

The Founding of the Guild of All Souls

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In introducing the booklet that the Guild of All Souls has published to mark our 150th anniversary, I'd like to pay tribute to my fellow Council member Mrs Anne Gray. It was her idea to re-publish the booklet about Fr Tooth that was first published in 1931, shortly after his death. She also obtained permission from the Children's Society (which owns the copyright). She typeset the new booklet, designed the excellent cover, and arranged the printing.

I contributed an extended Introduction to the booklet, and in what follows I will say a little about that. Like Fr Beaken, I beat my path to the door of the Sisters' Convent in Walsingham. I should add that, thanks to a legacy, we are able to honour our founders in this anniversary year by paying for the archives to be sorted, packed in proper folders, and catalogued by a professional archivist, with a view to depositing them in a library where they will be more readily available for research. So troubling the Sisters and washing the dust of 150 years off one's hands will soon be a thing of the past.

On my visit to the Convent I spent some time rummaging among the archives in the hope that they might contain some records from 1873. I looked through the cupboard, but there was nothing. Finally, I found a box of old books. I looked at them one by one, but again, they were all rather more recent. By the time I opened the last book, I was despairing, but then – eureka! There it was: the Guild's first Minute Book, begun in 1873.

As an historian, I know that research often shatters myths. Would our belief that the Guild was founded on 15 March 1873 be one of them? Would I need to suggest to Bishop Norman that our celebration should be re-scheduled? Fortunately, that was not the case. There, on page 1 of the book, was a minute of the first preparatory meeting, held 150 years ago today.

So what does my Introduction cover? First, I say something about St James Hatcham as a parish in the 1870s and also its significance in the Ritualist Movement. I must confess that until I did this work I was more than a bit hazy about where Hatcham actually is. It turned out that I'd parked my car several times outside the former church building! In the booklet I explain where it is and why it is not very well known, so if you don't know, that might be a good reason to buy the booklet.

It is well known that the Guild was founded by three laymen who worshipped in Fr Tooth's parish. The names are usually given as Joseph Plimpton and Edmund Croom, the churchwardens, and Joseph Plimpton's son Walter, but that is not correct. The three men who gathered on 15 March 1873 were in fact Edmund Croom, Walter Plimpton, and another man, John McEwen. One of their decisions was that Joseph Plimpton should be invited to the second preparatory meeting, along with two other men, and that he should be asked to host that meeting in his house, which was in St James's Road, close to the church. As the host, the older man, and a churchwarden, it was naturally Joseph Plimpton who chaired the second meeting in the absence of his fellow churchwarden, but it was Mr McEwen who at that meeting proposed the motion to found the Guild. At the first General Meeting, it was Edmund Croom, who

had been elected as Warden of the Guild, who moved the motion to adopt the Guild's Objects, but it was Mr McEwen, not one of the Plimptons, who seconded it.

In my Introduction I set out the story of the five preliminary meetings in which the Guild took shape before its launch at that first General Meeting on 21 April 1873. I also comment on Fr Tooth's role. The Guild was absolutely a lay initiative, conceived and shaped by laymen, but (as you would expect in an Anglo-Catholic parish) they laid their plans before their priest, accepted his direction, and invited him to become the Guild's first President. The meeting at which they did that was the only one of the five preparatory meetings that Fr Tooth attended. As the minutes of the third preparatory meeting put it, they 'wait[ed] upon that gentleman' in the Vicarage to receive his response to their proposals.

Though Fr Tooth's role was limited, it proved crucial. The three laymen had initially conceived of the Guild as a 'burial guild' whose primary purpose would be to provide the 'furniture' needed for catholic funerals, with a second purpose of praying for the dying, deceased members, and all the faithful departed. Fr Tooth told them to reverse these objects, so that prayer came first and the provision of liturgical paraphernalia second. I speculate that it may also have been Fr Tooth's influence that resulted in the gloss explaining the purpose of providing equipment for catholic funerals, which looks as if it was added to the text as originally recorded – 'so as to set forth the two great doctrines of the "Communion of Saints" and the "Resurrection of the Body"'. Although it is clear from the Minutes that from the outset the Guild's scope was envisaged as extending beyond the parish of St James Hatcham, it was surely the fact that the Guild existed first and foremost to promote prayer for the dead, and its espousal of these two great doctrines, that explains why it so very quickly extended its membership far beyond its original local area?

In the Introduction I go on to offer some more information about the three founders. A significant fact is the relevant youth of the three laymen whose idea it was: at 31, the first Warden, Edmund Croom was the eldest of the three. He died in 1919, but his son Fr Frederick Croom, whom Fr Tooth had baptized, became the Guild's fifth President and as such celebrated Fr Tooth's funeral requiem in 1931, at which he gave the eulogy that is printed in the booklet. Walter Plimpton was just 24 when the Guild was founded. He was its first Secretary and continued in office for 47 years. He became a noted expert on liturgy and was one of the two compilers of the Western Use manual *Ritual Notes*. He died in 1924 and was buried next to his father Joseph Plimpton in West Norwood Cemetery. I found their gravestones and photographed them for the booklet. I also took photos of the remaining wing of Woodside Convent, which Fr Tooth built after he left Hatcham, of Fr Tooth's grave in Beckenham Cemetery, and of screen and sanctuary ornaments that were erected at St James Elmer's End in his memory.

The story of the third founder, Mr McEwen, is more elusive and difficult to trace, but my research suggests that that story may have been the most significant of the three for the Guild's inception. John McEwen was 27 when the Guild was founded. He was a committed Anglo-Catholic, whose marriage to his wife Jeanette was the only one announced in the *Church Times* (then of course an Anglo-Catholic newspaper) in its issue of 7 June 1872. Their son Atholl Francis McEwen was born on 25 February 1873, but then disaster struck. On 14 March 1873 we read in the Deaths column of the *Church Times*:

‘On the 7th inst., Feast of S. Perpetua, M., at Peckham, Jeanette Matilda, wife of John P. McEwen. Aged 27. “May she rest in peace, and light eternal shine upon her.” ’

Fr Tooth buried Mrs McEwen in a consecrated section of Brockley Cemetery on Tuesday 11 March, doubtless after a funeral at St James’. I have found the spot, but there is now no memorial. I guess that a 27-year-old commercial clerk whose wife had died leaving him with a 10-day-old baby son couldn’t afford more than a wooden cross that hasn’t survived the intervening 150 years.

It is surely no coincidence that it was on the Saturday after he had buried his wife of nine months that John McEwen went to meet Edmund Croom and Walter Plimpton in Croom’s house (265 Queen’s Road, Peckham) and, as the minute of that meeting records, ‘after several hours consideration’, the three young men ‘resolved to take steps to form a Burial Guild’ and ‘a draft of proposed Objects and Rules was drawn up and agreed upon’.

John McEwen left the Guild’s Council in 1877, having moved to Scotland (this was, of course, before the days of Zoom), but he remained a member of the Guild, and at the 1891 Annual Meeting, for example, we find him moving the re-election of the President, Warden and Council. He died in 1917. I’m sorry that I haven’t been able to find his grave.

Fr Tooth himself was only 33 when these three younger men in his congregation conceived the idea of founding the Guild of All Souls, but he outlived them all, dying at the age of 91 on 5 March 1931. I conclude my Introduction to the Booklet by considering the various aspects of his legacy. Perhaps his most enduring legacy is the Guild of All Souls: it was as a result of his development of the Anglo-Catholic tradition at Hatcham and his teaching of members of his congregation there that the Guild came into being. In our first Secretary Walter Plimpton in particular, who was only 21 or 22 when he moved to Hatcham with his parents, Fr Tooth clearly inspired a love of catholic liturgy and doctrine that he expressed not only through his work for the Guild over the next half century but also in his publications. Our first Warden Edmund Croom and his son Fr Frederick Croom were also among those whom Fr Tooth inspired, as was H. W. Hill, an even younger member of Fr Tooth’s congregation, who joined the Guild in 1875 at the age of 24, served as its Treasurer from 1898 until his death in 1926, and in 1902 gave up his business career to work full-time as Secretary of the English Church Union, retiring in 1919 – one of the Catholic Movement’s leading laymen in that period.

But my last word is to encourage you all to pray, among our Founders, particularly for John McEwen, the one whom history has overlooked, and for his wife of nine months Jeanette McEwen, whose death, aged 27, on 7 March 1873 and burial by Fr Tooth on 11 March, were surely the catalyst for the meeting on 15 March whose 150th anniversary we are marking today:

Rest eternal grant unto them, O Lord. And let light perpetual shine upon them.
Amen.

This address was given by Dr Colin Podmore, a member of the Council of the Guild of All Souls, before the 150th Anniversary Mass celebrated at St Stephen’s, Gloucester Road, on 15 March 2023.