
Birdsall and the Founding of the Cheltenham Catholic Mission

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Dom John Augustine Birdsall OSB

‘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 President 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 August 5th, 1837)

During the years 1809 to 1837 the Catholic Community in Cheltenham was dominated by the figure of Dom John Augustine O.S.B. in a way which mirrored the influence, later, of Francis Close on the Established Church. Birdsall was not only responsible for moulding his congregation but he also erected 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 about 210 Catholics living in the whole of 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 friar from Perthyre, near Monmouth, also celebrated Mass, periodically, at Gloucester and, also, at Stroud. Then, in 1787, a member of the Webb Family of Hatherop Castle left money for the establishment of a proper mission, served by secular priests, at Gloucester and so, in about 1795, the first St. Peter's Catholic Chapel was opened in that city.

Between the years 1800 and 1826 the population of Cheltenham rose from about three thousand to twenty thousand people. Visitors naturally included a number of Catholics, particularly members of the Irish aristocracy and landed classes. With these wealthy visitors came many others, both rich and poor, hoping to make their fortunes providing services and trades for these wealthy visitors. The Vicar-Apostolic of the Roman Catholic Western District, Bishop Sharrock, was persuaded to allow a priest from Gloucester to travel over to Cheltenham, during the summer months, to celebrate a second Mass on Sundays and holydays. There seems to have been some success and, as a result, in May 1805, Bishop Sharrock appointed Dom James Calderbank O.S.B. as the Missioner for the Season at Cheltenham. This priest withdrew after only a few months, presumably because he failed to find any wealthy patrons after the visitors melted away at the end of the Cheltenham Season.

In the year 1807 the Reverend Nicholas Alexander Cesar Robin settled in the town and took upwork as a French language teacher. He had been brought to the town by Captain Grasy, possibly from Edinburgh where he seems to have been living in 1803. Abbe Robin had previously been a secular priest of the Diocese of Laon. It is interesting that the Cheltenham historian, John Goding, described him as a chaplain to King Louis XVI and, also, as belonging to a monastic order. I can find nothing to substantiate either of these claims.

Abbe Robin began celebrating Mass in the town and, in due course, he was even given permission to use the Town Hall which he did for about a year. The man was evidently popular and it must have come as rather a surprise when Bishop Sharrock wrote in July 1809, to inform him that the Benedictines would shortly be establishing a proper mission in Cheltenham. Robin responded by declaring that such a scheme was unlikely to succeed. However, his advice was not heeded and in October 1809 he received a visit from Birdsall who informed him that he had arrived in the town and was now responsible for supplying the spiritual needs of the local Catholics and visitors to the rising spa. Abbe Robin was somewhat hurt that his place had been taken by this English priest but, as the months unfolded, the two men established a friendly relationship which only ended with the death of Robin in September 1811.

Birdsall had previously been working as the assistant missioner at Bath having arrived in England in 1805 following the suppression of his abbey at Lamspring, the English Benedictine Monastery in Germany. He was a Lancashire man who had entered religious life at the age of sixteen. Cheltenham was certainly a challenge for a young priest as there was no proper

resident congregation, no chapel, and no wealthy patron. Fortunately, he arrived with means as he had between eight and nine hundred pounds from his life pension, legacies and loans from relatives. Immediately, he commenced building a chapel. It was, however, an unfortunate time in which to build as land was not only expensive but war-time building materials were costly. He purchased, for £290, a plot, 100 feet' x 40 feet, just off Somerset Place. This land belonged to a Bath wine merchant who had ear-marked it for a prestigious residential square – St James's Square. Somerset Place, was at the time, an open space situated at the bottom of Ambrose Street.

On December 13th, 1809, the first brick of the new chapel was laid. During the construction work Birdsall hired two room for Mass in the York Hotel in the High Street. In the twentieth century the site of the York Hotel was occupied by the Co-operative Stores.



Catholic Chapel in Somerset Place by George Rowe

The new Catholic Chapel was opened on June 3rd, 1810. The shell of the building cost the sum of £1,224 of which £350 was mortgaged for ten years. The little chapel was only fifty-three feet by thirty-six feet. It was a plain brick structure, occupying the site of the present tower of St Gregory's Church. The appearance was relieved, however, by a cross on the roof. The chapel was orientated east-west, unlike the present church, and, perhaps surprisingly, the altar was situated at the west end. In due course various alterations and additions were made and a number of gifts, such as vestments and plate, were received. In 1813, for instance, the plaster altar was replaced with one made of scagliola. Three years later, Griffiths was able to describe it as, '*a neat commodious edifice, has a roomy gallery and is capable of containing 300 persons.*' Various parcels of land were acquired adjoining the site which allowed for a second vestry to be added and then, in 1825, for a more major extension to be constructed costing £500.

In 1834 Henry Davies offered a fuller description of the building at that time:

'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 the year 1814 Birdsall erected the Chapel House which was squeezed between the chapel entrance and Tangent Alley. The house had a very small ground floor as it included for the chapel a new vestibule and entrance leading from the street. On the east side, the first floor of the new house, was built over the alleyway. Tangent Alley is the path leading down the side of the Old Priory. Birdsall recorded in his own personal notes that when King George III stayed in Cheltenham he walked across the fields into the town along a footpath where the alley now is. Apparently the stile was changed into a slip gate for his convenience.

As with the chapel, the house was added to at various times so as to provide a new kitchen and further bedrooms. The provision of more bedrooms was important as Birdsall seems to have supplemented his income by taking in boarders. Many years later, in 1881, the frontage of the old house was completely re-modelled in a gothic form following the designs of the architect-priest A.J.C. Scoles. This façade was retained when the old priory was demolished in 1965.

The third significant development at Cheltenham was the provision of a charity school for the poor, annexed to the chapel itself and opened in April 1827. The school was made possible as the result of the bequest of the Honourable Mr. Vavasour, who died in Cheltenham, together with a donation from Lord Shrewsbury. The school was run by a schoolmistress and, according to non-Catholic reports, fifty-eight Protestant children were educated at the school and were taught using the Catholic catechism. This school gradually developed and it was moved to St. Paul's Street North in 1857. Fifty years ago it moved to the present premises in Knapp Road, and, today, it is one of the largest primary schools in the town.

Birdsall wrote some notes outlining the early years of the mission in Cheltenham which have been preserved at Douai Abbey. These notes include interesting details about the erection of the buildings and the people who frequented them. He wrote that,

'Cheltenham is a favourite place with 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 mentions the visits of the Earl of Kenmare and his brother, Lord Castlerosse. Examination of the register reveals visits too by their sister, Lady Charlotte Gould, and other wealthy Irish such as Lady Dillon and Lady Meredyth, the wife of Sir Joshua Meredyth, baronet. She died in Cheltenham in 1813. Many of these visitors would have been attracted to Cheltenham by the racing, the theatre and the medicinal waters.

Not only the Irish were drawn to Cheltenham but also wealthy English visitors. 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, FitzHerberts, Talbots and others. The Hornyolds and Turvilles made generous gifts of vestments and plate, besides furnishings for the chapel itself. However, after 1814, a change was detected by 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 to Cheltenham 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, it is not exposed to the odious restrictions and obloquy which it experiences in England.'

Besides French and English visitors, other fashionable visitors included members of the French Royal Family. Birdsall wrote about the in the following terms,

'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 in 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.'

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 the company with the rest of the clergy, I waited upon the King in his levee and on that occasion they greeted me as an old acquaintance.'

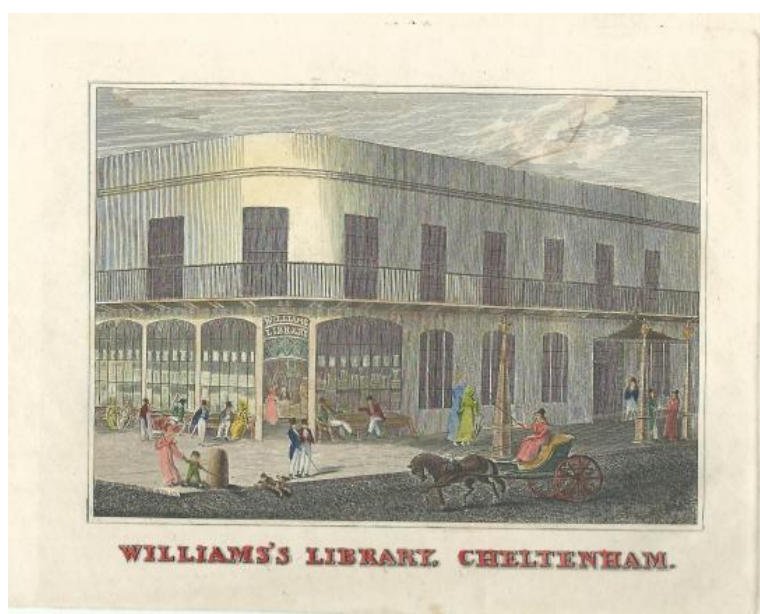
The Chapel Register at Cheltenham refers to the death of the Comte de Jarnac and the newspaper reports that his funeral took place at the Catholic chapel before interment in Gloucester Cathedral. In 1814 Birdsall visited the French prisoners-of-war at Stapleton, Bristol.

Besides the visitors 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 the poor Irish as well as a number of foreign settlers. Between the years 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. These converts included

whole families together with their children, an example being the Gregory Family of Charlton Kings.

An interesting convert family was descended from Elizabeth Wilks, who was, herself, received into full communion with the Roman Catholic Church in 1822, at the age of seventy-nine years. Two of her daughters became Catholics too, 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 much involved with Liberal politics in the town. James and William Boodle were both the political agents of the Berkeleys as well as local solicitors. Williams was also a Liberal and he became much involved with Cheltenham affairs holding the office of High Bailiff, or Mayor, for the year 1847. Ten years later, James Boodle wrote the word 'Bravo!' in the margin of his personal copy of Dr Olivers' 'Collections illustrating the History of the Catholic Church...' The author of that book had written:

'I am pleased to hear that my friend George Arthur Williams was elected, in November, 1847, High Baliff of Cheltenham, – the first Catholic so honoured since the days of Queen Elizabeth.'



Williams 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 the year 1824 and the Tiessets, brother and sister, who both taught French. The poor Irish seem to have started to arrive in large numbers from the 1830's. By the middle of the century they represented a large proportion of the total congregation.

Besides the residents of Cheltenham, Birdsall was also responsible for Catholics living 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 the Benedictine Mission in

Bath. The registers at Cheltenham confirm Birdsall's references in his personal diary to such places as Stroud, Leighterton, Hunters' Hall at Kingscote and elsewhere, where he often baptised children. From 1826 Birdsall celebrated Mass at Broadway and he built a chapel there which he opened in 1831. From the year 1828 many of the Catholics of Cheltenham were buried at Broadway.

One of the most interesting personalities in the Cheltenham congregation was the widow, Sarah Neve. She had been married to Charles Neve, Rector of the Sodburys. In 1831 she bought land in St. James's Square where she built Number Ten for the cost of £2,850. Later Sarah Neve established a chapel with a residence for a Benedictine priest in the main street in Chipping Sodbury, four years before her death at Cheltenham in 1842. Mrs. Neve gave books and other items to Archbishop Polding when he set off for Australia.

At the time of the opening of his Cheltenham chapel in 1809, Birdsall 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 there 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 prompted and so inducement be held out to them to prolong their stay.'

During the late 1820's this tolerant attitude seemed to change. In 1826 Francis Close was appointed Rector of the Parish Church. Under his towering influence the Reformation Society grew in strength and their proceedings were followed closely and sympathetically in the local press. Birdsall was less enthusiastic about these developments especially at a time when legislation was making its way through parliament in support of Catholic Emancipation. The 'Examiner' stated that the advocates and opponents of Emancipation were pretty nearly balanced in Cheltenham. Birdsall wrote that, *'during the excitement, great animosity and bitter opposition was manifested in the Town.'* The extant local newspapers for this period 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 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, at about 7 o'clock in the afternoon and drive Popery out of Town. Come and let not your hearts fail to do a good deed.'

The Catholic Poor School became a matter for controversy too. Birdsall wrote the following account of it:

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 that according to their computation or rating, the mighty increase in Catholics and their pretending to detail the ways made use of by us to make proselytes, such as distributing books etc. They certainly caused a great diminution in 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's Square.'

This opposition culminated in the Cheltenham Discussion which was a public debate in 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.

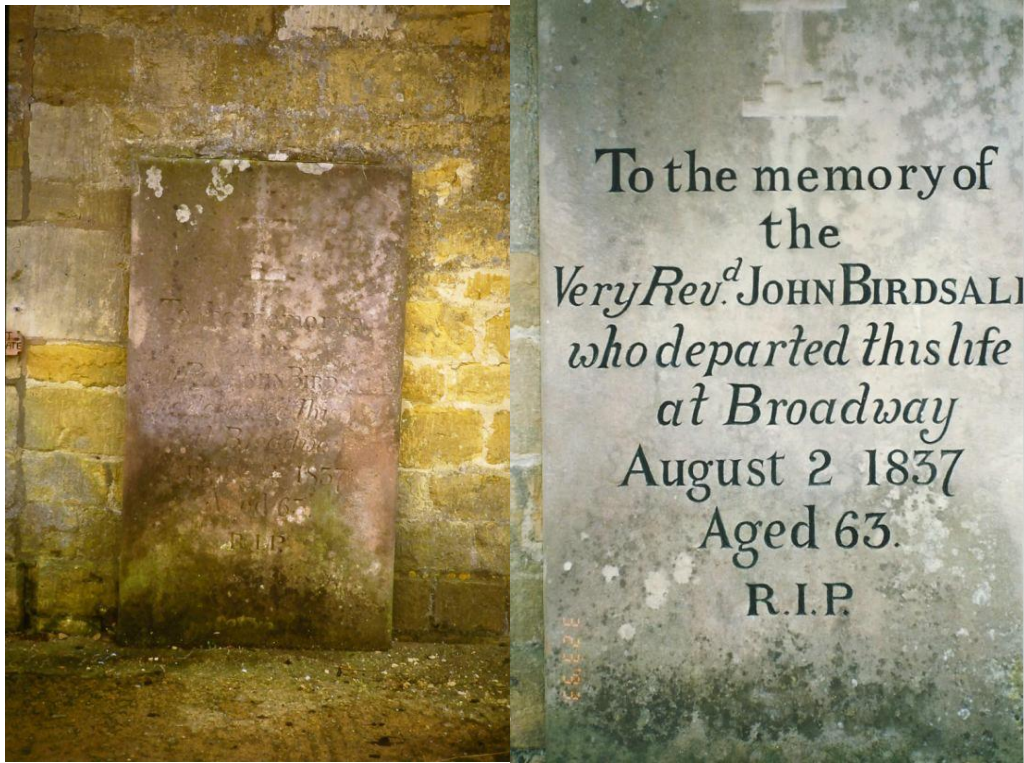
In 1826 Birdsall was elected President-General of the English Benedictine Congregation and, from 1830, a second priest was appointed to Cheltenham to give pastoral care. Birdsall owned the property at Cheltenham until 1836 when he resigned and moved across to Broadway where he had set-up a successor monastery to Lamspring.

During his years in Cheltenham Birdsall developed the congregation from 'a few', how it had been described as in 1813, to a situation in 1830 where there were forty-three baptisms in that year, fourteen deaths, one hundred and eighty Easter communicants, seven non-communicants, seventy-five non-communicants who were under fourteen years of age and three persons under instruction. By the year 1844 the figure rose again to 350 Easter communions and, by 1850, the Catholic population in Cheltenham was estimated at about one thousand. Three years later it was decided to erect a new church which necessitated, in time, the demolition of Birdsall's chapel.

Birdsall spent his last months at Broadway where he died on 2nd August 1837 after suffering a severe and lingering illness.

'Cheltenham Free Press Sat 5th August 1837:

'Death at Broadway, Worcs., after a severe and lingering illness, the Very Rev. John Birdsall, aged 63, for 25 years Catholic Priest of this town and President 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.'



Broadway Catholic Church with Tombstone to the left beneath the window

He was buried close to his chapel there. The memorial stone, which is still visible today, reads:

'To the memory of the Very Reverend John Birdsall who departed this life at Broadway, August 2nd 1837, aged 63 years. R.I.P.'

In Cheltenham the congregation placed a 'handsome' memorial in the Chapel which read:

'This tablet was erected to the memory of 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'

Sadly, this plaque would seem to have perished when Birdsall's chapel was reduced to rubble.

Birdsall wrote in his historical notes about the establishment of the Cheltenham Mission:

'I have great reason to thank God that he has enabled me to accomplish what is done and that I have lived to see the Mission so far established so as to have good reason to hope that it will be continued and kept up after I shall be gone; and I doubt not but when I shall be dead a prayer shall sometime be offered in that chapel for him who had the happiness to be its founder'

Richard Barton (1988)