



1. A Catholic Church for Clapham

The Catholic Church in late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century England was almost invisible. Neither England nor Scotland possessed a full Catholic episcopate.

They were ruled by a number of vicars apostolic, ordained as bishops but with few of the rights and privileges of diocesan bishops, and whose territory was extensive. Although the Catholic population of England had swollen from an estimated 80,000 in 1767 to almost ten times that by 1851, the vicars apostolic kept a low profile. Thomas Griffith, vicar apostolic of the London area from 1836 to 1847 was probably typical in his unwillingness to disturb the existing order of things. Although religious communities were beginning to arrive in England from the European mainland, he allowed none of them to open a public church. His immediate successor, Thomas Walsh, died after just a year in office and was succeeded by the energetic Nicholas Wiseman. Within a year of Wiseman's appointment, the hierarchy was restored and he was raised to the dignity of Cardinal Archbishop of Westminster, which dignity he retained until his death in 1865.

A new injection of life into the English Catholic Church came from a number of sources. Many Catholics fleeing the religious persecution of the *Reign of Terror* that followed the French Revolution in 1789 sought and found refuge in England. They were followed in the first part of the nineteenth century by refugees from revolutions elsewhere in Europe. That trickle became a tidal wave with the influx of refugees from the Irish Famine from 1845 onwards. On Wiseman's accession, there were just forty-two churches served by eighty-four priests in greater London: twenty years later, there were ninety-seven churches and 246 priests (an increase of more than 225 per cent and almost 300 per cent respectively). Wiseman positively encouraged male and female religious to come to his diocese, so that by 1889, there were fifty-three convents of women and twenty-four houses of religious men.



Clapham in the Nineteenth Century
was a semi-rural place

There was another factor that could scarcely have been predicted. A group of learned Anglican clergymen, for the most part based in the University of Oxford, had begun to publish a series of ninety articles between 1833 and 1841, entitled *Tracts for the Times*. The purpose of the tracts was to restate the Catholic claims of the Anglican Church and to renew a deeper sacramental sense in the life and practice of Anglicanism. Its unforeseen result was a flow of Anglicans, lay and cleric, who, despairing of a thorough-going Catholic reform in their own church, sought to return to Rome.

Factors such as these were among the signs that the Roman Catholic Church in England in the 1850s was undergoing what Blessed John Henry Newman, who has become identified with the Oxford Movement, would call “the second spring”.

Clapham

In the late eighteenth century, Clapham was a quiet semi-rural village on the edge of the city. Lavender Hill, not so very far away, acquired its name from the cultivation of fresh lavender as an ingredient for perfume. Around the Common, the homes of the comfortable middle classes were beginning to spring up. One particular group of Clapham residents were distinguished by their piety and the high moral line they took on issues such as slavery, then an economically significant element in British world trade. The “Clapham Saints”, or “Clapham Sect”, as they were popularly known, were a group of Evangelical Christians who worshipped in Holy Trinity Church on the Common. Their founder, Thomas Venn (after whom Venn Street, near St Mary’s, is named) was a curate there and his son, John, later became its rector. The group included Zachary McAuley, father of (Lord) Thomas Babbington McAuley, the writer and historian, Lord Teignmouth, former governor general of India and first president of the British and Foreign Bible Society, and William Wilberforce, leader of the campaign for the abolition of slavery.

It has been estimated that at this time there were no more than thirty or forty Catholics in the Clapham area, and they had to travel some distance to attend religious services. The first time Mass was celebrated in Clapham since the Reformation was probably at Christmas 1847, for a group of French Sisters, the Daughters of Mary, who had come to live in Clapham Old Town where they established a residence for unemployed servant girls. The celebrant was their chaplain, Fr Thomas Sheehan.

Within a few months, two members of a small religious congregation running mission stations in more remote parts of England were offered the chaplaincy. Useful as their work of providing regular pastoral care for the scattered Catholics of Hanley Castle, Rothermere, Lantharne and Great Marlow was, it was a dead

end for the future of their congregation unless they could get established in some larger centre of Catholic population. Their superior, Frederick de Held, had visited London in April 1848. A Catholic bookseller from Clapham, called John Philp, told him that a good property would shortly be coming on the market in Clapham. De Held met Bishop Wiseman, the pro-vicar apostolic for the London region, and outlined to him his hopes for moving his brethren to London. Wiseman was enthusiastic and immediately offered him the chaplaincy to the Daughters of Mary, which would provide living accommodation for two priests. With his *confrère*, Louis de Buggenoms, de Held took up residence in St Anne's House, Clapham Old Town, in June 1848. The Redemptorists had arrived.

In search of a home

The cramped accommodation in the Sisters' house was not suitable for a religious community, especially for one that was determined to add a church, no matter how small, to the basic living accommodation. Various properties were looked at, but the most attractive one seemed to be the former home of Lord Teignmouth, now divided into two residences and with a large garden. It had, besides, a large room that could serve as a chapel until it was feasible to build a church. After Teignmouth's death, the house had been purchased by Sir William Pearson, a physician. The only problem was the price. The asking price was £4,000, with £1,000 to be paid directly, and the remainder as a mortgage over seven years. It would strain the resources of a relatively poor community, but de Held took the risk and received the keys on 31 July 1848, just in time to allow the room designated as a chapel to be set up for the first Mass on the feast of St Alphonsus Liguori, founder of the Redemptorists, on 2 August. In the event, the morning Mass was celebrated by Mgr George Talbot, a well-known English convert priest who served as chamberlain to Pope Pius IX, while Wiseman officiated and preached at vespers in the evening.

For a contributor to the Catholic *Rambler* magazine (1849), there was something of a sense of exultation as he conjured up every aspect of Catholic practice most anathema to Evangelicals:

The room in Lord Teignmouth's house at Clapham (where the Bible Society was first planned) is now a Catholic chapel. Where Wilberforce and Thornton, Zachary McAuley and Greville Sharpe gossiped, dined, devised schemes for the abolition of slavery, articles for the *Christian Observer* and machinery for scattering printed Bibles all over the world – there now kneels a cowled monk, adoring the Blessed Sacrament of the altar, invoking Mary's intercession and praying for the souls in purgatory – such are the mutations in human things.



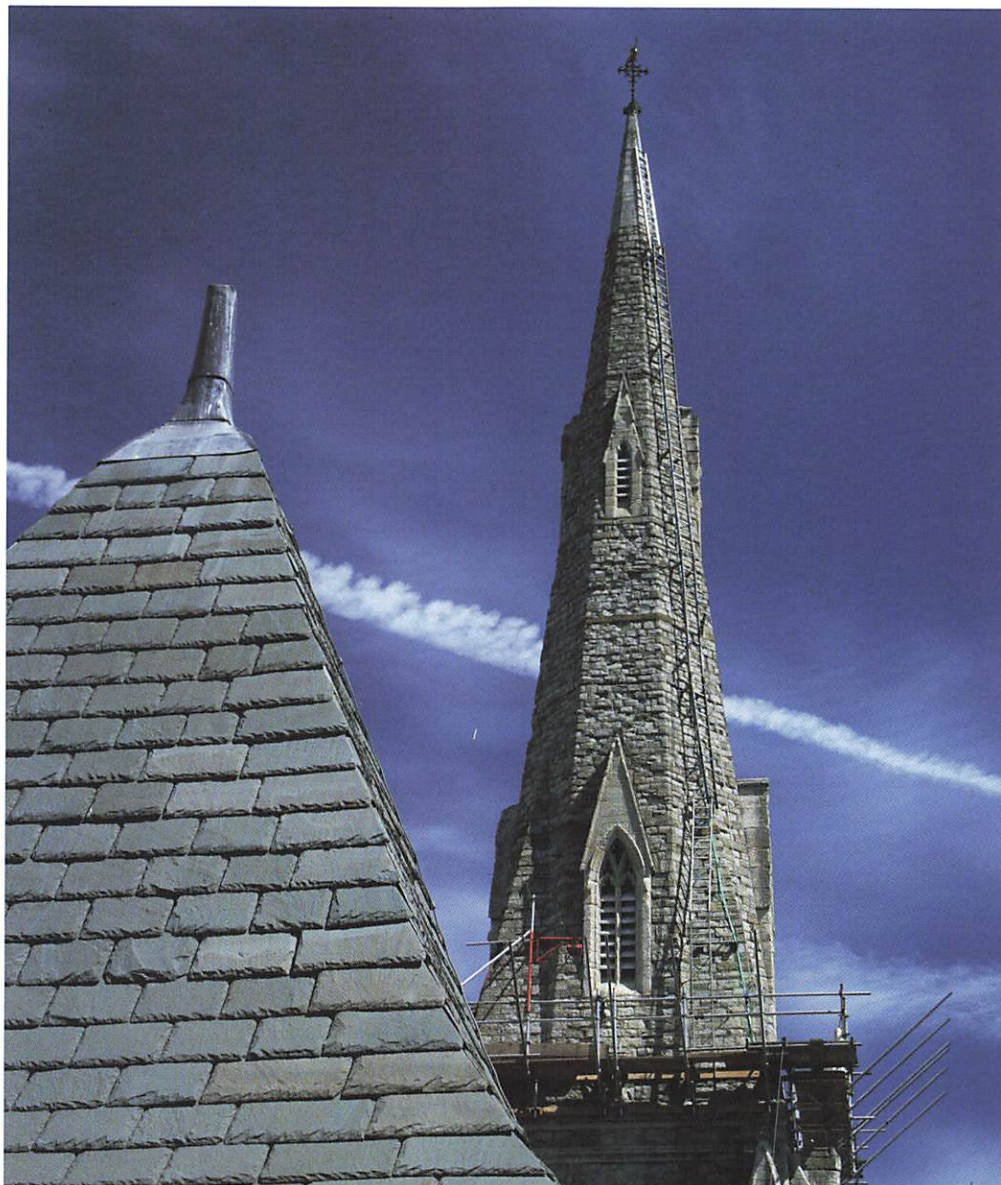
Nicholas Cardinal Wiseman,
Archbishop of Westminster

The available accommodation in the house was soon filled with Redemptorists. The temporary chapel could accommodate 200 people. On Sundays and holydays, Mass was celebrated at 7, 9 and 11 am, with an evening service at 7 pm and devotions for children at 4 pm. Since most of the members of the community were still struggling with English, there was no question of preaching parish missions, but a number of retreats to clergy and Sisters were given. In December 1848, the first Redemptorist mission in England was preached at St George's, Southwark.

The Clapham community at the end of 1848 consisted of Fathers de Held (Austrian), Patrack (Austrian), de Buggenoms (Belgian), Theunis (Belgian), Petcherine (Russian), Hecker (American), three professed Brothers and a Brother novice. There was a total of twenty-two Redemptorists in England between Clapham and the small mission stations. In addition to their own chapel, they were asked to take charge of the German Chapel near Blackfriars Bridge that had been designated as a centre for German-speaking Catholics in London. This was not an unreasonable request, given that several of the priests in the community were either native German speakers or native speakers of Flemish or Dutch, who would have been reasonably at ease with German. The chapel also attracted the Irish poor fleeing from the famine that had ravaged their country for the previous three years. There was an early morning Low Mass with a sung High Mass and sermon in German later in the morning. In the afternoon, there was a confraternity service.

The numbers of Irish flocking to Clapham made a larger church imperative. A year to the day after the first public Mass, the foundation stone of the new church was laid. It was calculated that there were about 212 Catholics in Clapham itself, with more than 150 scattered in Stockwell, Brixton and Tooting, who were ministered to by the Redemptorists. The architect chosen for the building was a young Catholic called William Wardell, a disciple of Augustus Welby Pugin, the apostle of the Gothic Revival. The sum of £7,000 was agreed with the builder as the initial estimate, but, inevitably, the price soared. Some money came in through collections, but the greatest help came from two benefactors, Mrs Petre, a widowed member of an old recusant family who eventually joined the Sisters of Notre Dame, and Fr Edward Douglas, a Scotsman recently professed as a Redemptorist, who undertook to defray the entire cost from his not inconsiderable personal fortune. We will learn more about the personalities of both Wardell and Douglas in due time.

Redemptorist superiors meeting in Bischensberg in Alsace in 1850 were determined to restructure the somewhat ramshackle and over-extended presence of their Congregation in England. All the small mission stations, including the German



Chapel, were to be abandoned, and for the future, only foundations that offered the possibility of living the traditional way of life dictated by the Redemptorist Rule and of engaging in the Congregation's chosen apostolate of parish missions were to be accepted. St Mary's, Clapham was designated as such a house, with Fr de Held as its canonical superior (rector) and with a regular community assigned to it.

Opening the Church

Between the laying of the church's foundation stone in 1849 and its official opening in May 1851, a momentous change had taken place in the fortunes of the English Catholic Church. By a papal bull, *Universalis Ecclesiae*, issued in September, 1850, Pope Pius IX restored the Catholic hierarchy to England, with one metropolitan archbishop in Westminster and twelve suffragan bishops. The following day, Nicholas Wiseman was appointed archbishop of Westminster and elevated to the rank of cardinal. A week later, he addressed his first pastoral letter to the Catholics of England, titling it *From out the Flaminian Gate*, from the name of the city gate in Rome that opened on to the Via Flaminia leading northwards.

Wiseman might have been forgiven a certain triumphalism in celebrating the return of the English episcopate but many readers, especially Anglicans, found the tone of his letter bombastic. Among them was the prime minister, Lord John Russell, who described the restoration of the hierarchy as an act of "papal aggression" and introduced an *Ecclesiastical Titles Bill*, forbidding the use of any of the traditional sees as part of an episcopal title by another church. It is even reported that Queen Victoria asked in exasperation: "Am I Queen of England or am I not?"

In Wiseman's defence, it might be remembered that he was a Spanish-born child of Irish parents who had spent most of his life on the European mainland, and he probably underestimated the effect of the flamboyant language of his pastoral letter. His subsequent *Appeal to the People of England on the Catholic Hierarchy* was more conciliatory in tone. Russell had raised the spectre of the Catholic bishops demanding the restoration of churches and other property they had lost during the Reformation. Wiseman insisted this was not the case. The allegation that his title as Archbishop of Westminster implied a claim on the Abbey was mistaken:

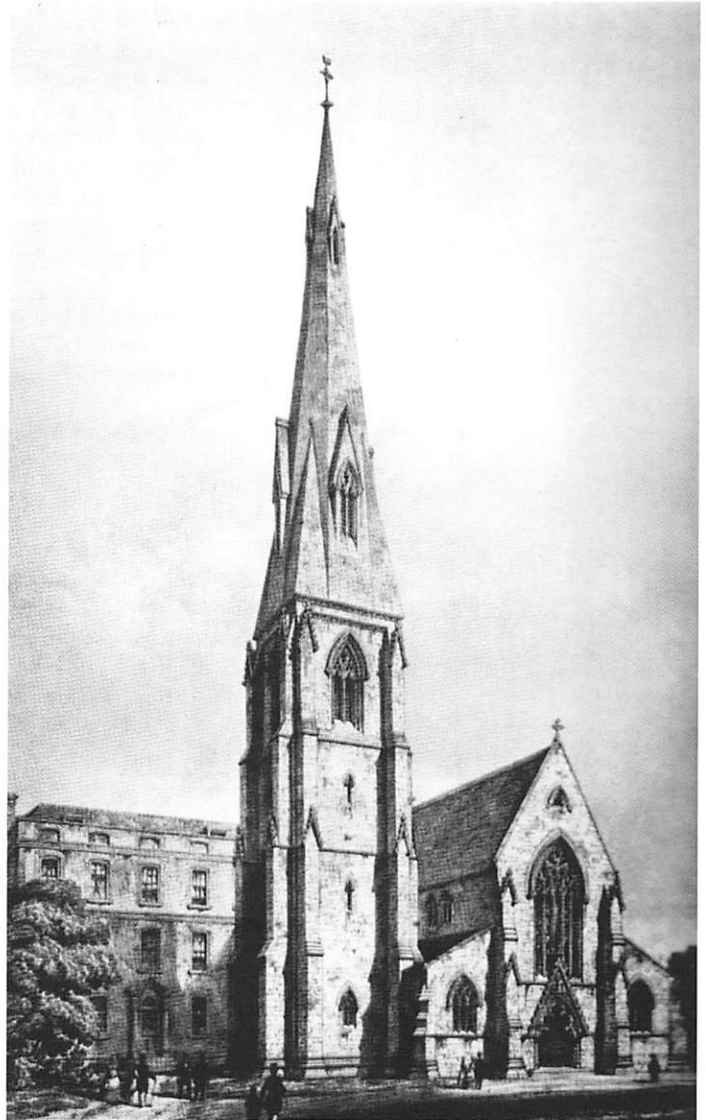
Close under the Abbey of Westminster there lie concealed labyrinths of lanes and courts, and alleys and slums, nests of ignorance, vice, depravity and crime, as well as squalor, wretchedness, and disease; whose atmosphere is typhus, whose ventilation is cholera; in which swarms a huge and almost countless population

... This is the part of Westminster which alone I covet, and which I shall be glad to visit, as a blessed pasture in which sheep of Holy Church are to be tended, in which a Bishop's godly work has to be done, of consoling; converting and preserving.

It was against this uneasy background that the solemn opening of St Mary's was set for 14 May 1851. Sensing that there might be trouble, de Held took the precaution of blessing the church at 5.30 in the morning, with only the Redemptorist community taking part. The liturgical procession around the outside of the building while chanting psalms and sprinkling holy water was done as unobtrusively as possible. At 10.30, the cardinal appeared. According to the account of the event in the house chronicles:

A large crowd which was assembled in the street, saluted his Eminence with marks of ill-will, for the minds of the people at this time were excited by what they called 'the papal aggression' in establishing the Catholic hierarchy in England but the faithful Catholic Irish people greeted his Eminence with loud and enthusiastic cheers.

Twenty Redemptorists, sixty visiting priests and four bishops attended the Mass and remained for dinner. There was another hostile demonstration as they went from the church to lunch, but the police dispersed the demonstrators. The day concluded with the celebration of solemn vespers at 5 pm.



Oldest Picture of St Mary's before the transept and present monastery were built

Opposition to the Redemptorists was not merely confined to the handful of demonstrators at the church's opening. A number of publications warned the unsuspecting of the errors of the Redemptorists. One of them, *Romanism in England Exposed: The Redemptorist Fathers of St Mary's Convent, Park Road, Clapham* (1851) took the form of a series of letters by Charles Hastings Collette, and attacked the Redemptorists on many grounds, from their promotion of devotion to the scapulars to alleged errors in the theology of St Alphonsus. A more concerted attack on Alphonsus's moral theology came in R.P. Blakney's *St Alphonsus Liguori* (1852), a collection of extracts from his moral theology, usually taken out of context.

The church was consecrated according to the solemn rite in the *Roman Ritual* on 15 October the following year, as Fr Douglas had cleared the entire debt: a church could not be consecrated until it was debt-free.

From the outset, the church was distinguished by the quality and dignity of its liturgical celebrations. A full High Mass was celebrated every Sunday, while the liturgy of major seasons like Holy Week and Christmas was carried out with as much splendour as was possible. The continental Redemptorists were accustomed to well-run public celebrations, while the convert members of the community had brought with them their Tractarian reverence for the liturgy of the Church. There was also a round of more popular devotions that appealed to the majority of the parishioners – adoration of the Blessed Sacrament on an altar decorated with flowers and candles, recitation of the rosary, devotion to Mary during the month of May, and to the Sacred Heart the following month. Many of these devotions, although common in Continental Catholicism, were largely unknown to the more staid tastes of English Catholicism of the period.

Bells and a Lawsuit

William Wardell's plan for the church included a 170-foot spire housing a complete peal of bells. It was the first, and remains the only, Catholic church in London with a full peal. The bells were hung and the spire was completed in September 1851, when Fr de Buggenoms and Brother Felician climbed to the top to set the weather vane in place. Neither architect nor community had reckoned with local opposition to the bell-ringing. Even when the only bell rung was a small one attached to the roof of the monastery to call the community or announce the Angelus, Mr Soltau, the tenant of the adjoining house, made his displeasure known.

With a full set of bells now ringing the changes, he became more irritated, and conveyed his displeasure in a letter to Fr de Held. De Held ignored the letter, but the house chronicler was forced to acknowledge that "this time, he had more show of reason on his side, as the bells were rung very frequently and often inharmoniously both by the Brothers and by unpractised bell-ringers."

Soltau brought a legal action against de Held. After an absence of two hours, the jury found him guilty and fined him forty shillings. A period of silence ensued before moderate ringing of the bells for services was attempted. Soltau took another case, and got an order totally silencing the bells. It would be more than thirteen years, when he was dead and the community had acquired his part of the house, that ringing resumed, on Christmas Day 1864. The chronicler observes, somewhat philosophically, that maybe it was a good idea to allow the bells a period of silence as too much enthusiastic ringing of them "might have damaged the tower".

The bells are but one instance of a certain Catholic triumphalism in St Mary's. Commenting on the Good Friday liturgy in 1857, the chronicler records:

Remarkable coincidence! In the procession, the Blessed Sacrament was carried by a converted minister (Fr Coffin), the canopy was supported by four others (Frs Robinson, Livius, Howell and Watson). The sermon was preached by a convert (Fr Bridgett) and the organist and his assistant were all converts.

The signs seemed to be showing that Catholicism's "second spring" might be on its way to high summer.

