**A letter of thanks to Father Higley**

Words by Sister Patricia Ainsworth

One could not write about St Elizabeth’s without assigning a special place to Fr Frederick Higley, one of our greatest benefactors.

How Fr Higley came to know of St Elizabeth’s is not clear, though it was probably due to his position as a Guardian of the Poor; he would no doubt have been informed of any Catholic establishments in the diocese of Westminster. Fr Higley had been ordained a priest in the year 1885 and became a curate at a parish in Mile End. In October 1888, only three years after his ordination, he was appointed as a parish priest in the parish of Our Lady Immaculate, Limehouse, by Cardinal Manning, remaining there until his death in 1934. Fr Higley is mentioned for the first time in a letter from Sr M. Augusta to Mother Marie-Augustine in November 1905. In it she says:

‘God has given us a very good friend, Fr Higley, a very zealous priest in a London Parish. His great desire is that we may have a beautiful garden, and so he has sent us 1,000 magnificent rose bushes and other shrubs which our gardener is in the act of planting on the two lawns at the entrance. How lovely it will be when you next come to visit us. The other day, he, Fr. Higley presented us with thirty framed pictures and yesterday, to my great astonishment, arrived a packet containing 8 large volumes of a new encyclopedia for the school. With it came a letter saying that he wants to build up a good library at Much Hadham for the benefit of these poor epileptics. At the same time he offered me 500 raspberry bushes, 1,000 strawberry bushes and 1,000 gooseberry bushes.’

There are numerous references to Fr Higley and his outstanding care and generosity. No doubt the money for many of the shrubs etc came out of his own pocket, although it is known that he begged among the East End market gardeners. Knowing the generosity of the East Enders and because of his own zeal and warmth, Fr Higley probably obtained very many of the shrubs etc in this way.

In a letter written in 1910 by Sr M. Edmund, the next superior, we read:

‘Fr Higley still sends us bulbs and trees. I often wonder when he will cease, but he never seems to get tired of sending us something or other. He has sent us a nice little shrine of Blessed Joan of Arc, now he is talking of getting a Calvary for the cemetery. His own idea is to make this place a Paradise for the patients. He will get a great reward for it I am sure. Thanks to him we have a fine library for the patients.’

In 1910 we read an account of the unveiling of the statue of the Scared Heart which is the statue one sees directly opposite the front door/main reception.

‘Last May we had our beautiful statue of the Sacred Heart unveiled. Fr. Higley, with twenty five visitors, came from London for the ceremony. It was quite grand; in fact it was a day never to be forgotten. A strange thing happened, Fr. Higley had almost finished his sermon, a light breeze must have got under the covering, and lifted it over the statue, and there it was exposed.’

Although one may detect a hint of the miraculous indicated in the description, a rather more charming and ‘legendary’ account was written in later years about the same incident.

‘This statue unveiled itself. The ceremony took place in the afternoon but during the morning the statue was covered with a white sheet which hung down at the back to the base of the statue, but in front only about half way down, just covering the outstretched hands. The day was bright and calm and the sheet hung over the statue quite undisturbed during the whole morning. In the afternoon, chairs were arranged in front of the statue for visitors. One of the workmen stood, map stick in hand ready to unveil the statue at the right moment. The ceremony began with hymns, at that very moment the sheet in front began to move as though a light breeze had got underneath it and while everyone watched, astonished and breathless, it rose gently and smoothly, until it reached the height of the head over which it floated and fell gracefully to the base, thus leaving the statue completely unveiled. After a moment of complete silence, Fr. Higley said, “it has unveiled itself”. Many faces were blanched by the surprise of the incident and word went quickly round the village that the statue unveiled itself. In the evening when the visitors had gone and all was quiet a neighbouring farmer’s wife – a non Catholic with a few of her friends came up the drive and asked “may we see the statue that unveiled itself.”

The above is, of course, a colourful and interesting account of what proved to be a momentous occasion which made a lasting impression upon those who were there and one may draw one’s conclusions as to the significance of the ‘miraculous’ occurrence.

Father Higley continued to send gifts, such as an aviary containing eight foreign birds. These were kept in the boys’ part of the house and he intended sending more, as we may read:

‘Fr. Higley intends sending another for the girls. Is he not good? At present, we have eleven birds, and they all appear to be in good health, and cheerful spirits, and never have a fit. They are splendid patients! The children are very fond of them.’

The sisters were extremely grateful for all of Fr Higley’s gifts, and were thrilled when they were able to find a way of reciprocating his gifts:

‘We are going to work for poor Churches. The patients are very keen about it and they are longing to begin the work. A few days ago they presented me with thirteen shillings (*sixty five pence, a considerable amount in those days*) to enable me to begin. I have had other presents so I hope to hold the first class on the first Friday in June. Fr. Higley is badly off for cottas (surplices) for his alter boys, so our first work will be for him. He deserves all we can do for him. He is such a benefactor’.

It is clear from accounts of Fr Higley’s life that the people of St Elizabeth’s were not his only beneficiaries. A testimonial given on his silver jubilee spoke of:

‘Your unceasing labour for the uplifting of humanity, labour which found expression in the building of three schools here in Limehouse, and in the initiating and furthering of institutions throughout England for the relief of human infirmities.

Towards the end of his life Fr Higley himself said:

“After the Schools of the Parish I consider that there is no other work more valuable than the work of a Guardian of the Poor. While I was Guardian, over £100,000 was spent relieving all forms of human suffering in various Catholic Institutions, and when I ceased to be a Guardian the one great necessity with regard to Catholic Institutions was a colony for our adult male mentally defectives and epileptics”.

Fr Higley’s generosity and dedication was reflected in the life-long support he gave St Elizabeth’s over the years. His legacy remains, helping to guide our ethos in everything that we do.

