

The Victorians were religious but seldom spiritual. Their religion was one based, as was their economy, on bricks and mortar. Its characteristics were discipline, respectability, patriotism, and at its best, charity. Spirituality was suspect, suggesting something slightly effeminate in men, sexual in women, and its encouragement in religious worship definitely foreign.

The safe road to heaven was via church building and attendance, Bible-reading and sermon-listening and missionary work both at home and abroad. The threat to this solid respectability was twofold, the revived interest in ritualism created by the Oxford (Anglo Catholic) Movement, and even greater, the new science, fueled by archaeological and anthropological research, which shook the old fundamental beliefs literally to their foundations.

Victorian artists were fond of religious subjects, whether scenes of church or chapel-going, or Biblical stories, popular fiction had a strong moral bias, particularly that directed at children, yet in 1851 it was estimated that less than half the population (just over 7 million out of 18 million) attended a place of worship. Henry Mayhew wrote that religion was a regular puzzle to costers. 'They mix up being religious with being respectable. They see people coming out of church and as they are mostly well-dressed there is very few of their sort among them.'

A scavenger told Mayhew that he never went to any church or chapel because he 'had not any clothes that was fit to go in and he supposed he would not be admitted to such fine places in his working dress.'

'Once I was in church but felt queer as one does in them strange places and never went again. They're fittest for rich people'. He said he had heard about religion and about God Almighty and he was satisfied with what he knew and felt about it. Another coster lad said he had never been in a church but he had heard that God made heaven and earth, but he had not heard of his making the sea. He had also heard of Jesus Christ. 'Yes I heard of him, Our Redeemer, well I wish I could redeem my Sunday togs from my uncles!'. Another 'intelligent and trustworthy man' told Mayhew that not three in a hundred costermongers had ever been in the interior of a church or other place of worship, or knew what was meant by Christianity. Of all things, he said, they hated tracts 'because the people leaving them never give them anything as they can read and they are vexed to be bothered with it.' They respected the City Missionaries because they read to them, and the costers would listen to reading even when they did not understand it, and because they visited the sick and sometimes gave oranges and such like to the children.

The same informant said that if the costers had to profess themselves of some religion tomorrow they would all become Roman Catholic because they often lived in the same courts as the poor Irish and 'when the Irish are sick be sure there come to them the priest and the Sisters of Charity, many a man that's not a Catholic has rotted and died without any good person near him, costers reckon that the best religions are those that gives most in charity and they think the Catholics do this.'

Such tolerance towards Roman Catholics was not shared by other sections of the population whose antipathy was based as much on the Englishman's suspicion and aggression towards anything foreign, rather than a matter of dogma. The bogey of Popery which had been laid to rest for many decades had been revived in the 1830s by the advent of the Oxford Movement.

In July 1833, John Keble, a comparatively unknown clergyman and Christian poet and hymn writer, preached what has become known as the 'Assize Sermon' at Oxford on the subject of National Apostasy (total departure from one's religion or belief). A comparatively political sermon (it was concerned with the encroachment by Parliament on the rights of some Irish bishops) it had far deeper significance in its condemnation of the increasing secularisation of the church in English life and a symptom of a much wider and graver crisis. Keble, and those who supported his views, felt that the Church was becoming little more than a brotherhood for the promotion of social virtue and matters of dogmatic belief, ecclesiastical organisation and liturgical observance, with its dignity and inspiration, were of secondary importance. Certainly in the first half of the nineteenth century most churches would have had bands instead of an organ and the central part of the service would have been the sermon, invariably long and probably obscure, the priest would not have been robed and Holy Communion would be celebrated at most once a month on Sacrament Sunday.

John Keble's sermon had been followed by 'Tracts for our Times' a series of pamphlets produced by a group of Oxford dons addressed to all those who wished to see new life injected into the Church of England, their authors included Edward Pusey and John Henry Newman who was not so long after to become a Roman Catholic and eventually a Cardinal. The opponents of this Oxford Movement, ever ready to exploit the built-in national fear of Roman Catholicism, condemned the whole business as 'Popery!'.
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In 1840 a disciple of the new Movement had been appointed to the parish church of St Paul's, at Knightsbridge, and soon began to make changes, a new ritualistic form of service and the introduction of incense, which low churchmen irreverently described as 'bells and smells'. He also wore a white linen surplice to preach, instead of the customary black gown, something which profoundly shocked Thackeray. Thomas Arnold also sought the reform of the English church but was bitterly opposed to the Oxford Movement which he described as the 'Oxford Malignants'. In 1858 the curate of St Barnabas, Pimlico, another 'high church' which has remained so to this day, was deprived of his office for refusing to give up the practice of hearing confessions, which the Bishop of London, Charles Blomfield had described 'as the source of unspeakable abominations.'

'We know what ritualism means!' cried the Rev George Chute, a vehement Evangelical, during the debates which ensued in the midst of the Oxford Movement. 'It means the defilement of your daughters the seduction of your wives and all the other evils that abound on the Continent!'

Even greater than the anxiety over the Oxford Movement, which was after all only the fad of a group of religious revolutionaries in the minds of most solid English churchmen and women, was the proposal by the Pope to give English metropolitan titles to Roman Catholic Bishops, an action regarded as an invasion by the Protestant English, who although they did not attend church very often were fiercely opposed to any alien creed. They needed little encouragement to start demonstrating and burning Popish effigies, thus stirring up fearful recollections of the events some seventy years earlier when the Bill for the Relief of Catholic Dissenters abolished a number of penal laws against Catholics. This had aroused indignation among Protestants, especially in Scotland and spread south to London, where Lord George Gordon led a riotous mob towards the House of Commons and the town was briefly embroiled in chaos and violence. No one now alive could personally recall the troubles but they had heard of them and feared a repetition. 'Punch' described the new proposals as 'insolent' and the Premier, Lord John Russell, assured an anxious populace that despite the appointment by the Pope of a Bishop of Westminster, or anywhere else in England, 'no foreign Prince or Potentate would be permitted to fasten his fetters on a nation which has so long and nobly vindicated its right to freedom of opinion, civil, political and religious. I will not bate a jot of life or heart so long as the glorious principles and immortal martyrs of the Reformation shall be held

in reverence by the great mass of the nation, which looks with contempt on the mummeries of superstition'.

The government then brought in an Ecclesiastical Titles Bill and the English went cosily back to sleep in their high-backed pews, satisfied that the Inquisition was no longer imminent.

Across the Irish Channel feelings were not less vehement in the opposite direction with occasional outbursts of Roman Catholic fundamentalism such as 'Bible Burning' as an expression of disapproval of English texts. In the Winter of 1855 such an incident carried out by a Redemptionist Father with a Russian name, inspired invective from a 'Gazette' correspondent. 'This disorder and discord, the religious turbulence and agrarian violence of this section of the empire is a scandal of the civilised world..... Ireland is the rotten limb of the Empire.'

Some idea of the strength of opinion among very ordinary people on religious affairs is shown by an incident which received extensive 'Gazette' coverage

The poverty-stricken people of mid-Victorian London may have had many causes that could incense them to riot but one might imagine that the least likely among them would be the case of a young woman who had been through a marriage ceremony in a Roman Catholic church without the presence of a registrar, thus making the union illegal, yet this accusation and its consequences in the West London Magistrate Court caused a near riot in Hammersmith in August 1854.

The Rev Thomas Teirney Ferguson, the Roman Catholic parish priest of St Thomas' chapel in Fulham Fields, was charged on summonses alleging he committed a felony by unlawfully solemnising a marriage between Thomas Cokeley and Hannah Sarah Steel, in the registered chapel of St Thomas, on September 8 1853, in the absence of the registrar of the district. The priest appeared on bail before a crowded court room and the road in front of the building was thronged with a number of Irish, particularly women.

The court was described as 'being at all times a most inconvenient one which is constantly being complained of by the public and others as being wholly unfit for such a purpose, the place being very small with bad ventilation and upon it being opened very few persons were admitted as the heat is intense when even only partially filled.

The worthy magistrate, having taken his seat, directed that the doors be thrown open and to admit as many of the public as thought proper to enter and observed that the case had caused a great deal of interest in the neighbourhood and he must put up with the inconvenience of a full attendance.

Mr Ferguson was said to be much fatigued from attending cholera patients from two o'clock that morning and was allowed to sit during the proceedings. (His zealous care of the sick may well have been the reason for the numerous supporters who had come to attend him).

Hannah Steel said that after the marriage she went to Essex where her father lived and he turned her out of doors because he would not believe she was married, although she showed him the certificate given to her by Dr Ferguson. She then came to Kensington and was

told by the superintendent registrar that she was not legally married and all that she could do was to swear that her child was Cokeleys, which she did, and obtained a paternity order.

Asked if she had had a child before, she said ' No ' , then admitted she had had a child three years ago in Essex, but it was now dead. Asked if she was ever disposed to enter the Roman Catholic Church , she replied ' I never was , but I did say I would become a Roman Catholic as I was in the family way when I went through the ceremony . I never went through a similar one before . I never said I would be married as private as possible . I was never asked why I was not married in Kensington . I never lived in Kensington, I lived in Earls Court . I had a great wish to be married in Kensington but Mr Ferguson persuaded me not to be married there . '

' Did you not give a reason that people would know you there and you would be discovered ? '

Hannah Steel said she was delivered of her baby on November 28 1853. After lengthy further questioning , the Registrar , Mr W.D. Strother , explained that his father was his deputy . He said it was usual for persons when they were going to be married to let him know a few days before in what place the ceremony was going to be performed , in order that he might attend . It required his father or himself to be present in order for the marriage to be valid. Mr Strother said he had been present at many marriages performed by Dr Ferguson and they had always been performed at the altar in the chapel and not in the vestry.

Mr Clarkson , for the Rev. defendant asked if the witness knew Spanish Place Chapel and if he knew that marriages were performed in the vestry there. The Registrar said he had heard that it was so .

Asked to reduce the amount of Dr Ferguson's bail of two sureties of £400 and one of £100, the Magistrate said that he could not, but he had no adverse feelings of any kind against Roman Catholics. The case was of such paramount importance to the social welfare of the country that if it were passed over others might occur , the whole country would soon be in a state of anarchy and revolution. No one felt more than he did of seeing a gentleman of Dr Ferguson's education played in such a position, but if he did reduce the amount of bail it would perhaps be thought that he did not consider the case to be so important as he did on the first examination.

The magistrate sent Dr Ferguson for trial and directed that the complainant, Hannah Steel , who had been staying at the Relieving Officer's house, should be removed to the work house, to which she objected, until told by the magistrate that she would not be kept as a pauper but be under the care of the matron and have her own apartment.

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- (Whereon she reluctantly agreed and left the court with Mr Perkins Jones, the Relieving Officer . On reaching the street she was greeted with long and loud yells from two to three hundred women who were congregated in the road and who appeared to have been waiting for the purpose of assailing her with shouts and yells and there was no doubt that but for the timely interference of Sgt. Kelly, the Acting Superintendent of Brook Green police station , and several constables of T Division, they would have laid violent hands upon her . Mr Perkins Jones took her at once to a neighbour's house for protection .
- (In the meantime Sgt. Kelly and brother officers endeavoured to disperse the women but without success for they still kept hovering in front of the house into which the young woman had been taken . After being kept there a short time Sgt. Cross took charge of her and when she came out again she was greeted with another yell before being hurried off up Brook Green while Sgt. Kelly, assisted by some constables, formed a line in the road and prevented a great many of the crowd following her, which they appeared determined upon doing .
- (The crowd of women upon seeing they could not follow her in that direction immediately turned round and proceeded as fast as they could, followed by Sgt Kelly and several other officers, along the high road towards Hammersmith Broadway , for the purpose of intercepting them as they came along Brook Green towards the work house at Fulham, but in this they were disappointed for the young woman or Sgt Cross could not be seen anywhere . The crowd remained about the Broadway for some time but Sgt Cross had taken care of his charge and safely lodged the young woman in the workhouse . '

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The Act which had required citizens to attend church on Sunday had been repealed in 1842, being impossible to enforce and having fallen into disuse decades previously. In many cases, of course, it would have been difficult to even find a church to attend as the population moved from rural areas into the overcrowded towns and cities.

Robert Southey, who had become Poet Laureate in 1820, wrote a pamphlet on the ' Million ' Act of 1818 by which the government gave financial support to building new churches to serve the swelling population (£1,000,000 in 1818, £500,000 in 1824 and a further £6,000 000 by 1833). In Marylebone , said Southey, there was only church room for 9,000 out of a population of 75,000 .

' Our forefathers built convents and cathedrals, the edifices which we have erected are manufactories and prisons, the former producing tenants for the latter.'

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The moral guidance of local vicars and ministers who used to run their parishes like well-ordered families had been lost in the towns, he said. Like so many after him, another poet, William Cowper, saw in the glittering urban prospect with all its attractions, a moral degradation. 'In cities, vice is hidden with much ease' he said. 'or seen with least reproach, and virtue taught by frequent lapse can hope no triumph there..... Sabbath rites have dwindled to unrespected forms and knees and hassocks are well nigh divorced ...God made the country and man made the town.....'

On the opposing side, Robert Vaughan, a Congregational minister and professor of history at University College, replied to the Tory denegation of great cities as dens of iniquity declaring that the **growth of great cities** must be the will of God and therefore must not be thrust back or impeded. 'We have our Babylons from the same will of Providence that has given us our Bibles. Cities, he said, were the birth place of political science and great moral questions belonging to good government.

James Shergold Boone, the Anglican Vicar of St Johns Church, Paddington, preaching in the mid 1840s in aid of the Metropolitan Churches Fund, founded by the Bishop of London, spoke of 'The mischief of the absence of religion in great cities, missing the soothing sacred influence of rural life, The cities were dominated by materialism and all its temptations. 'Consider honestly and seriously what London now is, an immense wilderness of streets and edifices with all the wants and passions of its dense multitudes heaving and fermenting in the midst of it. '.

It was hard, he said, to determine in what age or class in London religion was needed most, for the old or for the young, whether for men or for women, or for the children, whether for those rich who were surrounded by the many allurements and seductions, inflating them with an arrogant selfishness and effeminate vanity, or for those in the middle position, who were so immersed in the occupations of the busy mart and so tempted to make gain their god, or for those of the poor who, taught to look with a rankling eye on their superiors in station, were thronging, crushing and trampling upon each other in the straitness of their circumstances.

'A church brings with itself all other forms of good, exciting into action unwearied persons who will discover, visit and relieve physical and temporal as well as mental and moral necessities and carry benign assault against illness, improvidence, callousness and drunkenness which is the first importance in the working classes, making poverty worse.)

In Kensington, certainly, the church tried to play its part in alleviating some such miseries. Donations were invited from wealthy parishioners to support plans which might help to eradicate the dreadful 'rookeries' and the Kensington District Visiting Society did not refuse relief to any person on account of their religious persuasion, they also ran a provident fund to which the poor were invited to subscribe to save towards coal and clothing, the society adding a bonus to the amount.

Although acutely aware of physical miseries, Dickens was not slow to also preach the spiritual ills. 'If moral pestilence could be made discernable it would reveal depravity, impiety, drunkenness, theft, murder and a long train of nameless sins. Then we should see how the same poisoned fountains that flow into our hospitals and lazarettoes inundate the goals' ('Dombey and Son' 1848).

In 'Hard Times' Dickens writing of 'Coketown' said although the members of eighteen religious persuasions had built their red brick chapels there, the perplexing mystery was who belonged to those denominations? Whoever did it was not the labouring people. It was very strange to walk through the streets on Sunday morning and note how few people were called away from their own quarters by the barbarous jangling of bells, that drove the sick and nervous mad. Describing the flight of Little Nell and her grandfather from London he also speaks of the derelict new suburbs where the main streets were interspersed with small Dissenting Chapels 'to teach with no lack of illustration the miseries of earth and plenty of new churches erected with little superfluous wealth to show the way to heaven.'

The 'small Dissenting Chapels' may have warmed up their worship with liberal portions of Hell fire and damnation but they also offered plenty of tuneful singing and lively rhetoric which was far more attractive to the masses than the dreary conservatism of the established Church of England. The 'Gazette Mirror of the Month' in October 1854 said 'Of late the clergy and laity have raised a considerable clamour for liturgical revision. The length of the service is piteously complained of as being injurious to the lungs and wearying to the patience, so neutralising the tendency of the spiritual good in the minds of the attendants.'

A few more progressive churchmen were certainly making a move towards modernism, acknowledging that people might be literate and intelligent and would not be 'preached at' if the words used were either boring or repetitive or uninspired. They were becoming more than a little aware of ~~the appeal of~~ the emotional appeal and the jolly

music of the ' Bible banging ' street and chapel preachers among the non conformist and evangelical sects.

On June 6 1855 a Strutt editorial commented on the grave complaints made by Archdeacon Sinclair , the Vicar of Kensington, in his annual charge to the local clergy. ' Never was a visitation more seasonably made ' he wrote, 'and was proverbially and fearfully true.' Services preached by the local clergy were frequently tedious , their eccentricities the grief of the good and their ineffectiveness the jeer of the infidel. 'Men favoured with the loftiest privileges a mortal can enjoy are disgracing themselves by their pedantry, indifference and sloth.' People who deemed it decent to attend church twice on Sundays throughout the year, gave seven entire days of ten hours each listening to such sermons , allowing forty minutes for each discourse, yet those of rank and worth were still proud and frivolous, the merchants and traders covetous of gains, the mechanics and labourers jealous and profane and the scoffers sneered and denied sacred things.

The Archdeacon had held his visitation at St Pauls Church, Covent Garden, He said he felt great concern when he heard preaching by his local clergy disparaged and ironical praise given to short sermons only for their shortness. Preachers needed to be acquainted with modern science as their intelligent congregations would expect them to be. He did not mean that Christian preachers should give instruction from the pulpit in geology , optics or astronomy but sound views of economic science were quite compatible with sound Christianity and it was not safe for clergy in the management of large populous parishes to disparage or neglect this useful and well-practiced branch of study. There was nothing more vexatious than to hear a young preacher commend ideas which were not his own, not in the language of the present day but in that of Hooker or Jeremy Taylor, inappropriate to the reign of Queen Victoria.

Holy Communion was not considered to be a requirement of Christian discipline in either aristocratic or middle-class homes , even the Queen herself is reported to have attended such a service no more than once a month , if then, but the pious received their ' bread of life ' in lengthy sermons. Robert Peel 's father not only made him attend church twice on Sunday but to pay such close attention to the sermon to be able to repeat it when he returned home. Sermons were also used as a means of fund-raising and it is frequently announced that a lengthy discourse would be given for this or that charity, collections being taken at the end. On Trinity Sunday June 11 1854 the Lord Bishop of Natal preached twice at St Mary Abbots Church and again two days later on behalf of the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel on

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Some clergy had the courage to take on the establishment in a manner which would have gained them no more approval with certain quarters than similar Christian frankness does to day. There is an echo of some modern pulpits during the Falklands War in the sermons on the war in the Crimea, preached by the Rev John Kempe, Rector of St James, Piccadilly in May 1854, in the presence of the Premier, Lord Aberdeen. Preaching on the text ' Be not high minded, ' the Rector expostulated with his countrymen on their recent exhibition of self-confidence ' amounting almost to arrogance ' in the possession of superior physical resources and warning them to rely on a better hope 'during their dreadful enterprise ' ' If we say our own power and the right of our own hands and the energy of our own character has gotten us this wealth, then sooner or later we will realise to our cost that it is not in prowess, discourse, science, numbers, or money that we will gain victory. This will only be granted to those hosts who above all sought God to go forth with them.'

God has always been sought as an ally with opposing armies, usually being called upon by both, but Rector Kempe's next sermon was even more sharply to the point and took a very unjingo-istic point of view which must have set heads wagging in the pews. Acknowledging the inclusion of a Prayer for Peace in the recent Day of Humiliation, a circumstance he said was too remarkable to pass without notice, he set out the Biblical argument on the righteousness and otherwise of bearing arms. There were those, he said, who longed to see illustrated the new and peculiar features of naval warfare which could bring about the utter destruction of the mightiest vessel and send it to the bottom of the ocean with all its living freight, strong and gallant men although they might be of a different race and language, men we were wont to regard as barbarians, being willing bondslaves of an iron despotism, but still men of the same Creator, Christian men, and as such, despite martial glory and warlike success, such an action could only be regarded as a calamity.

It was a view which would possibly have been shared by Lord Aberdeen whose enthusiasm for the war had never been great an attitude already arousing dissatisfaction among the more belligerent members of his party and the opposition.

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Notwithstanding the upheaval of new ritualistic doctrines, the threat of science and the multiplying voice of Dissension, the solid citizens who supported the established Church of England continued to build churches.

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Every developer put the seal of respectability on his new terraces and squares by providing land for a church, sometimes even paying for its construction. The first church to be erected in addition to the parish church of St Mary Abbots in Kensington, as the growing villages began to overflow their places of worship, was Holy Trinity, in the fields of Brompton, built by the Ecclesiastical Commissioners out of money voted by Parliament under the 'Million Act'. To the west of the Kensington village another church soon followed, this of St Barnabas on Lord Holland's estate.

The Norlands and Ladbroke estates rapidly ^{developing} in the 1840s also needed their spiritual refuges and St John's the Evangelist, Notting Hill, was consecrated in 1845 with St James Norlands in the following year.

The proliferation of urban churches created a new professional opportunity for the sons of upper class families in addition to the popular outlets of the Army and teaching, as the reform of church finances by the Ecclesiastical Commissioners offered better rewards to genuine incumbents and spreading the wealth of the church more evenly, reducing the fortunes of the hierarchy and offering a realistic living to the parish priest. In 1855 'Punch', condemning 'strike fever', said it not only feared the poor curates would strike but the pluralists would demand forty thousand instead of twenty, while bishops would hang up their mitres, stick their croziers over the chimney piece and hold out against the Ecclesiastical Commissioners for double incomes.

Also early in the list of new Kensington Churches created in the parish during the incumbency of Archdeacon Sinclair was Christ Church, in the 'New Town' which was being built among the country houses, cottages and gardens off Kensington High Road in 1850. St Paul's, being built in the Vicarage grounds just north of the High Street was announced to be nearly complete and open for the letting of pews and sittings every day during Passion Week in April 1855. In common with the practice of the time it was to be an 'iron church' a temporary structure, the fashion for churches and railway stations being hardly distinguishable.

The opening coincided with the decisive victory at Sebastopol and

repeating the responses, by the Sunday School boys particularly, especially preventing one lad from leading the rest.'

St Paul's Church was later re-built but gutted by fire during the London blitz and eventually demolished.

'On St Barnabas Day, June 1855 the ground was broken for a new parsonage house at St Barnabas Church' reported the 'Kensington Gazette', the incumbent, the Rev Dr Hessey being permitted to purchase the site for £250 and to build the house at a further expense of £1500....and to make both over to the Church Commissioners'. (Poor Dr Hessey had had heavy calls on his finances for that year, he had also been responsible for the whole expenses of the church when the granting of no more than a halfpenny rate made it impossible for the churchwardens to offer any assistance.)

Church Rates which had been levied for the upkeep of parish churches had caused little ^{trouble until the} proliferation of Dissenters raised the issue of being forced to support a religious edifice of another denomination. In 1834 the Whigs proposed to abolish the Church Rates.

and raise the money out of general taxes, the sum fixed still causing controversy as supporters of the Church thought it too small and the opposing non-conformists, too large. The matter was left unsettled until the setting up of the Ecclesiastical Commissioners regularised and reformed the financial affairs of the Church. However if the Churchwardens and a Vestry ruled that a rate should still be levied this could be endorsed by the parishioners, and was often the cause of considerably strong feelings, as the 'Gazette' reported in October 1855. 'By the late refusal of a rate in the parish of Hackney the Churchwardens find themselves placed in an awkward predicament. A considerable balance was paid over to them by their predecessors which they concluded would be available for ordinary church purposes but on taking counsel's opinion they find they cannot appropriate one sixpence without the consent of the Vestry which has just decided against any church rate at all. On Saturday last (St Michaelmas) a quarter's salary being due to a long list of officers connected with the church who instead of sterling coin of the realm received a civil intimation that there were no funds to pay them.

The decision by Hackney Vestry to refuse the Churchwardens' request for support from the rates had been made after a poll of three days in August 1855 with 547 in favour and 835 against, a majority of 288. In refusing the rate the Vestry said it wished it to be known that it was actuated by no feeling of hostility towards individuals in the church but as the most direct way of making an emphatic protest against the church rating system.

The established Church of England was not the only contender in the race to build heavenly piles in the developing streets of London. Early in 1855 the 'Gazette' announced 'Additional chapel accommodation will soon be afforded to the increasing inhabitants of Kensington..... a large and handsome edifice of Grecian architecture has been erected during the Summer in Phillimore Terrace (now Allen Street) by the congregation of Hornton Street Chapel for the convenience of the growing number attendances under the pastorate of the Rev J. Stoughton of that

place of worship, and is now in the course of rapid completion. The lengthy account of the opening of this Chapel included detailed description of the building, which was said to have nothing ornate about its exterior or interior except for the Corinthian columns which supported the entrance. It had accommodation to sit about 1,150 persons and 250 of the sittings were to be free.

The non-conformist congregation which had caused this mighty edifice to be raised had been founded in Wensington some sixty years earlier by Mr Broadwood, the eminent manufacturer of keyboard instruments (and later pianos), Mr Forsyth head gardener to George III (and responsible for the introduction of Forsythia — from the genus oleaceous in China — to England) and Mr Gray, proprietor of a large nursery garden in the Gore, and a Mr Saunders. The latter had been coachman to both King George II and George III who it is said was much attached to him and was accustomed to converse with him in the most gracious manner on the subject of religion.

These four men had formed a religious society with a chapel in Hornton Street and their history was related by one of the many speakers at the day-long celebrations for the opening of the new building. This began with a religious service, with long sermons preached by the Rev Thomas Binney, at the conclusion of which nearly three hundred ladies and gentlemen repaired to Woolsthorpe Lodge, a nearby mansion in its own grounds on the site of the present Wensington Close Hotel, where a cold collation had been provided in a spacious marquee.

John Stoughton, the pastor of the new chapel said there would be only one toast drunk as there were differences of opinion about drinking healths and they had no wish to do anything that would trench upon the rights of conscience, but they would be extremely guilty of want of loyalty if they did not in that manner express their sentiments with regard to HM the Queen. Bissenters had always been considered among the most loyal subjects although not the principal supporters of the throne and if there was one place more than another in which they should manifest that loyalty it should be Wensington where HM was born. After the pleasures of the cold collation the visitors still had to endure a number of further lengthy addresses by various dignitaries, one of which, a Mr Thomas Chambers MP, said he particularly welcomed the new Chapel as efforts were being made by a certain set of pseudo philanthropists for the alteration of the character of the English Sabbath. Doubtless some those who were seeking to provide secular amusements for the people on the Sabbath were sincerely desirous of benefiting them but in his view they were entirely mistaken in the means they sought to employ.

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They seemed to believe that the development of beautiful sculpture and painting, exhibitions of God in creation, and the wonders of geology and in ten thousands of forms of science and art, as well as nature, would make men Christians.

After tea had been served, the entire assembly returned once more to the Chapel for another service and another long sermon.

Mr Chambers' reference to the English Sabbath was a typically middle class attitude where the cosy comforts of home at least alleviated the tedium of Sunday where even the newspapers might be sewed up until secular Monday dawned and no reading allowed except the Bible and 'The Pilgrim's Progress'. Sunday church-going was obligatory, probably twice a day, but no-one put a lock on the decanter and the serving of large middle day dinners of roast beef and the trimmings occupied much of the time in between. How different in working class homes too small to accommodate the whole family at one time, and comfortless at that. The streets, by virtue of the English climate, usually cold and wet for most of the year, devoid of any of the cheerful aspects of open shops, presented a miserable escape. Only the jolly, gaudy gin palaces and pubs offered any sort of pleasure, no wonder the poor revolted when a pious peer suggested they should be closed on Sundays. Even if the pseudo philanthropists described by Mr Chambers were trying to open the British Museum on Sundays this was hardly likely to be of much attraction to the uneducated masses, except perhaps for the warmth it would offer in cold weather.

The Frenchman, Henri Taine, whose notes on England cover this period, wrote that after an hours walk, in the Strand especially, on Sunday in the rain, one meditated suicide and Sunday in London in the rain had the aspect of an immense and well-ordered cemetery.

Church building was of no concern to the many missionaries who sought to convert the Godless in the streets and market places of the overcrowded city. Church attendance may have been sparse among the lower orders but just as the costers enjoyed story-telling by the slum visitors there was a ready audience for evangelical preachers from the Methodists, Baptists and other dissenting denominations, both indoors and out.

Reporting on a meeting held by the Hon. and Rev Baptist Noel, held on August 19 1854 in Caledonian Road, opposite the entrance of the new Cattle Market, Strutt says 'the attention of the people was most pleasing and encouraging, confirming the opinion formed that the masses who attend no place of worship will listen to the Gospel and Christian teaching if presented to them on their own ground in a proper manner by a qualified person.'

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The 'Gazette' reported that the meeting had attracted an immense multitude, not half of whom could get within reach of the speaker's voice. Services had also been conducted previously in an adjoining field by the Rev. J Wigner of Lynn, who had already preached twice and also had to do so a third time in Camden Road Chapel. Another service had also been held at the same time in another field at no great distance.

The district immediately adjoining where Mr Wood preached, is a second St Giles' said Strutt. (St Giles was one of the worst slums in London in an area now covered by New Oxford Street) There may be seen on Sunday men working at their trades and gardens, cricketing, shooting at marks, games of all kinds, swings and roundabouts etc. the place in all respects like Greenwich Fair. The district is one known as Belle Isle and cries aloud on all who value the Sabbath and the religion they profess, to arouse themselves to remove the ignorance and irreligion. On Sunday last, after Mr Noel had left, some infidels appeared upon the ground but their arguments were ably and conclusively answered by competent friends and tracts were distributed by followers of Mr Holyoake (presumably a rival preacher) but these were counteracted by the antidotes supplied in Mr Noel's 'Come to Jesus'. Despite his brilliant reputation and the crowds who packed into his meetings, Charles Strutt was not much impressed by the young Baptist evangelist, Charles Haddon Spurgeon, sharing the opinion of a critic who described him as 'the savciest dog who ever barked in a pulpit.' (he was renowned for spicing his subject with jokes and puns, which greatly increased his popular appeal).

Spurgeon was only twenty one when Strutt heard him preaching two charity sermons for the benefit of the Notting Dale Chapel and Schools in November 1855. Born into a Congregational family in 1834, Spurgeon, now Minister of the Park Street Chapel, had been first converted as a Primitive Methodist, but became a Baptist in 1850. Largely self-educated he was eventually to draw enormous crowds to his meetings but this was much later in his career and Strutt's first hand account of his earlier days makes interesting reading.

On this occasion the small buildings in which he was appearing, (the Westbourne Grove Chapel and Horbury Chapel at Notting Hill) were said to be excessively crowded 'to such an extent that members of the 'swell mob' (thieves) taking advantage of the crowds at the evening service succeeded in extracting sundry purses and watches from the persons of incautious wearers'.

Strutt admitted that the popularity of Spurgeon among a numerous section of religionists was not surprising.

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' It is known that his frequent occupation of Exeter Hall filled that immense building to overflowing on almost every occasion. To deny his gift of eloquence in the face of these facts would be sheer absurdity, for a tongue that can rely on repeatedly attracting a large audience must possess considerable power over human feeling and judgement. Yet the oratory of the young preacher, though commendable to a high degree, is far from being of a high order. His general tone is strong rather than sweet, authoritative rather than persuasive and winning, while his action may be considered unwieldy and violent, perhaps to many unpleasant from its want of grace, its extreme energy and rapidity smites and subdues the class of minds under its tempestuous influence. He stands as if one agitated by a mental storm and his spectators contemplate the snapping of the limbs of an oak obeying a tornado rather than a waving ash yielding to a summer breeze.

Mr Spurgeon is never ashamed of his doctrines or afraid of their defence. His moral courage is unbounded and commendable but its exertion might be better governed by prudence. No matter in what place or on what occasion his peculiar belief forms the chief burden of his theme. Indeed he seems to delight in the possession of a pulpit where his views are either doubted or denied, for his words then flow as a cataract both in volume and vehemence. The uncontrolled rush of sentiment is however often gained by a serious sacrifice of sense and refined taste, for frivolous remarks are frequently made with an impropriety of speech truly painful to hear...offensive incongruities of thought and expression.... we do hope that solemn subjects will not continue to be occasionally disfigured by him with a grievous legity of language. Anecdotes in the pulpit are as unbecoming and painful to sensitive souls as would be a joke on Mount Sinai or as idle chat on the summit of Calvary'.

Spurgeons' musical ability did not help to sweeten his rhetoric for Strutt continues 'In public perusal of hymns Mr Spurgeon is far from happy. The burning lines of the sacred lyrist gain no heat and melody from his ~~lips~~ inharmonious lips. This natural defect a patient cultivation on his part might considerably amend but his diction is marred by occasional ruggedness and although frequently lofty and sublime, spasmodically arrests attention in sudden bursts. His metaphor is ready and accurate but often infelicitous in choice. He is without affectation in manner and this tells vastly in his favour.

Strutt grudgingly concludes that he has no difficulty in predicting that the popularity of this preacher will greatly spread when the hand of time has smoothed out his mental angularities.'

He was right, of course. Soon the great Exeter Hall was too small for Spurgeon's immense drawing power and he moved to the Surrey Music Hall where he preached to over 10,000 people and at the height of his career addressed no less than 23,600 at a special service held at the Crystal Palace. In 1861 he built the Metropolitan Tabernacle at a cost of £31,000 to hold a regular congregation of six hundred people, preaching twice on Sundays and every Thursday evening, among his regular listeners being Gladstone and Ruskin. Variety of material was no problem for he often repeated his sermons, his audience enjoying their familiarity and religious catch phrases in much the same manner in which they preferred music hall comedians to repeat well-loved and well-known jokes and songs.

The Victorian religious scene was certainly not without its eccentrics. Among the assets of the bankrupt and disgraced financier, Sir John Dean Faul (who prior to his downfall had held a considerable reputation as an evangelist and writer of religious tracts and homilies) was Park Chapel, Chelsea.

This, the 'Gazette' announced in August 1855, was to be sold by auction during the course of that month. It was stated to contain 180 pews and 340 free sittings and to be capable of accommodating fifteen to sixteen hundred persons, the subscriptions or rents for pews being voluntary and producing some £500 to £900 a year.

Although the conservative element in the Church of England was deeply disturbed by the fancy dress and ritualistic liturgy of the new Oxford Movement, it turned a blind eye on some of its eccentrics, one of the best of whom was the famous Dr Price of Eglwysyllia in Wales, who adopted the costume of a Celtic bard. The 'Gazette,' obviously realising the news value of this colourful cleric extended its news coverage to report on a trial which took place in Cardiff:

'The plaintiff in this action, Price v Thomas, was a most singular spectacle. He was the celebrated Dr Price of Eglwysyllia whose beard hair and peculiar costume have long been a theme of curiosity among all who have seen him, especially in court. Today he stood at the barrister's table with the white skulls and huge horns of three of his Welsh mountain goats, and the shaggy, long black-haired skin of another lying on the table before him. His iron grey hair fell to his shoulders in tresses and locks almost down to his waist, an Asiatic beard of silver grey falling over his breast over a turned down collar of beautiful fine and white linen. His jerkin, or jacket, was of Lincoln green turned up with scarlet, the yellow buttons

each bearing the image of a different form of dog. The wrists of his jacket were scalloped alternately green and scarlet with yellow buttons and the wristbands of his shirt were also scalloped. The sharp keen eagle eyes of the Doctor, his Welsh idiom and general appearance were the subject of close attention by the court and we noticed that two or three of the learned Counsel were engaged in sketching the likeness of this remarkable Welsh character.

The subject of the action obviously takes second place to the description of the colourful appearance of the central character but the action was apparently brought 'to receive damages sustained by Dr Price in the loss of 37 kids and goats, as laid out in the particulars, worried or killed by dogs belonging to the defendant, a farmer by the name of Thomas. After being locked up for an hour the jury returned a verdict for the plaintiff with damages of £15.' The solid respectability of their religion did not prevent the subjects of the young matron Queen taking a lively interest in cults such as table-turning, spirit rappings and fringe sciences of hypnotism and phrenology. Macaulay, after attending a seance at which the medium said he was a painter, described the performance as 'paltry quackery' (he had been accompanied by the Bishop of Oxford) but Dickens was not so sceptical.

Dickens had been introduced to the author of 'Facts in Mesmerism' the Rev Chauncey Hare Townshend, by Dr John Elliotson, a Professor of Medicine at London University, whose involvement in Hypnotism and Phrenology led to his resignation from that post. Phrenology, the science which purports to read character from bumps on the head, was enjoying a great cult following at the time and Elliotson became the first president of the Phrenology Society and also experimented with the use of Mesmerism to relieve pain.

Dickens himself discovered that he had the power to hypnotise and experimented on his wife, Kate. His success in treating a friend's wife for nervous tic and hallucinations caused intense jealousy in Kate as the use of his magnetic powers often necessitated his visiting the afflicted lady for long periods in the middle of the night.

Macaulay's opinion of phrenology was no more flattering than his verdict on the medium's seance, the practitioner he visited, he said, spent some time pawing over my head and praying over the rotation of his pendulum...a transparent fraud.'

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If intellectuals such as Macaulay treated such 'science' with a vigorous scepticism, others were much more ready to be impressed and many society audiences were captivated by the performances of a medium called Daniel Home. Home came from America, as do so many modern cults and new 'religions'. A man with penetrating eyes clean shaven, with a shock of unruly hair, he was said to be the illegitimate son of the 10th Earl of Home who had been taken to the United States by his mother. Those who witnessed his seances said they saw flames coming out of his head and that he could make himself eight feet tall as well as producing sounds of birds flying and floating out of the window and back again. They had very hot summers in the 1850s, maybe that had something to do with it!

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