

THE FRENCH PRIESTS AT THE KING'S HOUSE, WINCHESTER, 1792–1796

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SUMMARY

The King's House, constructed on the site of the medieval Winchester Castle, was designed as a residence for King Charles II by Wren. Building began in 1683, and ended with the monarch's death two years later. In its two centuries of existence (it was destroyed by fire in 1894) it was put to several temporary uses, mainly military. Between 1792 and 1796 it provided accommodation for a large number of French priests, mostly natives of Brittany and Normandy, who were refugees from the French Revolution. What follows is an examination of the life of these clergy, and their impact on late Georgian Winchester.

The Great Hall, built between 1222 and 1236, and much restored in the last century, is the chief remaining fragment of the medieval castle of Winchester. The adjoining barrack, however, stands on the site, and, to some extent, parallels the scale, of a more recent royal residence which was once planned, with Charles II as patron and Christopher Wren as architect, to be an English version of the palace of Versailles. Work began on the building in 1683, and came to an abrupt end with the King's death in 1685. The incomplete hulk of what was to become a grandly conceived folly, finally destroyed by fire in 1894, remained an important ingredient of the Winchester townscape for over two centuries, and, perched on its prominence, provided a visual foil to the great cathedral church below.

In its time this building, the King's House as it was invariably called, served many functions, all of them of a temporary nature (Fig 1). It was frequently used when there was an emergency need for a public building within easy reach of London and the Channel, capable of accommodating large numbers. In times of war, during the course of the eighteenth century, it served at different periods, as a residence for soldiers and for prisoners of war (Bellenger 1982, 101–2). Its

most singular use was, perhaps, between 1792 and 1796, when what 'had been intended as the abode of royalty' became 'the seat of royal benevolence, being converted into an asylum for the refugee clergy of France' (Ball 1818, 150).

In the decade following 1792 England became the home of several thousand French refugee clergy, 'the émigré priests', who were unable, in conscience, to accept the ecclesiastical reordering of France which followed the French Revolution, and who sought exile rather than face execution, or adhesion to the new regime, in their native land. To many Englishmen, even among those who had no time for their religion or their country, they appeared innocent victims of a revolution which, by 1792, was being increasingly regarded with suspicion, if not horror. Committees for the care of the exiled priests were formed all over the country under the direction of a central committee in London. The presiding genius of this central committee, set up as a voluntary body, but eventually brought under the aegis of government was John Wilmot, M P for Coventry, who had wide experience of emigrant relief work from his period of office as commissioner in charge of the refugee American loyalists (Bellenger 1980, 3–7). He was given much assistance by the Bishop of Saint Pol de Léon in Brittany (Fig 2) who became, through his personal authority and toughness, the dominant figure among the exiled clergy (Plasse 1886, 61–94).

It is not clear who first suggested the use of the King's House for the French priests, but it was probably John Vane-Temple-Grenville, Marquess of Buckingham, a member of Wilmot's committee, and a man of wide political influence, who made the first move (Brindle 1855, 119). Dundas, the Home Secretary, took up the idea readily, and, with royal approval,

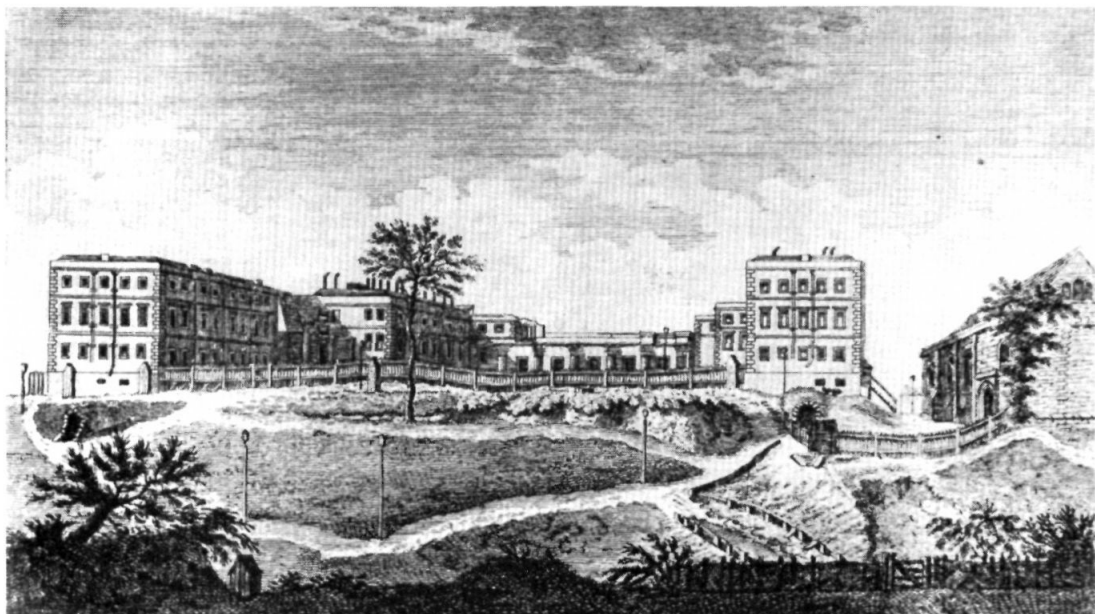


Fig 1. The King's House, Winchester, in the late eighteenth century (by courtesy of Winchester City Museum).

began to make the property habitable (PRO T/93/53, f 3).

When the priests moved into the house it retained something of its grand conception. 'The edifice', wrote Charles Ball less than a generation after the priests had left Winchester, 'which is surrounded on the south-east and west side by remains of the deep fosse of the castle, is built of a red brick and Portland stone, and forms three sides of an irregular quadrangle, enriched, in the centre of each front, with columns of the Corinthian order. The principal front, which is on the east side, consists of a range of lofty pillars, with a pediment bearing the King's arms, and even in its present condition, so infinitely inferior to the original design from which it was executed, presents on every side an appearance truly royal and magnificent' (Ball 1818, 151). Appearances were deceptive: by 1792, the buildings were very dilapidated and, according to a report prepared by surveyors from the Board of Works, although structurally sound needed considerable improvements to make them habitable; all the windows (weatherboarded and glassless)

needed immediate replacement, as did many missing doors and rotten floors. It was estimated that it would take five weeks to fit up the south wing for 500 clergy at a cost of £500, while some of the lower rooms could be made ready in about ten days for as many as 200 clergy. The report had been prepared by 26 September 1792 and it appears, from the rapid arrival of the priests, that the repair operations were launched without delay (BL Add MS 18591, ff 7–10).

The first priests moved in during the autumn and winter of 1792, and, by 8 February 1793, there were 221 priests lodged in 30 'lately whitewashed' rooms (BL Add MS 18591, ff 74–76). By 21 April 1793 there were 595 priests, approaching what the authorities considered the optimum level of 650, a figure exceeded by 21 November 1793 when there were 680 resident priests (BL Add MS 18591, f 130; PRO T 93 53, 169). By the time of its closure, in the early months of 1796, the house sheltered upwards of a thousand clergy (Milner 1809, 178).

Life in the house seems, from the picture that emerges from the accounts of Robert Reeks

Corbin, secretary to the local Winchester emigrant relief committee and appointed general administrator of the house by the London committee, to have been well-ordered, and relatively austere. Furniture was kept to the minimum required, while the diet of the establishment (albeit plentiful and nourishing) made few concessions to French dietary sensibilities. There were two main meals a day, dinner at twelve, supper at seven. Daily personal rations included a pound of meat, a pound and a half of bread, two ounces of cheese and two quarts of beer. Perhaps the generous allowance of food was to compensate for the daily ration for heating and lighting which was limited to a bucket of coal, and two candles for each room (BL Add MS 18591, f 41; PRO T/93/46 *passim*).

The house, in its four years as an asylum for French priests, had about it the atmosphere of a major seminary of a type familiar in pre-revolutionary France. This feeling was encouraged by social structure, personnel and horarium. The house was divided into groups, determined by 'room', each with its own president. Meals were taken in common (Loth and Verger 1899, 110). The general superior, Abbé Noël-Paul Thomas Martin (1745-1811), had formerly been rector of the seminary at Lisieux in Normandy, and was a man of great experience and competence, who had the complete trust of the Bishop of Saint Pol de Léon (Scantlebury 1932, 130). Martin was assisted by Abbé Aprix de Bonnière, who acted as bursar, a role for which he was qualified by his 'ci-devant' career as an official of the cathedral of Evreux (PRO T/93/46; EA, G 1816). The daily horarium had about it an almost monastic character. From early morning until eight pm there were always two priests in adoration before the Blessed Sacrament. On Sundays and Feastdays there were conferences on dogmatic and moral theology, and three times a week a conference on scripture (Isherwood 1972, 130). There was much time for private prayer and reading. There was an allotted period for recreation, and walks were encouraged both in the city and cathedral precincts (Twining 1887, 200). There were times, too, for shared work, and for individual money-making activities, essential to supplement the

small state funded pension. It was these activities which brought the French most into the life of the city.

In August 1793 manual labour was organised on a grand scale and, eventually, 200 were employed in the manufacture of tapestry under the direction of the Marchioness of Buckingham, who, with her husband, was the chief benefactor of the establishment (Brindle 1855, 119-20; Marshall and Woods (1968, 395). Many clergy were employed as French tutors, an occupation which encouraged much informal contact between exile and native (BL Add MS 18592, f 130). A few turned to writing, but this activity was frowned upon by the authorities of the Established Church. Dr Sturges, the spokesman for the Chapter of Winchester Cathedral, seeking to avoid a possible area of controversy, reached an agreement with Abbé Martin that the priests in Winchester should print nothing, and have nothing to do with the press (BL Add MS 18592, ff 117-118).

The danger of waywardness, even of apparent waywardness, among the priests, feared by the dignitaries of the cathedral, was shared by the government who backed up Corbin's general responsibility for the good conduct of the house with a supervisory committee which included representatives of the municipality, the cathedral and the local Catholic community whose pastor was John Milner, the historian of Winchester, who later became a bishop (BL Add MS 18591, f 53). These inspectors were assisted, in supervising the French, by the domestic staff, all English, who included a steward, a doorkeeper, a cook and an under-cook, who were only gradually replaced by the priests themselves (BL Add MS 18591, ff 31, 57, 60-61).

The administration of the house worked well practically and politically. The clergy were kept under one roof, and their good treatment 'served to prove to all the world the pre-eminent Liberality and Munificence of Great Britain'. (BL Add MS 18591, f 31). There were some carefully orchestrated scenes of common patriotic fervour for the cause of 'Throne and Altar' which revealed the potential propagandist use of the priests. A requiem mass for the guillotined Louis XVI organised for the French in Winchester's

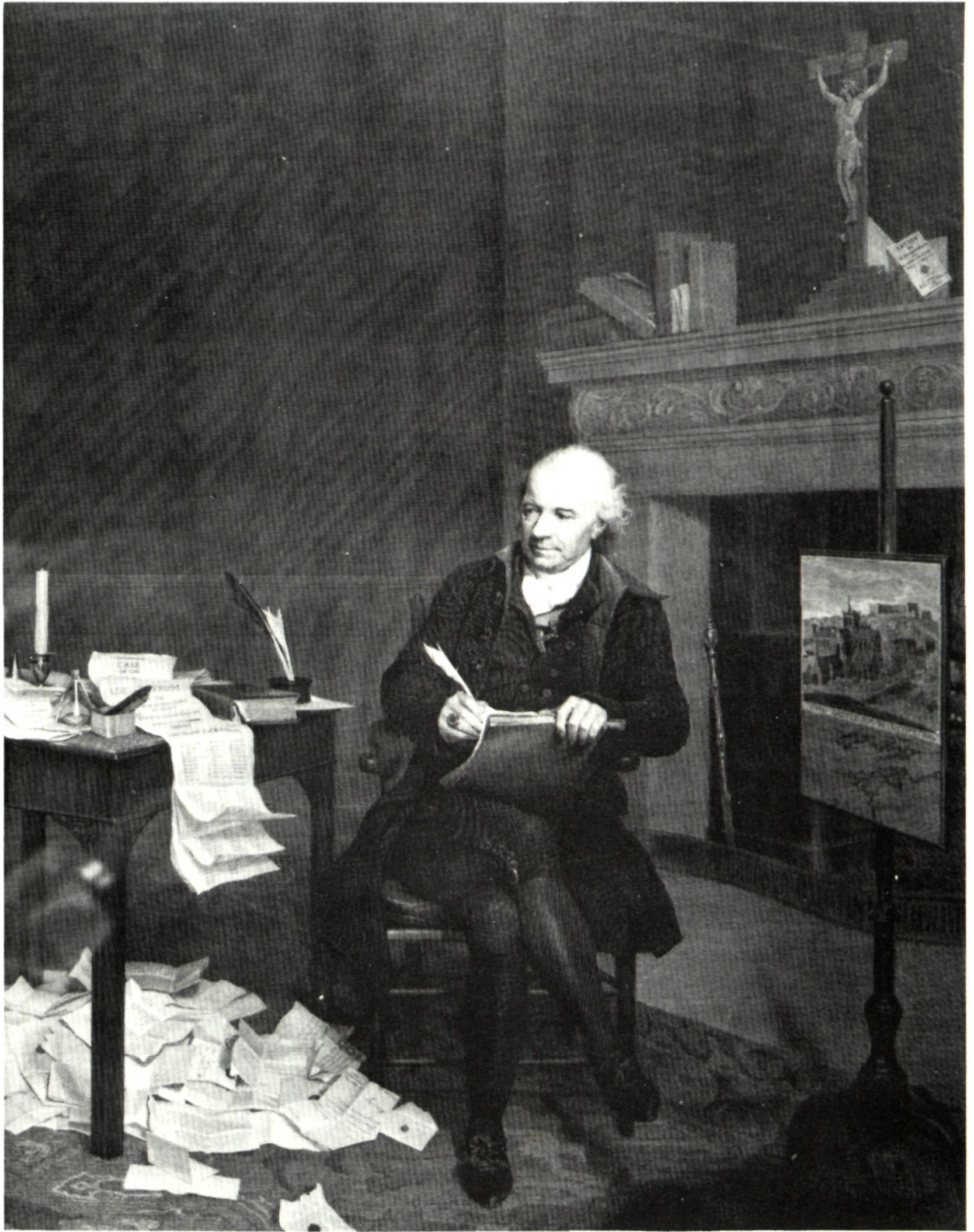


Fig 2. Jean François laMarche, Bishop of St Pol de Léon, from a print by Dānloux. Note the painting of Winchester on the right of the picture. (By courtesy of the British Museum).

Catholic chapel was supported musically by a regimental band, and personally by the attendance of many 'of the clergy and principal citizens of the city and neighbourhood' (AAW/1793-1794, 231).

Such scenes were, however, comparatively rare, and relations between the exiles and some residents of the city quickly became somewhat strained. The local tradesmen, in particular, did not have a good 'rapport' with the French. Abbé Martin, in January 1795, made some general complaints about high prices and low quality to the relief committee, complaints which he hoped would not cause a further deterioration in relations (PRO T/93/46, f 420). In their turn the shopkeepers, and the townspeople in general, began to look with increasingly hostile eyes to the house on the hill. Rumours about what was going on in the King's House multiplied, and it became widely believed that a plague was raging there (Loth and Verger 1899, 112). The French priests who ventured out of their refuge were 'continually exposed to insult' (BL Add MS 18592, f 100).

In the autumn of 1796 the priests left the King's House. This happened partly because of the growing problems in the town, which reached crisis point with reports of active

French proselytising (Bellenger 1978, 64-67), but mainly because of the urgent need, as the French wars dragged on, for barrack space (S J Milner letters, f 156). In retrospect Wilmot, the problems notwithstanding, saw the life of the Winchester priests as one of 'prudence and good sense' (Marshall and Woods 1968, 265), and the attitude of the priests themselves is summarised in the marble tablet which they left behind as their memorial, and which is now preserved at St Peter's Catholic Church in the city [see Appendix below]. The departure was a restrained one, and, to avoid attention the priests were dispersed gradually to the houses requisitioned for their use at Reading, Thame and Paddington. A number of priests chose to remain, in lodgings, at Winchester; in July 1798, for example, thirteen clergy and a servant were lodged with a Mrs Fleetwood in St Thomas's Street (WCL/O/C 103, f2).

The life of the priests at the King's House was a restricted, and in many senses, an artificial one, and its impact on the native populations was restricted, but the presence of the priests added a numerous and unique element to Winchester's life, and for four years 'the mighty wave of their prayer could be heard all over the city' (Leslie 1953, 20).

APPENDIX

From Milner 1809, 178-9: text of the French Priests' memorial.

FAVENTE DEO OPT. MAX.
 Diu sospes & incolumis
 In suorum decus ac delicias,
 In exterorum admirationem &
 Perfugium,
 Vivat
 Georgius III.
 Mag. Britan. &c. Rex piissimus!
 Aeterno pacis beneficio gaudeat!
 Jugi pietatis, scientiae, &
 opum laude
 Efflorescat,
 Nobilissima Gens Britannica,
 Quae
 Politicarum immemor querelarum,
 Clerum Gallicanum
 Innumeris calamitatibus oppressum,

By the favour of God
 May George the Third
 The pious King of Great Britain,
 Live long in safety,
 The delight and ornament of his
 own country,
 The admiration and protector
 of foreigners.
 May the generous British Nation
 Rejoice in the blessing of eternal
 peace.
 And be ever famous
 For it's piety, it's learning, and
 it's riches
 Which,
 Forgetful of it's rival enmity,
 Like a fond parent,

Patriis sedibus expulsum,
 Terris & alto jactatum,
 Almae Parentis instar
 Hospitali gremio excepit
 benignissime,
 Fovit tenerrime,
 Protexit studiosissime,
 Voluntaria cunctorum regni
 ordinum subscriptione
 Aluit generosissime.
 Sit etiam longum felix,
 Praestantissimus senator
 Britannicus
 Johannes Wilmot,
 Publicae munificentiae
 Una cum selectissimis
 Et integerrimis viris,
 Dispensator prudentissimus!
 Haec ardentibus votis
 A supremo rerum moderatore
 Efflagitat Clerus Gallicanus
 Per universas
 Britannici imperii plagas dispersus.
 Haec imprimis, anhelanti pectore,
 Ad aras supplex provoluta,
 Impetrare studet indesinenter
 Ejusdem cleri pars non exigua,
 Regalibus istis in aedibus,
 Insigni munere, collecta,
 Quae
 Hoc leve gratissimi pignus animi
 Ad perpetuam rei memoriam,
 Exaratum voluit.
 Anno reparaetae salutis M,DCC,
 XCIII.
 Atque XXXIII Georgii III.
 Altius haec animis, quam marmore
 sculpta manebunt.

Received kindly into it's hospitable
 bosom,
 Protected carefully,
 Maintained liberally,
 By a voluntary subscription of all
 ranks of men,
 And cherished tenderly,
 No inconsiderable part
 Of the Gallic Clergy,
 Driven out of their native country,
 And tossed about by sea and land.
 May the excellent British Senator
 John Wilmot
 Enjoy constant happiness;
 May happiness attend also
 Those choise and upright men,
 Who are, together with him,
 The prudent dispensers
 Of the public munificence.
 Thus the Gallic Clergy,
 Scattered throughout the British
 Empire,
 Eagerly implores the Supreme
 Governor of all things,
 Thus also do those of the same Clergy
 Continually pray, prostrate before
 their altars,
 Who, by a singular favour, lived
 collected
 In this Royal House.
 They
 Have caused to be engraven
 This small pledge of their gratitude,
 For a perpetual memorial,
 In the year of our Lord 1793,
 And in the thirty-third year of the
 reign of George the Third.
 The fond record of these munificent
 acts will remain much longer on the
 tablet of our memories, than the record
 of them on the tablet of marble.

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