

Catholic Church of Our Lady of Ransom Eastbourne

Are you visiting Eastbourne and would you like to see not just the usual sights of a seaside town but interesting things that are often missed by the casual visitor? Do you know where you can find a beautiful stained glass window of Charlemagne, the medieval ruler of most of Europe, who was crowned by Pope Leo III on Christmas Day, 800 AD as the first Holy Roman Emperor? This very rare, if not unique window is in England and you can find it in Our Lady of Ransom. Where can you find a memorial window for a Polish prince, and one depicting the builder of a church who is not a canonised saint – again very unusual? These also are in our lovely church along with many other beautiful things.

It is easy to find Our Lady of Ransom which is opposite the Town Hall in Grove Road, at the junction of Meads Road and Grange Road, just five minutes' walk from the railway station up Grove Road. The church is always open during the day and welcomes visitors.

Our lady of Ransom was named after the custom in the 16th century of praying to the Virgin Mary for the freeing of Christian slaves on the ships in the Mediterranean. The church is built in the medieval Gothic style and was opened in 1901, almost one hundred and twenty years ago. After the reformation of the 16th century when the Church of Saint Mary became Anglican – well worth a visit – there was no Catholic Church in the town. Catholics – and there were not many of them – had to go to Brighton or Hastings for Mass. In 1807, Father Charles Patrick King came to Eastbourne from Essex and opened a Mass centre in Ceylon Place, soon to be replaced by a small church, Stella Maris, in Junction Road. As the congregation grew, a bigger church was needed and land was obtained from the Duke of Devonshire, the major landowner in the town. During the negotiations for the land and the building of the church, a temporary church, known as the arcade church, was not very suitable as it was so draughty that the candles on the altar burned down four inches during every Mass. However, this building was used as a church for eleven years. Father Charles Stapley was appointed priest in charge, to be replaced in 1894 by Father Paul Lynch. The founder of Our lady of Ransom. He is depicted in the stain glass window above the confessional and was said to be a good likeness.

As the congregation grew the church was extended, lengthening the nave, installing a new bigger sanctuary with a bigger altar, behind which was a carved stone depicting medieval English saints. The sacristy was also extended, giving more space for priests and altar servers to rest before Mass. This almost transformation of the church was completed in 1926, the Silver Jubilee of the original foundation. The rebuilding was completed during the next six years, with a new Lady Chapel with its beautiful statue of Our Lady and lovely stained glass windows in 1929, and a new Sacred Heart Chapel, also with stained glass windows, which was blessed and opened in 1932. All of this rebuilding was under the direction of Mgr. Arthur Cocks, the parish priest of the time, except for the Sacred Heart Chapel. The “daughter” churches of Our lady of Ransom were opened for parishioners living in the eastern and western parts of Eastbourne during these early years, Saint Agnes in 1907 and Saint Gregory's in 1934. Both are well-worth a visit, although Saint Gregory's is not open all the time.

The 1939-45 war was marked in Eastbourne by heavy bombing and a decrease in the population as many children and adults left for safer areas, resulting in a considerably smaller congregation at Our lady of Ransom. Wonderfully, the church escaped major damage although bombs fell all around it. Only one of the beautiful stained glass windows in the new Lady Chapel was blown out, marked

today by the plain window there. We thank God for the preservation of the church at such times. Many parishioners in the town and in the armed forces were killed or injured during the war and a memorial to them will be placed in the church in the near future.

The Golden Jubilee of the church was celebrated in 1951 and, after the Second Vatican Council of 1960-63, a temporary altar was set up in the sanctuary to enable Mass to be celebrated facing the people. This was replaced in 1995 by a permanent altar and the sanctuary was redecorated and a new carpet laid, a stone ambo was installed from which the scriptures were read. The 1990s also saw the stepped entrance to the church replaced by a gentle slope to enable physically handicapped and elderly parishioners to enter the church more easily. Some pews (benches) at the back of the church were removed and the area was enclosed to create a porch or narthex, which made the church warmer. The heating system was also improved. Also during this decade, the baptismal font was moved from the back of the church to the back of the Lady Chapel in order to give it more prominence. Later, the area of the back of the church was converted into a small shop selling devotional objects and cards.

For most of the 20th century, parishioners has only a small, two storied hall behind the church in which to hold meetings or other social events, and the facilities were poor and outdated. In 1998, land which belonged to the diocese next to the tiny car park became accessible and it was decided to build a new modern parish centre and to enlarge the car park. At the same time, a doorway was made in the wall at the back of the Lady Chapel and a corridor constructed linking the new centre with the church and the priests' house. This was all blessed and opened by the Bishop in 1999. In 2015, one of the confessional boxes in the church was removed and the statue of Saint Peter was transferred from the Lady Chapel.

Come and visit our beautiful church and before you leave, sit or kneel to pray for a few minutes, for this is God's house. The Blessed Sacrament is kept in the tabernacle on the old altar in the sanctuary. Pray for yourself, and for your family and thank God for all those priests and parishioners who, during the past 118 years prayed and worker to build what we have today. Come to Sunday Mass at 10:30 am to hear our excellent organ and join in with the choir.

If you would like to know more about the church, pick up a newsletter in the narthex or call at the parish office in the priests' house next to the church, further along Grange Road to buy a 90,000 word history of the church for only £3.

We hope you enjoy your visit.