

ST. JOHN'S CHELTENHAM : EARLY YEARS

by Brian Taylor

Those who knew St. John's will remember its broad and imposing stone front, right on the pavement of Berkeley Street, and also recall that it was one of Cheltenham's 'low' churches. In fact it was not as low as some. Liturgical colours could be seen suspended within the tracery of the wooden communion table (now in the transept chapel at St. Luke's), and at any rate towards the end of his long incumbency, the Revd. C. H. Lancaster (1916 - 1956) wore coloured stoles for the sacraments. During the second world war, lighted candles appeared on what was probably by then called the altar. The stone façade was at the east end of the church, and the altar was at the west. The traditional orientation of churches was not much thought of when St. John's was built, and the nature of the site controlled decisions. Berkeley Street was more suitable for the entrance than Witcombe Place. Both Holy Trinity (begun 1820) and St. Paul's (begun 1827) lie more or less on a north/south axis. Even the Roman Catholic chapel (opened in 1810) had its altar at the west end. Neither in churchmanship nor in appearance did the St. John's that we remember resemble what was found in its early years, and those who watched its demolition after it was closed in 1967 could see that it was an altered building.

From medieval times until the middle of the nineteenth century, Cheltenham was one large parish, surrounded by the village parishes of Prestbury, Charlton Kings, Leckhampton and Swindon, and perhaps the corners of one or two others. Within St. Mary's parish the spa town developed, with a need for more places of worship. One way of securing them, in more affluent communities, was the building and licensing of proprietary chapels. Seat-holders paid rents, which, with the collections, provided the promoters with an income, from which expenses and the stipend of the minister were met, any surplus being a profit. The Berkeley Street Chapel project was promoted by the Revd. D. R. L. Moxon LLB of St. Catherine's College, Cambridge. He died in Cheltenham on 29 November 1828, aged 29, while the chapel was under construction. Moxon was succeeded as proprietor by the Revd. William Spencer Phillips BD of Trinity College, Oxford, who appointed himself as Minister when the chapel was consecrated on 2 January 1829.

Papworth - The Architect

The architect that was chosen was a well-known professional man, John Buonarotti Papworth (1775 - 1847), one of the originators of the Institute of British Architects in 1834. Papworth worked in Cheltenham from 1824 to 1832, and encouraged the use of the Regency style. He designed many houses, including Lansdown Terrace, begun in 1825, and his best-known building in the town is the Montpellier Rotunda, 1825-6. The chapel consecrated on 2 January 1829, was a classical building, with a portico with Ionic columns, and a cupola surmounted by a Latin cross. The altarpiece was a painting of the Transfiguration by William Brockedon (1787 - 1854).

Although Phillips was Minister until his death on 13 May 1863, he very soon left Cheltenham. From 1832 to 1839 he was Vicar of Devynock in Breconshire, and from 1839 to 1863 Vicar of Newchurch with Ryde in the Isle of Wight. He appointed Assistant Ministers to do the work at St. John's. The first of these was the Revd. William Morgan Kinsey BD, Fellow of Trinity College, Oxford, known as a travel writer, who served from 1832 to 1843. He won a popular reputation as a preacher, and this will have increased the revenues of the church. He left to become Rector of Rotherfield Greys in Oxfordshire, where he died in 1851.¹

Other clergymen were also employed at St. John's, as curates to the Assistant Ministers. One of these was Feilding Palmer of Trinity College, Cambridge, from his ordination in 1841 until 1845, later curate at Tidenham, from 1867 to 1889.

A New School

From 1844 to 1850 the Assistant was Alexander Watson, of Corpus Christi College, Cambridge. Watson was the son of Dr. Joseph Watson, the Principal of the Deaf and Dumb Asylum in the Old Kent Road. He was educated at Shrewsbury, and after Cambridge studied for ordination at Durham. After a curacy in Manchester, where he succeeded in freeing the parish schools from debt, Watson moved to Cheltenham. From his arrival, if not before, St. John's represented the high church interest in the town. It was the only church with daily services, and with a celebration of the eucharist every Sunday and on holy days.² Pew rents were necessary, but

Watson abolished the sale of tickets at the door. The poor of the neighbourhood were not forgotten, and he quickly established a day school behind the church, in Witcombe Place. The trust deed named Watson as the manager for as long as he was the Assistant Minister. After that the manager should always be the Incumbent of St. John's. The school was 'for poor persons frequenting the said Church ... and such other poor persons as the Manager ... shall direct and for no other purpose whatsoever.' The school would be 'in union with the Incorporated National Society for promoting the education of the Poor in the principles of the Established Church.' Early inspectors' reports were filled with praise. As



St. John's in 1829

well as managing the National school, Watson took private pupils in his own house, Roseville in the London Road, for he was always short of money. In 1851, he became Vicar of St. Mary Church in Devon, where he founded a school at Babbacombe. His religious views were shewn by his support for Miss Lydia Sellon and her community of sisters in Plymouth. Watson planned a theological college, but it did not come into existence, and he lost money in the venture. Financial difficulties followed him elsewhere in Devon and London, and he moved to Yorkshire, to take temporary charge of Middleton-on-the-Wolds. After a few months he died there on 1 February 1865, aged forty-nine, and is buried in the churchyard.³

Controversy

The Perpetual Curate of St. Mary's Cheltenham from 1826 to 1857 was the prominent evangelical, Francis Close, later Dean of Carlisle. He looked with disfavour on the developments at St. John's,

but could do nothing to control them, unless the Bishop of Gloucester and Bristol would revoke Phillips' licence. Bishop Monk would not do that, and ordained men to be curates at St. John's. Watson was succeeded at St. John's by William John Edge, of Emmanuel College, Cambridge, who absented himself from his parish of Hartshill in Warwickshire, where he was Perpetual Curate from 1848 to 1854. In 1854 he became Rector of St. Aldate's Gloucester. As curate from 1851 he had Henry Matthew John Bowles of Trinity College, Dublin, who left in 1854 to become Rector of Framilode. Edge was followed in 1852/3 by the Revd. George Roberts, of Trinity College, Cambridge, who came from a lectureship at St. Andrew's Holborn. Roberts was firmly in the same tradition as Watson, and under him choral services became a feature of worship at St. John's. The Incumbent of St. Mary's from 1857 was the Revd. Edward Walker, whose disapproval of St. John's was as keen as his predecessor's. In 1863 Walker became Rector, and in that year Phillips died. Walker claimed successfully that there were no surviving trustees of St. John's, and that the patronage had lapsed to him, as Incumbent of the mother parish. Roberts was dismissed, and many members of the congregation left with him, determined to found a new church, where their style of worship and tradition of teaching could be maintained. They were supported by the new Bishop, C. J. Ellicott, and that was the origin of All Saints' Cheltenham, where choral music was also promoted from the beginning. It was intended that Roberts should be the first Incumbent of All Saint's, but some of his opponents discovered that he had debts. They had him declared bankrupt, and so ineligible. He spent the rest of his ministry in Norfolk. His son, G. B. B. J. Roberts, a well-known Anglo-Catholic, was Vicar of Elmstone Hardwicke from 1879 to 1921, where signs of his influence can be seen in the church.

Walker appointed as the Minister of St. John's an Oxford friend, the Revd. Thomas Valpy French of University College. French had been a missionary in India for the Church Missionary Society, and was later to be the first Bishop of Lahore. He was, perhaps surprisingly, the maternal grandfather of the Knox brothers, 'Evoe' the editor of *Punch*, Dillwyn the agnostic cryptographer, Wilfred the Anglo-Catholic theologian, and Ronald the convert to Roman Catholicism. French arrived in Cheltenham on 10 August 1864. His biographer wrote, 'The

charge of St. John's, Cheltenham, was at this time from local circumstances a trust of special burden, and after devoted labour of some weeks, through the kindness of the same patron, French was enabled to accept the more important living of St. Paul's in the same town.'⁴ The special burden was the controversy concerning the dismissal of Roberts, and the disaffection of a section of the congregation. At the end of 1864, Walker appointed his own curate, Arthur Armitage of Trinity College, Cambridge, to be the Minister of St. John's. In 1865 a parochial district was formed. Walker gave the patronage to the Simeon's Trustees, ensuring a low church tradition. Armitage became the first Perpetual Curate, remaining there until 1903.

Refurbishment

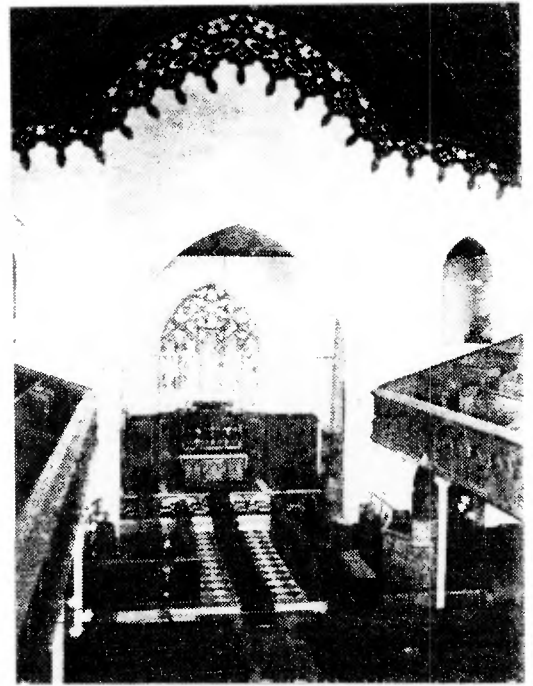
Very soon it was decided to alter the appearance of the church. In preparation for this the day school was moved in 1867 to a new building in Albion Street, which is still in use. In its place an apse was added to the west end of the church. The whole structure was encased in stone, and gothic features were used inside and out, generally in a decorated style. The south-east end of the façade became a short tower, with a pretty pierced parapet. It was intended that the north-east end should be built up into a taller tower with a spire, but this was never completed. Protestantism was declared by the absence of crosses from the gabled ends; a large finial surmounted the east front. The broad wooden roof was a triumph of carpentry, with decorated ribs. Where the roof joined the west wall of the nave, over the plain chancel arch, there was a flamboyant fretted wooden frieze. As I first remember it, the pulpit was raised on a tall single pillar, so it looked like an enormous oaken tulip, approached by a flight of iron stairs. Later, when it was realised that the galleries would never be filled again, it was reduced to a more comfortable height. The architect was Charles M. Muller, who worked in Cheltenham from the 1860s until about 1900. No other work of his has so far been identified.⁵

When the alterations were being planned, it was decided that William Brockedon's painting of the Transfiguration was too Catholic, and it was sold.⁶ One of the former members of St. John's congregation bought it and gave it to Prestbury Parish Church. In 1933, the Vicar of Prestbury, J. Baghot-de la Bere, gave it back to St. John's, and it was hung in a small chapel in the south-west corner.

It remained there until the church was demolished, but there appears to be no record of what happened to it then. Perhaps the publication of this note will cause the whereabouts of this important picture to become known.



St. John's



St. John's - internal view

The illustrations are from a leaflet on sale in the church in 1959.

Notes

1. His ministry at Rotherfield Greys is mentioned in glowing terms by Mary Russell Mitford in *Recollections of a Literary Life*. There is an obituary in the *Gentleman's Magazine* July 1851, p.95.
2. Details of the times of services in all the town's churches are given in Edwards *New Cheltenham Directory* for 1850.
3. There is an obituary in the *Gentleman's Magazine* April 1865, pp. 518 - 521.
4. Birks: *The Life and Correspondence of Thomas Valpy French* (London 1895) vol.1, p.152.
5. Roger Beacham of the Cheltenham Library tells me that Muller took part in the debate on the town's sewage disposal problems, with a letter to the *Cheltenham Examiner* 27 July 1864, written from 27 Winchcomb Place. Later he lived at 1 Ormond Terrace.
6. In his early years Brockedon was helped on his way by the Rector of Dartington, R. H. Froude. The association of the Froude family with the Tractarian movement may have influenced Armitage in deciding to dispose of the altarpiece.