

WIDCOMBE & LYNCOMBE LOCAL HISTORY SOCIETY
HISTORICAL NOTE NO. 10 – EYRE CHAPEL, PERRYMEAD

The Eyre Chapel in Bath is located in the southwestern part of the Catholic Cemetery in Perrymead, Bath. It can be reached by Perrymead or, by foot, via Bath Abbey Cemetery using the path opened in 2011 which leads from the mortuary chapel to the gate into Perrymead.



View from the north



The altar



View from the south



Location of the chapel within Perrymead cemetery

The article on the history of the chapel on the following pages, written by Christopher J J Wickham, was published in *Catholic Life* August 2011. It is reproduced with permission.

The chapel is open by appointment to visitors throughout the year: contact Mrs B. Carruthers (Tel: 01684-292600) [Email: belindacarruthers@btinternet.com](mailto:belindacarruthers@btinternet.com)) and takes part in the Bath City Heritage Open Days.

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EYRE CHAPEL, BATH

The Eyre Chapel at Bath is an outstanding example of mid- 19th century Gothic Catholic Revival architecture. Built between 1859 and 1863 as a burial place and chantry chapel for John Lewis Eyre (1789-1880) and his wife, Augustine Cécile Pulcherie (1797-1876), it is one of four chapels associated with the Derbyshire Recusant Catholic family of Eyre and the only one outside Derbyshire, the others being at Hassop, Newbold and Padley.

The architect was Charles Francis Hansom (1816-88) of Bristol. Less well known than his older brother Joseph, inventor of the Hansom cab, he was an accomplished architect in the Gothic revival tradition, strongly influenced by Pugin, of whom he was a devoted disciple.

Perrymead Roman Catholic Cemetery adjoins the much better known Bath Abbey Cemetery. The land for Perrymead was bought for the parish of St John's church in 1856 and a section was acquired in 1859 for the Eyre family. A charming chapel for the parish was consecrated in 1858 and though the architect is described as a Mr Hill, it is much more likely to have been Charles Hansom.

Turning to the Eyre chapel, Pevsner describes it thus: "Eyre Chantry...small but elaborate in Geometric Frenchified Gothic, with a polygonal East end, unbroken ridge line. Polygonal tower and spire, and richly decorated interior".

This miniature jewel of Catholic Gothic Revival architecture is a tribute to the remarkable skills of the stonemasons and craftsmen of Bath at that time, manifested in the stonework and carving. The masonry is banded alternatively smooth and hammer-faced to emulate a polychrome pattern effect and the roof is covered in Welsh slates with a fish-scale pattern and ridged with crested tiles. The porch is approached up steps and over it is carved the family motto

Neminem metue Innocens (Fear No-one if you are Innocent) and their coat of arms and crest, featuring a 'leg and thigh coupéd'. This commemorates the legend of the Eyre family, relating how the first Eyre, whose name was Truelove, came over to England with William the Conqueror, Duke of Normandy and helped to save his life. Afterwards, Duke William, finding that he had lost his leg in the battle, gave him land at Hope in Derbyshire.

Internally, the chapel is divided into a three bay nave with the fourth bay forming an apse. A series of recessed arches go round the chapel supported on columns of Devonshire marble: the screen of hammered ironwork dividing the chapel is by Hardman, and the stained glass windows are by Hardman Powell. The altar is in the form of a sepulchre, with an alabaster figure of Christ carved by Boulton of Cheltenham, over which the altar forms a canopy supported on Irish marble columns. The floor is paved with magnificent Minton tiles.

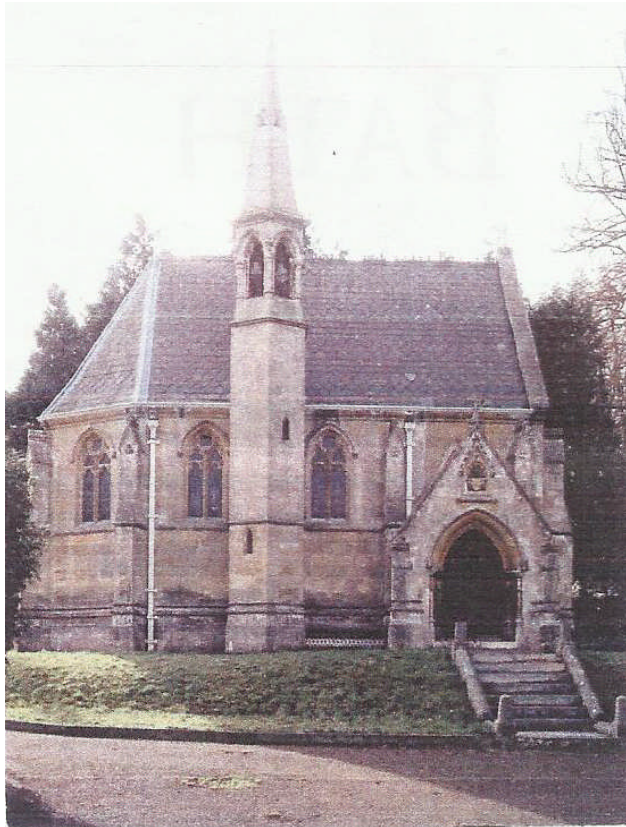
The crypt has a series of three transverse arches and groin vaults, supported on slender shafts of cast iron. The effect has been compared with the work of the great French 19th century architect, Viollet-le-Duc. The very fine stained glass represents saints after whom members of the family were named and to the left of the east window are St John the Evangelist & St Pulcheria, a Byzantine empress, representing the builders of the chapel, John Lewis and Augustine Pulcherie.

John Lewis was the 3rd son of Vincent Eyre (1744- 1801) of Newbold in Derbyshire and his wife Catherine Parker, who died at Bath in 1840 and left 13000 (a very considerable sum - using the average earnings index, worth today £2,300,000) for the building of the Catholic churches in Cardiff and Swansea, stipulating that they must be dedicated to

St David. Her grandson Thomas, who died in 1866 and was the first to be buried in the crypt, ensured that her wishes were carried out and the church in Cardiff opened in 1843.

With his first wife, Sarah Parker, John Lewis had five sons, four of whom became priests, and one daughter, Anne, who married William Grainger and whose son John also became a priest. Sarah died in 1825 and in 1828 he married Augustine Cécile Pulcherie de Sommerey, the daughter of Armand Dumesniel, Marquis de Sommerey and his wife, Cecile Riquet de Caraman, who fled to England as refugees during the French Revolution and settled in Bath. John Lewis and Augustine had one daughter, Pulcherie, who sadly died in infancy. It is surely not fanciful to think that this French inheritance, so marked in the chapel architecture, was in Hansom's mind when he created his designs.

John Lewis seems to have been a successful entrepreneur and was a founding director of the South Western Railway Company, taking for many years a leading part in the development of that railway. His piety and faith were recognised by Pope Gregory XVI, who created him a Count of the Lateran Hall and Apostolic Palace in 1843. The best known of his four priest sons is Charles Eyre, the first post- Reformation Roman Catholic Archbishop of Glasgow. The others being John, a priest in Newcastle, William S.J., Rector of Stonyhurst and Vincent Eyre, parish priest in London, first of St Mary's Cadogan Street and then Hampstead. Count Eyre's only grandson, John Grainger, ordained in 1881, was sent to Truro in Cornwall where he employed a Cornish architect, Sylvanus Trevail, to build a Catholic church there, dedicated to St Piran, Moving later to Devon, he started the Catholic mission in Exmouth.



The chapel has been looked after since the 1930s by a charitable trust (Charity No 233843) and today is headed by Major Eyre's daughter, Belinda Carruthers: Although only a ten minute taxi ride from Bath station, the location of Perrymead Cemetery, peaceful and rural in feeling though it is, with sheep often grazing in the field above, is on a lane vulnerable to vandalism. Sadly the charming Lodge built at the entrance for the caretaker (and probably also the work of Hansom) has been allowed to lie derelict and boarded up for many years. It is to be hoped that a way can be found to restore and find a use for it, helping to improve the security for the cemetery and chapels. The important stained glass of the Eyre chapel has previously been damaged by stones thrown at the windows. All the furnishings have been removed from the chapel, including a fine cross and candlesticks and exquisite vestments made in the 1880s by the French Carmelite nuns who founded the convent at St Charles Square, and precious relics.

The future of this beautiful chapel (at present in reasonably good condition, although there is damp in the crypt which has had to be closed for health and safety reasons) remains a financial concern - the original endowment barely covers the insurance and it is hoped to launch an appeal in the lead-up to 2013, the 150th anniversary of the chapel's consecration by Bishop Clifford of Clifton.

The Eyre chapel at Newbold, now on the outskirts of Chesterfield, in Derbyshire and given by the family to the diocese of Nottingham in 1949, was used until the 1960s for parish Masses but, after the opening of a large new church nearby in 1965, it fell into disuse and has now found a new lease of life as a place of worship for the Greek Orthodox Church and for local events and meetings. The Trustees have tried to explore whether greater use of the Bath chapel could be found other than for family burials and Masses but this has proved difficult. A few years ago the Russian Orthodox Church in Bath showed serious interest in using the chapel but in the end decided not to.

Also in the crypt repose other members of the family; who continued in the 20th century the tradition of service to the Church, including Major William Eyre, who died in 1988 and gave 40 years of service to the oldest Roman Catholic charity in England, now known as St Joseph's Homes, Brook Green, London. Here too reposes his sister, Dorothy, who died in 1994, a nun for 70 years in the Sacred Heart Order and who was responsible for building a Teacher Training College in Fenham, Newcastle.

Her name recalls a namesake and forebear, another Dorothy Eyre, of Hassop, who in the 17th century was an Augustinian nun in Paris, reminding us that for nearly three centuries Roman Catholics, as a persecuted minority, often fled to the continent so they could be free to practise their faith - fines, imprisonment, control orders, the necessity of obtaining permits to travel even in England, double land taxes and exclusion from public life, were among the challenges to be faced.

