

CATHOLIC PRESTBURY

by Roger Beacham (copyright)

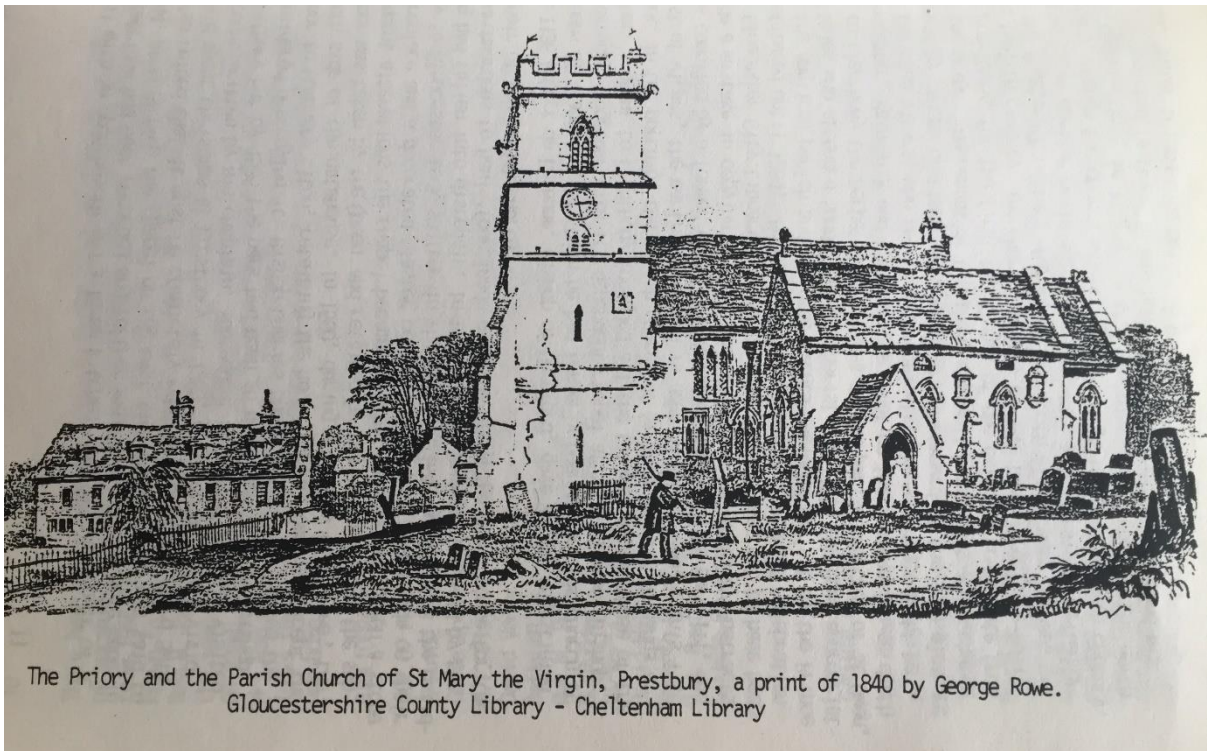
First published in Journal 11 of the Gloucestershire and North Avon Catholic History Society, Autumn 1989.

The name Prestbury derives from the Anglo-Saxon 'Preosdabyrig' – the priests' fortified place, so named, it has been suggested, after a defended manor house of the priests of the Cheltenham minster, whose lands were leased to the Bishop of Hereford in the eighth century [i]

By 1136 a large area in the north-west of the parish had been made into a park by the bishop and stocked with deer, rabbits and other game. After Ledbury, Prestbury became the second in importance of the bishops' estates, and they maintained there a moated, stone manor house as one of their residences. Pottery found on the site, near Shaw Green, may indicate that there had been a house there in the eleventh century. The site was excavated in 1951 and revealed part of the plan which included a hall with an open hearth and a large kitchen. In 1289 the repair of a drawbridge had been recorded and further extensive repairs were made in 1344. At this time the chapel on the west side of the house was said to be 'so ruined that it must be completely rebuilt'. Bishop Richard Swinfield spent Christmas at Prestbury in 1289, of which we have a vivid account written by his chaplain. Subsequent bishops frequently visited Prestbury but by 1535 the park had been so neglected that the bishop considered destroying it. Bishop Charles Booth had in 1531 leased the manor to Humphrey Elton, retaining the house for his own use except the south side of the gatehouse. In 1560, during a vacancy of the See, the manor was taken by the Queen and retained by the crown. During the subsequent alterations the chapel became a living room and was given a stone fireplace and a decorated plaster ceiling. A troop of Roundheads on their way to Gloucester took shelter in the house in 1643 but by 1698 the building had fallen into disrepair. In that year Mr Baghott was paid by the churchwardens to haul 'four loades of stone' from the manor house for the repair of the parish church.

In 1136 Robert de Bethune, Bishop of Hereford, gave to the Augustinian Canons of Llanthony, of which he had formerly been prior, the church at Prestbury, together with its dependent chapel at Sevenhampton. Bishop Robert's grant to Llanthony included all the tithes, except those of the park. In the porch of the parish church of St Mary the Virgin hangs a list of vicars, the earliest of whom is John of Naas, 1280, (this list was compiled by a former vicar, the Rev. John Baghot De la Bere III, who made a mistake in copying the earliest date from the Hockaday Abstracts at Gloucester City Library, for these show John of Naas not to have been instituted until 1284. However, 1280 was kept as a year of celebration by the Anglican parish and the many events included a visit by the Prince of Wales who attended Sunday Sung Eucharist.) In 1395 the Pope appropriated to Llanthony the perpetual vicarages of the parish churches of St Owen, Gloucester, Painswick and Prestbury, so that on the resignation or death of the then vicars, who were secular priests, the vicarages might be served by canons of Llanthony

appointed and removed at the sole pleasure of the prior. The canons of Llanthony may well have built a new church at Prestbury, for the first two stages of the existing tower date from the twelfth century. The church appears to have been largely re-built in the fourteenth century when north and south aisles were perhaps added to an earlier building. The rood stairs have survived virtually intact, though the church was heavily restored in the nineteenth century. Sir Robert Atkyns in 1712 wrote that the glass in a window in the north aisle depicted 'a fryer in his habit ... with these words round his head, "Mater Dei Memento mei"'. A window in the south aisle portrayed John Wyche, Prior of Llanthony 1409-1436, and the initials J.W. appeared in other windows. The present glass dates from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.



To the west of the church stands the house known as the Priory dating from the fourteenth century, when the Prior of Llanthony had a house at Prestbury. The building was extended in the sixteenth or early seventeenth century and cased in stone in the eighteenth century. Some of the external timbering was restored in the late nineteenth century when the house was again extended. As Robert Sweeney has written, 'the title of the house ... probably grew out of a post Reformation folk memory that "in the old days," the Prior (i.e. of Llanthony Secunda) was the important man who came to the house or sent his representatives to collect his dues on the quarter days. Prior plus house equals Priory, at least in folk memory. At any rate the misnomer is an ancient one ...' [ii]. Tradition associates the three sixteenth or seventeenth century stone houses in Deep Street with the Llanthony property, while the garden of the adjoining Reform Cottage, a converted barn, is known locally as 'the monks' burial ground'.

The Reformation came to Prestbury when the Prior of Llanthony surrendered to the King's commissioners on March 10th 1539, and the priory lands and rights in Prestbury passed to the Crown.

The advowson (the right of presentation to the benefice) was owned by the Baghott family, long established in Prestbury, from 1622, although they had presented from 1581. The advowson was sold in 1823, but by 1860 John Edwards (afterwards Baghot De la Bere) was patron and the patronage has since descended in his family.

By the 1540's William Baghott had a 'fair house' at Noverton called Hall Place which in 1569 was described as 'lately belonging to Llanthony Priory'. Now known as Upper Noverton Farm it has a small room traditionally said to have been a chapel. By 1700 the Baghott family had moved to The Priory and had intermarried with the De la Beres of Southam. William Baghott (1690-1764), eldest surviving son of another William Baghott and his wife Anne, nee De la Bere, adopted the surname Baghott De la Bere upon inheriting his mother's family estates. The line became extinct in 1821 when the Prestbury estates were inherited by the Rev. John Edwards, Vicar of Prestbury from 1824. Edwards, a descendant of the Baghott De la Bere family through his mother, adopted the surname Baghot De la Bere in 1879.

Edwards had been succeeded as Vicar of Prestbury in 1860 by his son, also the Rev. John Edwards, afterwards Baghot De la Bere. This Father Edwards had been assistant curate of St Paul's Knightsbridge in London, one of the first churches to 'translate the principles of the Oxford Movement into practice terms in a parish'. Edwards immediately made plans to restore the church at Prestbury to accord with the teaching of the Tractarians. The work proceeded in stages with the removal of the galleries, the extension of the aisles, the replacement of the east window and the restoration of the chancel with a greatly enriched sanctuary and new high altar, the focus of the new vicar's teaching. The work was completed in 1868 and the church re-opened on the Feast of the Transfiguration. From that date Prestbury became a noted centre of Anglo-Catholicism, with vestments, incense, altar and processional candles and a daily celebration of the Eucharist. Many of the leading Anglo-Catholic clergy preached and celebrated at Prestbury and Father Edwards played an active role in the Catholic movement in the Church of England. He was present at Newman's investiture as cardinal in 1879 and was among the more militant members of the English Church Union.

The infamous Bishop Mathew (who oscillated between Canterbury and Rome for most of his life), while a pupil at Cheltenham College in 1866 attended both St Mary's, Prestbury, and St Gregory's, Cheltenham, 'without distinction' and much later wrote that he 'hardly understood the differences between the services [iii], although, Edwards, unlike some other Anglo-Catholics remained faithful to the Book of Common Prayer.



Though supported by his parishioners Edwards' work at Prestbury was not accomplished without great difficulty. He was harassed continually by Protestant extremists, and mobs (paid, it was rumoured by the Dutch Baron de Ferrieres) often came out from Cheltenham to disturb the services.

In 1866 a red brick chapel had been opened in Deep Street, almost opposite the Vicarage, by members of the Highbury Congregational Chapel at Cheltenham, 'to afford to the inhabitants of Prestbury ... an opportunity of attending the means of grace, administered ... according with the word of God ... believing as they do, that ritualism which now obtains in many of the Churches is nothing short of Popery, in the midst of Protestantism ...'. [iv]

Nationally the opposition to the ritualists was formidable, culminating in 1874 in the Public Worship Regulation Act. Action by the Church authorities against the Vicar of Prestbury began in 1874 and continued until in 1881 he was deprived of the living. For a further two years an appeal against the judgement allowed him to remain at Prestbury until he finally resigned in 1884, allowing his father, the patron, to appoint a like-minded priest in his stead.



Congregational Church, Prestbury

The difficulties and uncertainties of life in the Church of England at this time probably played a part in the decision of some to seek admission to the Roman Catholic Church. At Prestbury among the first of several notable converts (or 'perverts' as they were vilified by a hostile press!), was the assistant curate, the Rev George Angus. Born in Scotland and brought up as a Presbyterian, early in life 'in obedience to conscience and conviction' he became a member of the Church of England. Ordained deacon in 1866 he came to Prestbury in the autumn of that year and in the autumn of the following year was ordained priest. His conversion to Roman Catholicism in 1873 brought some obloquy upon his former vicar, but, in 1881, Edwards could generously write that he regarded Angus 'with unchanged affection' and that Angus' 'bright and genial presence live(d) happily in the memory of many of his Prestbury friends'. [v] In 1876 Angus was ordained priest for the Westminster diocese serving as chaplain to the Catholic University College, Kensington. Later he became Missioner at St James' Church, St Andrew's, Fife, where he died in March 1909, only a few weeks before the death of his former vicar, the Rev. John Baghot De la Bere, formerly Edwards.

In January 1875, writing from St Mary of the Angels, Bayswater, Angus contributed a long letter on his conversion to the Cheltenham Examiner (issue of January 6th). Criticism had been levelled at the Vicar of Prestbury that by his teaching parishioners and in particular his former curate, had been led to Rome. What was this teaching? It included 'such points of faith and practice as the Real Presence, the Eucharistic Sacrifice, the honour due to the Saints and Servants of God, Confession and Absolution, Prayers for the Dead and what may be called Sacramental Worship'. All these, wrote Angus, he held as an Anglican, but he had not been taught them at Prestbury but held them 'long before' he 'saw the village or the vicar'. It was not Edwards' teaching that led Angus to Roman Catholicism but his own conviction that the 'one true Church of God' was that 'in communion with, and obedience to the See of Rome'.

In 1874 Frederick Shelton of Tatchley House, who had been Vicar's churchwarden, was received at St Gregory's into the Roman Catholic Church. The usual tirade followed in the local press although an anonymous correspondent to the Cheltenham Examiner (issue of December 9th 1874, in defence of Edwards' teaching, pointed out that Captain Shelton had, when resident at Clarence Square in Cheltenham, been a frequent worshipper at St Gregory's and 'a Romanist in inclination' before his removal to Prestbury.



Craven House to the right, facing

Another convert in 1883 was the former organist at St Mary's, William Balcomb [vi], a builder, house-decorator and plumber, of Craven House in the High Street. Mrs. Balcomb took in boarders advertising 'country apartments convenient for golf and hunting', but despite their various activities the Balcombs appear to have had severe financial problems and Craven House was heavily mortgaged. During the eighteen-nineties Balcomb worked in his spare time on a new house in Mill Street with the object of making it his home. However, in August 1895 when the house was near completion Balcomb, probably due to his difficult financial position, sold it. The building, 'long and narrow in structure and 'already 'somewhat ecclesiastical in appearance' became the home of a branch mission from St Gregory's, Cheltenham. The roof of pitch pine was surmounted by a miniature bell turret, and the exterior east wall ornamented by a small statue of the Virgin and Child, from the studio of Alfred Wall of Cheltenham. Several rooms on the ground floor were knocked into one to form a small chapel capable of holding about fifty worshippers. The furnishings were said to be plain, the reredos being the only feature worthy of notice; bought at Bruges, it had two panels, one representing the Virgin, the other Our Lord revealing the Sacred Heart. The western end of the building became a separate house known as Brook Cottage, though whether this happened immediately or a little later is unclear. Other rooms were used as domestic quarters by the caretaker although it was hoped later to have a resident priest. Harriet Thompson of

Cheltenham, widow of the convert Anglican clergyman and writer Edward Healy Thompson, was reported to have been a considerable benefactress' [vii].



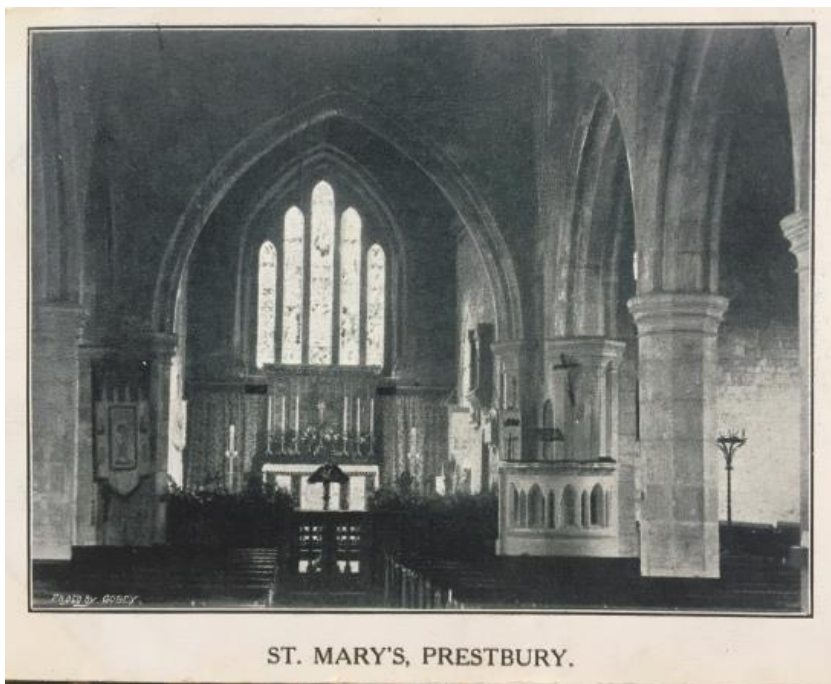
Chapel of Our Lady of Good Counsel, Prestbury 1895-1902

Dedicated to Our Lady of Good Counsel [viii], the mission was blessed by Dom Aloysius Wilkinson, O.S.B., Rector of St Gregory's, on December 18th 1895, then, but no longer, observed as the Feast of the Expectation of the Blessed Virgin Mary. Low Mass was said and Father Wilkinson gave a brief sermon from the altar steps (there not being a pulpit) on the text, 'behold, I bring you tidings of great joy, this day is born to you a Saviour, who is Christ the Lord'. After the sermon, the choir, led by Madame Rotundo and including the assistant priest, Father Trehearne, sang the Litany of the Virgin, and after the elevation, 'O Salutaris'. A Miss Bennett presided at the harmonium [ix]. The mission closed in 1902, probably due to the small number of Roman Catholics then living in Prestbury. It was probably always run from St Gregory's and it seems unlikely that the aim of having a resident priest was achieved, although little is known of the short life of the mission. The building reverted to its original function and is today a single house known as Wayside. On the east end wall is an empty niche that formerly held the statue of the Virgin and Child, while the upper panes of the windows on this side of the house are still of stained glass. Richard Barton has pointed out that Our Lady of Good Counsel was also the dedication adopted for the new chapel of the Poor Sisters of Nazareth in Bath Road, Cheltenham, blessed by Father Wilkinson on December 11th 1895.



Chapel of Our Lady of Good Counsel

In the early nineteen-seventies the late William Mitten of Morningside Lodge showed me a small red brick building, then used as a garden shed, in the grounds of Morningside in the High Street. This he said had been built as a chapel for Violet (nee Ede), the convert wife of Auston Rotheram, who lived at Morningside during the nineteen thirties. According to Mr Mitton (a loyal member of St Gregory's congregation) the Bishop of Clifton refused to consecrate the chapel due to the few members of his flock in Prestbury. However, the building was so small it would appear more likely to have been built as a private oratory for Mrs Rotheram. By 1938 the Rotherams had moved to 279, Gloucester Road, Cheltenham, where Major Rotheram died on November 13th 1946.



Following the Second World War the population of Prestbury expanded rapidly. The 1931 Census had recorded 1,426 people; by 1951 this had increased to 2,858 despite the fact that part of the civil parish had been taken into Cheltenham in 1935. The building of the new estates at Finchcroft and Lynworth during the nineteen fifties, provided housing for new residents who had swelled the population to 4,325 by 1961. The number of Roman Catholics in Prestbury increased in proportion, and in 1946 land at Lynworth was earmarked for a Mass centre. On January 3rd 1958, the Feast of the Holy Name, Mass was offered for the first time at the Women's Institute Hall at the Weighbridge in Prestbury Road. After Norman and Joan Sutherland moved to Prestbury from Bishop's Cleeve, Joan began energetically to work for the new Mass centre, and in October 1959 the first bazaar was held at the former Anglican Church House in the High Street. In April 1960 the Catholic Association (now the Holy Name Association) was formed and dances and social evenings held at the Anglican Church Hall in Bouncers Lane. In April 1961 the Lynworth and Prestbury Catholic Women's Association was formed holding monthly meetings in members' houses. In August of that year one of the members, Mrs O'Shea, suggested that the organisation should be renamed the Marian Society and with the approval of Father Ambrose Crowley O.S.B., Parish Priest of St Gregory's, this was done. During these years Mrs O'Shea cared faithfully at her home in Bouncers Lane for a statue of Our Lady, given by St Gregory's, which was taken each Sunday to the Women's Institute Hall. In 1962 to facilitate fund-raising, permission was given by the Bishop of Clifton to name the as yet unbuilt Mass-centre. Three names were suggested, St Benedict's, Holy Ghost and Holy Name. The last was chosen because of its association with the date of the first Mass in the W.I. Hall. Building of the Mass-centre in Pennine Road began in 1964, members of the congregation helping and doing the interior decoration. The altar was made by Cheltenham Shopfitting Company to a design by Norman Sutherland, and various gifts were made including hassocks from All Saints' Anglican Church, Cheltenham. The Holy Name Hall was opened on September 7th 1964.

In the nineteen thirties the Anglicans established a 'Mission room' in Swindon Lane, which was later extended and dedicated to St Nicolas. In 1968 an appeal was launched to build a permanent church and the Vicar of Prestbury, Canon Norman Kent, approached the Rev James Donovan, parish priest of St Gregory's, with a view to sharing the building. Though Father James keenly welcomed the proposal and was supported by the Vicar-General, Monsignor Joseph Buckley, Bishop Joseph Rudderham of Clifton, a conservative, firmly rejected the idea.

Compared with the situation of a century ago, it is a matter for much thankfulness that today's positive ecumenical climate exists. At Prestbury since 1977 a joint Christmas card has been delivered to all village homes by the three churches, Anglican, Roman Catholic and United Reformed (formerly Congregational). The Week of Prayer for Christian Unity sees active Roman Catholic participation and one Roman Catholic, whose Catholic adopted son formerly sang in St Mary's choir, is a regular worshipper at Anglican Evensong. In 1976 during the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, with the permission of the Bishop of Gloucester, Father James Donovan celebrated Mass at St Mary's using the Anglican holy vessels and vestments; the Vicar of Prestbury, the Rev. Ian Hazlewood, acting as deacon and the church servers assisting.

‘No one communicated and this’, wrote Father Hazlewood, ‘we offered as a sign of our disunity’.

In 1984 the Gloucestershire branch of the Ecumenical Society of the Blessed Virgin Mary was formed, through the initiative of the Vicar of Prestbury and the labours of the assistant curate, the Rev Paul Noble, with the support of Father James Donovan. On December 5th 1985 the Rt Rev Mervyn Alexander, Bishop of Clifton, and national co-chairman of the E.S.B.V.M., addressed members of the Gloucestershire branch at St Nicolas’ Anglican Church, Swindon Lane, on ‘the challenge of Mary’. May we all join with Our Lady, under whose patronage and protection Prestbury has been for centuries, in praying for that unity which is her Son’s will.

[i] A. H. Smith: The place Names of Gloucestershire Part II, 1964.

[ii] Robert Sweeney: Two hundred years of church life in Prestbury, n.d.

[iii] Arnold Harris Mathew: An episcopal odyssey, 1915.

[iv] J. Hewinson: Brief history of Prestbury Congregational Church 1866-1966, 1966.

[v] John Baghot De la Bere: The Prosecution, a letter to the Lord Archbishop of Canterbury, 1881.

[vi] William Balcomb or Balcombe was baptised at Cheltenham Parish Church on 16th November 1838 and in the register his father was described as a Plumber and Glazier of 4 Montpellier Villas. At the time of his christening his parents, William and Mary Ann (nee Cooke), had only just married, on 25th June 1838, at the Church of St Mary de Lode in the City of Gloucester. When, in 1866, William married Emma Freeman at Prestbury his occupation was given on the wedding certificate as Organist. Looking at the evidence provided in the census returns, it would appear that William was torn between pursuing a musical career and continuing in his father’s trade. The 1871 census finds the young couple living in Portland Parade, Cheltenham, and, at that time William was working as a Plumber and Glazier. Ten years later William and his family were living in Prestbury, at Craven House, and he was then working as an Organist as well as being the Collector of Rates. This was two years before he was received into full communion with the Roman Catholic Church. The 1891 census return listed him as being a Plumber and Decorator of Craven House. Later William moved into Cheltenham to live with his brother John, a Chemist of 11 Suffolk Road, but then returned to Prestbury to lodge with a family at Salford Cottage. Surprisingly, his wife, Emma, appears to have been running a boarding house in Fulham, London. William predeceased his wife, dying on 19th February 1928, at 11 New Street, Ross-on-Wye.

[vii] Our Lady of Good Counsel or Mater boni consilii. This title of the Blessed Virgin Mary resulted from devotion to a fresco, said to be miraculous, which is found in the thirteenth century Augustinian Church at Genazzano, near Rome. Over the centuries interest in Our Lady of Good Counsel had grown and this culminated in the title being added to the Litany of Loreto by Pope Leo XIII on 22nd April 1903.

[viii] Mrs Harriet Diana Healy Thompson (1811-1896), wife of Edward Healy Thompson and aunt of the poet, Francis Thompson. On her husband's conversion in 1846, Harriet was also received and like him she devoted herself to Catholic literary work, writing various biographies, histories and novels.

[ix] Cheltenham Chronicle, December 21st 1895, Cheltenham Examiner, December 25th 1895.

My thanks are due to the Very Rev. James Donovan for his reminiscences regarding the possible sharing of St Nicholas' Church; to Dom Aidan Bellenger for information on George Angus after his conversion; to my good friend and mentor, Canon Harry Hartley (sometime assistant curate at Prestbury) for reading my notes, and to Richard Barton, not only for asking me to write the article but for his encouragement and advice.