
Daughters of the Cross in Cheltenham 1863-1873

by Richard Barton (Copyright)

During the 1850's education for wealthy middle class girls experienced a revolution in Cheltenham as a result of the innovative work of Miss Dorothea Beale, the Principal of the Ladies' College. She believed, passionately, that girls should have an identical education to boys and she opened up to her pupils a far wider curriculum than they would previously have enjoyed. Wealthier Roman Catholic families had no suitable school for their daughters and this naturally discouraged many of them from settling in the town.

Dom William Benedict Scarisbrick O.S.B., the Benedictine assistant priest at St Gregory's, was anxious to rectify this situation by finding a religious order of Sisters who would be able to develop Catholic education in the town. He came to hear about the Daughters of the Cross and decided to visit their mother house in Liege. The Order had been founded in 1833 by Mademoiselle Jeanne Haze (1782-1877) and Canon Habets. Following their formal Foundation the foundress, now known as Mere Marie Therese, had decided that her Sisters should undertake the education of girls, especially those from poorer backgrounds. The spirituality of the new Order was Ignatian and gradually, as they became established, new houses were opened in Germany and Ireland. As yet the Daughters of the Cross had no English house and that was the situation that Father Scarisbrick set out to rectify.

Father Scarisbrick received a warm welcome in Liege and it was agreed that Cheltenham should have a convent. A suitable building had already been earmarked for this – 4 Bath Place, which was opposite to the present Playhouse Theatre. Six sisters were chosen, led by Sister Aloysia, she being a niece of the Mother Foundress. Of the sisters destined for Cheltenham only two spoke English fluently and two others were never to learn the language.

After a rough crossing, during which most of the Sisters were sea-sick, Sister Aloysia and her companions arrived at Dover at 4.00am on November 10th, 1863. Here they were met by the Missionary Rector of St Gregory's, Dom James Ambrose Cotham O.S.B. The party set off and they arrived in Cheltenham at 4.30pm that same day. A tremendous welcome awaited them and details of this were later sent back to Liege by Sister Aloysia:

'As soon as the carriage door was opened, Rev. Fr. Scarisbrick came forward at the head of the leading members of the Catholic community. There were at least twenty ladies and young girls 'of first rank'. Two noble gentlemen – one a colonel – were at the doors of the two carriages destined for us. They helped us to get in, looked after our luggage, then all the Catholic ladies accompanied us in their carriages right up to the Convent. An elderly respectable lady was at the door and everybody came into the parlour to wish us welcome. "Welcome, Welcome!" they cried. Their hearts were overflowing and some of them

embraced us with tears ... Father Scarisbrick said, "That's enough for now. Let the sisters rest awhile and then they can take some refreshment" – for they had prepared a beautiful tea for us.

Towards 7.00pm we were led to the Parish Church (St. Gregory's). A bench near the Sanctuary was reserved for us, and at our arrival we found all the Catholics already there. We learned afterwards that there were a good number of Protestants too. The Church bells rang out at that moment and the organ played a beautiful voluntary which seemed like a triumphal chorus. The altar and sanctuary were brilliantly lit by magnificent candelabra. Ten little choir boys carrying censers (sic) formed the procession for the priests and solemn Benediction began. It was sung by a special choir reserved for solemn occasions and I think there can be few to equal it. After the 'O Salutaris' and the Litany of Our Lady, the 'Te Deum' was intoned and sung in several parts. The whole service lasted an hour and was concluded by Handel's 'Alleluia Chorus', played on the organ.'

The local Catholic community had certainly given the sisters from Liege a warm welcome and I am sure they had huge expectations of what these women would achieve. Sister Aloysia added, in further letters home:

'We were nearly speechless the night of our arrival to see all the attention that had been given to the arrangements of our little house ... each of us had a beautiful little cell – too beautiful for they are well carpeted. Nearly all have a fireplace and we even found our beds made and covered with an elegant counterpane. Each sister has water, soap, candlestick, candle and matches – all prepared. Our beds are iron, painted green, with four brass knobs at the ends.

'The convent was regarded as an enterprise of general interest and everyone wanted to help. It was really very touching to see all the crockery which had evidently been given by many different people. I was particularly excited to find a harmonium in the chapel. That too, has been given by a Catholic gentleman. A little later a lady said, "You will find a barrel of beer in the cellar" (each time we take this, we are a little tipsy).'

One of the priests brought the Blessed Sacrament to the house for reservation in the chapel and, a few days later, the first Mass was celebrated there. The first Benediction was attended by many of their benefactors and well-wishers so that they 'overflowed the chapel on to the staircase.'

The arrival of the Daughters of the Cross must have caused something of a stir in Cheltenham at that time. However, the sisters tried their best to be unobtrusive. They wore hats over their bandeaux and guimpes when they went to Church, but when in town, they took off their bandeaux and guimpes and decorated their hats to hide their lack of coiffeur. They put scarves over their cloaks thus passing as women in mourning attire. They wore their habits in the house and college students apparently hung about outside hoping to catch a glimpse of them.

These women had been brought to Cheltenham primarily to help with education. From Christmas 1863 they took over responsibility for the Girls' Poor School. The government required that all grant-aided schools should have a certificated teacher which naturally proved a problem for foreign teachers. Sister Cyrille obtained her certificate and she was helped by a young lady, a great-niece of the Duke of Norfolk, who agreed to teach for two hours a day in the school.

Cheltenham's Catholic community was diverse in its make-up and there would have been huge differences between rich and poor. Sister Aloysia, in fact, spoke of St Gregory's congregation as having no real middle class. The sisters had an interest in working with the poor and some of the Irish hoped that they might live amongst them, 'so that they can protect us if we are attacked.' At the same time the sisters were also supposed to be establishing a fee-paying Convent education which would attract the wealthier families. This, it was hoped, might one day rival the Ladies' College.

From 1st December 1863, lessons commenced and within a few days the sisters could boast of six pupils. Also, six postulants came forward during the first few months including a Miss Curtis, who came from Cheltenham, and Fanny Fleming.

Christmas was soon upon them which gave their well-wishers a chance to be generous. Colonel Grahame provided them with a Christmas goose, 'ready prepared for the pot', as well as fruits and sweets. They received a plum pudding, eggs and a chicken from the aunt of a postulant. Besides the festive cheer in the Convent there was also the Christmas Liturgy at St Gregory's. Sister Aloysia wrote home about this:

'We thought it would be a great sacrifice to be here, but God took pity on us. Midnight Mass was solemnly sung. Father Scarisbrick arranged for three ladies to come for us at 11.30 and precisely at the appointed time, our three angels were in the parlour with the two sons of one of the ladies to go before us – to protect us if need be, but we did not see a soul either going or coming back. But what a night!! What a sky! It was as mild as the month of May. We crossed the town, keeping a religious silence. It was like going to the crib with the shepherds. Entering the Church, the first thing to strike us was the Baptistry. It was decorated with green garlands and flowers and the font was covered with roses. We were astonished by the profusion of decorations in the Sanctuary. All the arches were festooned with greenery, and all the pillars entwined with it. The shrines were filled with flowers; Our Lady's Chapel was a mass of white roses; texts and scrolls over the doors, written in large red letters and always decorated with greenery and all lit with numerous gas jets. The whole thing was lovely. We specially noted the following texts:-

Over the sacristy door, 'A Child is born. A Son is given us,'

Over the Baptistry, 'Gloria in excelsis Deo,'

Over the main door, the single word, 'Pax.'

A few minutes before midnight the organ began to play, and there was no other sound in the Church; It was as quiet as our own little chapel at home when the sisters are deep in prayer. At midnight, the Mass began. The choir sang a magnificent Mass by Mozart. At the end of Mass, our good Father Scarisbrick had arranged to give us Holy Communion as soon as the crowd had left the Church. A few privileged people profited by the occasion and, also, partook of some happiness. Five minutes after Mass when all was silence again and the lights were put out, Father came back to the altar alone, lit two candles, said the Confiteor and gave us the Babe of Bethlehem.

On our return, our English fire was burning in the grate and we happily partook of a cup of coffee. I sang a Walloon Christmas carol and we went to bed to await morning Mass.

At eight o'clock Father came to say the two morning Masses for us during which we sang the carols and hymns of Liege. At 11.00am we assisted at Pontifical High Mass celebrated by Monsignor Collier with great ceremony. At this Mass all the altar servers wore long purple tunics with scarlet capes and long white surplices. They looked like little bishops! Here on solemn feasts and even Sundays all the servers wear white stockings and gloves with cloth overshoes, specially for these occasions. I have never seen, neither has any of the sisters, such dignity in worship as here in England. It is for many the beginning of conversion ... the work of conversion interests everyone in England, especially the Catholics of some social standing who in this respect, like the primitive Christians, 'have but one heart and one soul'.

Sister Aloysia returned to Liege in January 1864 and Sister Cephassie was appointed as Superior at Cheltenham. She fulfilled these duties until 1866 when she was succeeded by Sister Marie Clothilde until 1869. In that year Sister Cyrille became Superior and she continued in this role until the convent closed in 1873.

It would seem Father Cotham was less involved with the sisters than his assistant, Father Scarisbrick probably because he suffered from poor health. As a result the sisters could not always have daily Mass but he often sent presents such as 'some good old wine.' One day, when visiting Bath Place, he remarked to Sister Cephassie, "I see you have already got beggars' signs on your front gate." When the good sister asked him to explain, he replied, "I'll show you" and, taking out a pencil, he drew the following signs. A square meant 'good here', a circle meant 'nothing here', a circle with a dot in the middle meant 'the Police would be called' and crossed lines meant 'bread and cheese would be given.' The Father went on to say that the new convent had a square at the gate. It would seem that they had been warned against the 'veritable plague of beggars' but Sister Marie Clothilde was of far too generous a nature to send the poor beggars away.



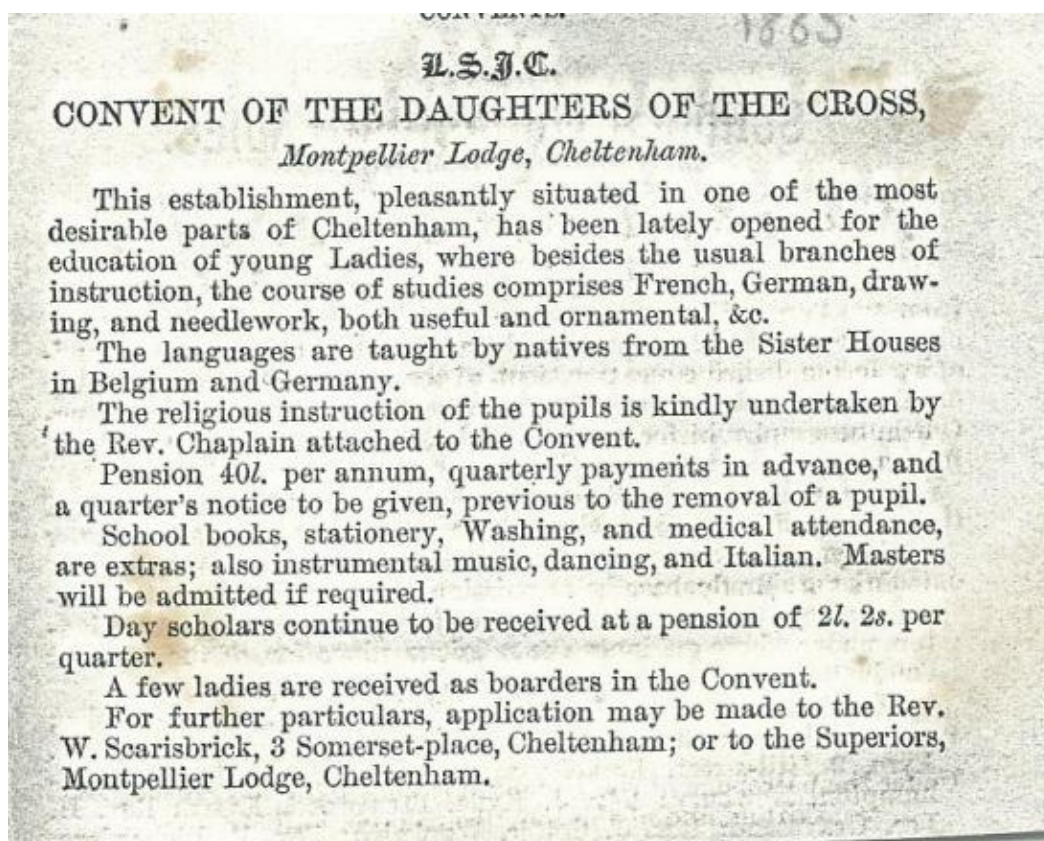
Dr G. Ford Copeland

Correspondence with Liege offers us some delightful insights into Catholic life in Cheltenham at that time. Dr Copeland, M.R.C.S., was the Convent doctor and, when Sister Cephassie lost her voice, he was considered the only Catholic doctor in the town. His prescription was 'wine and nothing else!' The sisters were unconvinced and a new doctor was sought. In September 1865, Dr Copeland prescribed for Sister Aloysia a bottle of quinine and other soothing things. However, the poor doctor's life was fading and Sister Aloysia wrote 'the last visit he made in his carriage. He had perspired all night and since then he has not left his bed.' Her concerns for the doctor were justified as he died after a lingering illness on 1st July 1873.

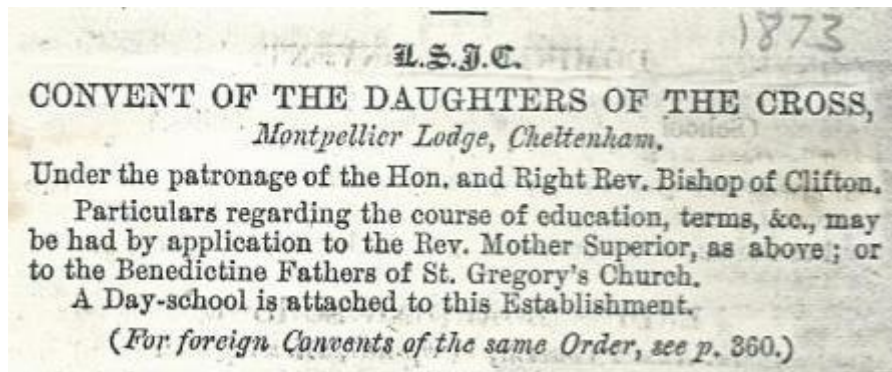
Plans were being prepared for a full-scale boarding school but they realised that this would necessitate finding a more suitable property. A number of houses were viewed, including what later became the Savoy Hotel, and also a property in St. Margaret's Road which in the twentieth century was to make way for the Black and White Coach Station. Interestingly a site was also considered in St. James's Square. One of their advisers, Colonel Grahame, was urging them to purchase a house in a good position. Dr Clifford, the Bishop of Clifton, visited the sisters at various times and arranged the faculties for their confessors. He was particularly interested in the acquisition of their new home in Cheltenham. James de Lacy Towle, a Catholic, was their legal adviser and he was later instrumental in the establishment of their second convent in Chelsea.

Finally, the sisters chose Montpellier Lodge, now Regent House, which is situated on the junction of Vittoria Walk and Montpellier Drive. The house was owned by Lord de Saumarez who had only occupied it for four months of the year. The purchase included an extensive garden as well as a stable block. The sisters moved to Montpellier Lodge to a visit made by Sister Aloysia in September 1864. Her report to Liege included a mention that Sister Cyrille had made little progress in learning English and that Sister Noellie, who could not put a single

sentence together in English, spent her time visiting the poor and carrying out domestic chores.

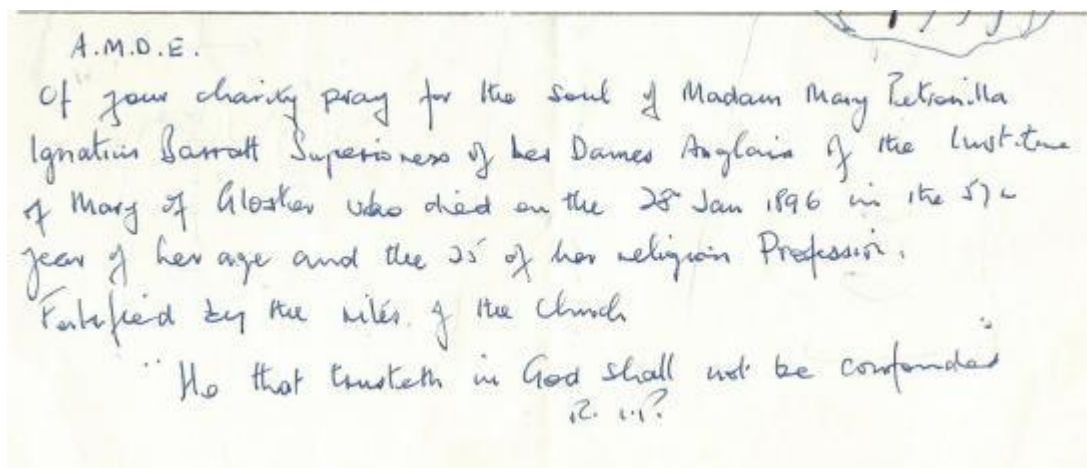


Problems were growing for the sisters as, in September 1865, Father Scarisbrick requested them to take over responsibility for the Boys' Poor School as well. However, he urged them to seek out suitable staff who would be able to get the pupils through the Government examinations. In 1868 a new room was added to the Poor School and the windows were wired. In 1871 work began on a major reconstruction and, also, general improvements were made to the buildings costing £100. Donations were made towards this by Monsieur Tiesset, Mademoiselle Tiesset and Mr. Healy Thompson. On February 7th 1872, a public meeting was held in the boys' school and it was decided to purchase a site on the corner of St Paul's Street North for the purpose of erecting a new school and playground. The assistant priest, Dom Robert Aloysius Wilkinson O.S.B., proposed that they should use, "every exertion in our power to secure the erection of the same."



However, these plans were not to involve the Daughters of the Cross because during the year 1873 they left Cheltenham for West Grinstead. The experiment had failed. The poor schools needed strong hands to guide them through the last years of the nineteenth century and these were eventually found in the Sisters of St. Paul of Charity. The convent school had been a failure too as the community only managed to attract a small number of boarders. At the same time a school for upper class Catholic girls existed in Gloucester during the 1860's, run by the Sisters of the Institute of the Blessed Virgin Mary. Finally their welfare work in Cheltenham was taken up by the Poor Sisters of Nazareth. Today the Daughters of the Cross are largely forgotten in Cheltenham these days but their correspondence back home offers a picture of Catholic life during this decade of growth.

Les Dames Anglaises of the German Institute in Gloucester



A.M.D.G.

LES DAMES ANGLAISES

OF THE

German Institute of Mary, GLOUCESTER.

Under the immediate patronage of the Honorable and
Right Reverend Dr. Clifford, Bishop of Clifton.

This Establishment, founded from the Parent House in Bavaria, October 6th, 1862, and conducted on the same plan, undertakes the entire care of Young Ladies of the upper class, in all the branches of a useful and an accomplished Education; together with every description of Plain and Fancy work.

Pension: Thirty Guineas per Annum, and One Guinea Entrance Fee. (Table Service and Sheeting included.)

EXTRAS PER QUARTER:

	£	s	d
Piano-forte - - - - -	1	11	6
Singing - - - - -	1	11	6
German - - - - -	0	15	0
Drawing - - - - -	1	1	0
Use and Tuning of Instruments - - - - -	0	5	0
Stationery and Stamps - - - - -	0	5	0
Washing - - - - -	0	15	0
Dancing for the Season - - - - -	1	1	0

Lessons can be had on the Organ, Harp, and in Italian if required.

Class-Books, Medical Attendance, Medicines, and Materials for Work and Drawing are also extras.

[TURN OVER

The Languages are taught by Members from the Sister Houses on the Continent; and every attention paid to accent and conversation.

The Uniform must be procured at the Convent, to secure similarity of Colour and Fashion.

Table Etiquette and general politeness are strictly enforced, and for which every convenience is afforded.

No reduction can be made for the absence of a young lady, unless the Religious themselves, by the advice of the Medical Attendant, find it necessary to send her home; her absence under such circumstances, shall be allowed on her return to school; but in no case can money be refunded.

For a shorter period than Twelve Calendar Months, no young lady will be received, and a Quarter's notice or Pension is required previous to a removal.

Malvern House stands in the open Country, commanding on every side an uninterrupted view of the Malvern and Cotswold Hills.

A Lady giving unexceptionable references, can be accommodated as Parlour Boarder.

I am indebted to Sister Lillian W. O'Neill who shared with me her research into the Liege archives of the Daughters of the Cross. Her book, 'With all my Heart', is recommended for those who are interested in this story.

Richard Barton (1987)