026)

Further Reading

G.A. Beck, *The English Catholics 1850-1950* (London 1950)
S. Bullivant, *Mass Exodus* (Oxford 2019)
M Hodgetts & A McClelland, *From without the Flaminian Gate* (London 2001)
M. Hornsby-Smith, *Catholics in England 1950-2000* (Bloomsbury 2000)