

The Catholic Church and the Irish in London from 1666

After the fire of London 1666 people began to move outwards and the area between Westminster and the City was being built up to a great extent. There was a rule about streets being 6 foot wide. From William III's reign, Catholics were not allowed to hold religious houses within 10 miles of London. After the Jacobite Rebellion Catholics were not allowed to live in the City of London from 1722. The gates of London were demolished in 1761. The River Fleet was part covered in the middle of the century because it became a cesspool. It runs down where the Holborn Viaduct is now. At the beginning of the century the streets were dark after sunset except for the lamps of the watchmen.

In 1718 citizens were required to provide lights outside houses in London at their own expense. In 1736 oil lamps were provided from 6–11 p.m. for houses at prices from 7/- to 40/- a year depending on the wealth of the householder. Oil lamps continued in use until 1807 when gas was introduced. The population of London was about 700,000 in 1750 and 1,000,000 in 1800. There was an estimated 30,000 Catholics in 1770 attended by about 30 priests. There were only 400 priests in England. In St. Giles and Holborn wards there were 14,000 Catholic households in 1780. To give some idea of the percentage of the Irish population:- in the Westminster dispensary out of 3236 patients 10% of the men were Irish and 7.4% of the women. The Irish were mainly poor. As education in Ireland was only open to Protestants, Catholics were either taught in Hedge schools or went over to the Continent for education. This had one salutary effect—it meant that the Irish Language was still dominant in Ireland. When the National schools were introduced to Catholics in 1831, English was taught to the exclusion of Irish. That was why Patrick Pearse called the National school system—the “Murder Machine”.

The Irish coming to London in the 1800's spoke Irish and tended to live together in certain areas even up to the time of the Famine. Confirmation of this is given in letters of a Fr. Kelly to Cardinal Wiseman in 1853—one third of the Irish in the Commercial Rd. parish spoke Irish as their normal language. In Wapping a large body of Irish could not speak English and 80% of the confessions heard by Fr. Toomey were in Irish and he requested another Irish -speaking priest from Cardinal Wiseman.

Another factor in the 18th century, Mass was not attended regularly by the Irish because of the Penal laws, and when they came to London they had to be introduced to the Mass again. It is difficult to pinpoint individual Irish Catholics at the time because they were not prominent in English life. Numerous Irish people are mentioned in the history of the time but in most cases it is hard to ascertain the Catholics amongst them.

It is relatively easy to discover where the Irish lived. One of the first “rookeries” (so called) mentioned was Clare Market, between Lincoln's Inn Fields and the Strand. It was said that the Irish lived in this dreary region carrying with them the virtues and vices of their native land and never becoming absorbed in the nation to which for years they are attached. “Swindlers, thieves and tramps surround them but do not affect them”. Clement's Lane, frequented by Samuel Johnson was very Irish. It is known that some of them went to Mass in the Sardinian Embassy, Duke St., and Bishop Challenor often celebrated Benediction in the area. More about this later on.

The main “rookery” called Little Ireland was in the St. Giles area. The houses occupied were built about 1672. Robbers and makers of base coin used to live in this area. Water colour drawings of this “Rookery” are in the British Museum and the Heal Collection in the Holborn public library—by J.W. Archer. The High Constable of Holborn, a Mr. Welch, in 1761 made survey of the district for Henry Fielding, who founded the Bow Street Runners, a precursor of the police. Lodgers could be obtained for 2d a night and gin at a penny a quart. In 1750 a quarter of the houses were gin shops.

There were two Irish schools in George St. at the beginning of the 1800's. The Seven Dials area between Covent Garden and Shaftesbury Av., was built up by a Mr. Neale in 1694 and contained a large

number of Irish. It is said that they nailed horseshoes over their doors. Catholic booksellers and Jews lived in Monmouth St.

Another Irish quarter in Holborn was Saffron Hill near the Fleet north of Ely Place, and this is mentioned by Charles Dickens in "Oliver Twist" where Fagan lived. The dock area attracted a lot of Irish in Whitechapel and Wapping. They were coal heavers, ballast getters and dockers. Women were fruit and flower sellers.

To the south a number of Irish lived in the Borough and were very poor. Bermondsey became an Irish district, where they worked in tanneries and skinning and were sedan- chair carriers. A number of notable Irish not necessarily Catholic lived in Gt. Queen St. which ran between Drury Lane and Lincolns Inn Fields.

THE CATHOLIC HEIRARCHY:-

BISHOPS OF ENGLAND

RICHARD SMITH; 1625-1629 Died 1655 aged 88 in exile, forced out of office by gentry, had to take refuge in the French Embassy.

A Chapter functioned between 1627 and 1685 to make up for lack of bishop. Among its members were:- John Sergeant who was secretary of the Chapter, was forced to resign in 1667 and later became a paid Government informer in 1679.

George Leyburn, who accounted well at the Irish Catholic Confederacy in 1647 and was president of Douai College 1652--1664

His nephew John Leyburn became secretary of the Chapter.
made bishop in 1685 by Rome. He died in 1702 aged 83.

1687 Bonaventure Gifford, of Chillington Gifford family who were landowners. He was chaplain to King James II, was imprisoned a while in Newgate prison. He attended the Earl of Derwentwater before his execution in the Tower of London in 1716. The Earl had taken part in the Jacobite rebellion of 1715. From 1703--1734:- Bonaventure Gifford resided in Hammersmith Convent. Became old and feeble and died aged 92.

BISHOPS OF LONDON:

1721--1758:- Benjamin Petre, Of Landowning family in Ingatestone, Essex. He had no Latin or Theology. The family money went into the Petre fund. He died aged 81.

1741--1781:- Richard Challoner, a convert whose father was a dissenter at Lewes but became a Catholic because he worked for a Catholic family. Was a very good bishop, regulated baptisms and marriages, wrote a number of holy books, heard a lot of confessions. He lived at 4 Castle St. (Now Furnival St. Holborn). He attended to the Irish, arranged chapels at Wapping, Bermondsey in 1773 and Southwark. He regulated church collections with the exceptions of Warwick St. (which was gentry run) and St. Patricks, Soho. He witnessed the passing of the Relief Act of 1778 which gave considerable relief to Catholics before the Gordon Riots 1780.

1759--1790:- James Talbot, of gentry stock, brother of the Earl of Shrewsbury, both of whom were trustees of the Warwick St. church.

1790--1812:- John Douglass, connected with gentry.

1803--1827:- William Poynter, compromised with gentry and government.

1823--1836:- James Yorke Branston. Not fond of Jesuits, kept them out of London.

1833--1847:- Thomas Griffiths. He stated that 3/4 of Catholics in England were Irish.

1847--1865:- Nicholas Wiseman, who saw the restoration of the Catholic Heirarchy and was made Cardinal.

One bishop worth mentioning in relation to the Irish was John Milner who lived from 1752--1826 who was born in London, son of a Yorkshire tailor, and served as a priest in London before he was

made bishop in the Midland region in 1801. He was a friend of the Irish and very much for a democratic system not dominated by the gentry. He fought the government without compromising.

Catholics in England were subject to Penal Laws up to 1778. Mass was said in foreign embassies but it was made difficult for English Catholics attending. Recusants had to pay large sums of money and it became so difficult for the landed gentry after the 1722 act that many left the Church in this century, after the families remaining loyal Catholics since the Reformation. Informers could get £100 to betray a priest and priests could be tried for treason. The last official martyr in England for the faith was St. Oliver Plunket in 1681 but as late as 1767 Father John Baptist Maloney was sentenced to life imprisonment in exile abroad.

Ignoring the embassies, Father John Gother opened the first chapel in the city of London in Lime St. in 1686. This was closed in 1688 at the flight of King James II. The mission moved to Grub St. (now Milton St.) Moorfields, north of the wall of London. The parish was recognised in 1710. A masshouse in an ale house was raided in Shoreditch in 1735. In 1739, there was a chapel in Grub St., Butlers Alley and the priest was a Father James Barnard. In 1744 the priest was Father Richard Dillon who was arrested 5 times and tried for priesthood, the last time was with Bishop James Talbot in 1771.

Chapels were known as "Penny hotels". A man at the door smoking a pipe looked through a grill and a payment of a penny was required to get in. Chapels had schools in St. Charles Square, Hoxton and White St. Moorfields. The school in White St. was used as a chapel from 1770. In the Gordon Riots of 1780 the chapel was burnt out and the priest Father Dillon was beaten up and died soon after from the effects. The Catholics were compensated for the damage, the chapel in White St. was rebuilt and was used until 1820. Father Hunt and Bishop Poynter founded a new church at the east side of Finsbury Circus. This building was used as a pro-cathedral from 1843 to 1869 when Our Lady of Victories, Kensington became the pro-cathedral. Bishop Challenor often said Masses in houses in poor districts. The Bishop lived at that time at no. 4 Castle St (now Farnival St.) very near Holborn Station.

Bishop Challenor had many associations with the Sardinian Embassy chapel in Duke St. Holborn. Franciscans used house in Lincoln's Inn Fields in the reign of James II. This was repressed and in 1720 the Sardinian Embassy took over the house in Duke St., and had chapel. Government spies made it impossible to have sermons in English, so sermons were often given in public houses nearby. Mass was also celebrated in pubs such as "The Hand and Pen" in Little Queen St., the "Royal Ann", "The Ship", and the "Freemasons Arms". A number of the publicans were Catholic or friendly.

Guards often brawny Irishmen were posted at the doors with a pot of beer to confuse informers. One infamous informer was William Payne, who secured the conviction of Father Maloney in Southwark. Protestant attorneys very often defended Catholics brought to court. One firm defended more than 20 priests free of charge. When the chapel in Duke St. was burned in the Gordon Riots of 1780, the Blessed Sacrament was carried to the "Ship Inn", which is still extant. The chapel in Duke was rebuilt and served the Irish in Clare Market and also the better-off in Gt. Queen St. Among the parishers was Dr. Thomas Arne who composed "Rule Britannia" and Samuel Webbe an organist. This chapel was replaced later by St. Anselm and Cecilia in Kingsway.

Bishop Challenor, aware of the Irish, opened three missions:- Wapping, Bermondsey and Southwark. There was also a chapel at Spitalfields serving the Irish, which met with stiff opposition in East London especially from Protestant missionaries. In 1736 anti-Irish riots broke out in Spitalfields involving Irish weavers and builders on St. Leonard's church who worked for lower wages. In 1768 a bloody battle was fought between Irish coalheavers and English sailors at Wapping. Only the Irish were charged and a Murphy and Duggan were hanged. In 1786 at Shadwell, after a fray, seven Irish were hanged. The Irish Catholics in this area were tough and fairly poor. It was said that the Irish women were chaste considering the conditions and temptations they laboured under.

In 1816 some priests addressed an appeal to 200 titled Catholic Families of England for funds for a new church at Spitalfields. Only a few replies were received and a paltry donation of £5. The Irish poor had to build their own churches at great sacrifice. The Poor Law institutions who had to take a lot of Irish often refused entry to Catholic priests and thrust Protestantism down the throats of their inmates. The following is quoted from the "East London Observer":- Irish dock labourers went to a chapel in Virginia St. (which I presume was the Wapping Mission). A priest, Father James Webb was tried at Old Bailey in 1762 before the judge Lord Mansfield. Lord Mansfield was inclined to find ways to avoid sending priests to prison.

Before the Wapping chapel was attacked by the Gordon rioters in 1780, some 3000 Irishmen gathered under Father Coen to defend the chapel. Father Coen got an express message from the Secretary of State asking him to stop the men assembling, to avoid bloodshed. Father Coen and his fellow priests complied. The chapel was destroyed but ample compensation was paid. The rebuilt chapel had a Catholic population of 16,000 in 1848 necessitating the building of the church of St. Mary and St. Michael in Commercial Rd. which opened in 1856.

Mentioning Southwark, Mass was said in a house in Kent St. (now Tabard St.) Father John Baptist Maloney was arrested in February 1767 on information supplied by the informer William Payne. The priest was sentenced to life imprisonment at the Kingston Assizes but after 4 years in the Southwark Gaol was deported abroad. The mission at Bermondsey was founded by Father Gerard Shaw in East Lane in 1773. This was burnt down in the Gordon Riots and rebuilt in 1782 to hold 400 people.

Not until 1786 was the Southwark chapel started in Bandyleg Walk (approx where the fire station is now in Southwark Bridge Rd.) This was an unsavoury district where the "old Charlies" were afraid to walk, quite an appropriate place for a chapel. It was opened by Father Thomas Walsh of Douai College. Charity schools were established by 1789. Father John Griffiths was the second priest in charge. A new chapel was opened in London Rd. in 1790, 200 yards from the Elephant and Castle. Dr. Hussey preached at the opening. He is mentioned later in St. James, Spanish Place. A Father Thomas Doyle who left the seminary of Ware in 1820 became curate at St. Georges chapel, Southark, preparing the way for the building of St. George's Cathedral on the very site where the Gordon Riots were initiated.

St. Patrick's, Soho was built on the site of Carlile House in Soho Sq. due to the efforts of a Father Arthur O'Leary and George Keatinge, son of a Catholic publisher. Father O'Leary was a chaplain to the Spanish Embassy and a Franciscan. The first priest there was a Father Gaffy when it was opened in 1792. George Keating and other business men formed a committee to run the church. The publishers, Keating, Brown & Keating were established in Duke St., Grosvenor Sq. They produced a Catholic directory in 1793. Father O'Leary died in 1802 and was buried in St. Pancras Graveyard before his remains were removed to Kensal Green in 1891. Most of the Irish in that district were buried in St. Pancras Graveyard at that time. Catholic graves were recognised by the initials R.I.P. Their choice of St. Pancras Graveyard was because the last public Mass in the London area was said there at the Reformation.

The Spanish Embassy moved from place to place and eventually to Manchester Sq. where the church of St. James, Spanish Place was opened as a public church in 1791. The most famous chaplain was Doctor Thomas Hussey, who was educated at Salamanca in Spain and was elected a fellow of the Royal Society in 1792. He was also friendly with politicians and Samuel Johnson. He was used by the Government on a diplomatic mission to Spain. Later he became the first president of Maynooth seminary and bishop of Waterford and Lismore. Previously the Spanish Embassy was in Ely Place, Holborn.

Warwick St. church was originally attached to the Portuguese Embassy in Golden Sq. Soho. It functioned as a chapel from 1724. In 1747 it was taken over by the Bavarian Embassy. St. James Workhouse for able-bodied poor was nearby, and Catholics in it were visited by priests. One of the Irish parishoners was Martin Archer Shee an artist and sculptor who was president of the Royal Society from

1796--1798. His portrait is in the National Portrait Gallery. The church was burnt in the 1780 Gordon Riots. In 1788 prominent Catholics formed a committee to raise funds. Among the trustees was the Earl of Shrewsbury, Lord Petre, and Sir John Throckmorton. The newly built church was purchased by Bishop Talbot in 1790 but was still supported by the Bavarian government until 1870. It was a fashionable place. Daniel O'Connell often went there. The Requiem for Louis XVI and Marie Antoinette was said there in 1793.

At a farmhouse in Paddington owned by a Catholic, Mass was frequently said. People attending were scrutinised by an Irish janitor through a grill and were required to give a password. In 1800 one of the French refugee priests chose Paddington to open a chapel for the nucleus of Catholics around. Refugee priests from France in the 1790's were welcomed in England and were to influence the founding of Somerstown parish in 1798 and the Hampstead church in 1796. A Masshouse in the St. Giles "rookery" in Black Lion Court was found in 1767 and closed.

The Portuguese Embassy Chapel at the junction of South St. and South Audley St. appears to have escaped the Gordon Riots. Records of marriages are still extant and are printed in a Catholic Record Society book in the Catholic Central Library, which used to be in Francis St. Many Irish names and birthplaces are amongst the records, and indications are often given of the Anglican parish in which they lived. I have copied some examples from 1722--1745.

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