
Dean Close's fight against 'Romanism'

Lecture Notes for his illustrated talk on Dean Close and the Roman Catholics of Cheltenham

by Brian Torode (copyright Cheltenham Local History Society)

Cheltenham had had a Roman Catholic presence certainly since the end of the 18th century and we know that since 1807, L'Abbe Cesar Robin, who had come to Cheltenham to teach French, was saying Mass for local Catholics first in private houses, then in the back room of a public house in North Street, later in the Town Hall in Regent Street. This later venue did not endear the community to local Protestants who objected when their desire to use the Hall clashed with a 'Popish' Mass booking.

1809 saw the arrival of Fr. Birdsall and 1810 the opening of the Catholic Chapel, on the site of the present building, to sit 300 persons. There were lots of Catholics in the town then, especially the Irish poor seeking work and the rich seeking pleasure, in races, hunting, theatre, balls etc., and so the locals, especially the Press, saw it as in the interests of the town to "tolerate" the Catholics and their Catholic Chapel.

In 1824, the very young Francis Close was appointed curate of Holy Trinity Church, Cheltenham, a new and very fashionable church near Pittville. Close was a Cambridge undergraduate from 1816 to 1820 and in 1820 he was ordained to serve his title at St James's Piccadilly, a bastion of evangelicalism. He was a protégé of Charles Simeon, the 'Father' of the evangelical wing of the Church of England and it was through him that Close was first appointed to Holy Trinity and then two years later, in 1826, to the Perpetual Curacy – later Rectory – of the Parish Church of Cheltenham, St Mary. Simeon had purchased the advowson and so he had at his disposal the right to appoint to the living. It was a prestigious appointment and, at the time, Close was only 29. For all his evangelical fervour, he was very much a 'Sacramentalist', regularly preaching that neglect of the Sacrament was tantamount to neglect of the Gospel, and that if, in his place of ministry, he failed to persuade people to partake regularly of the Sacrament then he too was guilty of betraying the Gospel. Along with this high regard for the Sacrament, he had an obsessive respect for the Sabbath and in later years in Cheltenham, he was credited with keeping "a better Sabbath in Cheltenham than anywhere outside Scotland".

He was idolised by young and old, especially young ladies, although he was married twice in fact, and had nine children. During his incumbency in Cheltenham he was showered with gifts – from hand-embroidered carpet slippers to a new purpose-built Vicarage in Malvern Road.

His style of preaching is well documented – a powerful preacher, fine voice, clear diction and he commanded a packed church – 1100 or so with even 900 standing.

See Alan Munden, 'A Cheltenham Gamaliel – Dean Close of Cheltenham', pp 24/25.

Under his influence, Cheltenham became an Evangelical stronghold and the authorities of the town – the Commissioners sank into insignificance when their influence was placed alongside that of the pious incumbent. Cheltenham was described in the Gentleman's Magazine of 1830 as, "an elegant, constructed case of fashionable butterflies (the idle rich) and evangelical beetles (the crawlers after Close)" – a rather unflattering reference to his influence.

But what was this influence? Over what did it exert its power? First and foremost, it focussed on profanation of the Sabbath; Close thought, believed and taught that the Sabbath was indeed God's day of rest when all good people were called to give God the honour due to Him. He was appalled at the idea of trains running on a Sunday, and for a while, organised strong opposition to their stopping at Cheltenham on their journey to London; he was totally opposed to horse racing which he believed encouraged gambling and profligacy. A sermon against such abuses was delivered in 1828 and, when printed, sold 3,500 copies locally. These views were of course detested by sportsmen especially the wealthy Irish, in the town, who were great gamblers and steeplechase supporters and CATHOLIC, and although the local Press maintained a laudable tolerance, Close was vehemently opposed to the opening of the Catholic School of St. Gregory in 1826, and the Catholic Emancipation Act of 1829. He was known to have supported the Cheltenham Free Press advertisement of that year,

"Notice to all true Protestants. There is a heap of rubbish, that stands in this town near to the Baptist Chapel, which is a nuisance to all true Protestants. We have 200 resolved to pull it down. There will be a meeting on Monday 9th March at 7 o'clock to drive all Popery out of this town."

There are no Press reports of any activity following this announcement.

In line with many Protestant Evangelicals, Close organised a Visitation Society – nothing to do with the Blessed Virgin Mary – which existed between 1827 and 1834, through which forty people visited between them, every home of the poor and needy, to provide assistance and to get the low down on the activities and the names of Catholics.

His published/printed anti-Catholic feelings, were aired at length in the Cheltenham Journal for December 1835, at a meeting of the Society for the Relief of Suffering Anglican Clergy in Ireland.

Close's anti-Catholic fervour was supported by other local preachers and in 1840 (December)) a packed audience – which included Close, heard a nonconformist minister deliver a highly publicised lecture on, "Is the Pope Anti-Christ?" A year later, Close delivered a speech at the first of his annual 'Close Dinners' in which he defended the authority and succession of the established church against the "Romanists".

However, the Press was not totally in sympathy with Close's vitriol and in that same year, 1840, there appeared a lengthy report of High Mass at the Catholic Chapel – a fine selection of sacred music, particularly the Kyrie Eleison, and the O Salutaris Hostia sung in a very superior manner. The Deacon and Organist are named, and the preacher took as his theme. The Good Samaritan, in which he mentioned "the calumnies with which Catholics were assailed", and cited a tract circulated in the town a few weeks previously, which stated that "murderers and thieves could purchase forgiveness of the priests at the Catholic Chapel".

Close never missed an opportunity to snipe at Roman Catholicism and between 1837 and 1854 he preached a sermon each year on 5th November – 'The Guy Fawkes Sermon' – in which he castigated the Catholic Church. He saw their presence in the land as a threat to the Established Church and, at a Church Missionary Society Meeting in 1841, that threat was made manifest for Close in the conversion of a Rev. Mr. Sibthorp to the faith of the Church of Rome.

Much of the fuel for Close's fire was provided on two fronts – the huge number of Irish poor coming to the town as a result of the 1840's potato famine – a third of the Catholic population was amongst the poorest of the poor – and secondly the Government's decision to support the Irish "Popish College of Maynooth". Close lost no opportunity to enlist the experiences – though prejudiced – of Irish Protestant preachers such as the Rev. Dr Walsh.

Close's attacks were tempered somewhat by a further report of an excellently sung Mass on Sunday 14th September 1842. A full and enthusiastic report was given in the Cheltenham Journal in June 1849 of a Confirmation at the Catholic Chapel.

It is not clear what Close's reaction to the following comment by the poet Tennyson was, when in 1845, while living at what is now St. Gregory's Priory, he wrote:

"Cheltenham is a polka, parson worshipping place of which Francis Close is Pope. His aim is to spread the Gospel according to Low Church principles, by building churches, founding schools, succouring the poor, extoling sobriety and upholding strict sabbatonical observances."

This he continued to work for until he left Cheltenham in 1856. But before he left, he was faced with perhaps the two greatest challenges to his principles while incumbent of Cheltenham. To deal with the second first of all – the Restoration of the Hierarchy, 1850. Meetings were arranged in halls crowded to suffocation and Close was regularly one of the speakers and his attack was not only directed at the Pope in Rome, but on his representative on our shores, Cardinal Wiseman. Public meetings were held all over the town and also in Charlton Kings too. Violent protests were prepared. These drew mixed reactions from the more tolerant Christians in the town – especially the Unitarians – but Close was suspected of being the instigator of the protests. Caution and forgiveness were encouraged in a sermon by Fr. Glassbrook on the following Sunday and several of the local papers carried reports condemning the attacks.

A year later, the Cheltenham Journal reported in full, the wording of an address signed by 550 Catholics on Fr. Glassbrook's departure from Cheltenham for Fairford and, two years after that, and up to 1857, the local papers carried advertisements and reports on the proposals to build, and the eventual consecration, of the new Catholic Church of St. Gregory – a five-year period of comparative calm, encouragement and tolerance.

It is amusing now to read some of the errors in the press reports – what's new – mainly through the reporter's unfamiliarity with the Catholic practice and Liturgy.

(Brian cited an example from the Cheltenham Examiner for May 27th 1857)

Close had been appointed Dean of Carlisle in 1856, and with his departure, the storm may have abated but not for long. For the next twenty years or so, successors to the 'Pope of Cheltenham' continued to fan the flames of anti-Romanism focusing on Infallibility, the Immaculate Conception and Leo XIII's declaration on Anglican Orders.

I could say more on Close's perceived threat of Romanism through the advances of the Oxford Movement which was for him not a church restoration but nothing less than a restoration of 'Popery'. Close also reacted to the conversions of Anglican clergy such as Newman during the 1840's. Close countered all this by founding educational establishments such as the Teachers' Training College, the Ladies' College and Cheltenham College. In fact, it was clearly intended that there would be no High Church activity in any Cheltenham School. At the opening of the Training College the ceremonies were both Protestant and Evangelical in flavour. It was made clear that there would be "no master or teacher but such as embrace the religion, creed and history of the martyred reformers".

The new Training College was set up so that there would be:

"teachers trained to meet the wiles of Romanism and to fortify the minds of the children of the working class against the insidious teaching and practices of the Popish emissaries who are now spreading through the land. Our children will be untainted by Romanism."

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