

William Welstead K.S.G. (1847-1929) of Cheltenham

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When I first became interested in the history of Saint Gregory's Parish, Cheltenham, various older parishioners were keen to show me photographs of a man whom they affectionately knew as "Colonel" Welstead. From his photograph he appeared to be a distinguished looking man wearing dress uniform complete with ceremonial sword. This sword later came to light when rummaging through a cupboard in St Gregory's Priory.

Correspondence with Mr Alec Welstead, his grandson, and articles found in local newspapers have helped me to assemble this first vignette in what I hope will be a series of pen portraits of Cheltenham personalities. When the subject of this article was invested as a Knight of St Gregory in 1918 the ceremony was spoken of as "unique" in the Clifton diocese. The only other person upon whom the Knighthood of Saint Gregory had been conferred in this period was Mr Austin King of Bath. He died before his investiture could take place and the insignia of the Knighthood were placed on his coffin at the funeral. You may wonder what Welstead had achieved to receive such a singular honour. (1)

William Welstead was born in London on 23rd September 1847, son of William Welstead, "a gentleman". The younger William spent his youth in Brighton where he attended the Grammar School. Leaving school at fourteen, he joined the firm of Messrs. Hannington of Brighton where he was apprenticed to one of the leading drapery firms in the country. In 1864 he joined the 1st Sussex Artillery as a volunteer. At the age of twenty-two he moved to Cheltenham where he was employed as a junior assistant in the shop of Mr John Lance, draper of the High Street. His ability must have been quickly recognised by Mr Lance, who during the first year the young assistant was with him, made him a buyer. In the following year (1870) the linen department was added, and in connection with this Mr Welstead continued to act as buyer for fifty years.

An inscription in a devotional book presented by Father Wilkinson, the Rector of Saint Gregory's, to him in February 1894, indicates that Welstead was a convert to Catholicism. As the book was given to mark the recipient's silver jubilee within "the one true church", this would indicate that he was received into full communion with the Catholic Church in the same year that he moved to Cheltenham. However, as there is no record of this taking place at St Gregory's we can only presume that this took place prior to commencing employment with Mr Lance. In October 1875 a Miss Welstead made a donation of 10 shillings towards the extension of St Gregory's Church – had his sister become a Catholic as well?

On 26th December 1877 Welstead married Mary, the daughter of Sergeant Charles Hawkins of the Royal Engineers and sister of Captain Hawkins R.N.. Their marriage took place at the Catholic Church in Southsea, the town in which Mary was then living. Their first family home was 6, Great Western Road, Cheltenham, and here their two eldest children were born, namely Mary McGlinn in 1878 and William George Sampson in March 1882. Shortly after this

the family moved to 5 St. Philip's Street where Margaret Francis was born in June 1883 and George Aloysius in October 1887. Within a few years the family moved again, this time to 23 Clarence Square and young William was sent to Cheltenham College.

In later years the two daughters were to become religious sisters, May spent time in Spain before spending her final twenty five years at the Convent of the Assumption in Corso d'Italia, Rome whilst Maggie became a Dame Religieuse de La Croix and taught in their school at Boscombe.

In January 1889 William Welstead was made a partner by Mr John Lance with three others, shortly before Lance's own death. From 1896 until the end of 1928 Welstead was Managing Director of what was by then one of the largest business houses in the town. For the last ten years he was also Company Chairman. During this long period the company grew from moderate to large proportions. "Among the extensions of the firm was a very large furnishing department in connection with which Mr Welstead used to tell that one of the partners bet him twopence he would not sell a suite of furniture on the opening day. But he did – and got his twopence !" (From his Obituary: Cheltenham Echo 23-11-1929).

Welstead was always an advocate of reasonable hours of work in shops, and as head of one of the chief businesses in the town he used his powerful influence for all it was worth to that end. In an article published by the Echo to mark his retirement, Welstead said, "When I first came here we closed at 5 o'clock on Saturdays and 7 o'clock on other days for four months of the year, 7:30 for 4 months and 8 o'clock on other days for four months of the year. Now we close at one o'clock on one day in the week and all the other days at 6 o'clock. I got the other houses into line with us at one time to close at 6 o'clock but some are now closing one day at one o'clock, two nights at six, Thursdays and Fridays at seven and Saturdays at 8:30. Even that, however, is very different from old times when plenty of shops were open on Saturday nights till twelve and even after the doors were shut, somebody would be rattling them wanting to get in."

It is not easy to establish when the Welstead's first became actively involved in Saint Gregory's parish. Clearly he was a great friend of the Rector, Father Robert Aloysius Wilkinson, who served Cheltenham from 1866 until 1905. In 1889 Welstead was Secretary of a fund to mark the Rector's priestly silver jubilee and two years later he was Secretary of another appeal to mark his silver jubilee of ministry in Cheltenham. Again in 1905 we find William Welstead as treasurer and secretary of another fund which had been launched to mark Father Wilkinson's retirement. On that occasion Welstead was thanked by his old friend for his long friendship and devotion which is "well-nigh co-extensive with my life in Cheltenham for your great labours in many testimonials which, I am bound to think, emanated in a great measure from your brain". Welstead was described in the Pope's brief, read at his investiture, as a staunch upholder of the Catholic faith "sparing no pains and endeavour that Christ's true religion, may gain greater increase within the diocese and that to both priests and religious you are in any of their difficulties a protection and a help".

Father Wilkinson's friendship with Welstead is manifested in the following note penned in May 1892. "My dear Mr & Mrs Welstead, I thought of you and said Mass for you at Lourdes. Please accept this cross and rosary of mother of pearl and silver, blessed by the Missionary Fathers of Lourdes – laden with indulgences – the cross blessed for the hour of death and also with the indulgence of the stations of the Cross, on condition that 14 paters, aves and glorias be recited with 5 paters, aves and glorias for the Holy Father, the Pope, – accept and retain these in token of my gratitude and affectionately yours, Robert Aloysius Wilkinson".

Certainly Welstead's commitment to St Gregory's was total. He was a school manager, a founder of the Gloucestershire Catenian Association and President of St Gregory's Athletic and Football Club. He also became a trustee of the national Catholic Benefit and Thrift Society. In fact he was described as working with untiring zeal, participating in all St Gregory's undertakings and interesting himself in old and young alike. In 1907 he was treasurer of the Church's Golden Jubilee Restoration Appeal.

Although William Welstead was a committed Catholic his influence extended into public service, so much so that the Gloucester Journal spoke of his knighthood as "a matter upon which others besides his co-religionists can heartily congratulate the recipient". Dr Burton, the Bishop of Clifton, emphasised that his investiture was not just because of his work within the Church but in recognition of his service to the community at large.

Mr Welstead was once described as "one of the busiest men in town". His grandson recalls a cartoon in the form of a drawing of 27 chairs, stacked on each other in a pile with his grandfather sat on top. It is understood that this represented a time when he was chairman of that number of organisations. He was a founder member of the Chamber of Commerce and in 1913 he was elected Chairman. When in 1927 he celebrated his eightieth birthday he was invested with a new chain of office and presented with a wallet with his initials in gold and a nice "lining" of notes. After retiring as Chairman he later became President, after the death of Sir James Agg- Gardener. Welstead was also associated with the Trader's Association and he was active in raising funds for prisoners of war in connection with both of these organisations.

In 1918 the Gloucester Journal bemoaned the fact that Welstead had declined nomination for the Town Council. Apparently he had been approached repeatedly but it was thought that he was influenced by an aversion to "mix in party strife". However, in 1920 he was duly elected to the Council as an independent candidate having stood both against a Liberal and also a candidate from his own Conservative Party. He was further elected in 1926 and again in 1929. His obituary writer spoke of him in the following way: "He was not a very frequent speaker either at the meetings of the Town Council or the Education Committee but his opinions were held in high respect, and the more so as they always seemed to be prompted by a spirit of reasonableness and earnestness for public good".

Other posts held included President of the Rotary Club, Vice-Chairman of the Hospital Board, Vice-President of the United Services Club, Chairman of British Legion, Chairman of the Christmas Relief Fund, Vice-Chairman of the Advisory Committee of the Employment Exchange, Vice-President of the District Council of the League of Nations as well as being a committee member of the Belgian Relief Committee and the War-time Appeal Tribunal.

His wife, Mary, was buried on the 16th November 1915 and her sister took charge of domestic affairs until she herself died. Both of his sons also died during his lifetime. His elder son, William Gregory, died in 1924 at Greenhithe leaving a widow and three children. In his last years Welstead retired to the Pyatts Hotel in Saint George's Road. Charles Pyatt (1868-1915) had been a member of St Gregory's congregation. Alec Welstead recalls staying at the hotel as a boy where he was fascinated by his grandfather's moustache cup, and Egg-Nog before breakfast.



William Welstead

His investiture as a Knight of Saint Gregory must have been one of the most memorable days of his long life. On the morning of Tuesday 1st January 1918 Bishop Burton celebrated Pontifical Low Mass at Saint Gregory's with a large congregation. During the celebration the new Knight was conducted by a priest from his seat in the nave to the prie-dieu at the sanctuary step which was draped in deep red. There he remained kneeling throughout the address by the Bishop and the reading of the Pope's brief which authorised him to don the uniform of the Order. The Bishop then pinned on his left breast a gold octagonal cross with the image of Saint Gregory in the Centre and a red background, and hanging on a red silk ribbon bordered with yellow. After kissing the Episcopal ring he was conducted back to his seat in the nave. The Mass continued and the choir sang "God bless our Pope" during the Offertory.

The investiture received coverage in both the Cheltenham and Gloucester newspapers and even on the 4th September 1920 the "Cheltenham Chronicle and Graphic" included a photograph of him in full uniform on the occasion of the visit of Cardinal Gasquet to Cheltenham.

Welstead's death at the age of 82 years, took place less than a year after his retirement from business. During the Armistice Day celebrations at the War Memorial on 11th November he caught a cold as a result of the weather being "very boisterous and wet" and this was exacerbated in the evening when he walked home in the rain after presenting the prizes at a whist drive. He quickly became unwell and was later found lying on the floor having fallen and he was suffering from facial bruising. He spent a brief period in a nursing home before passing quietly away on the evening of Friday 22nd November 1929.

"The Cheltenham Echo" for the following day contained a full account of his life and "The Cheltenham Chronicle and Graphic" carried a page of nine photographs of the funeral service which took place on Wednesday 27th. This was attended by a great gathering "representative of practically all the public bodies of the town testifying to the respect, esteem and love felt for the deceased councillor". Pictures included the Mayoral procession entering the Church, the coffin emerging after the Requiem Mass covered with a purple pall on which rested the deceased's official cap and sword of his order. He was laid to rest at Cheltenham Cemetery in what is now an unmarked grave next to that of his old friend, Father Wilkinson. His wife and Anne Rollings (buried 26-4-1906) lie in the grave with him. In his will he bequeathed £200 to the Rector of Saint Gregory's for the re-decoration of the Lady Chapel or such other purposes as the Rector may think fit, and to his "dear friend" Mary Daley, the water stoop formerly belonging to Abbot O'Gorman.

Sources

The Gloucestershire Echo

The Gloucestershire Journal (Langston's typescript)

Cheltenham Chronicle and Graphic

Correspondence with Mr Alec Welstead of Crieff, Perthshire

Archives of St Gregory's deposited at Douai Abbey and the Gloucester Record Office

Footnote

(1) William Leigh of Woodchester had been invested as a Knight of St Gregory, by Pope Pius IX, sometime before his death in 1873.

Richard Barton (1992)

Gael Welstead

Whilst researching my grandfather (Grumps) and his relationship with medicine I came across your article on William Welstead. William's grandson in the article, Alec Welstead, is my Grumps!

'Mr Welstead was once described as "one of the busiest men in town". His grandson recalls a cartoon in the form of a drawing of 27 chairs, stacked on each other in a pile with his grandfather sat on top. It is understood that this represented a time when he was chairman of that number of organisations'

It turns out my dad Fenning, Alec's eldest son, has a copy of the photography that created your curiosity.

Fenning said, 'I can remember him being referred to as WW and being chairman of Shirers & Lancers the outfitters. On one occasion Grumps (Alec) took me to the store and we found in the tailoring department an elderly tailor with measuring tape sling over his shoulders – he had been there since the first war and remembered WW. He greeted Grumps as Master Alec!'