
Sarah Neve and the Catholic Missions in Chipping Sodbury and Cheltenham

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Dr George Oliver wrote of Chipping Sodbury in his 'Collections...' published in 1857:

'Here Mrs Neve who realized the character given of Dorcas, Acts IX. 30., – "Haec erat plena operibus bonis et eleemosynis quas faciebat" – founded a mission for the Benedictines. For this purpose she bought convenient premises at the expense of £1,300 and added an endowment of £50 per annum. The Rev Thomas Rolling arrived here as the first pastor on 26th October, 1838, and celebrated Mass in the new chapel, which is 50 feet long by 25 broad, on Sunday, 2 days later.'

Dr Oliver added five lines of biographical detail concerning Mrs. Neve:

'She died at her house in Cheltenham in 1840. Her name was Sarah Lunn before her marriage to Rev Egerton Neve, who she survived many years. By the death of her sister, relict of Philip

St. Martin, comte de Front (the Sardinian Ambassador, who died on 4th November 1812) she received an increase to her fortune.'

These few details provoke many questions about Sarah Neve and this article is an attempt to answer some of them. These questions include – what was her family background? Who was her sister the Countess de Front? What of her marriage to Egerton Neve? How did she spend her years in Cheltenham? And why did she provide a chapel in Chipping Sodbury four years before her death?

Family Background

Sarah Lunn was born in about 1767, the daughter of Nicholas Lunn, a coal merchant, of Gloucester Street in the parish of St George the Martyr, Middlesex. Nicholas Lunn had married the widow, Sarah Bostock, also of St George the Martyr parish, on 31st October 1762 in the Church of St Giles in the Fields.

Sarah Bostock, the daughter of Henry Perrin, had previously been married to Richard Bostock (1720-1754), a London apothecary and grandson of Dr Nathaniel Bostock (1), and they had two children, James and Mary. Their great aunt, Catherine Bostock, was the third wife of John Paston of Horton Court who died, at Bath, in 1737 only five or six years after their marriage.

Through her mother, Sarah Lunn was the younger half-sister of Mary Bostock who was seventeen years her elder. According to John Kirk, Mary was the descendent of Nathaniel Bostock (1652-1714), of Whixhall in Shropshire. Nathaniel Bostock was a well-known physician, and a fervent Roman Catholic who gained MD at Caen and was buried in Bath Abbey. His son, Richard Bostock, (1686 – 1747) followed in his footsteps and gained his MD at Utrecht and was also buried in Bath Abbey. In his will, Dr Richard stated that if dying within a day's journey of Bath, he desired:

'to be buried between eleven and twelve at night in left hand aisle of the Abbey Church, and that a monumental stone against the wall bear only the inscription... Richardus Bostock M.D. olim de Whixall in co Salopiae obit ... Requiescat in pace.'

The Countess de Front

Sarah Lunn's half-sister, Mary Bostock, made three interesting marriages. Her first was to Sir Thomas Fleetwood who claimed to be the seventh and last Baronet of Colwich. These claims to the title were somewhat disputed. In 1802 they were both sponsors to a child baptised at the Catholic chapel in Bath and, seven months later, the Baronet, a man of sixty-one, died in Bath, leaving Mary a widow. In 1804 she married Philip St Martin, Count de Front, the Sardinian Ambassador to the Court of St James from 1788 until his death in London in 1812.

He was the protector of the Sardinian Chapel, the forerunner of the present Church of St Anselm and St Cecilia in Kingsway, London. A note in the registers of that chapel tell us that:

'A grand solemn Dirge took place in consequence of the death of Count St. Martin de Front, the Sardinian Ambassador. At an early hour the church was crowded with persons of distinction, including the Spanish, Portuguese, Russian and Sicilian Ambassadors. The High Mass was sung by the Rev. R. Broderick, first Chaplain to the Sardinian Embassy. The music was composed by Mr. Webbe.'

The Countess clearly did not settle to widowhood for she married Thomas Wright of Fitzwalter, Essex, a Catholic banker of Covent Garden. She died in 1818, twenty-two years before the family bank failed.

The sixty-eight-year-old widow continued to be referred to as the Countess until her death in 1830 at 10, Stanhope Street, Mayfair, aged eighty years. The Countess was a leading Catholic lady and her circle included her chaplain, Dr William Victor Fryer. She shared him with the Portuguese Chapel in South Audley Street. Dr Fryer was chaplain there when it closed in about 1825 so he continued to live in South Audley Street until his own death in 1844. In his younger days he had also been chaplain to the Bavarian Chapel but not, it would seem, to the Sardinian one.

The Countess de Front was undoubtedly a wealthy lady and much of her estate passed to the first Bishop of Southwark, Dr Grant, who used it to finance a new church which was built at Dover in 1868. The Countess, however, left the life interest to her sister, Sarah Neve, as well as many books from the libraries of her late husbands – Sir Thomas Fleetwood and the Count de Front.

The Vicar's Wife

With her connections to the Pastons and the Bostock Family Sarah Lunn clearly had a definite Catholic background. In 1781 Nicholas Lunn made his will and appointed Sir Thomas Fleetwood and his wife Mary as the guardians and executors of his daughter Sarah. This will was eventually proved in 1797. Nothing further has come to light concerning Sarah Neve's early life other than an address of Gower Street, Bedford Square.

On 25th June 1792 Sarah Lunn married the Reverend Charles Neve, of St Mary Magdalen, Oxford, in the Church of St Giles-in-the-Fields and the witnesses were Sir Thomas and Mary Fleetwood.

Twenty years later we find a mention of her in the Cheltenham Catholic register where she is recorded as being the sponsor at the baptism of a child at Horton in 1812. Six years later the name Sarah Neve is listed as being that of the sponsor, by proxy, at a baptism conducted by Dom Peter Baines, later Vicar-Apostolic, in the register of the Bath Chapel.

Charles, not Egerton, as often stated, was the son of Timothy Neve of Kensington. He was a student of St John's College, Oxford, and passed both his degrees before being awarded Bachelor of Divinity in 1792. After his ordination to the priesthood in 1787 he was appointed Vicar of Cleeve Prior in Worcestershire but from 1790 he seems also to have been curate at Weston-on-the-Green, Oxfordshire. On November 27th, 1795, he was appointed as Vicar of Old Sodbury with Chipping Sodbury and he held this benefice until his death, although Chipping Sodbury was hived off in 1822. From 1808 Neve was also incumbent of Whitelady Aston in the Diocese of Worcester and Cleeve Prior.

Very little is known about Neve's ministry in the Sodburys but, we do know, that in 1826 he was granted a twelve-month leave of absence by the bishop of Gloucester because of his illness, 'which requires recurrence to the use of the Bath waters.' A curate was appointed to look after Old Sodbury. Charles Neve was given a further leave of absence for the year 1828 as, 'you require to reside in some place where you can have immediate medical assistance and which cannot be procured in Old Sodbury.' He died in the July of that year, aged sixty-four years, leaving Sarah a widow.

His obituary in the Gentleman's Magazine:

'July 29th. At his house in Bladud's Buildings, Bath, aged 64, the Rev. Charles Neve, Vicar of Old Sodbury, Gloucs. and of Whitelady, Worcs. He was the eldest son of Rev. Timothy Neve, D.D., Rector of Middleton Stoney, in Oxfordshire and Margaret Professor of Divinity; and grandson of Timothy Neve, D.D., Archdeacon of Huntingdon. The deceased was formerly Fellow of St. John's College, Oxford.....he married Miss Lunn of Gower Street...'

Widowhood in Cheltenham

Dom John Augustine Birdsall O.S.B., Missioner at Cheltenham, kept a personal diary for much of his life and it is to these pages that we must turn for further references to Mrs. Neve. Birdsall had, for some years prior to 1809, been an assistant missioner at Bath and, whilst at Cheltenham, he served the Horton area from 1815 until 1823. The first reference to Mrs. Neve in this diary occurs in 1830 when he received a present from her of some glasses. These included a wine decanter, a water bottle, beer glasses and eleven wine glasses. These items Birdsall took to his new residence at Broadway. The entries for the years 1831 until 1833 include further references to Sarah Neve. Details are given of her financial affairs as well as estimates for the stone façade of her new house. In 1831 Mrs. Neve purchased land and proceeded to erect 10, St James's Square, the present St Gregory's Priory. This house was adjoining the gardens of the old Catholic chapel and Chapel House – the residence of Birdsall until his death in 1837.

By December 31st 1833 Sarah Neve had spent £2,600 on her property and Birdsall was clearly closely involved with the project as dimensions for the building feature in his diary. The Douai archives include a lease of the property to Dr Fryer, dated 1837.

Even though the house may have been leased for a time to her late sister's chaplain, the Cheltenham Annuaire and the 1841 census return indicate that Sarah Neve lived in her Cheltenham property during the period 1837 until 1842. In 1841 she is listed as having two servants living with her, namely John Foyle and Betty Austin. Her neighbour, at Number Nine, St James's Square, was a Mrs. Mary Paston, aged sixty-five years. This is rather an interesting coincidence as the Paston Family of Horton were relatives of the Bostocks and the major supporters of the Catholic mission which served the Chipping Sodbury area. However, this family actually died out in 1788 with the death of Mr. Clement Paston at Worcester.

Benefactress of the Benedictines

Sarah Neve would certainly have known the English Benedictines at Bath and it is, probably, as a result of her friendship with Birdsall that she moved to Cheltenham for the last years of her life. It only remains for us to wonder why she decided to provide a Catholic chapel in the small market town where her late husband had been, for many years, the Anglican incumbent. The entries in the Bath and Cheltenham registers indicate that she was involved with Catholic life in the area, even during her husband's lifetime. It is possible that she wished to continue the support of the few families in the area, especially those who had lived in Horton. In 1767 there were forty Catholics living at Horton and four at Chipping Sodbury. These four included a gardener, the wife of an innholder and two children. The number increased to eleven by 1780/1 and, during the early nineteenth century, the main Catholic family in the town was called Thompson. After the chapel was closed at Horton Court the local Catholics were dependent upon occasional visits from the clergy of Bath or Cheltenham.



During the year 1838 Sarah Neve purchased the Swan Inn at Chipping Sodbury and St Lawrence's Chapel was opened. This venture certainly helped to reverse the decline in numbers and, during 1839 alone, there were nine baptisms, three burials, four converts, an average of forty-five weekly Communions and an estimated Catholic population of ninety. According to Dom Alphonsus Morrall, writing in about 1850 concerning the progress of the English Benedictine missions,

'Mrs. Neve, a catholic who was married to the established clergyman of Old Sodbury... purchased the largest inn in Sodbury and formed the former ballroom and part of the stabling into a school house.'



In October 1839, when the chapel was registered as a place of worship, the signatories were Mrs. Sarah Neve, 'the proprietor of the Roman Catholic Chapel or place of congregation or assembly for worship situate in the High Street of Chipping Sodbury,' together with James Thompson, James Thompson, Junior, and Ann Thompson, 'three of the congregation usually assembling therein.' 'The Rev Thomas Rollings of Chipping Sodbury, aforesaid, is the officiating Minister of the said Chapel.'



Father Rollings only served at Chipping Sodbury for a short time as in 1840 he was succeeded by another Benedictine, Dom John Jerome Jenkins. The English Benedictines were to serve this mission until the year 1927 when it passed into the care of secular priests.

Sarah Neve was clearly a great friend of the Benedictines and she shared in Birdsall's interest in the Benedictine mission to Australia which was led by Dom Bede Polding, the first Archbishop of Sydney. When he left England for Australia in 1835 Mrs. Neve gave him books from her library, as well as others to be sold, along with trinkets and ornaments, in order to raise money for a foundation of the Sisters of Charity. She also promised to bequeath furniture to Polding as she intended moving to a smaller house – perhaps within five years.

Her Death

In the event, Sarah Neve died on September 22nd, 1842, (not 1840 as given by Dr Oliver) at Number Ten, St James's Square, Cheltenham. Her death certificate recorded that she was seventy-five years old and that her death was caused by natural decay. The witness to the death was her servant, John Foyle. She was buried in the Catholic churchyard at Broadway, in the same burial ground that Birdsall had been laid, five years earlier. Her house in Cheltenham passed to the Chipping Sodbury mission and it was leased out as a source of income. In 1853 Dom Maurus Cooper sold the house to the Cheltenham mission for one thousand pounds so that the present Church of St Gregory the Great could be built, partially, in the garden. One of the tenants during the 1840's was Alfred Lord Tennyson.

Some of Mrs. Neve's books were found a home in Cooper's library at Chipping Sodbury and many of these are now at Douai Abbey. Other books now form the nucleus of St Patrick's Seminary at Maily (1).

Conclusion

There is clearly scope for further research into the life of Sarah Neve. What we do know is that Sarah Neve made an important contribution to Catholic life both in Cheltenham and in Chipping Sodbury as well as in her support for the Benedictine Mission in Australia.

Richard Barton (1989)

Footnote

- (1) Colin Fowler O.P.: I am transcribing a shipboard journal kept by Lewis Harding on the 1835 voyage of Bishop Polding to New Holland. As an appendix I have gathered documents and correspondence relating to the embarkation of the mission band. Included is the letter of Mrs Neve to Polding offering her library in her will. You comment at the end of your article that "Other books now form the nucleus of St Patrick's Seminary at Maily [Manly]."

I have contacted the Veech Library, where the early books of Sydney Archdiocese – "Benedictine Collection" – are kept. However, the librarian informs me that there is no record of there being books received from Mrs Neve. I am wondering whether you have any references to the books arriving in Sydney, and perhaps what books were in the Neve library.

My project also includes the transcription of another Harding journal written on his return journey to England in 1846. Polding was also onboard this voyage. I hope to publish both journals together under the title: "At Sea with Bishop Polding". The 1835 manuscript is held at Downside Abbey; that of 1846 is in the Sydney Archdiocesan archive.



The Marian Town Cross, Chipping Sodbury

