

## St Gregory's Convent, Cheltenham

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Recently, a rather interesting building has been sold in Cheltenham – the former St Gregory's Convent in Saint Paul's Street North. Opposite to the old convent is another building which is up for sale too and this is the former St Gregory's School, which served the Catholic children of Cheltenham from 1857 until 1936. These two buildings were, for many years, closely associated as the convent was the home for the teachers at the school.

St Gregory's School was founded in 1827 and, by 1853, it had outgrown its limited accommodation. Because of this it was decided to erect a new Catholic church in the town so that the former Catholic chapel in Somerset Place, built by Dom Augustine Birdsall in 1810, could be utilised as the schoolroom. In the event, a new church was built on the chapel site and, with generous government grants, the school was re-sited. The old chapel was eventually demolished and, by December 1864 the completed tower with its majestic spire had risen upon the site.

The new school was opened in a former schoolroom situated at the junction of St Paul's Street North and St Paul's Road. Except for a few years during the 1860's, when the Daughters of the Cross were involved with the schools, the children were taught by lay-teachers, Mr Thomas Crotty serving as Master for over a decade.

Mother Aidan, who was headmistress of the school from 1925 until 1934, compiled a few details concerning the foundation of their Cheltenham house,

*'Owing to the neglected state of the Catholic children, Father Wilkinson O.S.B., the Rector, asked Mother Dupuis to give him the Sisters. At first she refused and told him to get some other community but he persisted in his request and finally his petition was granted.'*

Mother Genevieve Dupuis had established, in 1847, an independent English branch of the 'Sisters of Charity of St Paul the Apostle' on her arrival in Banbury, Oxfordshire, from the mother house, in Chartres. In 1864 she went on to develop St Paul's Convent, Selly Park, Birmingham, as the mother house for the new English Congregation and, from here, eighty-eight houses were gradually established across the length and breadth of the British Isles. In 1870 the sisters made a foundation at Chipping Campden where there is still a community today (1988). Mother Genevieve remained as Mother General until her death in 1903.

The sisters, who were engaged in almost every type of charitable work, wore a black habit with a black veil that had a starched linen under veil, similar to the French cornette. The sisters also wore a linen wimple and, over the wimple, a small black cross was suspended around their necks. The sisters also wore a rosary and crucifix which hung on the left side and for street wear they had a black cloak.

The convent at Cheltenham was opened on September 24<sup>th</sup> 1879 and Mother Magdalen (Martha Thompson) was the first superior. She arrived with four other sisters and they moved into a cottage near to the school in St Paul's Street North. The sisters took immediate charge of the schools. Sister Mary Euphemia Tyrell, who was a member of the community from March 1882 until April 1929, wrote that, prior to their arrival, the school had 'seemed to have been neglected owing to the different changes of staff.'

The community's cottage convent was purchased for £480 in 1874 and this was their residence until 1885 when St Gregory's Convent was erected on church-owned land, on the opposite side of the road to the school. Father Wilkinson was responsible for building the convent but it remained Benedictine property. The 'Pax' symbol, situated high up on the exterior, must have been a gentle reminder to the sisters that they were merely tenants of the Benedictines.

The convent was actually paid for by Mr. and Mrs. William Alexander Baring-Bingham and the house chapel, described later by Wilkinson 'as a gem of a chapel', was financed by Alexander Campbell White. Gifts included a statue of the Sacred Heart, which was given by Dr Ryan MacMahon, and one of Mary, the mother Jesus, which was donated by Father Wilkinson. The convent was large enough to accommodate ten or twelve nuns.

The convent was designed by Canon A.J.C. Scoles, the favoured Diocesan architect, who had already been commissioned to design an extension to St Gregory's Priory with its new and imposing façade fronting on to Ambrose Street. In the future Scoles would go on to receive the commission to design the chapel for Nazareth House, Cheltenham, as well as a new presbytery for St Peter's Church in Gloucester and the new Church of St Peter at Cirencester.



The Altar of St Gregory's Convent Chapel now in St Gregory's Church

The Chapel decorations seem to have been carried out by members of the Pippet Family who were working at the time for Hardmans of Birmingham.

In 1885 the community in Cheltenham consisted of six nuns but this figure later increased to ten. The sisters paid Father Wilkinson the sum of £55 per annum to cover the convent's rent, rates and taxes. This was, of course, in addition to his honorarium as their chaplain. He was able to write to the Bishop of Clifton that his new convent, 'will, I feel sure, tend very much to advance the interests of religion in Cheltenham.'

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.



Lady Chapel, St Gregory's Church

The other benefactor of St Gregory's Convent was Alexander Campbell White. He had retired to his house in Lansdown Road, Cheltenham, having led a successful career in Ceylon. His

involvement at St Gregory's led to a donation of £100 towards the creation of St Benedict's Chapel in 1880. He died in 1900, having reached the age of ninety-three, and left an estate valued at a figure over £270,000. His local bequests included £1,000 to St Gregory's Church and a further £1,000 to Cheltenham General Hospital. His obituary includes the following words,

*'generous benefactor, genial personality ... an earnest Catholic. The Roman Communion will feel his loss the keenest, but his charitable instincts were in no way effected by religious prejudice and all manner of folk will unite in mourning the loss of one whose chief happiness was found in doing good to others, with an unobtrusive and unaffected kindness far too rare.'*

The sisters, encouraged by Wilkinson and his assistant, Dom Maurus Wilson, soon organised the schools. One of the community wrote of these days,

*'The Sisters gathered together the children and taught them the best they could. After sometime they settled down and became very devoted to the Sisters.'*

Attendance at the school grew from 200 pupils in 1889 to 260 in 1902 and, during the final years of the nineteenth century, there were several building schemes realised which improved facilities and enabled the school to achieve the expectations of the government inspectors.

Mother Magdalen died on February 7<sup>th</sup>, 1881, aged fifty-nine years, and she was buried at Cheltenham Cemetery. She was succeeded as superior by Mother Teresa Pointon, Mother Agnes McCarthen and, then, by Mother Anastasia Turner.

When the sisters moved into their new convent one or two of the sisters were placed in charge of a new venture, a private school, which was opened in the cottage that they previously occupied in St Paul's Street, North. In about 1890 this school was moved to 10, St James's Square, recently vacated by Nazareth House, and the old cottage premises were demolished to make way for a new Catholic Infant School.

'St Gregory's High School for Girls' existed until around 1908 and it catered for the needs of middle class families such as the Walls, Welsteads and Rotundos. The actress Lillah McCarthy was probably its best-known pupil. Until his death in 1895 Father Maurus Wilson supervised the school and a town directory lists Sister Vincent Murphy as being the headmistress in 1900. Children were taken from the age of three years and at eight years transferred from the second to the first division. A school prospectus lists the subjects taught – Religious Instruction, English Grammar, Composition, Drawing, Painting, Literature, Reading, Writing, Arithmetic, History, Geography, French, Needlework, Calisthenics (light gymnastic exercises) and Singing. Music, German and French were extra subjects and pupils were prepared for Trinity College, Kensington Local Science and Art Department.

Mrs. Saunders wrote of her memories of St Gregory's High School in 1977:

*'The Catholic High School for girls in those days was in St James's Square. My friends because of Mama's position in the world of music, I supposed, tended to be from artistic families. The sculptor Albert Wall's daughters, Josephine and Gussy, were among my close acquaintances as was Rosie Alcock who became a fairly well-known pianist, but my dearest friend was Lillah McCarthy who was to achieve fame as an actress all over the world. Lillah was a couple of years older than me and there was always a touch of hero-worship in my attitude to her. Even as a child she was stage struck and Sister Vincent, our English mistress, often used to scold her in class for day-dreaming about future glories when she should have been concentrating on verbs and nouns.'*

On the subject of actors Sir Ralph Richardson, who was born at 11 Tivoli Road in 1902, recalled in his autobiography the night that his parents separated and his subsequent elopement with his mother. As Ralph and his mother departed in a taxi they bid farewell to a 'tall sister dressed in black with a starched white veil.' Presumably a Sister of Charity of St Paul the Apostle.

Mother Casimir (Martha Boardman) was superior at Cheltenham from 1892 until her death in 1904. She was succeeded by the headmistress of the Senior School, Sister Gertrude, who served as superior and also headmistress until 1925. In the January of that year, she died suddenly in Paris whilst returning from a pilgrimage to Lourdes. Mother Gertrude, who was well-known and much-loved in Cheltenham, was best remembered for the 'spectacular plays for the children.' The School Managers expressed their profound regret at her death and, 'their high appreciation of the excellent work done by her during the long time of her headmistress-ship' She was succeeded by Mother Aidan (Ellen Williams) who was also the headmistress of the Senior School.

On September 24<sup>th</sup>, 1929, St Gregory's Convent celebrated its Golden Jubilee and three priests, who had been pupils at the school, returned for the festivities. These included Canon John Quinn from Bangor, Father Wilfrid Harrington, the chaplain of Pentonville Prison, and his brother, Father Alban Harrington. One of them, Canon Quinn, had, as a small boy, been 'dressed in a white suit and had been sent by his mother to walk behind the sisters to see no one molested them.' His sister, Daisy Quinn, had attended the High School.



Sister John and Mother Gertrude

1932 saw the appointment of Mother Germaine Roberts as superior at Cheltenham but Sister Aidan continued until January 1935 in her post as headmistress of the Senior School. The final superior was, in fact, Mother Frances Regis English and she spent the last six months at the convent before its closure on August 1<sup>st</sup> 1935. The sisters withdrew shortly before the new St Gregory's School was opened in Knapp Lane, in 1936, and handed over the reins to Mr Lea, the first headmaster.

The Benedictines sold the convent and it became a hostel for St Paul's Teacher Training College. The altar was removed and, after serving as a school altar, was installed in St Gregory's Church as the new principal altar (1).

During the last fifty years the old convent has been little altered but its new owner, Mr. Boyce, has plans to install suspended ceilings in some of the rooms. Fortunately, he has produced a photographic record of the building and is aware of the building's important history.

Although the daily Angelus (2) is probably long forgotten, even by Cheltenham's oldest residents, the building still stands as a reminder of those sisters who did so much to educate generations of Cheltenham's Catholic children.

## Footnotes:

Footnote 1: 'The front of this altar is beautifully decorated with three panels, the middle one being of Christ as King, being welcomed by the five Wise Virgins holding up their lighted lamps (Matt, xxv, 1). The two side panels are niches containing on the left the statue of St Gregory the Great and on the right that of St Paul. The altar – originally in St Paul's (sic) Convent Chapel and then in St Benedict's School – was installed in St Gregory's Church as the High Altar to conform to the re-ordering of the Sanctuary in accordance with the Decrees of the Vatican Council II and was re-consecrated on 2<sup>nd</sup> December, 1975. (see the guide book produced by Alex and Ray Clarke in 1977)

Footnote 2: 'Many old people who lived in this district remember its ringing, men going to work by 6.00am or setting their clocks at noon. Also the nuns are remembered for their help to the needy in what was then a poor district. Solzhenitsyn said it was a sad day for Russia when the Angelus stopped ringing – a good reason for us to bring joy back to Cheltenham by hanging the Angelus bell in the bell-cote of St Gregory's Church in this our centenary year.' This was accomplished in time for the Centenary Mass and today the two bells ring out during Mass – the one from St Gregory's Convent and the other from Whitefriars School. (see Mary Wright, page 113)

## Sources:

The archives of the Sisters of Charity of St Paul the Apostle, Selly Park, Birmingham  
(by kind permission of Sister Francis Joseph)

Clifton Diocesan Archives

Volumes of the Cheltenham Annuaire and various local newspapers

Mary Wright, 'St Gregory's Now... and then'

Alex and Ray Clarke, 'An Account of the Church of St Gregory the Great, Cheltenham', produced in 1977 from an Account published in 1877 and research by Lt Col J.S. Close O.B.E.

Volumes of the 'Community' Magazine

Richard Barton (1988)