



**FIRST MARIST COMMUNITY  
IN ENGLAND  
23-07-1858**



---

## *First Marist Community in England (1858)*

---

The first foundation of the Marist Sisters outside France began in Spitalfields, a socially and spiritually deprived area in the East End of London, in 1858. Five Sisters formed the pioneer community and although their main work was teaching, faithful to the founding charism, they soon involved themselves "where the needs were greatest". This involved parish visiting, running soup kitchens and work with orphaned children.

The Marist Sisters, known in 1858 as the Sisters of the Holy Name of Mary, came to England at a crucial time in the history of the church. It was not quite thirty years since Catholic Emancipation and only just eight since the restoration of the Catholic Hierarchy by Pope Pius IX on 29<sup>th</sup> September 1850. The task of the new hierarchy was indeed formidable. Cardinal Wiseman, the new Metropolitan, and his twelve suffragan bishops had to live down open hostility to the Roman Catholic religion, and needed all the help they could get, especially from priests and religious men and women.



Mother Ambrose Mortier

Written evidence indicates that Cardinal Wiseman proposed a school in London to Very Reverend Mother Ambrose Mortier. It was natural that the Marist Fathers, a small group of whom, had arrived and taken up residence in St Anne's Mission Spitalfields in September 1850, should want the Marist Sisters to teach the girls and infants in St Anne's. In 1856, Fr Chaurain, superior of St Anne's and pastor of the mission, discussed the matter in person with Very Reverend Mother Ambrose Mortier, in Bon Repos Belley.

As documentation shows, Mother Ambrose thought it wise to throw the proposition open to as wide a discussion as possible. She therefore summoned all local superiors to Bon Repos on 15<sup>th</sup> September 1857 to thrash the matter out. It was readily agreed to accept the London mission.



Mother St. Jean Mugnier

In July 1858 a small group of five sisters\*, Sr Augustine Ashlin, Sr Wilfred Rook, Sr Pauline Fressinon, Sr Julie Rabut, and, as Superior, Mother John Mugnier, embarked for England with several Marist Fathers, one of whom was Fr Yardin, Assistant Procurator for Oceania. Tired and bedraggled after an uneasy sea journey, the travellers reached London towards noon on 23<sup>rd</sup> July 1858. They were met by an enthusiastic Fr Chaurain, who accompanied the Sisters to Spitalfields.

What a contrast to the Belley they had left. Brick Lane, the main thoroughfare, was a deep, dirty track, the nadir of East End poverty. Its off-shoot, Osborne Place, was no better. Both were typical of the crowded, insanitary, low neighbourhood. The houses were old, damp and dilapidated. No 2 Osborne Place, to which the five Marist Sisters literally picked their way, was among the best of them. These premises, a two-storey house in a small court opening on to Brick Lane and an old workshop in the back yard served as convent and schools for five years.

Whatever the condition of No 2 Osborne Place, Marist records show that the schools announced to the Parish by Fr Chaurain SM, during the eleventh Sunday after Pentecost, 1858, opened there, on schedule, at 9.30 am Monday 9<sup>th</sup> August 1858.

The middle class or paying school was in the largest room of the convent and started with four pupils and was in the charge of Sr Augustine Ashlin. As numbers increased, local girls, many of whom became Marists, gave their services in exchange for further education. This private School, the sole responsibility of the Marist Sisters, was quite new to Spitalfields, and was in time absorbed into the parochial schools.

The parochial schools for girls and infants were in the workshop in the back yard and in two rooms in Princes Street, Mile End. The workshop, divided into two rooms, was an all-age girls' school for which Mother John Mugnier and Sr Pauline Fressinon were responsible.



Sr. Pauline Fressinon

In Princes Street, Sr Wilfrid Rook, with lay help, ran a mixed infants' school, boys and girls being taught separately as was the custom of the time.

These parochial schools with a total of two hundred and seventy pupils in 1858, were the nucleus of the future St Anne's School, known so well to generations of Marist Sisters.

So, with that simple announcement by their pastor to the people of St Anne's Mission, Spitalfields, began the history of the Marist Sisters in Spitalfields, a slum district of London's notorious East End. In that simple announcement were also laid the foundations of the Anglo-Irish Province.

St Anne's Mission, Spitalfields, E.1, a district immortalized by Dickens, Booth and other nineteenth century social reformers, was the cradle of the Congregation of Mary in these islands.

To the left, St Anne's Church, Spitalfields, where on 28<sup>th</sup> August 1859 Cardinal Wiseman received the religious vows of Sister Augustine Ashlin and Sister Wilfrid Rook. The Congregation of Mary's first religious profession ceremony in England.



\*In support of their project, the Fathers sent two postulants to Bon Repos. These first-fruits of the Congregation in England were **Miss Eliza Rook**, 42 years of age, and **Miss Elizabeth Ashlin**, a young English convert whose Protestant parents had disowned her because of her change of religion. At their Clothing Ceremony, 3 October 1857 they received the religious names **Sister St. Wilfred** and **Sister St. Augustine**.

Besides the two novices, Mother St. Ambrose sent **Sister St Paulin (Anne Fressinon)**, Mgr Epalle's niece, later superior in Jarnosse, Peckham and Carrick, and a **Lay Sister, Sister St. Julie (Marie-Joséphine Rabut)**, one of Fr. Déclat's four nieces. And **Mother St. Jean (Marie Mugnier)**, later the third General Superior

We have no more photos – these would have been destroyed during the bombings in World War II.