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## Anti-Catholicism in Nineteenth Century Cheltenham

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### Part I: Before the Restoration of the Hierarchy

Between the passing of the Catholic Emancipation Bill in 1829 and the Restoration of the Hierarchy in 1850, Catholicism throughout the country experienced a certain amount of opposition, but in Cheltenham this reached the proportions of outright hostility. It seems strange to think that only forty years before the 1850 riot Dom Augustine Birdsall, the resident priest, was able to report that he had managed to open his chapel without experiencing opposition. During these years the religious scene in Cheltenham had dramatically changed, largely due to the influence of one man, Rev Francis Close.

In 1816 the Living of St Mary's Parish Church in Cheltenham was purchased by the followers of Charles Simeon, a noted Evangelical, who it had been said could well have led the Church of England into the paths followed by Wesley and the Methodists. The Simeon Trust purchased Livings as and when they became available, and they placed in them incumbents who were fervent Evangelicals. In 1826 the Rev Francis Close was appointed to the curacy of Cheltenham's new church, Holy Trinity, then the only other Anglican Church in the town other than the Parish Church. He served two years at Holy Trinity and was then offered St Mary's Parish Church where he was Rector until 1856.

Close, like Simeon, was an ardent Evangelical and he soon filled the Church as a result of his powerful and autocratic preaching. His sermons dominated the Church life of the town and were talked of in nearly every home. Many of them were published thus spreading his doctrinal position and assisting him in his efforts to influence public opinion, for Close's sermons were not confined to religion only. Every social innovation, which he felt were against the laws of God, provided fodder for his sermons. He appointed strong Evangelicals to all the chapels-of-ease, which were built during his years in the town. In later years he insisted that all boys registering at the newly opened Pate's school must accept religious instruction, but no High Church or Tractarian views were to be taught in case the boys might be converted to Catholicism – a threat which he felt was strengthened by Newman's conversion in 1845. Fighting High Church influence was as important a duty as fighting social issues and the evils presented by the tourist attractions of the day – the theatre, gambling and of course the races. He objected to the railway station and the local shops opening on a Sunday.

Francis Close was a powerful and eloquent speaker and a man of considerable influence in the town. Alfred Tennyson, who incidentally resided in the house which is now occupied by the Benedictine community, protested that – "Francis Close is Pope in this Town". Close felt

that Roman Catholicism was invading Cheltenham and with Act of Emancipation he felt that the time had come to take a firm stand against all that smacked of "Popery". Sermons were preached against the Emancipation bill and even the continued Irish immigration was declared another tool designed to increase the influence of the Pope in England. It seems ironic that two of his own descendants became Catholics in this century, Major James Close becoming a prominent member of St Gregory's congregation.

Tension between the Catholic community in Cheltenham and the local Reformation Society seems to date from the years immediately following the arrival of Francis Close. During the years leading up to Emancipation many columns were written in the local newspapers concerning this controversial legislation. The Cheltenham Journal of 19<sup>th</sup> May reported:

"The result of the Catholic question has created but very little sensation among the heterogeneous population of this fashionable watering place. True it is, but its advocates and opponents are here pretty nearly balanced; but there is amidst all, a general impression, that what might be given as a favour, should not be demanded as a right".

During the following months the Journal published correspondence between a sympathiser of the Reformation Society, writing under the name of "Omicron" and a Catholic sympathiser – "A Friend to Civil and Religious Liberty". These bitter exchanges introduced the local issue of the Catholic Charity School. Omicron wrote on 20<sup>th</sup> October 1828:

"Is it not a fact that 58 Protestant children (as appears from books kept by the Branch National School) have been assiduously taught by their catechism and that the true Church is under Christ's vicar on Earth, the Pope... Has not the schoolmistress strongly inculcated the same doctrines on the minds of her scholars and that too in a far less questionable shape. And are not the zealous Catholics in this Town loud in the vociferation respecting the Unity and Catholicity of their Church".

When the Catholic Charity School opened in April 1827 the only other schools in the Town catering for the poorer children were the Parish School, the National School in the Bath Road and the new Infant School in Alstone. The various chapels were gradually providing schools but the provision of a Catholic one was another matter. Father John Birdsall wrote in his private diary:

"In the summer of 1828 the inquisitorial meddling of the Biblicists etc. with our charity school, their printing notices and insertions in the Cheltenham paper stating according to their computation or rating the mighty increase of 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 the corner of St James Square.

As the year 1829 approached, the issue of Emancipation continued to fill the newspapers, and public meetings and protests were made. In some cities the mob attacked Catholic premises but in Cheltenham we only have record of a placard which proclaimed:

“Notice to all true Protestants of the Town of Cheltenham – There is a heap of rubbish that stands in this Town near to the Baptist Chapel, which is a nuisance to all true Protestants and we have about two hundred that have resolved to pull it down to the ground and all true Protestants are requested to meet on that spot on Monday 9<sup>th</sup> day of March, about 7 o’clock in the afternoon, and drive all Popery out of the Town. Come and let not your hearts fail you to do a good deed”.

(Father Birdsall)

The Cheltenham Journal for 16 March 1829 bore the following caution which no doubt deterred many rioters:

“By 7 & 8 George IV Cap 30 Sec 8 – That if any persons riotously and tumultuously assemble together to the disturbance of the public peace, shall unlawfully and with force demolish, pull down or destroy, any church or chapel for religious worship of persons dissenting from the United Church of England and Ireland, every such offender shall be guilty of felony and being convicted thereof shall suffer death as a felon”.

A scribbled note in Father Birdsall’s historical notes mentions that – “during the excitement great animosity and bitter opposition was manifested in the Town of Cheltenham”. The words “flog” and “imprisonment” can be made out, but the writing is too feint to be properly deciphered. There are no reports of trouble in the extant local newspapers of the day.

Life obviously settled down after the passing of the Catholic Emancipation Bill, but another bitter controversy erupted in the following year. The Cheltenham Journal for 16 August 1830 reported that an impressive sermon had been preached on the Sunday at the Catholic Chapel by Rev John Sheehan of Waterford, and that a collection was taken for the Cheltenham Dispensary. Father Sheehan was visiting Cheltenham for the “Discussion” which took place at the Riding School, Montpellier, from 16<sup>th</sup> to 23<sup>rd</sup> August, between members of the Society for Promoting the Principles of the Reformation and delegates of the Roman Catholic Church. The local newspaper, The Cheltenham Journal, followed the proceedings with keen interest and columns of reports were published for a number of weeks.

The story opens with an account dated 23<sup>rd</sup> August, which named the Reformation Society delegates as Captain Gordon, Rev Mr Digby and Rev Mr Armstrong. The Catholics included Mr MJ Falvey, Rev Mr O’Farrell, Rev Mr McDonnell, Rev William Walsh and Doctor TJ Brown OSB, the Professor of Theology at Downside who later became the Bishop of Newport and Menevia. The meeting was chaired by Spencer Percival MP for the first four days and then by Rev Mr McGhee. The subjects for discussion were “The Rule of Faith”, “The Holy Catholic Church” and “The Sacrifice of the Mass” and details were placarded on walls around the Town for several days before the discussions opened. In the event the meeting failed to advance

beyond the first subject and the atmosphere when the meeting closed on the following Monday was less than amicable. The Cheltenham Journal clearly supported the Reformation Society and the Report which was published on 23<sup>rd</sup>, only hours before the meeting was actually concluded, summed up the arguments in the following words:

“We have given a sketch of the substance of the arguments and of the state of the question, and we do not hesitate to assert, we will say with conviction of the crowded auditory, that the champions of the Church of Rome, though using the weapons of infidelity, have not proceeded one step in establishing the rule of their own faith or in shaking the rule of the Protestant faith. The Bible, and nothing but the Bible, is the very word of the Living God”.

The claims that Mr Falvey, the Catholic lay-contributor, was using the arguments of the infidel, finally brought the end to the meeting. The Protestant arguments were rooted in a belief that the Bible was the “Rule of faith” whereas Mr Falvey was countering this belief by arguing that the Bible had a place only within the teaching authority of the Church. His arguments brought shouts of “Infidel” from the meeting and his words were drowned. Mr Favey retired from the meeting followed by the Catholic clergy.

The matter did not end there for on Thursday 26<sup>th</sup> August the following advertisement appeared in the Cheltenham Chronicle:

Dear Sir,

As the enemies of our Holy Faith, unable to contend with you, in fair and legitimate controversy, have basely endeavoured to blast your character by charging you with infidelity, we, the undersigned Catholic Priests, have deemed it a sacred and imperative duty thus publicly to express our approbation, and our adoption of the arguments which you advanced in recent discussions, which have, at once, established the glorious and triumphant superiority of the Catholic Faith, and exhorted with its adversaries, the disgraceful admission, that Christianity, if it rests on their principles is powerless against the infidel: Signed:

|                 |                                      |
|-----------------|--------------------------------------|
| John Sheehan    | Parish Priest, Waterford             |
| Luke Barber     | President of Downside                |
| TJ Brown        | Professor of Theology                |
| Thomas McInerny | Parish Priest, Feakle, Co Clare      |
| Wm Stafford     | Parish Priest, Raithmines, Co Dublin |
| Wm Walsh        | Curate, clontarf, Co Dublin          |
| Henry Alley     | Curate, Wicklow                      |
| TM McDonnell    | Missionary of St Peters, Birmingham  |

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To M J FALVEY

This advertisement caused furious opposition and within one hour of its publication handbills were circulated in the area urging Protestants of the vicinity, who admitted the Bible as being the sole “Rule of Faith”, to rally at the Riding School on the following afternoon. The Cheltenham Journal of the 30<sup>th</sup> August reported that, in spite of handbills being torn down and destroyed, a vast crowd assembled to hear speeches delivered by members of the Reformation Society. The meeting passed three resolutions condemning the Catholic advertisement. The discussions on the “Holy Catholic Church” and “The Sacrifice of the Mass” continued in the absence of the Catholic delegates and full accounts appeared in the pages of the Cheltenham Journal. These reports naturally portrayed the events as a triumph for the Protestant cause.

Meanwhile Dr Brown published his “Substance of the Arguments adopted by the Roman Catholic Advocates in the Recent Discussions at Cheltenham on the Rule of Faith, Collected from Notes taken during the Discussion”. This in turn led to three letters in the Cheltenham Journal from Captain Gordon, a member of the Reformation Society. Dr Brown later referred to these letters in one which he wrote to The Catholic Magazine of April 1831:

“Many hear the awful menaces of the terrible execution he was about to inflict on Catholic doctrines, and the reasons which support them; but lo ! ere half his task was, by his own confession, accomplished, such an exposure was made in the same Journal of the gross ignorance and of the illogical attempts at reasoning, of the gallant officer belonging to His Majesty’s Navy, that he seems to have been glad to shrink out of the controversy, and is probably consoling himself, by telling his own story, where no one else is able, or permitted, to question its veracity. March 17<sup>th</sup> 1831”.

The Cheltenham Discussion clearly did nothing to break down anti-Catholic prejudice. Further discussions took place at Birmingham, Bath and at Downside College. The Cheltenham Journal, in later years, was to turn its attention from “Popery” to “Mormonism” which was to establish roots in the Town in the late 1830’s.

From 1839 Rev Francis Close preached an annual sermon against “Popery” on Guy Fawkes Day. In one sermon he said “When we leave Church we may be more disgusted than ever with Popery” and in his sermon for 1847 he declared – “The land is infected with Jesuits”. The sermon preached on 5<sup>th</sup> November 1846 by Francis Close was later published as “The Roman Antichrist – A Lying Spirit”. In it the Rector entreats his congregation to provide funds for a new schoolroom:

“And the greatest barrier which can be raised against Romanism is a good Bible education. For this, therefore, I plead this morning, and ask your alms towards the building of a suitable school room for the children of the old Cheltenham Charity School. Remember, beloved, the Bible is the best book ever writ against Popery”.

A newspaper report indicates the extent to which local Catholics felt they were being misunderstood by their neighbours. On Sunday 12<sup>th</sup> July 1840 Father Christopher Shann, the missionary at St Gregory's, preached at the High Mass on the theme of the Good Samaritan. The account of the sermon in the newspaper says that he spoke of "the calumnies with which Catholics were assailed" and he went on to cite a Tory tract which had circulated in the Town a few weeks beforehand, stating that "murderers and thieves could purchase a forgiveness off the priests".

The opponents of Catholicism were far from united for a deep rift separated Rev Francis Close and his supporters from the Berkeley Family and its supporters. The Berkeley Family was the most influential aristocrat family in the Town and their extensive lands and property included Berkeley Castle and Berkeley Square in London. Earl Fitzhardinge was the eldest son of the 5<sup>th</sup> Earl of Berkeley and, although denied his father's title through his illegitimate birth, he earned an Earldom on his own merit. Although a benefactor of local charities his name was more often connected with local sporting activities such as hunting and racing. The Berkeley Family was closely associated with the Whig or Liberal Party, which was the Party traditionally supported by the Catholic community. It is difficult to establish the number of Catholics who had the vote at this time in Cheltenham. Much of the congregation would have been poor Irish labourers but out of the estimated Catholic population of 700 in the Town in 1839-1840, a proportion must have been entitled to vote. One prominent Catholic Liberal was the bookseller, George Arthur Williams, who became High Bailiff of Cheltenham in 1847. His cousin, James Boodle (1809-1866), although not received into the Catholic Church until 1856, was a solicitor and the Political Agent of the Berkeleys. In later life he was a substantial benefactor of St Gregory's Church. Another prominent Liberal was Mr Robert Canning of Hartpury who although a Catholic became High Sheriff of Gloucestershire. Canning was a keen sportsman, a patron of the Cheltenham Races, and a friend of the Berkeleys.

The racecourse was a divisive local attraction passionately attacked by Rev Francis Close. The first races were held in 1819 and ten years later, as a result of the preaching of the Rector of Cheltenham, a well organised demonstration took place objecting to the Races. In the following year supporters of Francis Close burnt down the grandstand. Naturally racing, fox hunting and other pursuits caused serious quarrels between the Berkeley Family and the Rector of Cheltenham. The small Catholic community was largely allied to the Berkeleys until various strains were placed on this relationship.

The Hon. Craven Berkeley, brother of Earl Fitzhardinge, was Liberal Member of Parliament for Cheltenham from 1832-1848 and from 1852-1855, whilst his cousin Grenville Berkeley, was Member after 1855. The Hon. Craven Berkeley had a personal grievance against the Catholic Church. In 1839 he married the Hon Mrs Talbot, widow of the Hon George Talbot, brother of the Earl of Shrewsbury. The Talbots were a Catholic family and the Hon George had arranged for an influential priest, Dr Doyle of Southwark, to be guardian of his daughter Augusta. Dr Doyle placed Augusta temporarily in the care of the Franciscan nuns at Taunton as her step-father, the Hon Craven Berkeley, had wished to gain control of her affairs and remove her

from Catholic influence. The case went to Chancery in the full glow of publicity and whilst Dr Doyle won the case the Hon Craven Berkeley won the hearts of the Protestant anti-Popery movement and he was regarded as something of a hero in Cheltenham.

His brother, the Hon Grantley Berkeley, the Member of Parliament for West Gloucestershire, also opposed the Catholic cause. His wife, Caroline, became a Catholic early in their marriage and the elder of his sons, the Hon Swinburne Berkeley, although brought up an Anglican was received into the Catholic Church when he came of age. His younger brother, who had been brought up a Catholic, reverted to Anglicanism. The Hon Grantley Berkeley despaired at his elder son's decision and urged him to reconsider in the interests of the electorate of the County of Gloucester who would now be unprepared to support him as a future Member of Parliament. The Hon Swinburne Berkeley later made an anonymous donation of £120 towards the building of St Gregory's Church. In 1865 he died at Bonchurch on the Isle of Wight, apparently reconciled with the Church of England, to his father's joy. The Hon Grantley Berkeley openly condemned his wife's generosity to the Catholic Church.

It seems ironic that the wife of Edgar Berkeley Gifford, great nephew of Grantley and Craven Berkeley, was to open a Catholic Chapel at Sharpness in 1883 and that the second wife of Henry, 17th Lord Berkeley also the 8th and last Earl of Berkeley (1865-1942), Mary Emlen Lowell of Boston Mass., a Roman Catholic, was buried with her husband in the vaults beneath the Berkeley Chapel in the town's ancient Parish Church. When the last Earl died in 1942, the castle was inherited by the Roman Catholic Berkeleys of Spetchley and when they moved into the Castle they restored the Norman Chapel of St John in the Keep and, from 1970, Mass was regularly celebrated there. We can be sure that all of these developments would have earned the displeasure of both Craven and Grantley Berkeley!

To what extent their domestic problems influenced the attitudes of the Berkeley Family is difficult to say. Their attitude towards "Papal Aggression" in 1850 certainly weakened ties between Catholicism and Liberalism but that relationship soon recovered. During the final years of the 1840's hostility towards Roman Catholics was gradually hardening for both local and national reasons. Locally the Catholic community was greatly expanding not only as a result of Irish immigration but also as a result of the Oxford Movement and the reception of John Henry Newman in 1845. A small number of local clergy and prominent laity became "perverts" to the "Romish Church". In 1849 thirty converts were received at St Gregory's according to the Catholic Directory compared with only three in 1839 (Diocesan census). In 1850 Viscount Camden, later Earl of Gainsborough, was received with his wife into the Catholic Church and they eventually settled at Chipping Camden. In 1844 William Leigh, another convert, purchased Spring Park, Woodchester, where he built the Priory Church. Evangelical Anglicans, such as Francis Close, were particularly disturbed by these events and he soon became known nationally for his condemnation of "Popery". Articles designed to undermine Catholic activity were readily published in the press.

Nationally the question of Ireland was a major political issue. The state of the Church of Ireland was of great concern to Anglican churchmen and its status was being jealously

guarded from political attack. In 1845 the Government raised the grant to Maynooth Catholic Seminary from £9,000 to £27,000 as well as making a payment of £30,000 towards capital expenditure. The people of Cheltenham responded, and on 31<sup>st</sup> March 1845 “a great meeting of churchmen and dissenters” was held at the Town Hall to petition against the grant to Maynooth. The newspaper reported that the meeting lasted for four hours.

1845 was the last year that the parish boundaries were perambulated. Goding recalls that one of the yokels following the procession offered his explanation to his friends for the custom:

“That ain’t it mun! If they don’t do it every fourteen years Cheltenham would be claimed, mun, by the Catholics”.

## **PART II: Anti-Catholicism after 1850**

On 29<sup>th</sup> September 1850, Pope Pius IX restored the Roman Catholic Hierarchy to England and Wales. After the death of Queen Mary’s bishops the Catholic community was administered for a time by archpriests and later Vicars-Apostolic. In 1850 the eight Vicars-Apostolic were replaced by the Archbishop of Westminster and twelve suffragan bishops. Cheltenham was in the newly created Diocese of Clifton and its bishop was Joseph Hendren. The Restoration aroused a violent reaction throughout the country. Lord John Russell, the Prime Minister, the Anglican Bishops and the Press, led by “The Times”, raged at this “Papal Aggression” and extracts from “The Times” and “Punch” cartoons indicated the degrees and the depths of the “No Popery” campaign. Effigies of the Pope and of Cardinal Wiseman were burnt in many towns. An Address was sent to the Queen by the Anglican Bishops.

In Cheltenham the Restoration of the Hierarchy was met with considerable reaction and for months the local newspapers contained articles on the subject, the majority of them unsympathetic to the Catholic cause. On 5<sup>th</sup> November the Town Commissioners summoned a public meeting and the Cheltenham Examiner stated, “Well to observe that it arose out of a spontaneous feeling on the part of the laity of Cheltenham and not on the notion of the .... Clergy.”



(TO THE  
**HIGH BAILIFF OF CHELTENHAM.**

WE, the Undersigned, request that you will call a **PUBLIC MEETING** of all those Inhabitants of Cheltenham and its vicinity and others, who desire to record their Protest against the introduction of Romish Cardinals and Bishops into this Protestant Country, the Meeting to be held on an early day, for the purpose of agreeing to such Protest, and also to adopt a Loyal and Protestant Address to her most gracious Majesty, earnestly praying that Her Majesty will be pleased to take immediate measures to maintain inviolate the undoubted prerogative and rights of the Crown as well as the liberties and privileges of her Protestant subjects, against the late bold and presumptuous aggression of the Pope of Rome, and to preserve the Protestant Faith of these Realms from the injury which such aggression is intended to inflict upon it.

Cheltenham, November 5, 1850.

W. M. Hammerton  
 Thos. Fortescue  
 James Agg Gardner  
 J S Iredell  
 A Shirer  
 Thomas Jerram  
 Joseph Walto  
 R J Mansergh & George  
 Wm Debenham  
 Josh. Cornell  
 Wight and Bailey  
 Debenham, Pooley, and Smith  
 J W Brooks  
 Charles H Hale  
 Wm Cooper  
 Henry Forty  
 Joseph Isaacs  
 W Slade  
 Charles Marshall  
 Saml Martin  
 Frederick Robertson  
 George Schroder  
 J Lewis  
 James Simpson  
 W Johnston  
 M Lye  
 Wm Newhouse  
 John Dollman  
 William Sandes  
 M Q Henriques  
 William Edwards

Jas Shipley, Com. R.N.  
 Edmd G Hallewell  
 Wm Hall  
 George Jull  
 Wm Bourne  
 E L Newman  
 Capt Terry, h.p. 76th Reg.  
 R Dennis, Capt-R.N.  
 G A W Welch  
 Lieut-Col Hutchinson  
 George Rows  
 J D Tagart  
 Rowd J Ticehurst  
 James New  
 Major Coyle  
 Wm P Osborne  
 Henry Merritt  
 J B Clark  
 Hugh Morgan  
 Frederick Mouro  
 Sherlock Willis  
 John E Willis  
 Thos Barber  
 Edl Wallace  
 D J Humphreys  
 W Hassel  
 R D Huddstone  
 J Wynch, Lieut-Col.  
 E J Edulde  
 John Moysesaux  
 John Brasdos, Major

Joseph Wilkinson  
 Henry Whitbread  
 Wm Haining  
 Rd Wells  
 Benj. Barnfield  
 Wm Early  
 Camps and Partridge  
 Chas Field  
 D Alder  
 Wm Smith  
 Thos Baskett  
 Edmund Scott  
 J Goodchild  
 Lang and Hewatt  
 Daniel Mc F Patterson  
 Emf Chilcott  
 D Latimer St Clair  
 James Humphris  
 G J Egall  
 Thomas Plast  
 Aaron Hamer  
 Michael Beetham  
 William Harford  
 Thos Walker  
 John Kegan  
 James Willoughby  
 John Williams  
 D R Jones  
 W H Gwinnett  
 J Ross Phillips  
 Richard Hubber

In pursuance of the above Requisition, I hereby Certene

**A PUBLIC MEETING,**

of all those Inhabitants of Cheltenham and its Vicinity, and others, who desire to record their Protest against the introduction of Romish Cardinals and Bishops into this Protestant Country, to be held, for the purpose above mentioned,

**AT THE TOWN HALL,**

IN CHELTENHAM.

**On MONDAY next, 11th day of Nov. instant,**

**AT TWO O'CLOCK IN THE AFTERNOON.**

Given under my hand this 5th day of November, 1850.

(Signed) **GEORGE RUSSELL, High Bailiff.**

ROWE AND NORMAN, PRINTERS, "EXAMINER OFFICE", 8, CLARENCE STREET, CHELTENHAM.

The Rev Francis Close preached his annual anti-Catholic sermon at St Mary's during the "Service of Thanksgiving for the Deliverance of King James I and the three Estates from the Traitorous and Bloody Massacre by Gunpowder." He preached that it was now twelve years since he had begun to lift up the solemn and warning voice; he had year by year preached his sentiment with regard to Popery, he had met indeed with applause and approbation of the few, but by the many he had been looked upon as bigoted, uncharitable and schismatic. And during all these years nothing like a decided stand had been taken by the dignitaries of the Church, to stem the onward rush of Popish encroachment and abominations.

On 11 November, the "Great Meeting" took place at the Town Hall in Regent Street. The meeting recorded its "indignant protest against the late insolent and insidious aggression of the Pope of Rome, in the assumption of a power to introduce Popish Cardinals and Bishops into England to divide the Kingdom into ecclesiastical districts – and to confer upon such Cardinals and Bishops, authority to govern those districts in contempt of the existing governments, both civil and ecclesiastical." A Loyal Address was also proposed. Mr Grenville Berkeley, the Rev Francis Close and other local clergy and prominent laity spoke at the meeting. "A dutiful and Loyal Address" was eventually presented to Queen Victoria by the inhabitants and visitors of Cheltenham. On 17 November Father Anselm Glassbrook, the senior resident priest at St Gregory's, preached in his Chapel urging members of his congregation "to avoid collision, interrupting meetings etc and instead to express fraternal charity by showing forgiveness and love of one's neighbour." The Catholic voters, some seventy in number, resolved not to support the Hon Grenville Berkeley or his predecessor the Hon Craven Berkeley at the next parliamentary election.

# GREAT PROTESTANT MEETING

## AT CHELTENHAM.

**A**T a PUBLIC MEETING held this 11th day of November, 1850, at the Town Hall, Regent Street, Cheltenham, pursuant to a Requisition and Notice, of which the following are copies:—

"To the High Bailiff of Cheltenham.

"We, the Undersigned, request that you will call a Public Meeting of all those Inhabitants of Cheltenham and its Vicinity, and others, who desire to record their Protest against the introduction of Romish Cardinals and Bishops into this Protestant Country, the Meeting to be held on an early day, for the purpose of agreeing to such Protest, and also to adopt a Loyal and Protestant Address to Her Most Gracious Majesty, earnestly praying that Her Majesty will be pleased to take immediate measures to maintain inviolate the undoubted prerogative and rights of the Crown, as well as the liberties and privileges of her Protestant subjects, against the late bold and presumptuous aggression of the Pope of Rome, and to preserve the Protestant Faith of these realms from the injury which such aggression is intended to inflict upon it.

\* Cheltenham, November 5, 1850.

[Here follow the signatures.]

"In pursuance of the above Requisition, I hereby Convene a PUBLIC MEETING of all those INHABITANTS of CHELTENHAM and its Vicinity, and others, who desire to record their PROTEST against the introduction of Romish Cardinals and Bishops into this Protestant Country, to be held, for the purpose above mentioned, at the TOWN HALL, CHELTENHAM, on MONDAY next, the 11th day of NOVEMBER instant, at Two o'clock in the Afternoon.

"Given under my hand this 5th day of November, 1850—  
" (Signed) GEORGE RUSSELL, High Bailiff."

The Chair having been taken by the High Bailiff, Prayers were offered by the Rev. Francis Close for the Divine blessing on the proceedings of the Meeting; and

It was proposed by C. L. GRENVILLE BERKELEY, Esq., M.P.; seconded by THOMAS JERRAM, Esq.; supported by the Rev. FRANCIS CLOSE and the Rev. F. CALDER, and carried unanimously—

I.—That this Meeting desires to record its indignant protest against the late insolent and insidious aggression of the Pope of Rome, in the assumption of a power to introduce Popish Cardinals and Bishops into England—to divide the kingdom into ecclesiastical districts—and to confer upon such Cardinals and Bishops authority to govern those districts, in contempt of the existing governments, both civil and ecclesiastical. That this proceeding appears to this Meeting to be a daring assumption of supremacy over the entire realm of England, and a claim to undivided sway, which is opposed to the undoubted prerogative of Her Most Gracious Majesty the Queen, and inconsistent with the spiritual independence of this Protestant nation. And that this Meeting pledges itself to use all constitutional means to support Her Majesty and her Government in repelling an attempt so unwarrantable and unprecedented, and in maintaining unimpaired Her Majesty's Royal Prerogative, and the religious and civil rights of all classes of her Protestant subjects.

Proposed by E. G. HALLEWELL, Esq.; seconded by Colonel HUTCHINSON; supported by the Rev. L. J. WAKE and the Rev. JOHN BROWNE, and carried unanimously—

II.—That a Loyal and Protestant Address be presented to Her Majesty, earnestly praying that Her Majesty will be pleased to direct that immediate measures be taken to maintain inviolate the undoubted prerogative and rights of the Crown, as well as the liberties and privileges of her Protestant subjects, against the late bold and presumptuous aggression of the Pope, and to preserve the Protestant faith of these realms from the injury which such aggression is intended to inflict upon it.

Proposed by JAMES AGG GARDNER, Esq.; seconded by W. M. TARTT, Esq.; supported by the Rev. ARCHD. BOYD and the Rev. J. E. BLOWFIELD, and carried unanimously—

III.—That the following Address be adopted by this Meeting, and that Grenville Berkeley, Esq., the Member

for this Borough, be requested to take the earliest opportunity to present it to Her Majesty:—

THE DUTIFUL AND LOYAL ADDRESS  
of the undersigned Inhabitants and Visitors of Cheltenham and its Vicinity,

To Her Most Gracious Majesty Queen Victoria.

Madam,—We approach the Royal presence with every sentiment of profound respect and loyalty—with grateful acknowledgments of the manifold blessings we enjoy under your Majesty's gracious sway—and with earnest prayer that it may be long continued over a religious and prosperous people.

Unalterably and devotedly attached to the Protestant faith—regarding it as the basis of our civil and religious liberties, and as, under God, our chief bulwark against the mental and spiritual bondage of the Church of Rome—we view with profound indignation the recent presumptuous attempt of the Pope to parcel out the Metropolis of this great empire, and other parts of your Majesty's dominions, and to place them, in defiance of your Majesty's rights and prerogative, under the government of a Cardinal Archbishop and Bishops appointed by a Foreign Potentate, and arrogating authority paramount to the Crown itself.

Persuaded that a measure so preposterous could not have been adopted by the Court of Rome, if encouragement had not been given to its ambitious views by some among ourselves, we deplore the defection of Clergymen of the Church of England to that apostate church, and we lament the obvious disposition of many who still remain to assimilate the Church of England as much as possible to the Roman ritual and ceremonies; while, by a bold spirit of opposition to the exercise of the ancient prerogatives of the Crown in ecclesiastical matters, they shake the foundation of the Protestant religion, endanger our free institutions, and invade the sanctuary of the Throne itself.

Under these painful circumstances we repose in the conviction of your Majesty's unabated attachment to those great principles of the Reformation which placed your Majesty's illustrious family on the throne of these realms; and we are confident of the loyal response of the great body of your Majesty's subjects, who are still true to their Religion and their Queen.

We, therefore, humbly pray that your Majesty may be pleased to direct that such measures be adopted as shall at once frustrate the machinations of the Roman Pontiff, and preserve our Protestant faith and worship in all their integrity.

Proposed by Captain DEANS, R.N.; seconded by the Rev. Sir R. WOLSELEY, Bart.; and carried unanimously—

IV.—That the following Gentlemen be appointed a Committee (with power to add to their number), for the purpose of procuring signatures to the Address to Her Majesty, namely—

|                           |                        |
|---------------------------|------------------------|
| The High Bailiff          | Captain Morgan         |
| The Earl Fitzhardings     | Mr. Shirer             |
| C. L. Grenville Berkeley, | Captain Iredell        |
| Esq., M.P.                | Mr. E. L. Newman       |
| The Hon. C. F. Berkeley   | Captain Deans, R.N.    |
| Thomas Jerram, Esq.       | Captain Scott          |
| E. G. Hallewell, Esq.     | George Schreiber, Esq. |
| Colonel Hutchinson        | Mr. Sweeting           |
| James Agg Gardner, Esq.   | Mr. Turner             |
| W. M. Tartt, Esq.         | Mr. John Taylor        |
| Captain Robertson         | W. T. Sheison, Esq.    |
| Thomas Walker, Esq.       | Mr. Radford.           |

(Signed) GEORGE RUSSELL, High Bailiff.

The High Bailiff having left the Chair, it was taken by C. L. GRENVILLE BERKELEY, Esq., M.P.;

And it was proposed by Captain ROBERTSON, seconded by Captain MORGAN, and carried by acclamation—

V.—That the thanks of this Meeting be given to the High Bailiff, for the promptitude with which he responded to the Requisition to convene this Meeting, and for his able conduct in presiding on this occasion.

A portion of the National Anthem was then sung by the whole Meeting, and three enthusiastic cheers were given for the Queen, and the Meeting separated.

(Signed) C. L. GRENVILLE BERKELEY.

“In fulfilment of a promise made at the meeting at the Town Hall on Monday last, arrangements have been made by a committee to hold a second Meeting at the Town Hall, in Cheltenham, on Thursday next, the 21<sup>st</sup> of November instant: the proceedings at which meeting will be confined to the delivery of Addresses by several gentlemen on the subject of the recent Papal Aggression.” This meeting was again well supported. The Cheltenham Looker-On for 23<sup>rd</sup> November reported:

“A second great meeting for the purpose of protesting against the late Papal Aggression was held in the Town Hall, on Thursday evening; the attendance being quite as large as the former meeting, of which an account was given in our last number. Mr G Russell, the high Bailiff, again presided and opened the meeting, the objects of which, he stated, were to be confined to the delivery of addresses of the various ministers and others who had consented to take part in the proceedings, - no resolutions were to be moved – it being considered that those already adopted were, in every respect, sufficient for the purpose for which they had then, a second time, assembled.

# SECOND GREAT PROTESTANT MEETING.

In fulfillment of a promise made at the Meeting held at the Town Hall on Monday last, arrangements have been made by the Committee to hold a

# SECOND MEETING

AT THE

# Town Hall,

IN CHELTENHAM,

(INSTEAD) OF MR. REEVES'S RIDING SCHOOL, AS  
PREVIOUSLY ANNOUNCED,

# ON THURSDAY NEXT,

The 21st of NOVEMBER Instant;

The proceedings at which Meeting will be confined to  
the delivery of Addresses by several Gentlemen on  
the subject of the RECENT PAPAL AGGRESSION.

# GEORGE RUSSELL,

HIGH BAILIFF.

# THE CHAIR WILL BE TAKEN AT SIX O'CLOCK.

The Committee beg to remind those who had the privilege of attending the former Meeting, that this Meeting has been convened for the express purpose of allowing the same privilege to those who were excluded by want of space on that occasion. The Gallery and the Seats against the Walls will be exclusively appropriated to Ladies.

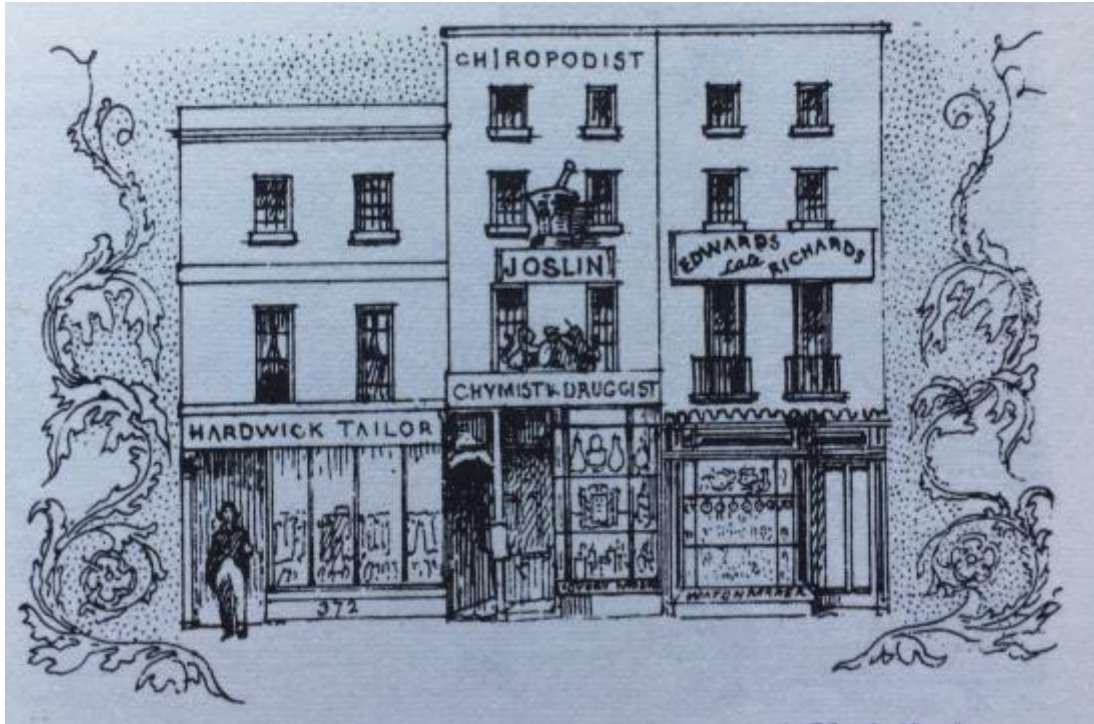
E. DAVIS, PRINTER, "CHRONICLE AND FARMER REGISTER" OFFICE, 1, MONTPELLIER STREET, CHELTENHAM.

The Rev F Close addressed the meeting first, and was followed by Mr Grenville Berkeley, Mr F Monro, Rev Morton Brown, Mr Tartt, Rev FD Gilby, and several other clergymen and gentlemen, all of whom spoke with great warmth and energy on the subject which they had been called together to denounce. But one feeling appeared to animate both speakers and hearers – every sentiment and expression which could be in any way construed into a defiance of Papal domination, whether spiritual or temporal, being instantly seized upon and greeted with most enthusiastic applause. Not the least interesting incident which occurred at this meeting, was the production by Rev F Close, in course of his address, of an original document, signed by the famous Cranmer and several other bishops and dignitaries of the Church, declaring or protesting against a recognition of Papal authority in these realms, in the eventful days of the Reformation... Written in Latin, it was translated by the Rev Speaker as follows:

“The Bishop of Rome has no greater authority given to him by God in Holy Scripture in the kingdom of England than any other foreign bishop”

The reading of this short but very decided declaration, was received as may be readily supposed, with loud and continued cheering.”

After the meeting ended a riot took place outside the Catholic Chapel which is worth considering in detail. A group of enthusiastic Protestants decided to hold a no Popery demonstration “after the fashion of a Guy Fawkes celebration, and arrangements were made for a procession to burn the Pope in effigy, when the business of the public meeting would be over”. Effigies of the Pope and Cardinals were prepared and displayed in the shop window of Mr Joseph Hardwick, a tailor of the High Street, and several tons of coal and loads of faggots were provided for the auto-de-fe. Excitement rose as it was feared that a number of Catholics from the lower part of the Town had determined to stop the exhibition at all costs. The magistrates feared that there would be a major public disorder and even loss of life so during the afternoon they published a “Notice” forbidding the exhibition of the effigies and several hundred of these notices were displayed around the Town. The notice was signed by Messrs Pilkington, Gyde, Harford, Hallewell and Henny. A party of policemen were also stationed outside Mr Hardwick’s door, “to prevent the escape of the offending effigy”.



Mr Hardwick's Shop in the High Street by George Rowe

At nine thirty that day, the meeting at the Town Hall concluded. (Regent Street). Tension rose and the policemen guarding Mr Hardwick's shop were pelted with mud, missiles and eventually stones. One policeman was hurt and he had to be sent home. Finally a plate glass panel above the door of the late Mr Joslin's shop was broken and this led to the breaking of every pane of glass in Mr Hardwick's shop. It was decided to give up one of the effigies to the crowd as the police were losing control. "Cardinal Wiseman" was paraded in triumph through the Town to Sandford Fields, when a cry went up, "DOWN WITH THE CATHOLIC CHAPEL AND HANG THE BISHOPS". The shutters of Mrs Honnis's millinery shop in the High Street and also the shutters of Mrs Ann Brown's Stationery and Catholic Book Shop in Ambrose Street were torn down. The windows of the latter were smashed and her Catholic Books were seized by the mob. A furious on-slaught was made on the doors of the Catholic Chapel as well as on the doors of the adjoining Chapel House. The former were forced in but the latter were saved by the police. The mob tore down the railings and the dwarf wall in front of the Chapel. Brickbats were hurled through the windows, until every pane of glass was destroyed. A bonfire of wood from the railings was lit and the effigy was burned amid a scene of indescribable confusion. An attempt was made to set the Chapel on fire when Mr Lefroy, the Chief Constable, arrived with the magistrates and a vigorous charge on the mob by the Police quelled the disturbance. If they had arrived a few minutes later the Chapel would have been burnt down. The mock "Pope" was later seized by the Police and a newspaper reported, "His Holiness now lies in state at the station house" (St George's Place.)



Catholic Chapel in Somerset Place by George Rowe

The Looker-On played down the riot in its account and says of the mob – “They set fire to the figure, and then consummated their demonstration by breaking nearly every pane of glass in the chapel windows, which achievement accomplished, the rabble quietly dispersed”.

Deposited in the Clifton Diocesan Archives is a letter from Father Glassbrook to the Bishop describing the activities that evening:

To the Right Reverend Dr Hendren

3 Somerset Place

Cheltenham

My Lord,

According to desire I present you with particulars of the outrage perpetrated on the Catholic Chapel and House of Cheltenham on 21<sup>st</sup> November last 1850.

About a quarter past eleven o'clock on the evening of 21 Nov. when all the inmates of the house had retired to bed except myself, I heard a tremendous outcry of a multitude of voices in the street which was immediately followed by a volley of stones directed with great violence at the Chapel and House so that I was fearful of the inner doors of the establishment being broken and an inroad at once being made upon me and the rest of our family. The bells of the doors were rung with great fury and upon me asking who was there, I got no reply. In the meanwhile I, my assistant Mr Kendal, and the servants and beg (sic) they would not bear in their hands, in descending the stairs, any lights lest they might be aimed at by the populace in the street and particularly in the front of the Chapel. Occasional yells in the street during the attack were frequently made which we supposed must have been at the time the effigy of Cardinal Wiseman was being burnt, which took place near the Chapel about the distance



of three yards from the main entrance. The wood palisading was torn up and added to the fire on which the effigy was burnt whilst the bricks of the wall, which elevated about a foot from the ground, afforded additional materials to throw at the windows of both house and chapel. The Chapel door was forced open in about twenty minutes after the violence had began. Several of the poor Irish had managed to get to the back door of our house and gradually cleared the rabble who formed part of the multitude who had attended the procession from the High Street. By means of these poor faithful Children of the Church I managed to get out with safety in search of the Police and the magistracy to prevent any further damage and to extinguish the fire which was already blazing so near the buildings of our property.

Whilst I was in search of aid from the authorities, I was relieved on my return to the Chapel House, when I found the Magistrates assembled and the police ready to obey orders and (to) take such measures as the necessity of the case seemed to require to disperse the mob and stop any further injury to the property. About 60 persons came and volunteered their services in protecting the property till the following day. On the 22<sup>nd</sup>, whilst we deplored the sad proofs of mischief evinced in the ruinous state of our sacred temple, we were cheered with the reflection that as according to the learned Tertulian in the earliest ages of Christianity the blood of the martyrs was the seed of the church. Our persecution has made us many friends and we have had many sympathisers and generous offerings to repair our losses. I have the honour to remain your Lordship's most obedient and humble servant in Christ.

The Rev E Glassbrook

On the morning after the riot Mr James Boodle appealed to the Magistrates fearing a recurrence of the riot and in response two hundred special constables were sworn in, to assist the regular force in preventing further outrage.

On the Saturday after the riot, Mr Grenville Berkeley, the Member of Parliament, visited the Catholic Chapel and met some of the leading members of the congregation. He denied allegations that he had personally encouraged the effigy burning and he described such activities as a "wanton and unjustifiable insult". He added that the attack on the Catholic Chapel was a "most cowardly and disgraceful proceeding". Mr Berkeley offered to contribute towards the cost of repairs but the members of the congregation who were present informed him that they would be applying to the hundred for compensation before they would consider receiving private donations. One of the local newspapers stated that it believed that Mr Berkeley was one of the two hundred special constables who had been sworn in the day after the riot.

The Looker-on reported that "this outbreak of vulgar prejudice and folly cannot be too deeply deplored: such a circumstance is calculated to do our Town much injury, by creating an uneasy and uncomfortable feeling in the minds of the most respectable families, and will, doubtless, by such as are members of the Roman Catholic communion be considered as an affront to

their religion. Of this, however, we feel that there is not one among the respectable and right thinking portion of our population but sincerely laments its occurrence”.

Attitudes had certainly changed. The Cheltenham Examiner for 27<sup>th</sup> November 1850 included a front page “Address of Condolence” signed by members of the Unitarian Congregation. The address described Catholics as “brethren and fellow Christians” and added “we have heard with deep regret and indignation of the cowardly attack lately made upon your place of worship and the unworthy insults offered to your Religion in this and other parts of the country”. The riot was denounced as an infringement of civil and religious liberties. The Unitarians offered sincere sympathy as well as a substantial contribution towards the cost of repairs. The Address was signed by Rev Henry Solly, the Pastor, and Mr WB Price esq., JP.

This same newspaper also included a letter – written by a non-Catholic – which raised embarrassing questions. The writer wondered if respectable citizens had encouraged the mob to make “the public streets, for a whole night, the scene of riot and confusion, and Roman Catholics insulted wherever they were met”. The writer added that the prime mover of the effigy burning was “a satellite” of Mr Close and that it led him to conclude – “Can the Rev Mr Close hold himself free from a charge of instigating?”. The Looker-On assured its readers that none of the gentlemen engaged in the Town Hall Public Meeting were identified with the demonstration.

Some Cheltonians wondered why the Magistrates had in fact banned the effigy burning. The Examiner felt that a “Papal act” should not subject the “quiet Roman Catholic inhabitants in Cheltenham to insult and injury....in our opinion the Magistrates acted perfectly right to step in, at all hazard, and protect them”.

The Cheltenham Examiner published a reply from the Catholic congregation to the Unitarians thanking them for their condemnation of the cowardly attack on their Chapel and the residence of their Pastors. They declined the offer of financial help as they were “applying to the Law of the Land”. The newspaper also reported a meeting on 23 November at the chapel house, chaired by Lt Col Brown. At this meeting Mr George Arthur Williams proposed that his cousin, James Boodle, should present a claim for compensation to the Hundred. On Monday 25<sup>th</sup> Father Glassbrook applied to them for the sum of £30. The matter was eventually settled in favour of the Catholic community and Father Glassbrook received £26-19-3d. The shopkeepers who had also suffered losses during the riot were compensated.

Reports of the incidents in Cheltenham also circulated in France but distortions to the story crept in. In one account Protestant Hardwick was assumed to be a pious Catholic tailor who had had his windows smashed by the hostile crowd. Elsewhere the pious “Catholic” tailor was depicted as being persecuted by the Protestant mob for displaying an effigy of his “prime Bishop” in the window of his shop. The comment in the Cheltenham Examiner was concern that Catholics reading these false reports in the future might proclaim a “Saint Hardwick”!

Early in December 1850 over 1,000 local Catholics signed a “Loyal Address to their Queen” and on Sunday 8<sup>th</sup> December 1850 High Mass was celebrated “for the miraculous

preservation of human life and escape from personal injury during the late outrage". A collection was taken for the Cheltenham General Hospital. JN Langston in his essay on the Cheltenham Mission stated that "the re-opening service was attended by the Mayor and Corporation, when Father Glassbrook preached the sermon". I have not found his source for this.

During the following year articles continued to be published in the local newspapers regarding "Papal Aggression" and this culminated in the Ecclesiastical Titles Bill. In November 1851 Rev Francis Close continued to preach against "Popery" on Guy Fawkes Day. Gradually, however, the relationship between St Gregory's Church and other local churches became more cordial, especially after 1856 Rev Francis Close left Cheltenham to become Dean of Carlisle. The building of the new St Gregory's Church between 1854 and 1876 excited much comment and in 1883 the attitude of the Evangelicals was expressed in the erection of a 204 feet tower and spire on St Mathew's Church which was clearly designed to block the view of St Gregory's 202 feet tower from the centre of Cheltenham.

As in many other places hostility no doubt existed between the pupils of the respected schools. As late as 1907c the Kensites visited St Gregory's Poor School and removed the statues of Our Lady and St Joseph from the building. An account of this episode stated that the Sister-in-charge of the class told the children to sing "Faith of our Fathers" whilst she summoned the assistant curate, Father Boniface MacKinlay, and a leading Catholic layman, Mr William Welstead. Eventually the Kensites were persuaded to return the statues! Such episodes, amusing as they may seem today, were no doubt the result of mutual bigotry and misunderstanding. It is pleasing today that St Gregory's Church plays a full part in the Cheltenham Council of Churches and that a parishioner, Mrs Maureen Stafford, is Mayor of Cheltenham.

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