

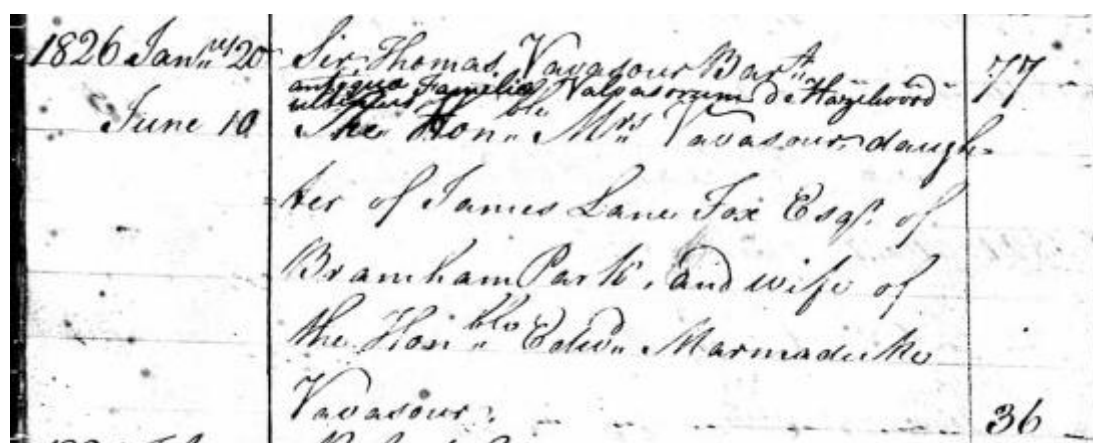
---

## St Gregory's School, Cheltenham

by Richard Barton (Copyright)

A significant development at Cheltenham was the provision of a charity school for the poor, annexed to the Catholic chapel and opened on 23rd April 1827. The school was made possible as a result of the bequest of the Honourable Mrs Marcia Vavasour, who died in Cheltenham, together with a donation from Lord Shrewsbury.

In 1813 Marcia Bridget Fox (1790-1826) had married Edward Marmaduke Stourton (later Vavasour), the heir to Hazlewood Castle in Yorkshire the ancient home of the Catholic Family of Vavasour. The couple took the name Vavasour but on 10th June 1826 Marcia died in Cheltenham. Her body was taken back to Hazlewood for burial and Father Birdsall accompanied the cortege. It was probably in gratitude to Father Birdsall that her husband, who became a Baronet in 1828, gave £200 for the education of poor children, in fulfilment of her wishes and in consequence of her dying in Cheltenham. The sum was appropriated to the Cheltenham Mission, the capital could be used to liquidate the debt on the chapel 'or must be so used and must continue to be acknowledged that the interest on £200 may be applied according to the intention of the donor for the Charity School and prayers must be offered for the soul of Mrs. Vavasour.'



Entry in the burial register at Hazelwood, Yorkshire, for Mrs Marcia Vavasour

The other benefactor of the school was John Talbot (1791-1852), sixteenth Earl of Shrewsbury, often known as 'Good Earl John' because of his support for Catholic churches, schools and charitable causes. He inherited his property and titles in 1827 and lived at Heythrop Park, near Chipping Norton, until 1831 when there was a disastrous fire and he

moved to Alton Towers in Staffordshire. On 15th September 1828 he gave £100 towards the School.



Father Birdsall described the Catholic Community in the early nineteenth century:

*'Cheltenham is a favourite place with Irish and although the Catholics of that nation who are wealthy bear a very small proportion when compared to those who are poor, yet they are not a small number, and the congregation in this Chapel is at all times composed in no small degree by Irish Catholics.'* This is confirmed by the rhyme of the day – *'The churchyard's so small and the Irish so many, they ought to be pickled and sent to Kilkenny.'*

When St Gregory's school opened its doors the only other schools in the town catering for the children from poorer families were the Parish School, the National School in the Bath Road and a new infant school in Alstone. The new Catholic foundation was run by a schoolmistress and, according to non-Catholic reports, fifty-eight Protestant children were being educated at the school and were being taught using the Catholic catechism. The school had a pre-history as we know that on 30th August 1818 public catechism was first held in the chapel with the children, it having previously been held in the vestry.

The Catholic Poor School quickly became a matter for controversy and the Missioner, Dom John Augustine Birdsall O.S.B. who had built the first St Gregory's Chapel in 1810, wrote the following account of it:

*In the summer of 1828 the inquisitorial meddling of the Biblicals etc. with our Charity School, their printing notices and insertions in the Cheltenham paper stating that according to their computation or rating, the mighty increase in Catholics and their pretending to detail the ways made use of by us to make proselytes, such as distributing books etc. They certainly caused a great diminution in our scholars by threatening the protestant parents with various losses, if they continued to send their children to our schools. They set up a branch National School right opposite our Chapel from whence they removed it into the High Street, till soon after they built what they call the Infant School at St. James's Square.'*

Writing in 1851, Daniel Evans, a Catholic tradesman, shared his concerns with the Bishop of Clifton about the progress of the mission in Cheltenham and his letter includes the following details about the state of the school:

*We have a Boy's and Girl's School supported hitherto by the direct exertions and influence of a Gentleman and Lady whose further services owing to circumstances cannot be safely calculated on very long – We require a new school room so badly that had not the Rev Mr Glassbrook rented a large room in the locality of the Chapel the refusal must have been given to very many.*

During the year ending 31st December 1852 sixty pupils were on the registers for the Girls' School which was housed in two small rooms over the chapel vestries, each measuring only fifteen feet by twelve feet. The Boys' School was accommodated in an old carpenter's workshop with a brick floor, without ceiling, eight feet in height and with only one window, which was not designed to open. This badly ventilated workshop was rented and it had no playground or 'ordinary conveniences'. In January 1852 sixty-five boys were registered. In response the new Missioner-Apostolic, Dom James Ambrose Cotham, arranged a meeting to consider 'the propriety of building a school for the education of our poor children.'

At the meeting various proposals were put forward. These included a plan for a new church on a different site leaving the chapel available as a schoolroom, secondly building a new school elsewhere and erecting a church on the site of the chapel or a third course of action in which the church would be built in stages over a number of years culminating in a new school on another site and a completed church occupying the whole site of the former chapel. The third plan was adopted and by 1857 the new church had been opened and the time was deemed right to address the school problem so that the old chapel could be knocked down and the tower and spire erected.

Providing education was a struggle for the Catholic community. An article in the 'Tablet,' written in 1857, offers the following description:

*'The congregation is partly supported by the wealthy Catholics who come to Cheltenham during the Season, or to drink its waters. It mainly consists of poor Irish who settle in the town in considerable numbers, and migrate in the summer, wandering over the country in search of agricultural employment.'*

Father Blount urged well-to-do Catholics to 'adopt' and pay for the education of some of the poorest children, whose parents could not afford even one penny per week. He spoke of *'a large crop of Murphys, a tribe of Flanaghans and a collection of Driscolls, Flemings and Sullivans.'* He, himself, sponsored a number of these children. However, in 1859 alone thirty children died as a result of an epidemic.

With the assistance of substantial grants from the Government and the Catholic Poor School Committee two large, well ventilated schoolrooms, accommodating 150 children, were opened in 1857 in St Paul's Street North, 'close to the dwellings of the poor.'

The new school had previously been St Paul's National School and was purchased at auction in 1854 by the builder John Acock. Joanna Vials takes up the story:

*'This building, on the corner of Hamilton Place and St Paul's Street North, and built in 1836 for £670, was able to accommodate a school roll of three hundred and seventy. It became redundant in 1854 when Practising Schools, designed by G.f. Bodley and built by Acock and Son 'in vigorous manner' were opened in the grounds of the prestigious St Paul's Teacher Training College.*

*Acock renovated the school and sold it to the Catholic mission for £640, of which £336 came from a government grant. The school opened in May 1857 comprised two rooms, each measuring 38 feet 4 inches x 35 feet and having a galleried tier and a stove; the rooms were separated by sliding doors.'* (Joanna Vials – *'The Indomitable Mr Cotham'* Page 382)

In the grant application the school was described as intended for *'the instruction of the children of the labouring poor in the Parish of Cheltenham ... the labouring portion of which are chiefly employed as Mechanics and in Agriculture.'* Other parents were described as domestic servants of the 'numerous gentry.'

The teachers were Thomas and Harriet Crotty and Government Inspections were positive but, from 1858, the school was subject to the system of 'payment by results' which meant that grants were not guaranteed but contingent upon yearly examinations.

Joanna Vials, in her fascinating study *'The Indomitable Mr Cotham'*, mentions that from as early as 1853 the Missionary Rector had dreams of the Sisters of the Sacred Heart and Brothers of Christian Instruction teaching in the schools. This came to partial fruition in 1863 with the arrival of the Daughters of the Cross in Cheltenham. These Sisters were brought to Cheltenham to help with Catholic education in the town through assisting with the Poor Schools and in establishing a fee-paying College for young ladies. From Christmas 1863 the

Sisters took over responsibility for the Girls' Poor School. The government required that all grant-aided schools should have a certificated teacher which proved a problem for these Belgian ladies. Sister Cyrille managed to obtain the necessary certification and she was assisted by a young lady, a great-niece of the Duke of Norfolk, who agreed to teach for two hours a day. The Sisters were conscious that Cheltenham's Catholic Community was divided into rich and poor with few middle class families. They were drawn to work with the poor and it was said that some poor Irish families hoped that they would establish their convent in their part of the town 'so that they can protect us if we are attacked.' From 1865 the Sisters took on responsibility for the Boys' School too.

In 1868 a new room was added to the Poor School and the windows were wired. Three years later work began on a major reconstruction. General improvements began costing £100 and donations were received from members of the Congregation including Monsieur Gonez, Mademoiselle Tiesset and Mr Healy-Thompson. On 7th February 1872 a public meeting was held in the Boys' Schoolroom and it was decided to purchase a site on the corner of St Paul's Street North so as to provide a new boys' school and a playground. The land was acquired for £200 and in January 1873 a further £40 was spent on providing an infant school. During the following October a house and garden, adjoining the school, were purchased for £480.

However, in 1873 the Daughters of the Cross left their Convent in Montpellier to settle in West Grinstead leaving St Gregory's Schools without teaching sisters. The problem of providing teachers prompted Father Wilkinson, the missionary Rector, to write to Mother Genevieve Dupuis to ask her to send sisters of her order to assist with the existing infant and senior schools. The sisters had already opened a house in Chipping Campden in 1870. In 1879 a group of Sisters of Charity of St Paul the Apostle arrived in Cheltenham from Selly Park in Birmingham and moved into a cottage near to the school in St Paul's Street North. Eventually, St Gregory's Convent was built and these Sisters were closely involved with the school from 1879-1935.

In 1884 the Poor Sisters of Nazareth opened a house next to St Gregory's Church and they worked tirelessly to improve the lot of the poor in Cheltenham. They later moved to Bath Road where they cared for orphaned children and for some years the children were sent to St Gregory's School for their education.

Father Alexander Maurus Wilson served for nearly fourteen years as the assistant or coadjutor priest attached to St Gregory's Church. He was an exceedingly popular figure and, when he celebrated the silver jubilee of his monastic profession in 1894 the Missionary Rector, Father Robert Aloysius Wilkinson, said of him:

*'During his thirteen years in Cheltenham he had built up the Convent of St Paul, a convent of no mean dimensions, containing the very gem of a convent chapel; he had enlarged, furnished and improved the schools; he had brought over the community of the Sisters of Nazareth to attend to the poor men and women and distressed orphan children; he had founded a school which had done and was still doing excellent work: and he had founded a school which had*

*done and was still doing excellent work; and he had founded a guild for boys and the young men, and another guild for the girls and young women, the two guilds being of incalculable advantage not only to the young men and to the young women, but also to the clergy who were responsible for their souls.'*

In 1899 the Education Department insisted on the school buildings being completely remodelled otherwise grants would cease and the Schools would be forced to close. £900 was the sum required to complete this work and the Catholic Community responded by holding a three-day 'Swiss Village Bazaar' in the Assembly Rooms situated in the High Street. The bazaar was a very grand occasion and it was formally opened by Archbishop Scarisbrick who had been attached to St Gregory's during his younger days.



During October 1936 a brand new St Gregory's School was opened in Knapp Lane, to the designs of Healing and Overbury, and, today, it is one of the largest primary schools in the town.

I think that I may be correct in saying that after Richard Pate's Grammar School (1586), St Gregory's School is the oldest surviving educational establishment in Cheltenham.

Richard Barton (2020)

## **St Gregory's School, Cheltenham 1903-1916 – From the Pages of the Managers' Minutes Book**

by Brian Torode (1989)

Although founded in 1827 the first official managers' meeting was held in St Gregory's Priory on 11th November 1903. The Foundation (Church nominated) Managers of St Gregory's R.C. School, Cheltenham No.12 were the Very Reverend R.A. Wilkinson (Rector), Chairman; Rev D.P. O'Hear (Assistant Curate), Secretary; Mr William Welstead and Mr Denis Daley. To those are added two non-Foundation Managers, i.e. Local Education Authority appointed members – namely Alderman George Norman and Mr Hubert Waddy.

The Managers' Meetings were held in the Priory until 1912, after which they were sometimes held in the School or in the 'Teachers' House' – presumably St Gregory's Convent, opposite the School premises in St Paul's Street North. The Minutes of these meetings record in some detail the social as well as the academic background to the way of life experienced by the children.

One of the things immediately apparent is the constant change of staffing in days when pupil teachers were still acceptable and un-certificated teachers the norm. In fact during the period concerned there was only one certificated member on the staff until 1908. Teachers' salaries were negotiated with the Education Committee through than Managers and any increase requested by a teacher had to have the support of the Head Teacher. Increases recorded amount to £5 per annum for a certificated teacher and £2-10-0d for an unqualified assistant. In 1912 the Headmistress of the Senior School received £100. The Education Committee paid salaries for SECULAR teaching only. The proportion of time spent in teaching 'religion' had to be funded by the Managers. The Headmistress of the Senior School, Mother Gertrude, was also a 'serving' teacher – that is a class teacher. She made several requests for 'an assistant', as the running of the school and full time teaching was proving unsatisfactory and almost impossible. In fact, it was not until 1908 that such a request was granted and an 'all round improvement in the school' was reported at a subsequent Managers' meeting.



**VICTORIA LEAGUE ESSAY COMPETITIONS.**

PRIZE WINNERS AT ST. GREGORY'S ROMAN CATHOLIC SCHOOLS, CHELTENHAM, WITH REV. FATHER MACKINLAY AND MRS. MASON.

These children won the majority of the prizes in competitions open to Cheltenham Elementary Schools.

Father Boniface MacKinlay was Secretary/Correspondent to the Managers in 1907 and he, and later his successors, made repeated and strong references to the untidiness and uncleanliness of both the school and the children, although the discipline was good. One of the difficulties that had to be faced was that parents, as now, had a free choice as to which school they wished their child to be educated at. As some parents resented correction they moved their children to non-Catholic schools and so it became difficult to improve the image of St Gregory's. Plus ca Change ..... However, State schools were experiencing the same problem. Gloucester Road Council Schools' Headmistress voiced her feelings on the subject in 1909, even though in 1906, all head teachers had been instructed by the Education Committee not to admit children from other schools without reasonable excuse.





At St Gregory's repeated attention was drawn to the poor condition of the children and in 1908 an anonymous benefactor supplied shoes and stockings to all needy children. The poorer children received a ticket to the Christmas treats during the holidays as well. Eighty-seven pairs of boots were also given to those in need and those who did not receive them were supplied with 'Robin Tea'. In spite of obvious need, the Managers in 1908 refused to implement the Provision of Meals Act, considering that the children were adequately fed and that the adoption of the Act would tend to 'pauperize and demoralize both parents and children, and ENCOURAGE IMPROVIDENT HABITS!' By late 1908 at the annual medical inspection, the Doctor reported that the condition of the boys was satisfactory – a tidy respectable set of children; but of the girls – satisfactory with a few exceptions. Requests were made for a clothing grant from the Education Committee but it was stressed that all garments would have to be stamped so that they would not be pawned.

The numbers of children attending the two departments of the school remained fairly static during the period under consideration – about 146 in the senior department and 86 in the infant department, although at one period the former's numbers peaked at 186. During the summer term attendance often dropped with as many as forty children being absent 'hop-picking'. Regular inspections were undertaken by Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Schools and on most occasions good reports were received. Only in 1913 were they 'dissatisfied with the report'. Two years previously a very practical suggestion had been made, that girls should be taught to REPAIR as well as to MAKE garments! Each month the children received a half day's holiday as up to 1910 there were no half term breaks, but even when half term holidays were officially introduced the Catholic schools could not claim them as they took Holidays (Holy Days) of Obligation instead.

The condition of the buildings and the furniture within them were often criticised. The Local Authority was responsible for 'wear and tear replacements'. Repeated requests for new desks with backs and footrests were finally granted in 1909. After a cleaning, painting and repair blitz in 1907 'the building is now both internally and externally in an excellent state of repair and although the schools are not new, they are now as cheerful, clean and well ventilated as any in the town'. Two years later, the latest 'incandescent' gas lighting was installed. The caretaker's wages were a constant source of dispute between the Education Committee and the Managers. The rate was £24 per annum but St Gregory's claimed that its caretaker could not do the job for less than £30. It took two years of constant arguing before the Local Education Authority agreed to St Gregory's claim.



With thanks to David Burke whose sister Pat is in the photo (1930)

The children were encouraged to take part in all local celebrations such as Empire Day and Victoria League Pageants and Competitions. One boy who won a prize – a copy of *Westward Ho!* – had it sent back with a protest, by the Managers' Correspondent, Father MacKinlay, as being unsuitable. A substitute replacement was received! The attitude of the Managers over some issues seems rather puzzling and at times unsympathetic – as with the school meals plans mentioned earlier. In 1908, when an attempt to introduce Fire Drill into all schools was made, the Managers felt 'instruction is inapplicable to our school premises'. Later, when there was a possibility of buying land in Monson Avenue for a boys' school Father B.E.R. Thomas (then Rector) was openly relieved when the plans came to nought as he could 'see no need', despite the fact that the other Managers were most enthusiastic. However, in 1914, as the boys had to learn gardening, land was rented in Brunswick Street for a school garden. A local

gardener, Mr J. Barratt, was employed to do the teaching at a wage of 2-6d per week – holidays excepted.

Most of the teachers at the school were Sisters of St Paul of Charity from St Gregory's Convent but in the Minutes they are frequently referred to by their secular names. There was a succession of Infant School Headmistresses which included Teresa Lyons (c1904), Miss Gerrard (-1906), Margaret Sheridan (1906-1916) and Miss Fenton (1916-1921). Mother Gertrude (Sarah Malone) was Headmistress of the Senior Mixed School from November 1902 until June 1925 when she died suddenly in Paris returning from a pilgrimage to Lourdes. She was best remembered for the 'spectacular plays for the children' and was well known and much loved. The Managers expressed their profound regret at her death and 'their high appreciation of the excellent work done by her during her long term of Headmistress-ship'.



Former St Gregory's School building in St Paul Street North

This paper was produced in 1986 and the author wishes to record his thanks to Father Timothy Kelly (Rector) and Mr Brian Woodhouse (Head Teacher) for allowing him access to the archives.

(Published in Journal 9 of the Gloucestershire and North Avon Catholic History Society, Spring 1989)