
After Birdsall (1837-1852)

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During the first forty years of the Catholic Mission in Cheltenham Birdsall had accomplished much of the pioneering work. He built the chapel and established a viable and stable resident congregation. He also opened a poor school and stood up to the opposition of the evangelicals in the town especially during the period of Catholic Emancipation. His attention later moved to his foundation of the German College at Broadway and the fight for the survival of the English Benedictine Congregation. As he loosened the reins upon Cheltenham the mission was served by a succession of Benedictine priests, some of whom were young and inexperienced and none of them stayed long enough to make any real impact in the town. The congregation continued to expand with the constant influx of poor Irish immigrants and with converts who were influenced by the Oxford Movement.

In 1830 there were forty-three baptisms, fifteen deaths, one hundred and eighty Easter communicants, seven non-communicants above the age of fourteen, seventy-five under the age of fourteen years and three people were under instruction. In 1844 the total congregation was estimated as being about five hundred. During the year there were fifty-three baptisms, eleven converts, thirteen conditional baptisms, seventy-nine confirmations, thirty-five first Holy communions, three hundred and fifty Easter communicants, six marriages, and five deaths. Between 1844 and 1851 the estimated Catholic population was to rise from five hundred to a thousand.

After the death of the founder of the Benedictine Mission in Cheltenham, Dom John Augustine Birdsall, in 1837, the mission was served by Father Christopher Augustine Shann. He was appointed as Missioner at Cheltenham in 1835. He was a monk of Ampleforth and he had spent many years in the Northern Province serving at Morpeth, Scarisbrick and elsewhere. In 1840 Shann was succeeded briefly by Father Edward Bernard Paillet from November 1840 until January 1841. He had been born in Bath and came to Cheltenham as a young priest suffering from a nervous disposition. Cheltenham quickly proved too much for him and he swapped posts with Father Jerome Jenkins, the Benedictine Missioner at Chipping Sodbury. Father Paillet's nervous attacks increased and eventually he lost his sight.

Father Jenkins had already served at Cheltenham under Birdsall and this second duration only lasted until 1843 when he was sent to Rome as the Procurator of the English Benedictine Congregation. Later he became the Provincial of Canterbury and he served in a number of missions including Bath and Coventry. When Father Jenkins left for Rome the Provincial could not immediately find a successor for Cheltenham and it would seem that Rev. Robert Chapman, a secular priest, served the mission from August until October 1843 when Dom James Hilary Dowding arrived from the mission of Little Crosby in the northern province.

Dowding was born in Bath and after being married he was clothed as a Benedictine monk at the age of thirty-nine years. He served at Cheltenham until 1849.

Dowding was succeeded by Father Anselm Glassbrook who served the mission from October 1849 until March 1851 when he was moved to Fairford. During his time the congregation endured the violent attack upon the chapel during the tensions associated with the Restoration of the Catholic hierarchy. 550 members of the congregation at Cheltenham signed a 'Notice' regretting his removal from the town. One of his innovations was the establishment of an evening service which was described as being both of benefit to the extension of the faith and as much appreciated by the poor.

Father Nicholas Kendal was assistant missionary at Cheltenham from 1850 and then succeeded Father Glassbrook as the senior priest from March 1851 until 17th July 1852. He was assisted by a succession of Benedictine priests – Father Aloysius Levy came from Liverpool at the time of Fr Glassbrook's departure and remained in Cheltenham until the end of the year. From January until March 1852 Father Benedict Lynass was assistant and then from March until July 1852 Father Basil Duck was assistant to Father Kendal. Fr. Basil Duck was the nephew of Dom James Ambrose Duck who had himself been an assistant to Fr Birdsall at Cheltenham.

During 1851 Sunday Mass was celebrated at 8.30am and 11am. Vespers took place at 3pm and Compline at 7pm. Weekday Masses were celebrated at 7.30am and 8.30am.

The Gloucester Journal for 8th May 1852 reported that Father Ignatius Spencer visited the town. He was Superior-General of the Passionist Order in England and a brother of Earl Spencer. He had been an Anglican clergyman prior to his reception into full communion with the Catholic Church in 1830. He was both an ancestor of Sir Winston Churchill and Diana, Princess of Wales. When Spencer visited Cheltenham it was reported,

' "Father Ignatius" alias Hon. and Rev. George Spencer, brother to Earl Spencer, and formerly a clergyman of the Established Church, has during the past week, paid a visit to Cheltenham. He was dressed in a coarse black serge cloak, a low-crowned hat with an immense brim; his feet were bare. Suspended from his breast were two silver orders of the Jesuits (sic). It is said he is on a tour through England to collect funds for the conversion of this nation to Romanism'

Also during 1852 Cardinal Wiseman visited Cheltenham and the Gloucester Journal for the 19th June reported that he had come to negotiate the purchase of the Queen's Hotel for £20,000 so as to convert it into a nunnery. At about this time the hotel was actually sold for £8,400. On 4th July Bishop Burgess of Clifton confirmed eighty-nine candidates at St Gregory's Chapel.

With the departure of Father Kendal in July 1852 Cheltenham was to have another Missioner of a similar stature to Father Birdsall. The new priest, Father James Ambrose Cotham, would rebuild the Church and during his twenty-one years as missioner many other initiatives would unfold.