

## ST ANNE'S, SUTTON:

### Home of Blessed Dominic Barberi, Venerable Ignatius Spencer and Venerable Mother Mary Joseph (Elizabeth Prout)

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## PART ONE: THE FOUNDATION

“The establishment of this Mission and Retreat is due entirely to the generosity and practical faith of Mr John Smith, a Railway Contractor of Sutton, St Helens, Lancashire.” Thus begins the first Passionist Record of the foundation of St Anne’s, Sutton. John Smith, born in Windle in 1794 of an old Catholic family, was, as described by Father Ignatius Spencer CP, a gentleman who was “a most remarkable case of successful industry combined with noble generosity”, for “he always wished to do something for religion” and in 1849 gave “twelve good acres of land to the Congregation of the Passion and built upon them a handsome Gothic Church with a tower and a steeple, all in stone” and beside it “a portion of a monastery sufficient for the needs of the community at that time.” In 1849 there were only thirty or forty Catholics in Sutton and Bold. Because they had no church or chapel in the area, in order to attend Mass or bring a priest to a sick or dying person they had to walk several miles to St Helens, Blackbrook or Rainhill in all kinds of weather and despite whatever other difficulties they had. These were the people John Smith wanted to help.

### Father Ignatius Spencer CP

How John Smith met the Passionists and became their benefactor was later described by Father Salvian Nardocci, Rector of St Anne’s from 1866-1869, who had known Father Ignatius Spencer. According to Father Salvian, because of the troubles in Rome and throughout the Italian States in 1848 the Passionist Superior General, Father Anthony Testa asked Father Dominic Barberi to accept any houses he was offered, in case any of his Italian brethren had to flee to England as refugees. By January 1849 Father Dominic had houses in Aston Hall, near Stone, Staffordshire, in Woodchester, Gloucestershire and in London but these were insufficient to accommodate all the refugees who might come. In the previous years, however, he had given several missions and retreats in Liverpool and he had personally answered Bishop George Brown’s plea in 1847 for Passionists to tend Liverpool’s fever-stricken Irish refugees from the Great Potato Famine. He was well aware of the good that Passionist missionaries could do near a city like Liverpool. On his part, Bishop Brown had expressed his desire to give the Passionists a foundation in his diocese.

Accordingly, on 9 January 1849 Father Dominic sent Father Ignatius Spencer to see Bishop Brown at Bishop Eton. At that time Bishop Brown had nothing suitable to offer but Father Ignatius stayed in the area for a few days, questing for the building fund for Aston Hall. In the meantime, Father James Abraham of St Mary’s, Blackbrook went to see Bishop Brown to tell him that John Smith, who owned most of Sutton, had expressed a desire to build a church

there. Bishop Brown, seeing the possibilities for the Passionists, sent Father Ignatius to see Father Abraham. On Monday, 15 January 1849 Father Abraham and Father Ignatius went to see John Smith in Sutton and it was then that he promised to build a small monastery as well as a church and to give the Passionists twelve acres of land for a garden, private monastic walks and a pasture for cows for their milk supply.



John Smith's house in Sutton

### Blessed Dominic Barberi CP

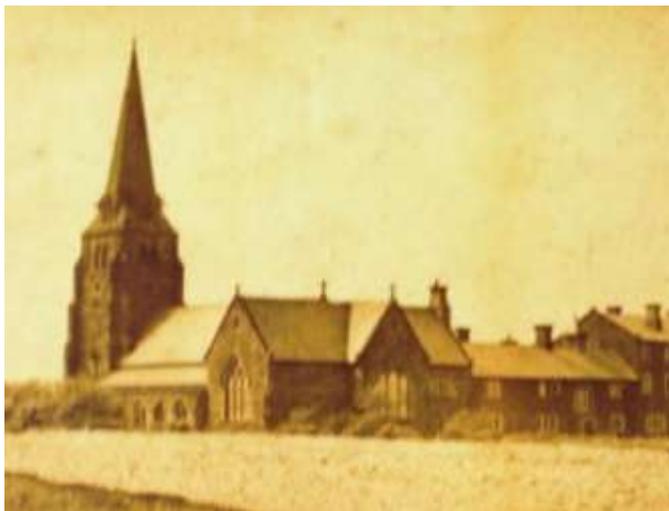
Father Ignatius reported back to Father Dominic that afternoon and returned to see Bishop Brown on 18 January. The next day he went to Sutton to see John Smith about the actual site. According to Father Salvian, Father Dominic also went to Sutton and arrived at St Helens Junction first. When he saw 'those high chimneys, hanging as it were over him, his courage failed him and he was almost sorry that he had promised to bring his poor religious there. He had never dreamt that in such a comparatively small place there would be such extensive glass works as to cover thirty-eight or forty acres of land for the buildings alone, quite apart from the chemical and iron works'. Recovering his courage, however, and setting out to look for John Smith, Father Dominic met a 'fine-looking, open and plain man', who saluted him. Concluding that he was probably a Catholic, Father Dominic asked him if he knew where Mr John Smith lived. 'I should think I do', John Smith replied, introducing himself and the two began to walk over the considerable stretch of land which he owned. Next Father Ignatius Spencer arrived and the three men inspected three possible sites. John Smith pointed out which he considered the best. Father Dominic, however, chose what appeared to be the worst. Father Ignatius demurred a little but Father Dominic, the mystic, insisted, '**Here have I chosen to live. This will be my resting place for ever. The house that is to be built here will be the largest and best we shall have in England.**' That, then, was the site that John Smith gave to the Passionists, not directly, however, in order, perhaps, to avoid the anti-Catholic litigation prevalent at the time, but in the name of the Bishop of Liverpool and other trustees and in such a way that the Passionists could not be deprived of the property unless they themselves wished to give it up. Father Dominic and John Smith drew up the plans for the buildings and accommodation. Hence St Anne's, Sutton owes its existence to John Smith, Blessed Dominic Barberi and Father Ignatius Spencer.

### The First Mass

Bishop Brown officiated at the laying of the first stone of the church on 26 July 1849, the feast of St Anne, patroness of the new parish. According to Father Salvian, the foundation-stone of the monastery was to have been blessed by Father Dominic Barberi on 30 August 1849 but he died three days earlier. Finding, however, that Father Gaudentius Rossi, shortly to

become the Founder of the Sisters of the Cross and Passion, was unexpectedly in the Sutton area, John Smith invited him to perform the ceremony privately on 30 August, as planned, the day before Father Dominic's interment took place in St Michael's church, Aston, near Stone.

On Saturday, 23 November 1850 Father Ignatius Spencer and Father Honorius Mazzini arrived in Sutton to open the Passionist foundation there. Father Honorius, who was going to take care of the mission, stayed that night at John Smith's house, whilst Father Ignatius went to Blackbrook. On 25 November both priests went to see Bishop Brown. Both had been saying Mass in St Mary's, Blackbrook but after he had done so the next day Father Honorius took what he needed for the celebration of Mass and on the following day, 27 November 1850, he celebrated the first Mass in Sutton in John Smith's house, Mount Pleasant in Paradise Row. On 24 December 1850 Father Ignatius Spencer again went to see Bishop Brown and then went to St Anne's, Sutton, where he said Midnight Mass and two other Masses from 7.15 a.m., probably in the monastic chapel. He and Father Honorius then went to Blackbrook, where Father Honorius said his three Christmas Masses, with Father Ignatius preaching at the third. It was probably from this time that Father Honorius said Sunday Masses in the monastery chapel, until it became possible to use St Anne's church itself in 1851. About the same time, Father Austin Edgar and Brother Michael Behan joined Father Honorius to form St Anne's first Passionist community.



St Anne's church and monastery

### **Consecration of St Anne's Church**

About the end of October 1852 Father Bernardine Carosi CP became Rector and on the afternoon of Wednesday, 26 October 1853 Bishop Alexander Goss, Coadjutor to Bishop Brown of Liverpool, consecrated St Anne's church. That night Bishop Goss stayed at Orrell House at Blackbrook, returning to St Anne's the next day, when Father Ignatius Spencer celebrated the first Mass in the newly consecrated church. Bishop Goss preached on that occasion, whilst Father Ignatius preached at Vespers and Benediction in the afternoon.

### **Elizabeth Prout, Mother Mary Joseph of Jesus**

It was Father Bernardine who in 1855 invited Elizabeth Prout, Mother Mary Joseph of Jesus, Foundress of the Sisters of the Cross and Passion, to come to Sutton. Like Father Honorius, she and another Sister stayed at John Smith's house until she opened her first convent in the area at Parr Hall on 15 August of that same year. She opened a convent in Sutton

itself, at Peckers Hill, on 16 November 1855, the feast of Blessed Paul of the Cross and just a few days after the incorrupt body of Father Dominic Barberi had been transferred to St Anne's. It was a week that was momentous in the history of Sutton. Many of the Passionists in England had gathered there not only to welcome Father Dominic's precious remains to the place where he had chosen to rest but also to celebrate the feast of their Founder, Paul of the Cross. Dr Henry Edward Manning, the future Cardinal, preached at a Solemn High Mass on 16 November; Father Ignatius Spencer preached at the 11.15 Mass on Sunday, 18 November; and Father Leonard Fryer, who had accompanied Father Dominic's remains to Sutton, preached that Sunday evening at Vespers. Father Ignatius and Father Gaudentius Rossi then visited the new convent. On the feast of Our Lady's Presentation on 21 November, traditionally marked as the birthday of both the Passionist Congregation and the Congregation of the Sisters of the Cross and Passion, Elizabeth Prout and her Sisters renewed their religious vows, in their convent at Levenshulme, in the presence of Father Gaudentius Rossi. Two days later Father Ignatius went with him to Liverpool and the next day, 24 November 1855, Father Gaudentius sailed for North America, leaving Father Ignatius in his place as the Sisters' co-founder and father. Elizabeth Prout and her Sisters have always remained an integral part of St Anne's parish life.



Elizabeth Prout, M. Mary Joseph CP.