

## Father Matthew Gerin – a remarkable French Priest.

Dispossessed of his parish in the diocese of Lyons by an anti-clerical French Government, Father Matthew Gerin arrived penniless in England in the late 1880's. He was taken in by the Woodroffe family at their house Frensham Place (now Edgeborough School) where he celebrated Mass for the family in their little chapel. Soon the family opened the chapel for Mass to the faithful of the neighbourhood, calling it the *Chapel of the Holy Name*.

With a steady increase of Sunday visitors, Father Gerin decided to found a mission in Farnham and with Bishop Butt's encouragement and his offer of help with diocesan funds, he purchased the old police station in Bear Lane in the centre of the town. On 26<sup>th</sup> January 1890, the feast of St Polycarp, the new church was opened in the upstairs room. The following year St Polycarp's school was opened in one small room downstairs.

In February 1905 Father Gerin met with an accident that put an end to his active life. One morning he was coming home from the workhouse (which later became Farnham Hospital) having said Mass for the Catholic inmates, when a car in the Borough skidded, mounted the pavement and threw him through a plate glass window. He sustained grave injuries to his legs. He never recovered and received no compensation, as in those days not all motorists were insured. He retired as an invalid in May 1907 and for a while lived at Fleet and then at Ash before moving to Littlehampton. His law suit failed and in 1916 he was declared bankrupt.

Father Gerin died in Littlehampton on 2<sup>nd</sup> February 1918 and was buried there locally in an unmarked grave. It was the time of the Great War. Recently, Patricia Knight, author of *The Bear Lane Years of St Polycarp's School*, found the unmarked plot in Littlehampton cemetery. The parish of St Joan of Arc has purchased the plot and erected a memorial stone, recognising the parish's debt to this extraordinary man, his work and precious legacy. On Monday 13<sup>th</sup> February Bishop Richard Moth led a graveside service of Blessing and Thanksgiving for finding Father Gerin's grave.