

The Church of England Chaplaincies in Florence since 1820

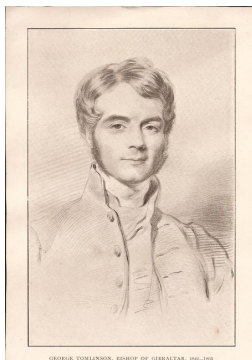
In 1817 a young English aristocrat, Beaujolais Campbell, travelling to Florence by road, recorded in her diary the tragic death of a fellow traveller. She noted that as the only non-Catholic Christian burial ground in Tuscany at the time was the Cemetery at Livorno (a journey of many miles) it was thence that the body was to be taken, under cover of darkness.

A few years later another young woman, Susan Barrington, travelled the same route to Florence to be married. Neither she nor her intended were Italian but they were part of a growing number of travellers from the United Kingdom who, after the end of the Napoleonic Wars, spent months at a time in the city. Their marriage took place at the Florentine Villa that was home to Her Britannic Majesty's Minister Plenipotentiary at the Court of the Grand Duke of Tuscany. In 1823 an Act passed by the British Government legally recognised marriages such as Susan's, solemnised by a British chaplain on official 'British' premises and witnessed by a Crown representative.

At the beginning of the 1800s, with much of Europe still embroiled in territorial wars, it was not thought necessary for *ex-patriate* British communities to have their own 'off-site' centres of worship. Within thirty years of both of the above events however, thanks to a period of liberal opening-up by the Grand Duke Leopold of Tuscany and following the example of other Protestant communities in the city, such as the Prussian and the Swiss, the British community in Florence had established its own chaplaincy church, later known as Holy Trinity, with chaplain and committee. It was more formally referred to as the British Protestant Church at Florence, or, sometimes, the English Church.

Recognition in Britain that *ex-patriate* communities abroad, such as that in Florence, needed a chapel or church, a burial ground, the services of a resident chaplain and their own designated Bishop and Diocese, had been slow in coming. Such 'spiritual superintendence' as was offered fell to the Bishop of London. However, in 1842 Andrew Buchanan, H.M. *Chargé d'Affaires* in Florence, received a letter signed by the Foreign Secretary, Lord Aberdeen, instructing the British community in Tuscany to recognise a newly created Church of England 'Diocese of Gibraltar', and its new Bishop, George Tomlinson, DD.¹

The early years of the nineteenth century were difficult for non-Catholic worshippers in Italy. In Tuscany, the Court of the Grand Duke recognised the right of the *ex-patriate* Protestants to worship in their preferred way but only within the diplomatic confines of their various communities.



The Right Revd George Tomlinson, DD.

The rules were strict, simple and straightforward. No churches should be built, no outward symbol of Christian worship should be displayed and church services and Bible study were to be conducted in the mother tongue at all times, never in Latin or vernacular Italian. Proselytising was forbidden.

Italians connected to the community were expected, by law, to be Roman Catholics.

Protestant Italians, both rich and poor, out-with the protection of a Foreign Delegation, faced their own trials and tribulations. Some who sought to worship and study with local Anglicans in the early

¹ A pdf file containing the full Foreign Office Circular from Lord Aberdeen is available. If you wish to download or quote from this document, however, we ask that you credit St Mark's English Church Florence. Thank you.

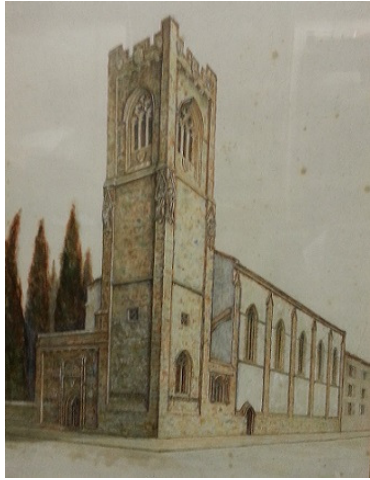
1850s were prosecuted and punished with exile or imprisonment. Count Guicciardini was exiled and a couple who ran a boarding house were sentenced to several years of incarceration at Volterra. Francesco Madia, the husband, received the additional penalty of hard labour. Papers in the Chaplaincy Archive, currently housed at St. Mark's, also make clear the case of a man of dual Italian and British nationality, who had been raised as a Protestant in India and who on moving to Florence had chosen to worship at the English Church. The Tuscan government insisted that he must conform to the Roman Catholic religion of the State. Without such conformity, his son, about to join the Civil Service, would be denied employment. Much trouble ensued, at the highest levels, as he, and the English Church, sought to establish his right to worship as an Anglican. Another, later case, involving a high profile Anglo-Florentine and his Italian-born children by his Italian wife, established at law their right to be both (Tuscan) Italian and Church of England. These papers too are in the Archive.

Following the Risorgimento and the establishing of the Kingdom of Italy, two further English Anglican communities grew up. Each had its own church. From 1877 onwards, the original Anglican chaplaincy of Holy Trinity found its dominance challenged by St. Mark's. This was a privately founded and very popular little church which offered an Anglo-Catholic style and rite of worship and mission. The third, Christ Church, offered yet another alternative style of worship but made little impression and was short-lived.

These three churches in Florence reflected a significant shift within Anglicanism in England. That shift in its turn reflected social and political change. It is impossible to understand the English Church in Florence without some sense of these shifts.² At home and abroad, the changing pattern of rite and ritual championed by the Anglo-Catholic movement in England was mirrored by changing tastes in decorative design, art and artefacts. The increasing prosperity and emancipation of British society threw up a new middle class who found, first, the pre-Raphaelites and, later, the Arts and Crafts Movement, very much to their taste. These visual arts, (and aural, one need think only of Verdi's operas, or Elizabeth Barrett Browning's poetry, to hear the same 'voice' at work), promoted and spoke out, in turn, into a *zeitgeist* of social and political change. They championed 'the dignity of labour', cloaking it in romance and mediaeval notions of chivalry, at a time of general concern with the improvement of living and working conditions for the new working classes. For the newly affluent and socially mobile entrepreneurial and speculative class, the many recently opened or modernised galleries and museums and even local orchestras and music such as Mendelssohn's Italian symphony, brought home the wonders of the world, from the Roman Empire to the British Empire. This in turn encouraged a 'mass' taste for travel, superbly promoted by Thomas Cook, as Europe settled down politically in the last quarter of the nineteenth century. With such huge changes at home and in Europe generally, the stage was set for a new period in English Anglicanism in Florence.

² Mittler, Penny (2007) 'Only Connect: A Case Study of the Influence of the English Church and the Non-Catholic Cults in the Florence of the Risorgimento'. In Faltin, L. and Wright, M. (2007) *The Religious Roots of Contemporary European Identity* New York & London: Continuum Press www.continuumbooks.com

It is interesting to see how, as the rules governing worship in Italy were gradually relaxed, these 'English' churches began to appear. Socio-cultural trends from within both England and Italy are very much reflected. Outwardly these influences are visible in the architecture. The church at Bagni di Lucca, today a library, reflects the 'vernacular' villa style employed under the early restrictions.



*The English Church at Bagni di Lucca, today the public library.³
Also an original watercolour of Holy Trinity Florence.*

The English Perpendicular' style of the second Holy Trinity Church, (designed by English architect, G.F. Bodley and built between 1891 – 1904 and now home to the Waldensian community), reflects not only the freedom of worship embraced by the Kingdom of Italy but also the increasing confidence and prosperity of both city and ex-pat community as told through the big bold urban structures of the late nineteenth century in the Western world. And the 'Arts and Crafts' style interior decoration of both St. Mark's and Holy Trinity is also to be seen in many of the 'ex-pat' villas of the epoch.

The symbolism of architectural design and interior décor reflects the sense of Gospel values and Mission at the heart of each church. Decoratively, St Mark's Church is influenced by the Pre-Raphaelite and Arts and Crafts Movements, its heavily stencilled walls and simple floral ceiling a painterly metaphor for the Incarnational Presence of Jesus the Christ: the *mysterium* of God's heavenly Kingdom and the dignity of the humble working man or woman, meeting in art, as in Christ.

Ecclesiologically, St Mark's remains anchored, to this day, in the conviction of the Anglo-Catholic movement that the duty of the Church is to take the Good News of Jesus Christ, our Saviour and King, out into the world, not only through speaking out the Word of God but in practical ways of service and social justice, with the Gospel of Christ at their heart.

During the nineteenth century in Europe, cities housed huge populations of workers in unhygienic and overcrowded conditions. Houses were damp, of poor quality and lacking fresh water and sanitation. Contagious illnesses and killer diseases spread rapidly. Without birth control, families were large but with young death still commonplace, especially amongst mothers in childbirth, and without education and training available to them, many children and young people were orphaned or left with nothing 'useful', income-earning or aspirational to do. Others had work but in atrocious conditions, frequently using industrial processes and toxic materials that further reduced their life expectancy.

³ Picture courtesy of www.bellabagnidilucca.com

According to a series of articles written for *La Nazione* newspaper by Giulio Piccini, under the pen name, 'Jarro', in 1884, and reproduced as late as 1900, the area of the oltr'Arno around St. Mark's was one of several slum 'ghettos' of dilapidated, insanitary and overcrowded housing. Much of the city's crime was blamed on the inhabitants of these districts and it was claimed that police dared only venture into the warrens of tiny streets in large armed groups. The oltr'Arno district included Via dei Serragli, a street that was home to many of the earliest 'Protestant' and 'Evangelical' churches. Between 1860 and 1914 more made their home in this district, enabled by the right to freedom of worship that was enshrined within the new Statute of Rights of the Kingdom of Italy. The Evangelical Theological School of Turin moved to rooms on the Via dei Serragli in 1860 and St Mark's church was privately established in the Via dei Serragli, 1, in 1877. This network of Protestant churches soon offered Sunday classes and vocational training eg for factory machinists, to the local people. Sound scriptural teaching both informed praxis and was offered along with it.

The founder of St. Mark's, Revd Charles Tooth, had been the Rector at a new church, St. Mark's, Snow Hill, Shelton, near Stoke-on-Trent. It was an industrial town in the heart of England's 'Black Country'. Prior to becoming a priest, Charles Tooth had been the manager of the Tooth family brewery in Burton – on – Trent and knew the working environment well ⁴. He and two of his brothers, Arthur and William Augustus, also priests, were passionately committed to the Anglo-Catholic vision for the Church of England, first inspired by John Henry Newman and the Oxford, or Tractarian, Movement of the late 1830s. At Snow Hill, Charles Tooth ran night classes and Sunday schools for local workers and founded a choir and musical society. The pollution from the Potteries and foundries was all pervasive. Suffering from poor health, he moved to Tuscany in 1872.

He began as the chaplain in Siena, moving to Florence in late 1877. In Siena, it had been the insistence of hoteliers that had led to a Church of England presence, so it was perhaps from his experience in Siena that Charles Tooth got the idea for opening a 'Mission Church' in Florence that would meet the needs of tourists. The location of his new church suggests that Charles Tooth also saw opportunities for mission-based evangelism such as he had nurtured in Shelton.

His new, independent, 'house church' was founded in order to promote Anglo-Catholic principles of Church teaching and to offer Holy Eucharist at 8.00 am five mornings per week. Some canny promotion was employed to 'run' service times at the new St. Mark's, Florence, out to the hotels, thus ensuring large numbers at worship throughout the 'season'. St. Mark's was also freely accessible to all who wished to worship there, whereas Holy Trinity at the time charged pew rents or subscriptions and had a strictly observed social structure. One wealthy patron of Holy Trinity, for example, strongly objected to a stranger sitting in 'his' pew during his absence. The contrast between the two churches was not lost on many of those recently arrived 'nouveau-riche' who took villas for an entire season but who did not 'fit' in the old hierarchies. Many found St. Mark's an attractive 'home'. Despite apparently meeting with considerable opposition from the established Anglican church of Holy Trinity, St Mark's congregation grew rapidly. By 1880, Rev. Tooth had purchased a small early sixteenth century palazzo in Via Maggio, not far from the original rooms where St. Mark's began and quickly had it converted into the first phase of the church still in use today. It opened in May 1881.

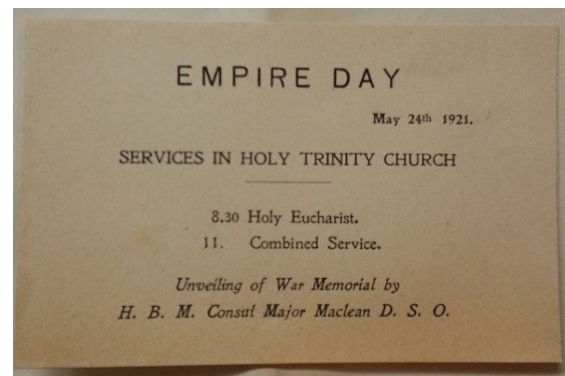
⁴ <http://www.breweryhistory.com/journal/archive/134/Tooth.pdf>



Archive records show that the then Bishop of Gibraltar, Bishop Charles Waldegrave Sandford, did not agree. He was outspoken in his antagonism towards Anglo-Catholics and strongly objected to the way in which Charles Tooth had set up his own church without going through Church of England channels. He refused to visit the church or to confirm candidates prepared by St. Mark's unless they were presented by the official chaplain from Holy Trinity. Nevertheless, the huge popularity of the little church with travellers, Anglo-Catholics and those who had never felt comfortable with the social structures of Holy Trinity, could not be ignored. Urgent discussions were held and at the end of 1884 formal documents were drawn up recognising St. Mark's as a second and much needed chaplaincy in Florence. Fr. Tooth and his flock were at last in a formal relationship with the Diocese of Gibraltar.

After the death of Fr. Tooth a decade later, the church was expanded and re-structured. The chaplains, Council and congregations settled into a pattern of part church / part landlord that has continued ever since. One name that stands out from this period is that of Irish lawyer, Dr. Walter Copinger. He served both St. Mark's and Holy Trinity as a legal adviser for over 50 years. Copinger oversaw the transition of St Mark's as it passed from the ownership of the Tooth family, first to a Trust (a difficult thing in Italy, which does not have them) and, eventually, after years of patient legal work, to the Diocese of Gibraltar, now the Diocese in Europe.

WW1 seems to have had little direct impact on St. Mark's, although members of the congregations of St Mark's and of Holy Trinity of course lost loved ones to the carnage, as memorial plaques from Holy Trinity testify. However, almost as soon as the guns of the First World War fell silent, further tragedies began to unfold in Europe. Chaplaincies in Italy found themselves caught up in events on the larger



stage. The 1920s and 30s saw the rise of Fascism in both Italy and Germany. Italy still harboured imperial ambitions in North Africa and as Church and State signed a concordat (part of the Lateran Treaty) in 1929 that signalled scope for limitations on non-catholic churches, *ex-pats* increasingly found themselves subject to unpopular (at least with them) checks and restrictions.⁵

Reverend Frederick James Bailey had, as a young man, worked in the Royal Household and had served in WW1 IN France and Egypt, for some of the time in Intelligence. He picked up several Civil Service honours at this time. In the 1920s he became a missionary priest in the Bahamas. In 1936 he was sent to Spain to cover for the chaplain in Madrid who had been recalled. When the consulate there was bombed, Bailey moved on, arriving in Florence in 1938. Those who still remember him say he was a lovely man. He certainly seems to have enjoyed St. Mark's, serving as its chaplain for over 25 years. During World War II, both Holy Trinity and St. Mark's were closed and were looked after by

⁵ Alex Preston's 2014 novel *In Love and War* (pub Faber & Faber) describes this period. St Mark's Archive furnished some background information and both the church and its chaplain (1938-1965), Frederick James Bailey, play a cameo role in the book].

their caretakers. Fr. Bailey tried to keep St. Mark's open, but as the service register testifies, in August 1941, he was arrested and interned, though later released. He had no choice but to return to England. He resumed his chaplaincy at St. Mark's after the war and in 1962 was awarded the OBE for his War Service. Neither church suffered very much war damage, even at the height of the bombardments for the Liberation of Florence in 1944 but St. Mark's church became the worship centre for the Allied Forces in the city, under the chaplaincy of Rev. Carver.



The 1950s seem to have passed fairly quietly for both churches but it was clear that the pre-war high attendance figures were unlikely ever to return. Even with rental income from some local properties the Diocese realised that the closure of one of the two was inevitable. In 1965, just 70 years after it was built, Holy Trinity was sold. It remains a church to this day but sadly, much of its artwork was stripped out and sold at the time and not all has been traced. This includes some important pieces by John Roddam Spencer Stanhope, the same artist who decorated St. Mark's in the 1890s.

Early on November 4th 1966, the river Arno burst its banks, leading to devastating flooding of the city. People lost their lives and priceless art works across the city were destroyed or seriously damaged. Flood water mingled with heating fuels, oil, mud and sewage. In the Via Maggio, the chaplain of St. Mark's, Reverend Church, was woken by a heavy and repeated banging on the front doors. He struggled downstairs in the dark but quickly realised that the ground floor of the building was under water. He ran back upstairs to look out of the window. The street was now part of the raging river; a heavy tree trunk was banging against the church doors. The story goes that he found a rubber dinghy and paddled into the church amongst floating pews and hymn books to salvage what he could and raise as much as possible above the likely level of the flood waters. Sadly, the waters rose to about 1 metre in the church, as the dark oil stains to the white marble font reminds us to this day.⁶ Most of the stencilling to the lower walls was washed away. The damaged area was later distempered over and we live with the frustrating results.



Today, almost 200 years on, the Church of England Chaplaincy in Florence is an integral part of this post-modern city. Its ministers and members participate in the ecumenical and interfaith networks of which Florence is rightly proud. Holy Trinity still stands as a symbol of the early origins of Anglicanism in the city but St. Mark's English Church on the Via Maggio continues as its living presence, bringing the chaplaincy not only to tourists and to the local neighbourhood, but to a global expatriate community and to Italians who freely choose the worship and culture on offer. As Florence plans for 2015 and the 150th anniversary of its time as Italy's Capital City, we can say of the Anglican Chaplaincies in Florence, "We were there ~ we are here."

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⁶ Our thanks to *FotoLocchi* of Florence for the image of the St Mark's font.