

A history of Roman Catholicism in Strawberry Hill

At the end of the year in which Catholics celebrated the visit by Pope Benedict XVI and the 125th anniversary of St James' Church, Robert Youngs looks at the way that Catholicism in our area has been influenced by the building of the church and the establishment of Catholic teaching institutions.

When Alexander Pope came to live in Cross Deep in 1719 with his mother, he was perhaps the first Catholic in this area since the Reformation. This was a time when Catholicism in England was at a low ebb. Since the 16th century, Catholics had been banned from teaching, holding public office, voting, living within 10 miles of London or owning land. Pope therefore leased a plot of land from Thomas Vernon, on which he built his villa and, later, the Grotto. Pope remains the most famous Catholic to have lived in what we now know as Strawberry Hill.

Most of the restrictions of civil liberties against Catholics continued until the Catholic Relief Act was enacted in 1829. At this time, the area was largely unpopulated, the exceptions being Pope's Villa, a few other large houses along Cross Deep and Horace Walpole's Strawberry Hill.



Alexander Pope

Residential development had started by 1850 and St James' Catholic Church, in Popes Grove, was opened by Cardinal Manning in 1885. It was largely financed by a gift from James de Lacy Towle to Cardinal Manning for the purpose of building churches in the diocese of Westminster. It was consecrated in 1887, with Cardinal Manning preaching the sermon. Until then, Catholics in Twickenham had been worshipping at a house in Grosvenor Road.



The St Anthony Window in St James Church

In 1908, at the age of 19, the younger son of King Carlos of Portugal succeeded to the throne as Manoel II. After the Portuguese revolution of 1910, Manoel and his mother fled to England, eventually settling at Fulwell Park in 1913. They were regular worshippers at the church and were generous supporters. He presented a window depicting St Anthony to the church in 1932, the 700th anniversary of the saint's death. The window, in the south wall (Pope's Grove end), contains the crest of the Braganza family and an inscription in Portuguese. Manoel died shortly after this, but the organ from the family chapel at Fulwell Park was donated to the church by his widow. It can be found in the organ loft over the sacristy, at the northwest corner.

The history of Catholic education in the area begins in 1914, when the Sisters of Mercy opened a convent school in response to a request from the Parish Priest of St James. The house, until recently called St Catherine's, still stands at the corner of Vicarage Road and Hampton Road. They moved in 1916 to Orford Lodge in Popes Grove, which stood opposite the end of Upper Grotto Road (the house was demolished in about 1930, to make way for new housing). The school moved to Popes Villa in 1919, the original of which had been demolished and rebuilt by Baroness Howe in 1807/8. The extension on the opposite side of Cross Deep was built in 1928 and Pope's original tunnel through the grotto was used by the girls and staff. The Sisters vacated Popes Villa in 1995, when it was sold and became St James Independent School for Boys and now, in 2010, Radnor House School. There remains a small community of the Sisters of Mercy in Popes Grove.

After Walpole's death, Strawberry Hill was considerably extended by Lady Frances Waldegrave and eventually passed to Lord Michelham (after whom Michelham

Gardens is named). In 1923 it was sold by Lord Michelham's widow to the Catholic Education Council. St Mary's College Catholic teacher training college in Brook Green, Hammersmith, unable to accommodate the increased demand for Catholic teachers, moved to Strawberry Hill in 1925.

The Vincentian Fathers (also known as the Congregation of the Mission), who had been put in charge of the college in 1899, moved into Walpole's house and additional buildings were added, including the chapel. Fortunately, the Vincentians made few changes to Walpole's house, thus preserving the fabric for the recent restoration. There was also a need for accommodation for student teachers sent to the College by Catholic religious communities. The Xaverian Brothers, the Christian Brothers and the Presentation Brothers acquired houses to be used as hostels in Bonser Road, Strawberry Hill Road and Waldegrave Gardens. These houses remain in use to this day.

In 1992, the Vincentians relinquished their charge of the College and Dr Arthur Naylor was appointed the first lay Principal.

St James Church celebrated its 125th anniversary on 18th July 2010 with a mass said by Archbishop Nichols, the Archbishop of Westminster. Pope Benedict XVI celebrated Catholic education in the presence of 3500 young people at St Mary's University.



Archbishop Nichols and children outside the church

Horace Walpole and the Catholic influence



The Tribune - "all the air of a Catholic chapel - bar consecration!"

Although Walpole was certainly not a Catholic, his taste seems to have been influenced by Catholic art and culture: he welcomed visitors to his "little Gothick Castle" wearing a cardinal's hat, which he claimed had belonged to Cardinal Wolsey. In the introduction to his Gothic novel, the Castle of Otranto, he states that it was found in the library of "an ancient Catholic family in the north of England". And in a letter to Sir Horace Mann in 1759, he describes the Tribune in the house "to have all the air of a Catholic chapel – bar consecration!".

He would have been amused to learn that, 200 years later, the Tribune had been, in fact, consecrated and was in use as a chapel by the Vincentian Brothers while they occupied his house.

References:

"The Parish of St James, Twickenham, UK, 1885-2008" by Tom Devitt. Available from St James Church, call 020 8892 4578 or see stjamestwickenham.org.uk

"Strawberry Hill. A History of the Neighbourhood" by Anthony Beckles Willson, third edition, 2010. Available from Strawberry Hill Residents' Association. For ordering details, see www.shra.org.uk

The Twickenham Museum's web site www.twickenham-museum.org.uk

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