

St Mary Moorfields: More than a Century



Lecture given by Dom Aidan Bellenger,
Monk and Prior of Downside Abbey,
on 4th June 2003, in the centenary year of the new Church
£3.00



Lithograph by T.H. Shepherd of *The Catholic Chapel, Finsbury*, inscribed, "To His Grace The Duke of Norfolk Scc. Scc. This plate is respectfully dedicated", circa 1825.
Photo: St Mary Moorfields

Cover illustration: Watercolour of the interior of the pro-Cathedral by an unknown artist.
Photo: St Mary Moorfields

Introduction

The centenary of the new Church, located at 4-5 Eldon Street, gave the opportunity to begin a series of lectures and publications on the history and current mission of this city parish. The first lecture, given by Dom Aidan Bellenger OSB covers the history of the earliest Chapels and the pro-Cathedral which was located at the corner of Finsbury Circus and Bloomfield Street. A blue plaque, that was blessed by His Eminence Cardinal Hume, marks the location of the pro-Cathedral. I am very grateful to Dom Aidan for delivering the lecture as he brought his deep knowledge of the history of English Catholicism and a long standing association with this Church together.

The front cover of this booklet shows a watercolour of the interior of the pro-Cathedral, and indicates how faithfully, George Sherrin, the architect of the present Church tried to recreate the interior, albeit on a smaller scale. The large water stoops held by angels can now be found in St Patrick's Soho Square, and the large candelabra, except one at the back of the Church, now reside in Westminster cathedral. In addition there are a number of contemporary engravings of the interior and exterior.

Included with the text of the lecture are a number of maps showing the location of the original Chapel in Lime Street, the first pro-Cathedral, and the present day Church. The first map was kindly lent by Dom Aidan, and the two ordinance survey maps are printed with the kind permission of the Guildhall Library.

I do hope that you will find this publication of interest and thank you for your support and prayers for the mission of St Mary Moorfields to the City of London.

Fr Peter Newby



Fig. 1. Interior of the new Church looking towards the altar.
Photo: Fr Peter Newby

St Mary Moorfields: More than a Century

by

Dom Aidan Bellenger

During the Gordon Riots of 1780, the largest civil disturbance ever experienced in London, the Catholic chapels of Moorfields, ransacked and raped, made a brief appearance on the national stage. In *Barnaby Rudge* (1841) Charles Dickens gave these events some sort of immortality and early illustrations made much of the defenestration of Catholic objects into the London streets. This novel, too, was an early example of sympathy towards Catholics, showing them as victims rather than villains. The history of the Catholic community who now use the church of St Mary, Eldon Street, still always known as Moorfields, are heir to a tradition which is a reflection of the history of the English Catholics over the last three hundred years; a period marked mainly by quiet and heroic survival, occasionally disturbed by violence.

The richness and variety of late Medieval Catholic London gave way to the greyer shades of the Church 'by law established'. London was always too addicted to Mammon to cut all its ties with Catholic Europe but as far as religious practice was concerned the City of London, by statute and convenience, remained a Catholic-free zone. Those Catholics who managed to keep their heads down or to pay the heavy recusancy fines had to seek the sacraments outside the City in the chapels of the foreign ambassadors further to the West. Only briefly and ultimately unsuccessfully under James II the last Catholic King in the 1680s was Catholic worship restored to the City.¹

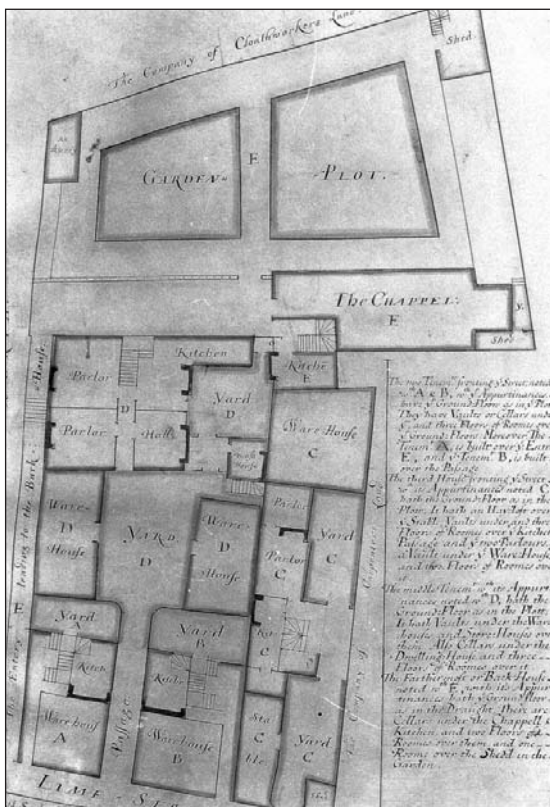


Fig. 2. Detail from a plan book of 1686-88 compiled by William Leybourne for the Fishmongers' Company showing the location of the original Chapel between Leadenhall St and Fenchurch St against Leadenhall Market.

Photo: Dom Aidan Bellenger

A survey of 1680 counted only seventy-seven Papists or reputed Papists in the City² although the Catholics in the western suburbs, as Professor John Miller has pointed out, provided 'a vigorous urban Catholicism of artisans and shopkeepers which did not exist in other towns'.³ Under James II there were at least eighteen London Catholic chapels including one in the City of London itself.⁴ This was the Lime Street Chapel which existed from 1686-88. It was situated in a property belonging to the Fishmongers' Company and a chapel is shown in a contemporary plan book compiled by William Leybourne (Fig. 2). The chapel was first staffed by the secular clergy; the Lime Street property had been rented by Dr John Betts, a well-known recusant, whose son James (born c. 1665) was a secular priest and later became a Carthusian at Nieupoort. John Betts' sister was the mother of John Gother (d. 1704), the great spiritual writer, who was working in London in the 1680s but the Lime Street chapel seems to have had Andrew Giffard (d. 1714) as its chaplain. He was unceremoniously removed by the Jesuits, who accused him of Jansenism, and he later compared this expulsion unfavourably to his subsequent removal from Magdalen College, Oxford, where as a Catholic his fellowship was terminated by the fall of James II. The Jesuits, under royal patronage, opened a school in Lime Street and had Father Charles Petre as their superior, but in October 1688 the chapel was demolished in a popular disturbance which reflected a revolution seen by many as 'glorious'.⁵

Moorfields in the Middle Ages was a wild fen with a causeway starting at Moorgate from 1415 in the direction of Hoxton. Under the Tudors and early Stuarts the fields were drained and, following the Great Fire, some building was done. In time the area housed the great lunatic asylum of Bedlam and was probably coincidentally noted as a centre for dissenters; Whitefield's tabernacle of 1752 was crucial in the development of Methodism. In adjoining Finsbury the Bunhill Fields cemetery, the 'campo santo' of dissent, and Wesley's Chapel marked clear nonconformist territory. In such an area poor Catholics, many of them from Ireland, began to congregate alongside the dissenters.

Catholic chapels came and went with rapidity and although the Moorfields registers date back to 1763 little is known about the eighteenth-century 'Mass Houses'.⁶ There is, for example, no existing engraving or picture of the chapels of the area. Secrecy and quiet observance were the order of the day; the anti-Catholic Penal Laws had grown more draconian with the accession of William and Mary. Glimpses, however, of the Catholic life of the City, are revealed from time to time. *The Gentleman's Magazine* (February, 1735) reported the discovery of a Mass House adjoining an ale house at the back of Shoreditch with a congregation of a hundred mainly Irish and 'miserably poor and ragged'. William Maitland's *History of London* (1739) mentions a Catholic meeting house in Butler's Alley, Grub Street, perhaps the same locale as the meeting houses in the adjoining Ropemakers Alley:

In the process of time these two chapels were converted into one, a small building in an obscure street, with a spy-window, through which to discriminate between friend and foe, before opening the door to the applicant for admission. In a hatch-doorway a man in his shirt sleeves sat smoking his pipe, and with rough chaff extorting from each comer the sum of a penny before allowing then to enter; this was done in order to avert suspicion of it being a 'Mass House', and this the little chapel was called, and came to be known as, 'the penny hotel'.⁷

William Payne, known as 'the Protestant Carpenter', conducted an active campaign against the London Catholic chapels especially in 1765 at a time when the Bishop of London was concerned by the growth of Catholicism in the metropolis. Payne's motives were economic, hoping to benefit from handouts given to informers - but he was unsuccessful in his ultimate aim to extirpate Catholicism. Two of the Moorfields priests of the time, Fuller and Dillon, were indicted for their priesthood in 1771 but were acquitted.

Some useful sidelights on the Catholic life of the period 1764-90 are provided in the diary of William Mawhood, a woollen-draper of London, published in 1956. In 1771 he recorded going to 'prayers' (that is, Mass) at Moorfields on 29 September at 9.00 pm. His favoured place of worship seems to have been the Sardinian Chapel in Lincoln Inn Fields, then the most fashionable of London Catholic churches, but on 12 July 1778 he refers to a new church in Moorfields, not mentioned elsewhere, one that had to be replaced after the Gordon Riots. Mawhood's comfortable middle-class life is a reminder that Georgian Catholicism was not all country house or urban poor.⁸

If the Catholic life of Georgian Moorfields remains obscure the same cannot be said of its priests. Godfrey Anstruther's biographical survey of the English secular clergy has gathered together much of the surviving material.⁹ John Fuller (1729-92), a Londoner by birth, ordained in 1758, came to Moorfields soon after his ordination and remained there until 1779 when he returned to his old college at Douai where he died. James Barnard (1734-1803), the first biographer of Bishop Richard Challoner, the much-loved pastor of the London Catholics, was the convert son of a London haberdasher and an old boy of Christ's Hospital. Ordained from the English College, Seville, in 1757 his will describes him as being 'formerly of White Street, Little Moorfields'. Richard Dillon, an Irish priest from County Meath, was also at Seville and after his ordination in 1742 worked on the English Mission. He died on 5 August 1780 on account, it is said, of the Gordon Riots:

Aug 5 Rev Mr Richard Dillon, late of the RC chapel in Moorfields where he had resided for 36 years till it was destroyed by the mob in the late riots; at the same time his house having been totally pulled down, his books and household furniture burnt, without even a bed being left for him to lie on; the shock

he received from such barbarous treatment deeply affected his health and spirits and is supposed to have hastened his death.¹⁰

He had fallen victim to an orgy of anti-Catholicism and anti-Irish sentiment. To many of the City poor the Irish were taking scarce jobs. 'No Popery' was the rallying cry, Lord George Gordon the demagogue, but the riots were bigger than mere sectarianism; they were part of a European-wide pattern of popular protest which was to receive definitive form in revolutionary Paris.¹¹ For the Catholics of Moorfields, however, what they meant was the end of their old secrecy and the opening of a new chapel, situated in a former warehouse in White Street, providing a place of worship for a most populous district:

St Mary Moorfields: - This has a district attached to it be far the most extensive of any in London. It comprehends all the city, with a trifling exception, also Saffron Hill, Clerkenwell, Bethnal Green, Mile End, Whitechapel, Spitalfields, Islington, Holloway, Stoke Newington, Homerton. Its Catholic population, which at the commencement of this century was only five or six thousand now amounts to thirty thousand. It has large Charity Schools, two connected with the Associated Catholic Charities, and two with Spitalfields. Its Pastors have also to attend the Newgate Gillspur, and Clerkenwell Prisons for felons; the Fleet and White Cross Prisons for debtors; St Luke's, Lymington, and Great St Bartholomew's Hospitals; no fewer than twenty-four workhouses, many of them containing hundreds of poor, principally Catholics. The churches of Bunhill Row, Islington, Holloway, Hackney, Homerton, Mile End, Spicer Street, Hoxton, Clerkenwell, and Ely Place, have each received a portion of what was once the enormous Parish of Moorfields, 'and nearly forty priests found their time fully employed in attending to the Hospitals and Prisons and Workhouses; which when served by the four priests of Moorfields alone must have been a cruel burth¹²

The cathedral at Baltimore and the pro-Cathedral in Dublin, metropolitan 'chapels' providing a showcase for Catholic liturgy and devotion, were paralleled in London by the new church of St Mary Moorfields built in 1817-20 to the designs of the architect John Newman. Built by subscription and voluntary contributions, the chapel was inaugurated by Dr William Poynter (1734-1827), Vicar Apostolic of London, on 20 April 1820. A splendid gold chalice and paten were presented by the Pope. The church's scale, according to *The Laity's Directory* for 1820, was 'magnificent and capacious' in order 'to confer becoming splendour on the services of our Holy Religion, and to afford sufficient accommodation for the numerous congregation of the district'. The cost of the new building was £26,000 and the adjoining clergy house cost £6,000.¹³

The facade of the church consisted of a recessed pair of Corinthian columns *in antis* with pairs of flanking *antae* (see frontispiece). The pediment had a Bas relief of personified Faith and Piety at the foot of the cross. The remainder of the church was in a restrained Greek revival style with the exception of the highly dramatic apse. The architect, John Newman, a pupil of Smirke, had visited Paris and seen the *lumière mystérieuse* devices used at St Roch and St Sulpice and these he incorporated in his design. The grouping of the six fluted columns, overhead lighting, Agostino Aglio's panorama of the crucifixion and rich altar table (like the columns by Comulli of Milan) has led Dr Rory O'Donnell to suggest that 'Catholic London had seen nothing so dramatic since the east end arrangements of the Queen's chapel at St James' Palace from which they were ejected in 1688' (Fig. 3).¹⁴ To Pugin it was 'like a theatre... the product of a Protestant architect.'¹⁵

Newman's original chaste and rather lifeless building was gradually Italianised by gift and design over the next seventy years following its opening. Such 'improvements' were particularly characteristic of the 1850s when the church became the stage for Cardinal Wiseman's flamboyant and triumphalist pontificate as first archbishop of Westminster (Fig. 4). As early as 1836 Wiseman, at the height of his powers, lectured on the principles of Catholicism at Moorfields to a great concourse, many not Catholics: 'Many persons of position and education were converted, and all departed with abated prejudice, and with very different notions about Catholicism from which they had been proposed by their 'education'.¹⁶ Wiseman used Moorfields as his Pro-Cathedral and the building witnessed many important ecclesiastical events and commemorations none more



Fig. 3. Hand-coloured print by T.H. Sheperd, *Roman Catholic Chapel, Moorfields*. Celebration of High Mass on Christmas Day.

Photo: *St Mary Moorfields*

poignant than the Cardinal's funeral in 1865 with a panegyric by Provost Manning and a funeral procession through crowded streets all the seven miles to Kensal Green. Manning retained his *cathedra* at Moorfields (where he was consecrated bishop by Bishop Ullathorne in 1865) until 1869 when it was translated to Our Lady of Victories in Kensington. During its years of Cathedral status it was still the ministry to the poor which provided its principal *raison d'être*. Its priests were dedicated and celebrated, most notably Robert Whitty and Daniel Gilbert, and its run of long-serving clergy gave it a great stability. Joseph Hunt (1765-1841), for example, priest when the new church was opened, was born at Pye Corner, St Sepulchre's Newgate, in the City and was educated at Douai. At Moorfields by 1800, he had a stroke in 1830 and was blind for six years before his death and subsequent burial in the Moorfields vault. The vaults and burial ground at Moorfields interred many thousands of London Catholics in the years prior to its closure in 1853 including three Vicars Apostolic (Poynter, Branston and Gradwell), later reburied at St Edmund's College, Old Hall Green, Ware, and Charles Weber, the operatic composer. In 1839 the church was saved by four resident priests according to *The Laity's Directory* and they had their work much complicated by the massive poor congregation. While adult education courses and libraries were provided for the prosperous and 'respectable' poor the 'ragged' were somewhat marginalized.

The great Rosminian evangelist Luigi Gentili (1801-48) gave a mission at Moorfields which was much appreciated by its listeners but the congregation was largely fashionable. Gentili was frustrated in being unable to preach to the poor. An anonymous letter to Gentili of 20 March 1847 puts it bluntly:

Pardon the liberty taken in addressing you by one unknown to you. I trust I am actuated by not other

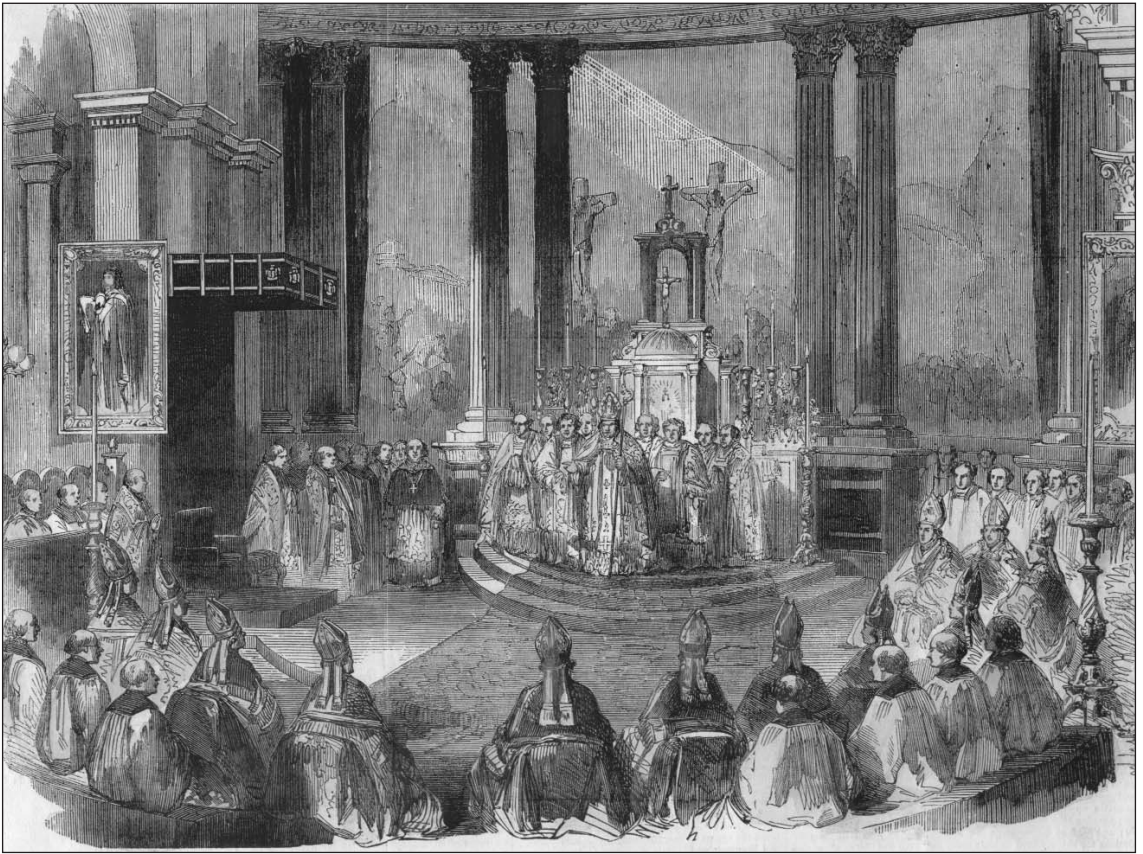


Fig. 4. Hand-coloured print by an unknown artist, *The “Te Deum” for peace, at St. Mary’s Roman Catholic Church, Moorfields*. Cardinal Wiseman preaching before the Bishops.

Photo: St Mary Moorfields

motive than as anxious desire for the success of your holy mission at Moorfields. An obstacle to that success had arisen which I think you Should be apprised of. It is intended to charge 6d for each person at every evening service during the mission, so that to attend the mission regularly will cost each individual 7/- and where there is a large family the sum is considerable. The persons who are to give this, are almost all persons struggling with the world, and who already contribute to the utmost of their power to the churches to which they belong. I know more than one family, good and holy and ardently desirous of profiting by the mission, who will be absolutely deprived of it, entirely by this arrangement. The careless and negligent Catholic who most requires your instructions, will not go at all when this obstacle is placed in his way, and you find the attendance very different on week evenings from what it has been in Lincoln’s Inn or Spanish Place. I speak not for myself for I am willing to pay, but my movements depend in some degree on those of others, who are so much disgusted with this attempt to prolong a system of exploitation which has always prevailed at Moorfields, that they will not go at all.

A previous anonymous protest is more indignant. It dates from 1845:

Will you be kind enough to give early notice to the Public of the next *sixpenny* and *twopenny* Exhibition you intend to have. “All for the Glory of God: to be free, say you” I am sorry that you should lend yourself to such a vile system of Traffick. It is nothing but a *pious humbug*. Preach your mission, have your Processions, but let the chapel be *free*. ‘No money’ no matter what the Clergyman of the house says. The *Chapel* should be free and the Mission preached purely for the salvation of Souls. “No money”, and then you may expect to make converts.¹⁷

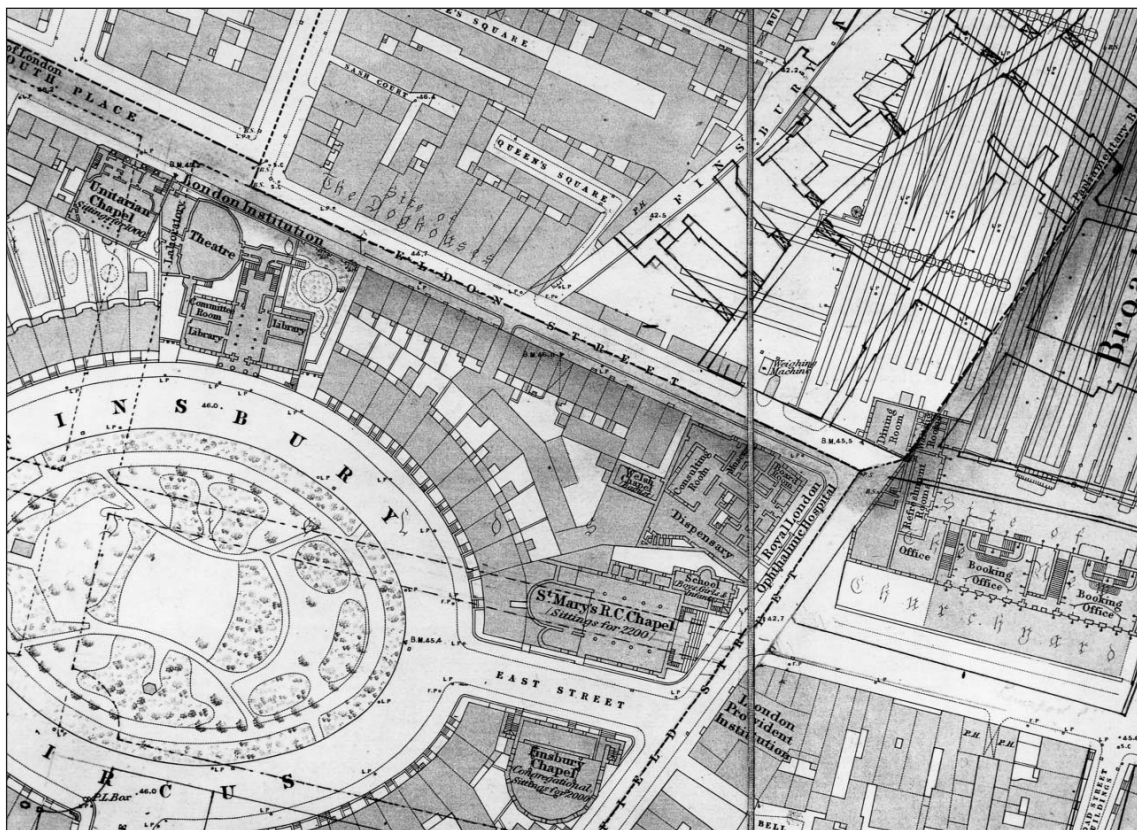


Fig. 5. Ordnance Survey Map, 1871 revised, showing location of the 1820 church.

Photo: Guildhall Library, Corporation of London

The Victorian parish priests attempted to address these problems but continued the church's dual ministry - to the poor and to the growing number of City workers. Robert Whitty (1817-95), a Wexford man, was ordained priest at Maynooth in 1840 and worked in England for some time at St Edmund's College, Old Hall Green. He became a close confidant of Wiseman who put him in charge of Moorfields mission, Provost of the Westminster chapter and Vicar General of Westminster. In 1857 he joined the Jesuits and eventually became Provincial. His task for the religious life had already been shown by his time as a priest novice at the Birmingham Oratory in 1849-50.¹⁸ Daniel Gilbert (1827-95) was one of Wiseman's and Manning's closest confidants being Vicar General of Westminster for twenty-seven years.¹⁹ In 1861 he was admitted to the degree of D.D. by Cardinal Wiseman and his 'modern' interests were shown in the same year by a course of lectures on Geology and Scripture. He shared Manning's great concern for social justice and he saw the foundation in 1860 the Providence Row Night Refuge as his life's work. Nevertheless despite the activity, Moorfields star was somewhat in decline. Around 1900 'a dispute arose as to whether Moorfields or the Sardinian Chapel, Lincoln Inn Fields, was the chief metropolitan chapel, and after much argument it was agreed by all parties that it was to be decided in the following manner: two hackney coaches...were engaged by different persons midway between the two chapels, and the coachmen were told to drive to the Catholic Chapel. They both drove down to Lincoln's Inn Fields'.²⁰

The building of new churches, the opening of new missions and the establishment of many new religious houses reduced the Moorfields congregation in the last quarter of the nineteenth century. The railway, too, was encroaching (see Figs 5 and 6). In 1874, for example, with the extension of the Metropolitan Railway to Liverpool Street the church was badly shaken and compensation of some £12,000 was given. In 1875

Moorfields was given a reprieve but in 1900 it was sold and demolished. The last service held in the old church was in November 1899 when a *Stabat Mater* was rendered by a special choir. More sinister was the relay of horse-drawn carriages who removed the bodies from the vaults to an anonymous resting place in Waverley Avenue, Wembley.²¹ There was much dispute about this but there was gain as well as loss; not only was money given to the new cathedral of Westminster but the new church in which we stand tonight built to the designs of George Sherrin incorporating the altar arrangements of the old, was made possible. The new church, has re-established itself as a Mass centre for the City and its workers with a large congregation on weekdays.

Most of the worshippers at St Mary's in the years before the new church were, I suspect, victims of Mammon rather than its adherents. Yet, with the public apostolate of the great Victorian Cardinals there was a beginning of Catholic involvement in the life of the City. The first Catholic Lord Mayor since the Reformation was Sir Polydore de Keyser (1832-97) in 1887-8. The second, Sir Stuart Knill (1824-95), whose family business was in wharfs and warehousing, Knills of Fresh Wharf and Cox's Quay, became Lord Mayor in 1892. Very openly Catholic he held a banquet for Cardinal Vaughan and the Catholic Bishops, to whom the first toast was 'The Holy Father and The Queen'. His son, Sir John Knill Served as Lord Mayor in 1909-10 and Sir Alfred Bower was Lord Mayor in 1924-5. His private chaplain, probably the first Catholic priest to hold this office since the Reformation, was Mgr Edmond Nolan of St Mary Moorfields.²²

A church celebration of a living community is always best remembered in worship and the continuing life of prayer. But St Mary Moorfields does have a long and distinguished history and is effectively the mother church of the diocese. The demolition of the old church made the building of Westminster Cathedral possible. Local pressure ensured that this City church survived. We hope that this sacramental presence in the secular city will continue its witness for many generations to come.

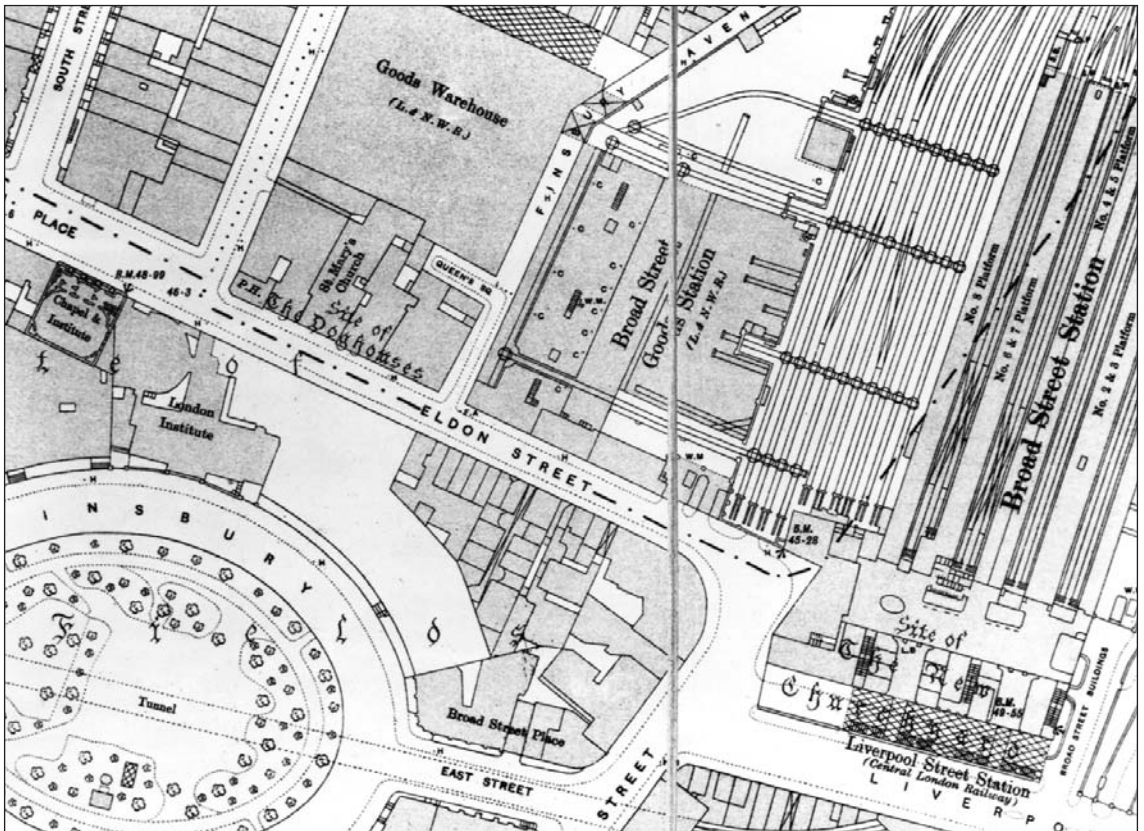


Fig. 6. Detail of the Ordnance Survey Map of 1916 showing the location of the new church.

Photo: Guildhall Library, Corporation of London

Notes

1. See G. Macdonald, 'The Lime Street Chapel', *The Dublin Review* 180 (1927), pp. 253-265; *idem* 181 (1927), pp. 1-16.
2. J. Miller, *Popery and Politics in England 1660-1688* (Cambridge, 1973), p. 23.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 25.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 245.
5. See G. Macdonald *op.cit.* and G. Anstruther, *The Seminary Priests III 1660-1715* (Great Wakering, 1976).
6. Baptismal Registers are continuous from 1763, Marriage Registers (more intermittent) from 1785 and Burial Registers from 1819. I did a survey of the registers in 1965/6 at Fr Leonard Collingwood's suggestion.
7. J.H. Harting, *Catholic London Missions* (London, 1903) p. 82, quoting W. Fleming, *A Brief History of St Mary's Moorfields* (privately printed, 1896), p. 1.
8. E.E. Reynolds ed., *The Mawhood Diary, The Catholic Record Society* Vol 50 (London, 1956).
9. G. Anstruther, *The Seminary Priests IV 1716-1800* (Great Wakering, 1977).
10. *Ibid.*, p. 89.
11. For the Gordon Riots see C. Hibbert, *King Mob* (London, 1958).
12. W. Fleming, *op.cit.*, pp. 7-8.
13. For a good description of the 1820 church see R. O'Donnell. 'The Interior of St Mary Moorfields,' *The Georgian Group Journal* 7 (1997), pp. 71-4.
14. *Ibid.*, pp. 72-3.
15. *Ibid.*, p. 73.
16. W. Ward, *Wiseman I* (London, 1897), p. 235.
17. C. Leetham, *Luigi Gentili* (London, 1965), p. 270.
18. See *The Tablet*, 7 September 1895.
19. *Ibid.*, 2 March 1895
20. J.H. Harting *op.cit.*, p. 93.
21. Letter from J.V.A. Kelly, *Catholic Herald*, 2 February 1951.
22. As early as 1834 the Rev. J. Harrington from Moorfields served as Chaplain to Alexander Raphael, the first Catholic to act as one of the sheriffs for the county of Middlesex. *The Morning Herald*, describing the inauguration dinner at Merchant Tailors Hall, recorded: 'Among the novelties of the day was the presence of a Roman Catholic priest, officiating as Chaplain to Mr Sheriff Raphael, who, having abjured the Hebrew religion, has become a convert to the church of Rome'. See *Andrews' Weekly Orthodox Journal* 13 September 1834, p. 233.

Times of Services

Mass: Monday - Friday 08.05, 13.05
Sunday 10.00

Confessions: Monday - Friday 12.30 - 12.55, 13.30 - 13.50

Morning Prayer: Monday - Friday 07.45

Evening Prayer: Monday - Friday 18.00

Please consult the website for further details about services and church opening times.

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