

## FATHER BIRDSALL and the Founding of the Cheltenham Catholic Mission

by Richard Barton

at "Death at Broadway, Worcestershire, after a severe and lingering illness, the Very Rev John Birdsall, aged 63, for 25 years Catholic Priest of this town and resident of the Order of Benedictines. A man beloved and respected by his congregation and numerous friends - in him the poor have sustained an irreparable loss. He possessed very superior talent and was a most accomplished scholar".

(Cheltenham Free Press Saturday 5 August 1837).

During the years 1809-1837 the Catholic Community in Cheltenham was dominated by the figure of John Birdsall in a parallel way to the later influence of Francis Close on the Established Church. Birdsall was not only responsible for moulding his congregation but he built a chapel and school for them. He was not the first priest to serve the nineteenth century mission as it began some years earlier as a station served from the older mission at Gloucester.

In 1773 it was estimated that there were only 210 Catholics living in Gloucestershire. These were looked after by chaplains who were from time to time attached to local Catholic residences such as Hatherop Castle, Hartpury Court, Horton Court and Beckford Hall. A Franciscan from Penthyre, near Monmouth, also celebrated Mass periodically at Gloucester and Cheltenham. In 1787 one of the Webb family of Hatherop Castle left money for the establishment of a proper secular mission at Gloucester and in about 1795 the first St Peter's Catholic Chapel was opened in the City.

Between 1800 and 1826 the population of Cheltenham jumped from 3,000 to 20,000. Visitors naturally included a number of Catholics, particularly of the Irish aristocracy. With the wealthy visitors came many fathers, both rich and poor, who hoped to make their fortunes providing services for these wealthy visitors. The Vicar Apostolic of the Western District, Bishop Sharrock, was persuaded to allow the priest from Gloucester to travel over to Cheltenham during the summer months to celebrate a second Mass on Sundays and holydays. It would seem that Bishop Sharrock wanted to establish Cheltenham as a Benedictine mission, like Bath and in May 1805 he appointed Don James Calderbank O.B.S., as Missioner at Cheltenham. This priest withdrew after only a few months, presumably because he could not find any wealthy patrons. When he left, Cheltenham reverted back to the Gloucester connection.

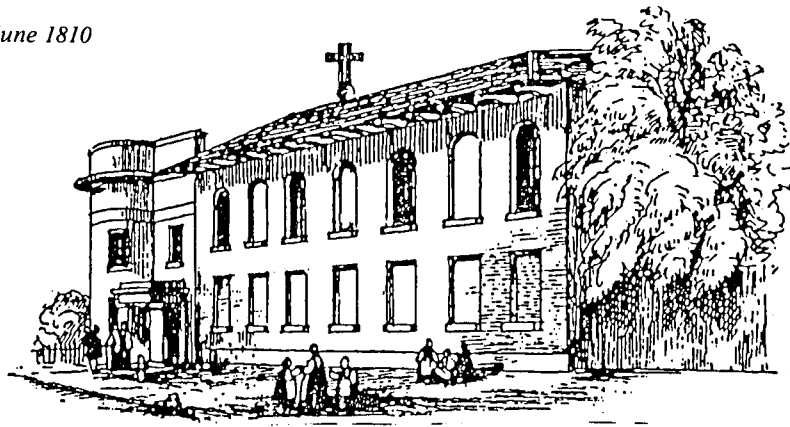
In 1807 Rev. Nicholas Alexander Cesar Robin settled in the town as a French language teacher. He had been brought to Cheltenham by Captain Gray, possibly from Edinburgh where he was living in 1803. Abbe Robin had previously been a secular priest of the Diocese of Laon. It is interesting that Goding described him as a chaplain to King Louis XVI and also of a monastic order with no evidence to support these claims. Abbe Robin started saying Mass in Cheltenham and he was even allowed to use the Town Hall for a year. He was clearly very popular and it must have come as a surprise when Bishop Sharrock wrote to him in July 1809 informing him that the Benedictines would shortly be establishing a proper mission in the town. He wrote back stating that this was unlikely to succeed. However, in October 1809 he was visited by Dom John Augustine Birdsall who informed him that he had arrived in Cheltenham to take over the care of the local Catholics. Although Abbe Robin was hurt that his place had been taken the two men built up a friendly relationship until the death of Abbe Robin in September 1811.



Birdsall had been working in Bath as assistant missioner from 1805 having returned from Lambspring Abbey in Germany. He was a Lancashire man who entered the religious life at the age of sixteen and when his monastery was suppressed he returned to England as a missionary priest. Cheltenham was certainly a challenge. There was no proper resident Catholic congregation, no chapel, and no wealthy patron. Fortunately he arrived with between eight and nine hundred pounds from his life pension and legacies and loans from relatives. Immediately he decided to build a chapel. It was an unfortunate time to build for not only was land expensive but materials were costly with it being war time. He purchased a plot 100' x 40' off Somerset Place, for £290, part of a site belonging to a Bath wine merchant who had earmarked it for a prestigious residential square—St. James' Square. On 13 December 1809 the first brick was laid. Somerset Place, at the time, was an open space at the bottom of Ambrose Street. During the building operation Father Birdsall hired two rooms in the York Hotel (near the present Co-op), where he celebrated Mass.

The Chapel was opened on 3 June 1810. The shell of the building cost £1,224 of which £350 was mortgaged for ten years. The small chapel was fifty three feet by thirty six feet. It was a plain brick structure, standing on the site of the present Church tower, with a cross on the roof. It was orientated east-west, unlike the present church, and the altar was at the west end. In 1816 Griffiths wrote "A neat commodious edifice, has a roomy gallery and is capable of containing 300 persons". In due course various alterations and additions were made. A number of gifts such as vestments and plate were received. In 1813 the plaster altar was replaced with one made of scagliola. Various parcels of land were acquired adjoining the Chapel so that a second vestry could be added and later an extension in 1825 which cost £500. In 1834 Henry Davies wrote "The exterior is utterly devoid of decoration but a light and elegant interior compensates for the lack of ornament without. It has a commodious gallery and over the altar is a painting of the Last Supper by Raphael. The Chapel is capable of containing 500 persons."

In 1814 Father Birdsall erected the Chapel House between the Chapel and Tangent Alley. The house had a very small ground floor as the building included a new vestibule and entrance to the Chapel, off the street. On the other side, the first floor of the house was built over the alley. Tangent Alley is the alleyway down the side of the existing Old Priory. Father Birdsall recorded in his



personal notes that when King George III stayed in Cheltenham he walked across the fields into town along a footpath where the alley now is and that the stile was changed into a slip gate for his convenience. The house was added to at various times. A new kitchen was erected and further bedrooms were created. It would seem that Father Birdall took in boarders, probably to supplement his income. The frontage of the house was remodelled in 1881 and the old house was demolished in 1965 except for the 1881 facade which was incorporated into the present building.

The third significant development at Cheltenham was the provision of a charity school for the poor, annexed to the Chapel, which was opened in April 1827. The school was the result of a bequest from Hon. Mrs Vavasour, who died in Cheltenham, and a donation from Lord Shrewsbury. The school was run by a schoolmistress and, according to non-Catholic reports, 58 Protestant children were educated at the school, being taught the Catholic catechism. This school gradually developed and was moved to St. Paul's Street North in 1857. Fifty years ago it moved to the present premises in Knapp Road, and it is now one of the largest Primary Schools in the town.

Father Birdsall wrote some notes outlining the early years of the Mission which have been preserved. The notes include interesting details about the erection of the buildings and the people who used them. He wrote "Cheltenham is a favourite place with the Irish and although the Catholics of that nation who are wealthy bear a very small proportion when compared to those who are poor, yet they are not a small number, and the congregation in this Chapel is at all times composed in no small degree by Irish Catholics". This is confirmed by the rhyme of the day "The churchyard's so small and the Irish so many, they ought to be pickled and sent to Kilkenny." The Cheltenham Chronicle refers to the visits of the Earl of Kenmore and his brother Lord Castlerosse. Examination of the Register reveals visits by their sister Lady Charlotte Gould and other wealthy Irish such as Lady Dillon and Lady Meredyth, the wife of Sir Joshua Meredyth Bt. She died in Cheltenham in 1813. Many were attracted by the racing and theatre.

Not only the Irish were drawn to Cheltenham but also wealthy English visitors. Father Birdsall wrote 'the number of visitors to Cheltenham is every year very great, and the fluctuation is continued and incessant. The congregation is of course ever changing and the mode adopted by the priests at Bath... of placing a person at the door on Sundays and holidays to receive the weekly contributions of the people was also made use of here'. In the registers we find references to such families as the Welds, FitzHerebrts, Talbots and others. The Hornyolds and Turvilles made generous gifts of vestments and plate besides furnishings for the chapel. However, after 1814 a change was detected by Father Birdsall. He noted that after the downfall of Bonaparte English people were again able to travel freely on the continent and the number of visitors diminished. He

considered that this was particularly the case with English Catholics 'as there are many inducements for them to travel abroad, more than for Protestants. It was abroad that many of them had been educated... abroad their religion is held in honour and practised with dignified solemnity, is not exposed to the odious restrictions and obloquy which it experiences in England'.

Besides French and English visitors other fashionable visitors included the French Royal Family. Father Birdsall wrote: 'in the same year, 1813, the Duchess of Angouleme came to Cheltenham, with her suite, where she was joined by the Duke, her husband, upon his return to England from the allied army on the continent, and during their stay here, of about six weeks, they frequented regularly and publically this chapel so that on holidays and on Sundays when they were at Mass the Chapel was crowded to excess. The King of France also came to Cheltenham from his retreat at Hartwell on a visit to the Duke and Duchess, his niece and nephew, but having his private chaplain with him, he did not come to the chapel'.

Father Birdsall also referred to the visit of the Comte d'Artois in his notes as well as the following incident: 'I again saw the Royal Family at Bath when in company with the rest of the clergy I waited upon the King at his levee and on that occasion they greeted me as an old acquaintance'.

The Register refers to the death of the Comte de Jarnac and the newspaper reports that his funeral took place at the Catholic Chapel before interment in Gloucester Cathedral. In 1814 Father Birdsall visited the French prisoners of war at Stapleton.

Besides the visitors Father Birdsall gradually moulded together a congregation made up of English Catholics who were either converts or people who had moved to the town from places such as Bath. Others included poor Irish as well as a number of foreign settlers. Between 1809 and 1818 he baptised ninety children and between 1812 and 1837 he made eighty nine adult converts, seven of them being over seventy years of age. The converts included whole families together with children like the Gregory family of Charlton Kings. An interesting family were the descendants of Elizabeth Wilks who was received in 1822 at the age of seventy nine years. Two of her daughters became Catholics, one of them being the mother of George Arthur Williams, the owner of Williams' Library from 1815. His cousins included the Boodle brothers who were later involved in local Liberal politics, James and William, both being the political agents of the Berkeleys as well as local solicitors. Williams was also a Liberal and he was involved with local affairs, becoming High Bailiff, or Mayor, in 1847. He was probably the most influential resident Catholic during the middle years of the nineteenth century. The foreign settlers included Pio Cianchettini, the composer, who seems to have been organist at the Chapel, Philippe Caffieri, a wine merchant who came to Cheltenham from Bath before

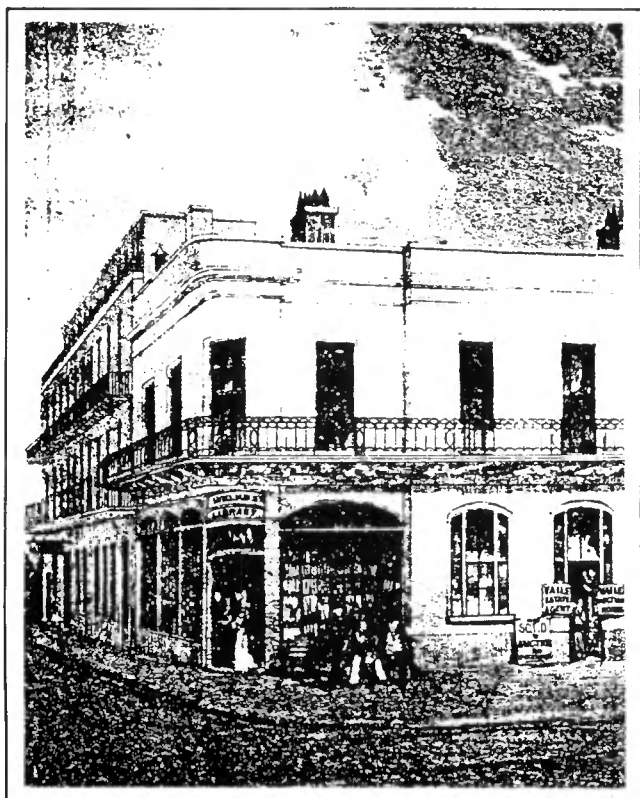
1824 and the Tiessets, brother and sister, who both taught French. The poor Irish seem to have started to arrive in the town in the 1830s. By the middle of the century they made up a large proportion of the congregation.

Besides the residents of Cheltenham Father Birdsall was also responsible for Catholics as far afield as Strensham and Horton, near Chipping Sodbury. The Horton Mission was attached to Cheltenham from 1815 until 1823 when it was transferred back to Bath. The registers confirm Father Birdsall's references in his diary to such places as Stroud, Leighterton, Hunters Hall and elsewhere, where he baptised children. From 1826 Father Birdsall said Mass at Broadway and he built a chapel there which was opened in 1831. From 1828 many of Cheltenham's Catholics were buried at Broadway.

One of the most interesting personalities in the Cheltenham congregation was Sarah Neve. She was the widow of Rev. Egerton Neve of Old Sodbury. She bought land in St James Square and in 1831 built No 10 for the cost of £2,850. Later she established a chapel and residence for a Benedictine priest at Chipping Sodbury, four years before her death in 1842 at Cheltenham. Mrs Neve gave books and other items to Archbishop Polding when he set off for Australia.

When the Chapel was opened in 1809 Father Birdshall was able to write 'On the part of the townspeople no opposition has been experienced indeed they were all well aware that it was for the benefit of the town that should be a Catholic Chapel.... It was natural that a Catholic chapel was viewed with complacency by the generality of the people of the Town particularly as it consists almost entirely of lodging houses and hotels whose prosperity was necessarily connected with every improvement by which conveniences and recommendations of the various visitors might be promoted and so inducement be held out to them to prolong their stay'.

During the late 1820s this tolerant attitude seemed to change. In 1826 Rev. Francis Close was appointed Rector of the Parish Church. Under his towering



Williams' Library

influence the Reformation Society grew in strength and their proceedings were followed closely and sympathetically in the local press. Father Birdsall was less enthusiastic about these developments especially at a time when legislation was going through Parliament for Catholic Emancipation. The *Examiner* stated that the advocates and opponents of Emancipation were pretty nearly balanced in Cheltenham. Father Birdsall wrote that "during the excitement, great animosity and bitter opposition was manifested in the Town". The extant local newspapers do not record any local tension when the bill was passed in 1829, but a warning was issued to potential rioters. This may have been in response to the following placard, described by Father Birdsall:

'Notice to all true Protestants of the Town of Cheltenham — there is a heap of Rubbish that stands in this town near the Baptist Chapel, which is a nuisance to all true Protestants and we have about 200 that have resolved to pull it down to the ground and all true Protestants are requested to meet on that spot on Monday 9 March about 7 o'clock in the afternoon and drive Popery out of Town. Come and let your hearts fail to do a good deed'.

The School was also a point of controversy between the Catholic community and the Evangelicals. Father Birdsall wrote: 'In the summer of 1828 the inquisitorial meddling of the Biblicals etc. with our Charity School, their printing notices and insertions in the Cheltenham paper stating according to their computation or rating the mighty increase in Catholics and pretending to detail the ways made use of by us to make proselytes, such as distributing books etc. They certainly caused a great diminution of our scholars by threatening the protestant parents with various losses, if they continued to send their children to our schools. They set up a branch National School right opposite our Chapel from whence they removed it into the High Street, till soon after they built what they call the Infant School at St. James Square.'

This opposition culminated in the Cheltenham Discussion which was a public debate at the Riding School between members of the Reformation Society and a number of Catholic theologians. The meeting quickly ended in disarray during the discussion of the first subject. The Catholic party stormed out and much was written and said about the matter on both sides for years to come.

In 1826 Father Birdsall was elected President-General of the English Benedictine Congregation and from 1830 a second priest was appointed to Cheltenham to look after the Mission. Father Birdsall owned the property until 1836 when he resigned the Cheltenham Mission. During the following year he died at Broadway at the small monastery he had established there.

During his years in Cheltenham Father Birdsall developed the congregation from what was described as a few in 1813 to a situation in 1830 where there were 43 baptisms, 14 deaths, 180 Easter communicants, seven non-communicants, 75 other non-communicants who were under fourteen years of age and three persons under instruction. By 1844 this figure rose again to 350 Easter communicants and by 1850 the Catholic population in Cheltenham was estimated at a thousand. Three years later it was decided to build a new Church which necessitated in time the demolition of the old chapel. When the old chapel was raised to the ground the following memorial was lost:

'This tablet was erected to the Very Rev. John Birdsall, the founder and first pastor of this chapel by his affectionate flock as a tribute of their gratitude for his great zeal in the cause of religion and his anxiety for their spiritual welfare'.