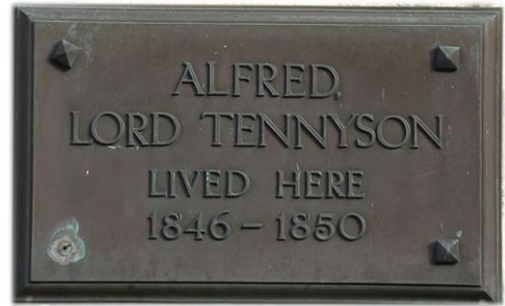


ALFRED TENNYSON LIVED HERE - OCCASIONALLY

A few months ago as I stood at the bus stop in St James Square a gentleman came along the pavement alongside St Gregory's Church and peered intently over the wall at the presbytery, No 10. He walked inside the gate and looked again. 'I've read everything I can on Alfred Tennyson and I can't find anything that says he lived here,' he told me. Not for the first time I explained the mistake recorded on the bronze plaque, itself an historic item, being the first 'memorial tablet' put up in the town by the Public Libraries Committee, in 1926, to commemorate famous persons connected to Cheltenham. But, as most local historians know, it has been a source of misleading information for almost 100 years.



No 10 St James Square, sometimes known as Beuno House, has a history of tenants from across society, from paupers to prelates, but mostly the tenants in charge of the household have been, more or less, prosperous independent women. No 10 is now the Presbytery, the Priests' House, for the adjoining church but that is a relatively recent usage.

St James Square never attained the shape and residential importance foreseen in the first decades of the 19th century. The first Catholic Chapel was opened at the corner of the new Square in 1810 and, two hundred yards away across the fields, the workhouse was built ten years later, but by 1832 the development of the square was still 'very incomplete'. An early investor was Mrs Sarah Neve, attracted to the property because of its proximity to the Catholic Chapel and its missionary, Fr John Birdsall, whom she had known in Bath. Mrs Neve, childless widow of an Anglican vicar, had inherited money from her sister and enjoyed spending it on the newly emancipated Catholic Church, especially those missions headed by Benedictines in Cheltenham, Chipping Sodbury, and Australia. Sarah herself lived in the house for a few years prior to her death in 1842, leaving the income from the house to the Catholic mission in Chipping Sodbury, her late husband having been an incumbent of Old Sodbury.

For about fifteen years, until 1857, the house changed tenants frequently. Mrs Tennyson's household, resident between 1846 and 1852 was busy, and mostly female, with two unmarried daughters, her son Horatio, her sister, a cousin, and a staff of three, together with numerous pets. Unsurprisingly, when visiting Alfred retreated from the crowded household to write poetry in a remote upstairs room. Alfred was only ever a visitor, for health reasons, or his honeymoon in 1850 with his wife Emily, and again in 1852 when Emily was pregnant with their second child. If it wasn't exactly his home, it could be described as his base, until he finally made a home with his wife and sons in Farringford, on the Isle of Wight.



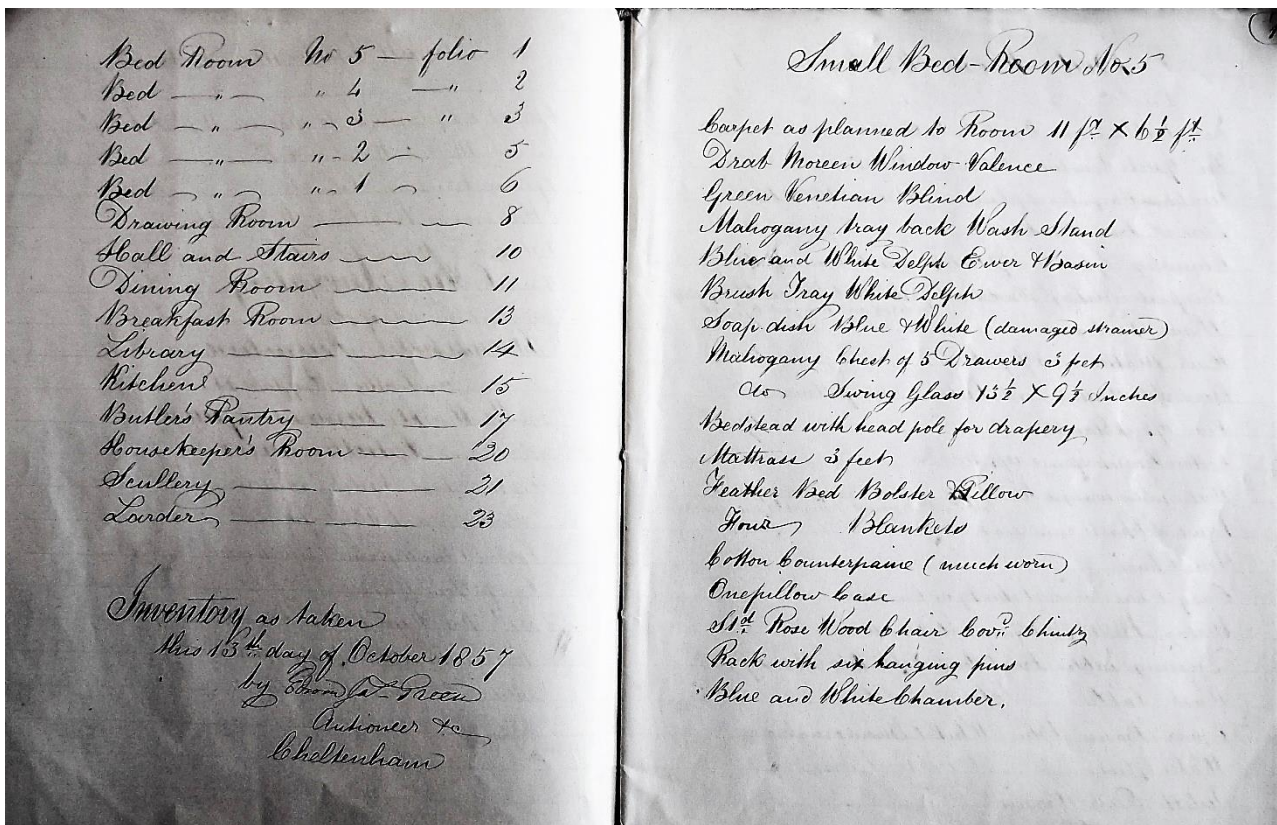
During this period, until 1854, the house and its grounds were separated from the neighbouring Catholic Chapel by the generous gardens belonging to Fr Birdsall, putting distance between the old chapel and No 10. Fr James Cotham's plans for a large Victorian Gothic church, covering the gardens, altered that balance.

In July 1853 he advertised in the *Tablet* for new tenants. The green fields, and later Jessops Gardens, fronting the house had given way to the encroachments of the GWR station. In Charles Hansom's designs for the new church the East end of the church would almost touch the side wall of No 10 and access to the rear of the house was shared with access to the back of the church.

Cheltenham.---To be Let, Fur-
nished, an elegant and commodious FAMILY RESIDENCE,
 adjoining the New Catholic Church in St. James's-square, con-
 taining double Drawing-room, Dining-room, Breakfast Parlour,
 Library, Housekeeper's-room, Pantries, Larders, Cellars, and
 other suitable domestic offices. The rent will be very moderate
 (especially if taken for a term of years), and immediate possession
 may be had. Apply to the Rev. James Cotham, St. James's-
 square, Cheltenham. A 248

Fortunately for Fr Cotham, his tenant between 1857 and 1884 was Mary Monington Webbe-Weston, newly widowed, with limited income but great devotion to the Church and loyalty to Fr Cotham. Few tenants would have tolerated the noise and nuisance of continuous building work and railway development on every side (and late, Shacklefords Manufactory and Barnby Bendall and Co). Mrs Monington's rent, a modest £130 p.a., remained constant until her death in 1884 at the age of 95. From the income, £50 was paid to St Laurence's Church, Chipping Sodbury as part of the mortgage, but the use of the gardens and access for the builders was invaluable to St Gregory's Church.

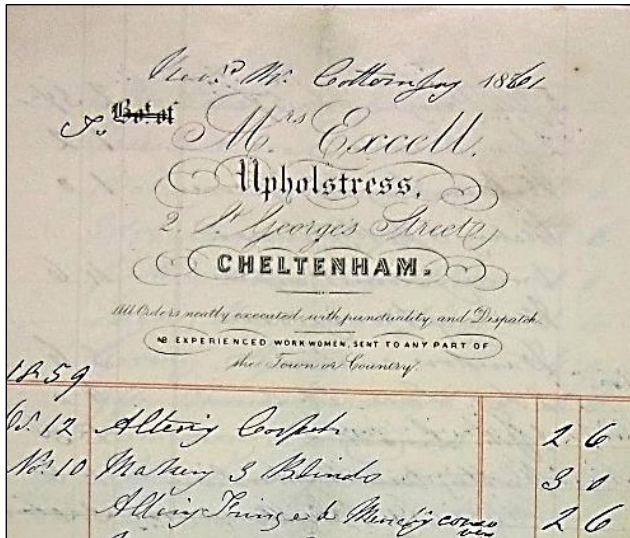
Fr Cotham was a fair and generous landlord. The inventory made in 1857 gives an idea of the sizes of the rooms and the state of the contents. Blankets were mostly 'worn', furniture was 'scratched' and kitchen services and utensils were 'incomplete' or frankly 'broken' but he bought replacements over the years.



Bedroom No 5 was one of two servants rooms, furnished for sleeping and washing, without a fireplace. The housekeeper's room downstairs contained her bed and a fireplace.

Cheltenham builder Richard Dutton had been unsuccessful when he tendered for building the church, but he was called on to make good the effects on the neighbouring house. Redecorating was frequently necessary, as were occasionally extensive repairs to cisterns and water pipes, *opening ground making light and air to cellar and taking up and relaying paving sunken by ruts*. Even so, the cost of this invoice, £12.14s.6d, was miniscule compared to the thousands being spent on the new church.

1861		The Rev H Cottam	£	s	d
		To Rich ^d Dutton			
May 18	To Work Done at Somerset Place Taking Down & Re-sitting Furnace Whitewashing Scullery & Five Bricks for Mortar Nitty & Plaster of		2	0	
	Man 1/4 Day - - - - -			3	
Sept 10 th	To Work Done at Beving House <i>ent</i> <i>H</i>				
	Cleaning - Stopping - Ceilings of Stairs base, Landings Passages & Entrance Hall ceiling Papered & all the above whitened Kitchen ceiling Cleaned Papered & Whitened & -		2	5	
	Labour & Materials - - - - -				
	Taking of Chimney Nts. Cleaned Repaired & Re-sitting &c - 2 New C. Nts. Mortar Cement & Labour -	10			
	To Excavate Ground for Making wing beside of House, Opening Ground making light & air to Cellar & Whitewashed & -				
	Cleaning out Closet Vault & Taking up & Relaying Paving sunken by Rats & -				
	& other Offices Cleaned out & Whitewashed & -				
	Gratings Slaten wire & Glass for Cellar -		4	0	
	Bricks Mortar & Cement for wing	1	0		
	Finnest best stone for Sashed Window		3	0	
	55 feet of Finest Paving Stone Worked for wing & Repairing Paving in front of House	1	12		
	Cement & Mortar for work & Iron Grating		9	0	
	Self, Mason & Bricklayers & Labour & Lime	4	15		
	Cleaning & Colouring Front & Back wire				
	Labour & Material			5	
	Carpenters Work New sash Lines to Windows & Sill of New Mullions & other Work		0	6	
			£	12	14
				6	
Carried over					



One of the busiest tradespersons, for relatively little outlay, was Mrs Ann Excell and her team of upholstresses. In the plentiful use of lace, cord, tassels and coverings – all protected from the sun by window blinds – we see a Victorian interior being created for the pious widow.

Ann (Merriman) worked as an upholstress from the age of twelve. When her husband, David Excell, took early retirement from his grocery business in the High Street after bankruptcy in 1862 Ann became the family earner. In 1911 she lived as a widow with her two granddaughters, both upholstresses.

5 yds Fringe at 5/6	2 5/6	4 yds Ribbon at 9	3 0
2 yds Canvas	1 2	Tassels & cord	9
Preparing Buzik & Sofa cover	1 0	Making Curtains & Drapes	4 6
Making & putting down		3 yds Lace at 1/2	3 6
Drawing room carpet	4 6	Putting down Carpet & Tack	1 0
Making Drawing room		Edging Book case & Gump	1 4
Window curtains	5 6	Covering Squares	4 0
2 yds Lace at 3	6 0	9 yds Sunshade at 2/6	1 2 6
3 yds Linosin	1 3	Remaking & putting up	
Putting down Carpet in Library	1 6	Tobacco Ornament Bed	2 6
Making 3 Blinds	3 0		£ 2 3 1
4 yds Ribbon at 9	5 3	Total	6 19 9
Making 1 del. Curtains	3 6	Deduct Screen	1 6 6
2 yds Lace at 3	6 0		5 13 3
Edging Book case with Lath	3 6		
5 yds Leather at 2/6	12 6		
Covering 3 stools	2 0		
Covering Sofa Bed & Pillow	3 0		
Binding case and Mattress			
& Binding	1 0		
Making 2 Blinds in			
Small sitting room	1 6		
	£ 3 2 5/6		

After Mrs Monington's long tenancy, No 10 was used mostly as a parish amenity. In November 1884 the Poor Sisters of Nazareth began their work in the town, starting with some elderly inmates and three children from the workhouse. By December 1884 they had sixteen orphan or destitute children, as well as aged and infirm poor adults, occupying nine rooms in two separate parts of the house. In 1888 a new Nazareth House was bought in Bath Road and was frequently extended during the next eighty years.

The destitute and poor were followed by middle-class girls who came daily for a middling education from the Sisters of Charity of St Paul, whose main work was at the Catholic Infant and Junior School in St Paul's St North. Lillah McCarthy (1874-1960) was a pupil at No 10 and in due course earned her own blue plaque, in the High Street, as a celebrated professional actress.

Despite the occasional illustrious occupant, No 10 St James Square has been a working house for most of its existence. The interior layout of the rooms is little changed since Fr Cotham's advertisement in 1857, the small rooms below stairs and on the upper floor contrasting with the few 'elegant and commodious' spaces in between. In the 1980s the parish priest, Fr James Donovan, obtained some period furniture at auction for the main reception rooms, but for the parishioners of St Gregory's it is known mainly as 'the office next door' rather than the erstwhile residence of a poet laureate.

Extract from the conveyance to Mrs Neve by Thos. and John Read May 17 1831 for the land situated at Mead Furlong, alongside Tangent Alley 'through and over the fields called Milkhouse Homestead'.

Extract from conveyance to Mrs Neve by Thos. and John Read May 17-1831

All that Plot of Land (parcel of a certain close of ground situate at Cheltenham called Mead = Five long) containing in length in front on the Westward side thereof next to a Public Road leading to St James's Square one hundred feet or thereabouts, and in depth throughout from such front backwards to a Public Footway or Path of seven feet wide called Tangent Alley through and over the Fields called Milkhouse Homestead one hundred and three feet or thereabouts, bounded on or towards the Northward side or end thereof by ground belonging to the Rev John Birdwall. On and towards the South by ground belonging to Saunders and Francis Fitzherbert Esq. and on the Eastward by a wall next adjoining Tangent Alley.

And also all that Area of five feet wide made or intended to be made before the whole front of the said Plot of ground (which said Area is never to be built on)

And also all those Vaults intended to be made under the Terrace walk or paved way and Road made or intended to be made in front of and on the outside of the said Area. Together with the free use of sewers, Roads &c.