

## **Nazareth House, Cheltenham, 1884 - 1916**

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From 1884 Nazareth House was one of the chief outlets for charitable works in Cheltenham. The present community of sisters is fortunate in that it possesses a 'Foundation Book' from which one may trace the development of the House to the present day. Details of bequests, as well as information about the erection of the buildings, are provided and major liturgical celebrations receive due mention as do the many friends of the community. Unfortunately, the volume offers only a few details about the actual sisters and, even more so, the residents of the house. This brief precis of the Foundation Book attempts to provide an outline of the work of the Poor Sisters of Nazareth in Cheltenham up to the year 1916.

The story unfolds with the arrival of the sisters in Cheltenham on November 21<sup>st</sup>, 1884. Four sisters set out from the mother house in Hammersmith with their Mother General who was accompanied by another member of the Congregation. The records do not mention whether the sisters travelled in their habits but they belonged to a Congregation which was founded in London in 1851 by a French lady, Victoire Larmenier (1827-1878), under the direction of Cardinal Wiseman.

After changing trains at Gloucester, the book records that the Mother-General began to recite the Rosary and the Litany of the Blessed Virgin Mary, and the sisters finished this devotional exercise just as the train pulled in to Cheltenham Railway Station. They were met at the station by four Catholic ladies and escorted across the road to St Gregory's Church, where they spent a few minutes praying before the Blessed Sacrament.

When they arrived at their new home, 10, Saint James's Square, the Presbytery next to the present church, they were received by the Rector of St Gregory's, Dom Aloysius Wilkinson O.S.B., together with his curates, Dom Maurus Wilson O.S.B. and Dom Edward Roche O.S.B. Also in attendance were 'the principal ladies and gentlemen of the congregation.' The sisters were given a 'most-hearty and cordial welcome' and Father Wilkinson, robed in a cotta and stole, 'addressed a few touching words' to the sisters before blessing the new Nazareth House. The house was furnished with 'new beds, bedding, armchairs and every convenience for the comfort and happiness of old men and women.' In the upper part of the new Nazareth House the sisters found small beds and cots for the little children.

Father Wilkinson clearly made an impact on the sisters for the records reveal that, 'his amiable manner and many admirable virtues have won for him the esteem and affection of all who know him, but especially the poor whose friend and father he has always been.'

The account of the first few days of the Poor Sisters of Nazareth in Cheltenham moves to the evening of November 25<sup>th</sup> when Father Maurus Wilson went to the Workhouse with 'cabs' and brought back 'several old people, some of them blind and paralysed' These he helped to carry upstairs and the scene was most 'affecting when they raised their hands and voices to

heaven calling down the Blessing of God on (him) who had done so much for them.’ Later in the evening several children arrived and Father Wilson was overjoyed, ‘for now his long desire was accomplished – that of seeing these poor people placed under the care of the Sisters where they might breathe their last in peace.’

The following day the Mother General returned to Hammersmith and Sister Mary Petronella was left in charge of the new foundation. Soon there were five sisters at Nazareth House and this number had increased to seven by the year 1888.

During 1886 it was decided to begin a soup kitchen for the large number of unemployed people in the town. Soup was served daily to three hundred people. During the previous year it is recorded in the Foundation Book that the sisters received kindness from all and they had been able to feed and clothe twenty-five people who had been admitted to the house. This charitable work was largely financed through the sisters, themselves, who went out begging from door to door in Cheltenham and within the local neighbourhood.

The work clearly prospered and the sisters found themselves fulfilling a genuine need. Larger accommodation was soon needed and, in 1887, the Poor Sisters of Nazareth purchased for £2,000 a large property, 1 Sandford Place, Bath Road, Cheltenham, situated opposite Cheltenham College. The community moved there on December 27<sup>th</sup>, 1887, and the Mayor, Mr. Haddon, sent his men and horses to receive their furniture. On the following day Father Wilkinson blessed the new Nazareth House with its chapel and the first Mass was celebrated by him on the following day. The chapel was dedicated to Our Lady of Good Counsel and it contained an altar donated by Mr. Richard Sykes, a frequent benefactor of Nazareth House. The move from St James’s Square to Bath Road presented serious financial problems for the sisters. In January 1888 Mr. and Mrs. Baring-Bingham **(1)** arranged a bazaar which raised £1,000 towards paying off their debt on the new property. The Baring-Binghams had already supplied many gifts and, in the late summer of 1888, they organised another bazaar which they hoped would raise sufficient funds to clear the debt. In the event the organisers of the bazaar failed even to cover expenses. Apparently a ‘great number of Catholics left Cheltenham at about this time, including many of our best benefactors.’ Mrs. Baring-Bingham, who had intended to settle the bill for the installation of gas and new sanitary facilities, withdrew her offer as she had been left with the heavy expenses of the bazaar, which she had paid herself. It is further recorded that she did, however, continue to supply meat to Nazareth House until at least 1901.

Nazareth House, Cheltenham, now found itself to be ‘very poor’ indeed and even the ordinary bills could not be met. Friends and well-wishers came to the rescue and various fund-raising events were organised which, together with legacies and donations, helped to keep the whole project solvent. A donation of £25 and later a further £650 came from Mrs. Delinia Radcliffe as a memorial to her late husband. This sum helped to finance the cost of building the chapel wing which was commenced in November 1894 and provided a chapel, sacristy and schoolroom. As the winter was so severe the construction work was delayed until the spring. In December 1895 Father Wilkinson, assisted by his curate, Dom Ceolfrid Trehearne O.S.B.,

blessed the new chapel and dedicated it (again) to Our Lady of Good Counsel. Father Maurus Wilson had died during the previous year having been nursed at the end by the sisters who, later, described him as a devoted friend to their community and a father to the old people and the little children.

Also in December 1895 Father Wilkinson blessed the new chapel at Prestbury and it too was dedicated to Our Lady of Good Counsel or Mater boni consilii. This title of the Blessed Virgin Mary resulted from devotion to a fresco, said to be miraculous, which is found in the thirteenth century Augustinian Church at Genazzano, near Rome. Over the centuries interest in Our Lady of Good Counsel had grown and this culminated in the title being added to the Litany of Loreto by Pope Leo XIII on 22<sup>nd</sup> April 1903.

The new chapel wing, together with other alterations to the house, were designed by the Reverend Canon A.J.C. Scoles, the diocesan favoured architect, and the total cost was £1, 205. This sum was settled from generous donations from families such as the Baring-Binghams, a Mrs. White, presumably the wife of Alexander Campbell White of Lansdown Road, and also Mrs. Healy-Thompson, widow of Edward Healy-Thompson, a former Anglican clergyman and uncle of the poet, Francis Thompson. In 1899 the sisters erected a new wash house at a cost in excess of £400. Donations and legacies included the sum of £645-7-10d which came from the estate of the Late Isaac Solomon, a member of the Cheltenham Hebrew Congregation **(2)** **(3)**.

Nazareth House received many gifts including a beautiful statue of Our Lady of Lourdes which was brought back in 1888 from that town, by Father Wilkinson. A sanctuary lamp for the new chapel was provided by Mrs. Whinyates and benches for the sisters' choir, from his old chapel of the Immaculate Conception, were given by the priest at Cirencester. Mrs. Baring-Bingham gave a statue of St Anthony, a new organ and a large oil painting of St Anthony and the Holy Child. Monsignor Owens, the chaplain at Postlip Hall, provided a picture of Our Lady of Perpetual Succour for the Sisters' choir and one of the Holy Father for the community room. Later Owens gave the community at Nazareth House 'a large handsome crucifix' and twelve pictures. Other gifts from this period included a statue of St Patrick and the processional cross. In 1907 Father Wilkinson bequeathed Nazareth House a 'beautiful set of white vestments' and Father Albert Williams, their resident chaplain from 1908-1914, presented the sisters with a missal in memory of his mother. No doubt the statue of St Joseph, which was acquired in 1891 as a thanksgiving for Mrs. Radcliffe's donation, found its way into the new chapel too.

In 1896 we gain an insight into life outside of the convent walls. We learn that there was a smallpox epidemic in Gloucester and, on December 17<sup>th</sup>, reference is made to a 'severe earthquake in the town.'

For a number of years, the arrangements for Midnight Mass were recorded in the Foundation Book. The celebrant was usually the assistant curate from St Gregory's but, on one occasion, the Abbot of Douai, Dom Lawrence Larkin O.S.B., was the celebrant and on another there was no Midnight Mass celebrated at all on account of the chaplain's indisposition. Reference is

also made to five orphan children receiving their first Holy Communion at Midnight Mass in 1900. Christmas Day festivities are also described in some detail. Mrs. Baring-Bingham provided 'turkeys, pork, lamb, vegetables, fruit and eight tons of coal' and, in another year, she set 'beef, turkeys, plum puddings, fruit, beer, spirits and five tons of coal.' She and her husband also called in at Nazareth House during dinner one Christmas Day. Their presents to the children, in 1904, included a set of new dresses, coats and hats. In 1915 the Ursuline Sisters from Fullwood Park, Cheltenham, provided a Christmas tree, gifts, clothing and toys for the children. On another occasion Father Wilkinson donated £10 and Mother General £5 towards the Christmas festivities at Cheltenham.

Presents and treats were actually received throughout the year. Teas on Easter Day and St Patrick's Day were provided by the Baring-Binghams who, on All Saints' Day 1909, provided gramophone entertainment as well as tea. Coronation Day 1911 was the occasion for a grand tea and brakes were provided in the evening to take the residents out. The Baring-Binghams also made regular gifts of flowers, fruit and vegetables, as well as 'a valuable horse' in 1892, followed by two further ones in later years. Mrs Baring-Bingham gave a 'nice set of dresses and hats for the girls', which were made at her own home so as to save troubling the sisters.

Legacies included £55 from Countess Cecile de Saumarez and £246 from Mr. Leslie Young's legacy, 'through Mr. Welstead'. An old soldier gave £15 to the sisters out of a deferred pension payment of £20.

The sisters at Cheltenham continued to expand their premises and, in October 1906, they purchased the neighbouring house for £1,800. Ten years later they purchased Corinth House, 3 Sandford Place, for £2,000. From 1892 Corinth House had been a special House at Cheltenham College catering for the needs of Jewish students, presided over by Mr. Nestor Schnurmann. The much-extended Nazareth House was now used to house boys from the Rescue Society and it was blessed by the new Rector of St Gregory's, Dom Bede Ryan O.S.B. in 1915.

The 1904 Cheltenham Annuaire describes Nazareth House as:

*'A Home for the Aged Poor and Incurable and Orphan Children. The object of the Institute is to provide a permanent home for the infirm poor of both sexes, irrespective of creed, all being free to attend their own place of worship. The Institute has the further object of rescuing and providing for incurable and orphan children and is entirely dependent on the charity of the public. The visiting hours are from 2 to 5 p.m. daily.'*

We glean from the pages of the Foundation book that the religious formation of the residents received much attention. The records give the numbers of those confirmed; nine in 1890; eleven orphans and one aged inmate in 1898 and twenty-two in 1912. On October 15<sup>th</sup>, 1907, Bishop George Ambrose Burton confirmed thirty children in the house chapel. Previous to that the confirmandi had been taken down to St Gregory's Church. Some of the residents were actually received into full communion with the Roman Catholic Church, some on their

death beds. Eight children were received in 1901 alone of which five came from the town of Cheltenham.

The various Bishops of Clifton during this period paid regular visits to Nazareth House. In 1898 Bishop Brownlow, 'showed a kind interest in the poor on his visit and he spoke words of sympathy and comfort to each.'

The liturgical cycle at Nazareth House, Cheltenham, included various highlights including the annual Procession of Our Lady around the grounds of the convent. On the Feast of the Assumption (August 15<sup>th</sup>) in 1902 the children were dressed in white. Townspeople presented banners and other items which were used on these occasions. 1908 saw a Sodality of Our Lady being established within the house. The first outdoor Corpus Christi procession took place on June 1<sup>st</sup> 1904:

*'The weather was all that could be desired. The functions of cross bearer, thurifer and acolytes were performed by the well-trained altar boys of St Gregory's. The Blessed Sacrament was borne under a rich canopy of white silk, embroidered with wreaths of ivy and passion flowers, the work of one of the Sisters. A profusion of beautiful flowers, provided by Mrs. Baring-Bingham, adorned the different altars at which Benediction was given in the usual manner. Those who witnessed the scene will not easily forget the first Procession of the Blessed Sacrament at Nazareth House.'*

The orphan children were educated at Nazareth House during this period. A report for 1908 was quoted in the Foundation Book which is of interest:

*'There is a marked improvement in all subjects but especially in this noticeable in the very sensible and grammatical letters written by the older girls. Musical drill taken for the first time was carefully gone through and altogether the discipline of the children is most highly creditable.'*

Nazareth House, Cheltenham, was heavily reliant upon its benefactors and during 1915 it received a double blow with the deaths of Mr. Baring-Bingham and Mrs. Forster of 'Petra', Cleeve Hill and formerly of Postlip Hall. The work of the sisters inspired both Catholics and non-Catholics alike and it did much to break-down anti-Catholic feeling within the town as well as alleviating the suffering and hardships of the poor and infirm. After the first World War the venture continued to meet the ever-changing needs of local people. The sisters moved from Bath Road to the new Nazareth House in London Road, Charlton Kings, in 1965. Indeed, Cheltenham owes much to these pioneering women and their generous benefactors.

## Superiors of Nazareth House, Cheltenham

Sister Mary Petronella 1884-1886

Sister Mary Placida 1886-1888

Sister Mary of Bethlehem 1888-1891

Sister St Basil 1891-1892

Sister Mary of Providence 1892-1901

Sister Mary Genevieve Langdon 1901-1907

Sister Mary Patrick White 1907-1910

Sister Mary Barbara O'Brien 1910-1925

## Footnotes

**Footnote (1):** William Alexander Baring-Bingham (1859-1915) lived at Cowley Manor House before moving to Rosehill, Cheltenham, during the 1890's. He owned the race course at Prestbury Park until 1905 and, it was he, who began the National Hunt Festival. He not only enjoyed racing but he kept a kennel of coursing greyhounds and he was an enthusiastic cricketer. He was also an expert shot and was the world champion for pigeon shooting, having won the Tirs Competition. Baring-Bingham was a very generous benefactor to Nazareth House, Cheltenham, and the writer of an obituary in one of the local newspapers described his kindness to the poor of Cheltenham and his philanthropic nature. King Edward VII is said to have visited them at Rosehill on several occasions. In 1930 his widow, who had by then moved to Abbey Cottage, Barnwood, left £3,000 to Canon Chard for St Peter's Gloucester.

**Footnote (2):** 'In 1898 news was received of the death of Isaac Solomon of 3 Oriel Villas, Bath Road, Cheltenham, at Barnwood House Asylum. He left estate valued at nearly nineteen thousand pounds. Under the terms of the will the Cheltenham Hebrew Congregation was left one thousand pounds. Other charities in the town were also to benefit. However, Isaac's brother and Sarah, his sister, contested the will and proceedings were taken by the other executors to have the will proven in the courts. Two months later, April 1899, the deceased's relatives indicated that they would be prepared to accept a compromise agreement. It was not until 1901 that the will was finally released by the courts showing that as a result of the compromise the synagogue's benefit had been reduced to £322.12.11d. Other beneficiaries included Cheltenham General Hospital, the Salvation Army, Nazareth House, Cheltenham Corporation, Delancey Hospital and Victoria house Nursing Home.' (Page 50 and 51, 'The Hebrew Community of Cheltenham, Gloucester and Stroud', by Brian Torode, 1989)

**Footnote (3):** The Cheltenham and Glos Graphic (9-3-1901) recorded that the death of Isaac Solomon – ‘added to the roll of Cheltenham’s modern benefactors.’ He was described as ‘a Hebrew in religion, and an active Liberal converted in politics to Toryism.’ He took care to guard against the possibility of dissemination through books of any religion or politics he did not approve. This would explain his bequest to the Public Library of £129.10.3d for ‘the purchase of good and useful books not of a political or religious nature.’ (From Notes of Brian Torode)

## Bibliography

This article has been compiled by Richard Barton from the Foundation Book of Nazareth House, Cheltenham, with the kind permission and assistance of Sister Teresa Joseph and Sister St Clare.

‘The Hebrew Community of Cheltenham, Gloucester and Stroud’, by Brian Torode, 1989

Cheltenham Annuaire, 1904

Richard Barton (1988)