

History of Our Lady of the Wayside Parish

The parish of Shirley was founded in 1934. In June of that year the Church of Our Lady of the Wayside opened as a Mass centre in a former house known as 'Heathfield' on Stratford Road, served by the Church of St Augustine in Solihull. In the following year a small, permanent church was built on land to the rear of 'Heathfield', the building surviving behind the present church as a parish meeting room and nursery school. In 1962, Father Patrick O'Mahony (1925-1991), who was ordained for the Birmingham diocese in 1949, was appointed parish priest and immediately instigated the building of a larger church on the site of 'Heathfield'. The site, however, presented difficulties in that it already contained a new presbytery on the south-east side and a service road to a school at the rear on the north side. This severely restricted the east-west dimensions of the site and resulted in the functional axis of the church being aligned north to south. Built between 1965 and 1967, the new church was designed by Brian Rush, then at the start of his career and in partnership with Remo Granelli; by the time the church opened Rush was practising on his own. Its Modernist design was inspired by the requirements of the liturgical revival brought about by the reforms of the Second Vatican Council (1962-65), allowing the congregation to be grouped around three sides of the high altar, thereby maximising active participation in the liturgy. Sculpture was commissioned from Dame Elisabeth Frink (1930-1993) and the Kenilworth sculptor Water Ritchie (1919-1997), once a pupil of Eric Gill. As Ritchie produced a font carved from a single block of Portland stone that weighed seven tons, it was positioned on the altar platform before the walls of the church were built. Stained and coloured glass was designed by Tom Fairs (1925-2007), who worked on the nave windows of Coventry Cathedral with Geoffrey Clarke. The new church opened on 23 June 1967 and was completed at a cost of £84,000, including works of art and furnishings. It was designed to seat about 600 people with space provided for a further 200 at balcony level. Contractors were J and P Kelly Ltd. The church of 1935 was subsequently converted into a church hall.

Father Patrick O'Mahony, in the thirty years of his ministry as parish priest of Our Lady of the Wayside, established links to aid projects in India and Africa, sending money and goods from the parish and receiving news in return. He also established the first church-based Amnesty International group and was actively involved in the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace and the Linacre Centre for the Study of the Ethics of Health Care, of which he was governor.