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Evangelical in the Shadows: Charles Jervis of Cheltenham

ALAN F. MUNDEN

In the summer of 1836, only a few months before his death, Charles Simeon made an eight-week visitation of the parishes in his gift. His visit to Cheltenham was extended for him through an attack of gout, but he had sufficient strength to meet his friends, to visit the parish and to preach. He was overjoyed at what he saw:

Here at Cheltenham I have almost had a heaven upon earth. The churches so capacious, and so filled; the schools so large, so numerous, so beneficial; the people so full of love; the ministers such laborious and energetic men; and God himself so graciously with me in my exertions: in truth, I can scarcely conceive any higher happiness on earth than I am now privileged to enjoy.¹

Simeon preached at Cheltenham parish church on 19 June, and at Holy Trinity on 3 July. This was a particularly moving experience for him, since 'this is the church in which Mr Thomason laboured; and it will be delightful to me to stand up in his place.'² Thomas Truebody Thomason (1774–1829), who had been his first assistant curate from 1796 to 1808, served in India as one of the five evangelical chaplains nominated by Simeon to the East India Company, and succeeded Close as minister of Holy Trinity, Cheltenham from 1826 to 1828.

By 1836, Francis Close (1797–1882) had already made his mark on the life of the town, since Simeon had appointed him to the parish church in 1826. Close was to remain at Cheltenham until 1856, when he was appointed dean of Carlisle. But whilst all historians of Cheltenham are agreed that the town was dominated by the personality and achievement of Close, what has not been recognized is the significance of the ministry of his predecessor at the parish church. Although Charles Jervis was the perpetual curate for only ten years, much of his work provided a foundation for Close's ministry—which received the glowing eulogy from Simeon. Cheltenham became the model for Simeonite evangelicalism, the west-country equivalent of Clapham, and it is not too much of an exaggeration to describe it as the English Geneva.³ This was only brought about, under God, by the principles established by Jervis and subsequently developed by Close.

The rectory of Cheltenham was purchased in 1800 by Joseph Pitt,

the wealthy landowning speculator and Member of Parliament for Cricklade from 1812 to 1830. 'Anything which could be bought and sold at a profit attracted Pitt; land, advowsons, seats in Parliament, were all exploited.'⁴ To this end he acquired the living of St Margaret, Bagendon, Cirencester in 1812, and exchanged it for Cheltenham in June 1816.⁵ A few months after nominating Jervis in the summer of 1816,⁶ Pitt sold the right of presentation to Simeon for £3,000, but kept the valuable impropriation as lay rector. It is possible that Jervis may have suggested the purchase to Simeon; and if not directly, through a mutual contact such as his friend Henry Ryder, bishop of Gloucester. Simeon wrote to Isaac Milner with the news that 'Cheltenham, where there are 10,000 souls, besides 10,000 visitors, or nearly so, is mine. It was to be sold for £3,000.0.0 and I instantly secured it: and the Lord has raised up friends to concur with me; so the burden is light.'⁷ Simeon's purchase of Cheltenham, in the autumn of 1816, slightly pre-dated the formation of the Simeon Trustees in the following year.

Charles Jervis (1782-1826), the son of Charles Jervis of Birmingham, entered Trinity College, Oxford in 1801 and graduated in 1805, taking his MA in 1808. He was minister of St Andrew's Church, Clewer, near Windsor, Berkshire from 1805 to c. 1814,⁸ and non-residential incumbent of Kenchester, Herefordshire from 1811, and of Ludtenham near Faversham, Kent from 1813 to 1826. He was also chaplain to the Duke of Cambridge, as well as the perpetual curate of Cheltenham parish church from 1816 to 1826. He read himself in at Cheltenham on Sunday, 1 September 1816, preaching his first sermon as incumbent the following Sunday.⁹ On 25 April 1817 he was married by Bishop Ryder to Marion Grape of Eton, at St George's, Hanover Square, and they took up residence in the fashionable Royal Crescent, Cheltenham.

Whilst it is not possible to identify Jervis' theological position precisely, his absence from the documentation of evangelicals at Oxford¹⁰ and the national evangelical movement¹¹ does not mean that he was unsympathetic towards evangelicalism. Indeed, the evidence would suggest that he was an evangelical. He referred to Henry Ryder (1777-1836), who was his near neighbour when he was canon of Windsor between 1808 and 1812, as his friend; and to Thomas Tregenna Biddulph (1763-1838), incumbent of St James, Bristol, from 1799 to 1838, as his father and friend.¹² In the language of the day, this would have meant a close spiritual bond between them, if not the one through whom he had been converted. In 1806 he produced a hymn book for Clewer church, in the preface of which Jervis recommended William Law's *A Serious Call to a Devout and Holy Life*, 'a book which I take this opportunity of recommending to your attentive perusal.'¹³ Jervis' library, which was put up for auction after his death, reflects his theological position and included

the works of Tillotson, Home, Doddridge, Taylor, Scott, Owen, Watson,

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Hall, Waterland, Clarke, Porteus, Hooker, Newton, Wilson, Simeon, Paley, Lardner, Milner, Watts, Beveridge, Baxter, Collier, Whitefield, Romaine, and numerous others; with Henry's Bible and works, Calmut's Dictionary, the Fathers of the English Church; a very large selection of sermons, tracts and religious publications.¹⁴

During Jervis' incumbency, Simeon preached on three occasions at Cheltenham parish church—in the autumn of 1820, 1821 and 1822—and each time the collection was taken for the Jews' Society. In 1819, the sermon for the society was preached by Basil Woodd. Other evangelicals who preached at the parish church during Jervis' incumbency were Henry Ryder (1817), Edward Bickersteth (1822) and John Cunningham (1824). Jervis was also prepared to invite George Gorham to become minister of Holy Trinity Church, and on the recommendation of Cunningham to consider and appoint Close to the position.

As the incumbent of the parish of Cheltenham, which in 1821 had a resident population of 13,396, Jervis was responsible for a number of projects. In 1816 he was involved in the formation of the National School and in the enlargement of the Sunday School. In order to relieve the pressure on the parish church, he proposed to enlarge it and planned the erection of two additional churches. He was able to see through the completion of Holy Trinity, consecrated by Bishop Ryder on 11 April 1823, but not St Paul's, which was completed after his death by Close. Simeon was to have preached at the consecration of Holy Trinity, but was unable to do so through illness. He had the vision to see this as the first of many churches to be erected in the parish: 'For though the provision now made is very inadequate to the wants of this daily augmenting population, it will doubtless be of important service, and serve as a prelude, I trust, to somewhat which shall be still more effectual.'¹⁵ Jervis was a keen advocate of Sabbath observance, and from December 1817 was responsible for starting an evening service at the parish church, and shortly before his death intended to commence a midweek evening Bible lecture. He began a lending library in the vestry room of the parish church, and a short-lived Provident Society for the Indigent Poor (1816). In 1817 he was responsible for the formation of the Cobourg Society, or lying-in charity, 'for the purpose of affording relief to indigent women during the period of their confinement.'¹⁶ Jervis was also responsible for the addition of the casualty ward to the Cheltenham Dispensary in 1822, and preached annual sermons for its funds. He was a cautious man, for when he was approached by Samuel Wilderspin, the infant school pioneer, to open an infant school in Cheltenham, he 'was not fully convinced of the utility of the plan' and 'declined it as visionary'.¹⁷ It was left to Close, and a Dr R. M. Coley, to open the school in the spring of 1826, the first of the many educational establishments supported by Close.

During the early nineteenth century, a number of improvements were carried out in the ordering of worship at the parish church. A new organ was erected by subscription in 1810, and a special selection of *Psalms and Hymns Selected for use in the Church of Cheltenham* was published in 1814. The only change which Close introduced at the parish church on the death of Jervis was the substitution of this book for the psalter in the *Book of Common Prayer*. Jervis erected the large three-decker pulpit in the nave, and possibly the Royal Arms of the House of Brunswick (1816–37). In 1821 pewter alms dishes were provided for use in the church, and a silver communion service was presented in 1824.

As early as November 1816, and within a year of his appointment as bishop of Gloucester, Henry Ryder was hoping to obtain a government grant for church building in Cheltenham.¹⁸ But since the Church Building Commissioners did not award grants until the population exceeded the capacity of the church by 20,000, Cheltenham was ineligible. By 1818 Jervis had detailed plans for the erection of a chapel of ease to the parish church. It was built almost entirely through the generosity of Lord Sherborne at a total cost of £14,000, but without reference to any church building Acts. Subsequently both of these factors caused difficulties. As early as 1827 it was necessary to obtain a legal ruling over the proportion of burial fees paid to the incumbent of the parish church and to Lord Sherborne as the main shareholder. By August 1857, Close's successor, Edward Walker, even questioned the legality of the church's consecration. Tied as it was to the control of the pew owners, and not to the needs of the area, Holy Trinity remained a chapel of ease to the parish church until 1898, when it became 'the district chapelry of Holy Trinity'.¹⁹

In 1823 Jervis advertised for a curate for Holy Trinity Church: 'A graduate in priest's orders might meet with temporary, and perhaps permanent employment in a large town, some distance from London, at a rate of £180.0.0. per annum.' In response, George Bonner (1784–1840) wrote to Jervis on the recommendation of John Hatchard, the evangelical publisher of Piccadilly. Jervis invited Bonner to Cheltenham on 28 June 1823, and he began his duties the next day. After three weeks, Jervis said that he was entirely satisfied with Bonner, and that he would be appointed to the church at a salary of £150 a year, subject to the approval, and granting of his licence, by Bishop Ryder.

Bonner saw the bishop at Gloucester on 16 August, and the latter made it clear that he would only licence Bonner to Holy Trinity if he was also prepared to officiate at baptisms, marriages and burials at the parish church. Bonner protested that he had come to Cheltenham to minister at Holy Trinity, and not to be involved with parochial duties at the parish church. A lengthy correspondence then developed between Bonner, the bishop, and Jervis, which Bonner subsequently published in 1824.²⁰ The outcome was that Bonner would not undertake what he

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considered to be additional duties, and the bishop would not licence anyone to Holy Trinity who would not undertake them. Bonner remained at Holy Trinity—without episcopal licence—until Close was appointed in March 1824. What is clear is that Bonner was *not* discriminated against because he was *not* an evangelical, as was suggested by a correspondent to *The Gentleman's Magazine*,²¹ but because of his refusal to submit to the bishop's authority.

Francis Close, then assistant curate of Willesden and Kingsbury, Middlesex, tells of a conversation in 1823 while walking down Oxford Street with John Cunningham, vicar of Harrow, and Henry Venn, later to become the secretary of the Church Missionary Society:

Mr Venn mentioned to Mr Cunningham that there was an important church vacant in Cheltenham, and asked him if he knew anyone suited to such a position. Mr Cunningham replied, 'Here is our friend, Close, he is the very man for it'. 'Oh', said Mr Venn, 'I didn't mean that'. 'But I do', said Mr Cunningham, and turning to me, he said, 'Do you, go, Close, to the first coffee house we come to and write to Mr Jervis, the incumbent of Cheltenham, and tell him that I consider you are exactly fitted for the new church there.'²²

Close immediately wrote to Jervis, but, on his arrival home in Kingsbury, found a letter from a city friend which indicated that Jervis, anxious to make an appointment, had already offered the curacy of Holy Trinity to George Cornelius Gorham (1787–1857), later to become the controversial incumbent of Brampford Speke, Exeter. However, Gorham held back his reply for two or three days to allow Close time to apply for the curacy. Close noted 'that two such persons, totally disconnected from each other, should thus have selected me as a fit candidate for this important post struck me as singularly providential.'²³ The following day, Close received a letter from Jervis which stated that he was not in a position to offer him the curacy of Holy Trinity, but could offer him a curacy at the parish church. As the incumbent, Jervis was entitled to appoint to Holy Trinity, but perhaps the bishop was taking more than a passing interest in the appointment following the problems over Bonner, or Simeon was exercising some pressure upon Jervis. Close then consulted Cunningham, who told Close to leave the matter with him, since he felt sure that he could persuade Jervis to give Close the curacy. Then, by return of post, Close received a further letter from Jervis inviting him to Cheltenham to discuss the matter and, on his arrival, Jervis offered him the curacy of Holy Trinity. At this stage, Close was still unaware that Simeon was patron of Cheltenham. Jervis took Close to Gloucester to meet Bishop Ryder, who insisted that his ministry in the town would involve parochial work, as well as duty at Holy Trinity.²⁴ Jervis was certainly clear in his own mind:

I fully concur with the bishop in thinking that no man ought to have Trinity church, and no man ever shall while I remain incumbent, who will not enter fully into all the duties of the parish, *when ever* the incumbent shall require them. If this has not been ever my opinion, it is certainly so now.²⁵

There was some urgency in making an appointment. Not only did Jervis want the position filled, but, because of Ryder's pending translation to Lichfield and Coventry, he would not be in a position to licence Close unless the latter could obtain the necessary signed papers within three days. Close moved quickly. He returned by mail coach to London, 'then despairingly sat down to consider where I could find three beneficed clergymen in the city of London who would sign my testimonials, without which I could not be licenced.'²⁶ That this was not an easy matter, indicates the practical difficulties which evangelicals had to face at that time in the capital. Though there was a growing number of evangelicals, most of them were unbeneficed. Close had hoped that 'my almost only friend' Basil Woodd, the minister of Bentinck Chapel, Marylebone, could have signed the testimonials, but he was out of London at the time. However, Close successfully obtained testimonials from Samuel Crowther, vicar of Christ Church, Newgate; his godfather, Francis Randolf, rector of St George's, Bloomsbury; and his own incumbent, Henry Fly. He then obtained the countersignature of William Howley, bishop of London.

The same evening, Close took the mail coach to Gloucester, and the next morning was received by Bishop Ryder:

'Oh', said he, 'Mr Close, I am very sorry to see you; I hope you have not changed your mind about Trinity church, and you know I could not licence you until you had got all your papers ready.' Upon this I fumbled in my pocket, and calmly produced my papers to his lordship. He was much surprised. Looking at the papers, and seeing that they were alright, and looking at me rather archly, he said, 'Why, Mr Close, you have come by return of post.' With much hospitality and kindness, he both issued my licence, and entertained me hospitably.²⁷

Close was to receive £150 a year:

with the further sum of £30.0.0. or so much thereof as the net income arising to the said Charles Jervis from the reserved rents of the said church of Trinity shall amount to. To be paid to you by the said Charles Jervis by even and quarterly payments and we do injourn you to reside in the parish of Cheltenham whilst you shall continue to serve the said cure.²⁸

He stayed the night in Cheltenham, and returned the following day to Kingsbury, drawing a moral from what

proved to be the most important crisis of my life... that if... the remark-

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able providences had not been met with corresponding energy, it is probable that the important result would not have been accomplished.²⁹

Close began his ministry at Holy Trinity, Cheltenham on 25 March 1824, and preached his farewell sermon on 12 November 1826. Jervis, aided by Close, supported the main evangelical societies of the day. In the tradition of Simeon, support was given to the Church Missionary Society and the London Society for Promoting Christianity Amongst the Jews. Jervis had already been the enthusiastic founder of the short-lived Clewer Church Missionary Society,³⁰ and, not without some opposition, Jervis and Close began the Cheltenham auxiliary of the Jews' Society.³¹ During Jervis' incumbency, local auxiliary committees were formed, in union with the Irish Society of London, for Scriptural Education through the Medium of the Native Tongue, the Ladies Hibernian Female School Society, the British and Foreign Bible Society and the Religious Tract Society, as well as the older Anglican societies, the Society for the Promotion of Christian Knowledge and the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel.

After a short illness, Jervis died at Cheltenham on 28 September 1826, and was buried in the parish church. Funeral sermons were preached by Close and the Rev. G. Gretton. Gretton spoke of the crowd which had assembled at the funeral,

not drawn together by an idle and unfeeling curiosity, but following in sorrow and in tears, their common friend... Let them recall to mind the many qualities of him they have lost, which bound and endeared him to them as a minister and a friend. They can truly say, with what profit to religion he exercised his calling, setting forth in himself zeal without enthusiasm, devotion without bigotry, and fervent piety confirmed by faith and chastened by charity.³²

Within a week of the funeral, Simeon had visited Cheltenham and offered the living to Close. He preached his farewell sermon at Holy Trinity on 12 November, and, on 19 November, his introductory sermon as the perpetual curate of Cheltenham.³³ With Simeon as patron, and with his approved nominee at the parish church, the evangelical succession was guaranteed. Ten years later, and with a further twenty livings in his gift, Simeon believed that 'if I had never done more than purchase Cheltenham, I should be already well repaid for all the pains I have taken, and all the labours I have expended.'³⁴

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NOTES

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- 4 W. B. Crouch, *Materials for a History of Cricklade* (Minety, Wiltshire 1949) pp.54–5.
- 5 *An Act for effectuating an exchange of the advowson of the church of the parish of Bagendon... [for] the impropriate rectory of Cheltenham*. Session 1816–56, Geo. III; Royal Assent, 22 June 1816.
- 6 Gloucestershire County Record Office, GDR 334B, 1804–21, p.148.
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- 8 On Jervis' successor at Clewer, the Rev. William Canning, see G. Hunt, 'A Real-Life "Jane Austen Clergyman"', *Theology*, Vol. LXXIX, May 1976, pp. 151–7.
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- 21 *The Gentleman's Magazine and Historical Chronicle*, Vol. XCVI, July to December 1826, p.583.
- 22 F. Close, MSS 'Autobiography', n.d. (c.1860) p.7.
- 23 *ibid.*, p.7.
- 24 Bonner, *op. cit.*, pp.8, 25, 26.
- 25 *ibid.*, p.26.
- 26 Close, *op. cit.*, p.8.
- 27 *ibid.*, p.10.
- 28 Gloucestershire County Record Office, GDR 341, p.257.
- 29 Close, *op. cit.*, p.10.
- 30 Hole, *op. cit.*, pp.282–3.
- 31 *Cheltenham Journal*, 10 November 1845.
- 32 G. Stretton, *A Sermon, Preached at St Mary's Church, Cheltenham, on Occasion of the Lamented Death of the Rev. Charles Jervis, AM, Late Incumbent of the Parish* (S. Y. Griffith and Co., Cheltenham, n.d.) pp.11, 6–7.

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- 33 F. Close, *A Farewell Sermon, Preached in the Church of the Holy Trinity on Sunday Morning, 12 November, together with an Introductory Sermon, Preached in the Parish Church of Cheltenham, on Sunday Morning, 19 November 1826* (Hatchard, London 1826).
- 34 C. Smyth, *Simeon and Church Order; A Study of the Origins of the Evangelical Revival in Cambridge in the Eighteenth Century* (CUP Cambridge 1940) p.203.

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