
Father Dolling and Prinknash Park

by Brian Torode (1995) (copyright rests with Richard Barton)



Prinknash 1929

Whilst sitting outside the chapel at St. Peter's Grange some time ago, my thoughts wandered back to a biography which I had just finished reading. Prinknash may be as old in parts as the 14C but mention of Prinknash as a residence of the Abbot of Gloucester is first made in 1526. The original house was rebuilt and enlarged by the last Abbot of Gloucester, William Parker, whose tomb is in Gloucester Cathedral although the whereabouts of his corpse is unknown.

At the dissolution of the monasteries, the County of Gloucester was created an Episcopal See and the former Abbot of Tewkesbury became the first Bishop of Gloucester. The Manor of Prinknash was rented to successive noble families until 1628 when Sir John Bridgeman, Chief Justice of Gloucester, purchased the manor jointly with his son. At this time the Chapel was in a ruinous condition with part of one wall being entirely razed to the ground. Sir John made it a priority to have the chapel restored and it was eventually consecrated by Bishop Goodman of Gloucester. Rudder records that a room in the house was consecrated as a chapel in 1629 and dedicated to St. Peter. Bishop Goodman later was to become a Catholic.

Horace Walpole writing in 1774 of a visit to Prinknash, describes the chapel as low and small but antique with painted glass with many angels in their coronation robes – i.e. wings and crowns.

Prinknash passed to different families during the next centuries until 1847 when it was sold to James Acker of Larkhill who, since 1841, had been M.P. for Ludlow. He carried out further restoration and refurbishment of the chapel but it was a later owner, Thomas Dyer Edwardes who was responsible for lavishing more care and attention on the chapel than it had had since the days of Abbot Parker.

After buying Prinknash in 1888, Edwardes added an apsidal sanctuary and furnished it with plate and embroidered vestments. He had a villa in Nice and while there on holiday he heard a Fr. Dolling preach on behalf of his Landport (Portsmouth) mission and “he at once captivated me with his bright and boyish personality. He spoke with a frankness and originality the like of which I had never come across before. He asked me afterwards to come and see him at Landport on my return. His magnetic personality captivated you; you felt as if taken possession of; I gained in him a priceless thing – a true friend on whom one can rely in joy and in sorrow.’

On his return to England Mr. Edwardes frequently asked Dolling and his fellow clergy to come to Prinknash for a rest and a change, and there they were always honoured and welcome guests. When staying at Prinknash he preached in the chapel on Sundays and the addresses, according to Mr. Edwardes, were such as to touch the hearts of all who heard them. “I was constantly being asked when he would be coming back to Prinknash. He dedicated the new altar and apse in the chapel and once gave a retreat for many of the local clergy. I was told by his sister that on his last illness he was constantly talking of Prinknash and hoping that if God spared his life, he might be able to go down there again and be in a chair on the lawn. But that was not to be.”



So, what do we know of this Anglican priest who so impressed Mr. Edwardes that he was invited to dedicate the altar in the restored chapel?

Robert Dolling was born in 1851 in Ireland, the son of an evangelical rector and landowner. He was no academic but eventually left Cambridge with a degree. He became influenced by the famous Anglo-Catholic, Fr. Stanton – who incidentally came from Stroud but, at that time, was on the staff of St. Alban’s Holborn. Dolling offered himself for ordination and after training at Salisbury Theological College, he was ordained and began his work among men and boys in the tough area of Stepney.

From the Orange Order in Ireland he had learned the value of colourful pageantry and “Solemn Vespers alternated on weekday evenings with our little dissenting services of extempore prayer”. He was invited by Winchester to take over their mission at Landport where he discovered an atmosphere of utter hopelessness. St. Agatha’s Mission had been started in 1882 and was one of several slum missions adopted by the Public Schools. The problems of the area, with its fifty-one pubs and as many brothels, presented Fr. Dolling with quite a challenge. During a period of ten years, he opened almshouses, gymnasiums,

communal eating houses for up to 200 children at a sitting and the Vicarage was open house to anyone who would come.

By 1895 a great Anglican church was opened to replace the humble mission chapel – a service at which Fr. Dolling preached to over 600 men. The Bishop soon received complaints about his ritualism but recognised the vicar's qualities and no charges were brought. He made many enemies as brothels were closed and Trades Unions encouraged. However, in 1895, the newly appointed bishop refused to license the new church because 'Requiems' were celebrated on one of the side altars – this being only one of the many liturgical deviations which the Bishop discovered. He ordered Fr. Dolling to conform to the rites and services of the Book of Common Prayer and Dolling replied with his resignation.

The shock was felt not only in Portsmouth but nationally. Fr. Dolling was out of work for eighteen months until he was appointed Vicar of Poplar where he did good work under a sympathetic bishop. He campaigned vigorously for better housing, water and sanitary conditions. After a period of declining health he died on 15th May 1902.

He had lived a life of Franciscan sparseness and often sold his belongings to pay bills. He loved ritual and claimed that where there is no music or ritual people would be driven to the chapels. He also was critical of Oxbridge educated clergy, claiming that they were totally divorced from the ordinary people to whom they should be ministering. Nevertheless, he cultivated the wealthy whose consciences he stirred and from whom he received many generous donations. Such was his effect on Dyer Edwardes.

Mr. Dyer Edwardes was, himself, involved with the movement to establish a Benedictine community of monks within the Church of England and having no male heir to inherit his property, and his only daughter having married well, he decided to approach the then Anglican Abbot of the Benedictines of Caldey Island, with a view to bequeathing to them the former residence of Abbot Parker at Prinknash. Its small chapel seemed ideal for such a community which was, at the time, seeking to establish a daughter foundation in the Cotswolds. Abbot Carlyle visited Prinknash and was impressed but, not having any monks to spare at that time to set up the foundation, he declined the offer, for the moment at least, until he had had time to take stock of the situation. He had in fact, only just been left the Abbot's Lodging at Pershore Abbey.

In March, 1913, the Anglican Monks on Caldey were received into the Church of Rome and hopes of Prinknash faded for them as did Edwardes' hopes for Prinknash. Eleven years were to pass by before Edwardes too became a Roman Catholic and in 1924 he again made his offer to the now Roman Catholic Benedictine Monks on Caldey. The offer was tentatively accepted and the property was inspected on 10th February 1926. On the monks' inspection tour of Prinknash, news was brought to them of the death of Mr. Dyer Edwardes, at his villa in Naples. Of course his death made the Deed of Conveyance inoperative and the estate legally passed to his grandson. In the event he said that he had no desire – nor need – to contest his grandfather's wishes and he did, in fact, honour his grandfather's intentions in the matter. All

the valuables in the house had to be sold to pay death duties. The new occupants – and owners – arrived from Caldey on October 6th, 1928.



Prinknash 1934

But what of the Anglican connection?

The medieval glass from the windows in the library now adorn the cloisters of Gloucester Cathedral – the South walk – and some of the stalls in the chapel come from the Anglican Benedictine Monastery of Our Lady and St. Dnstan at Llanthony, or rather at Capel-y-Ffin, in the Black Mountains. On the death of this Abbey's founder in 1909, the notorious Father Ignatius of Llanthony, the Capel-y-Ffin Abbey passed in his will to the sister community, then still Anglican, on the Island of Caldey. Some of the plate and statuary, as well as vestments, also came to Caldey and these are now at Prinknash or at Farnborough Abbey.

From Ireland to Cambridge, to Landport to Poplar, from Caldey to Prinknash – and Fr. Dolling is the link.



Prinknash 1934