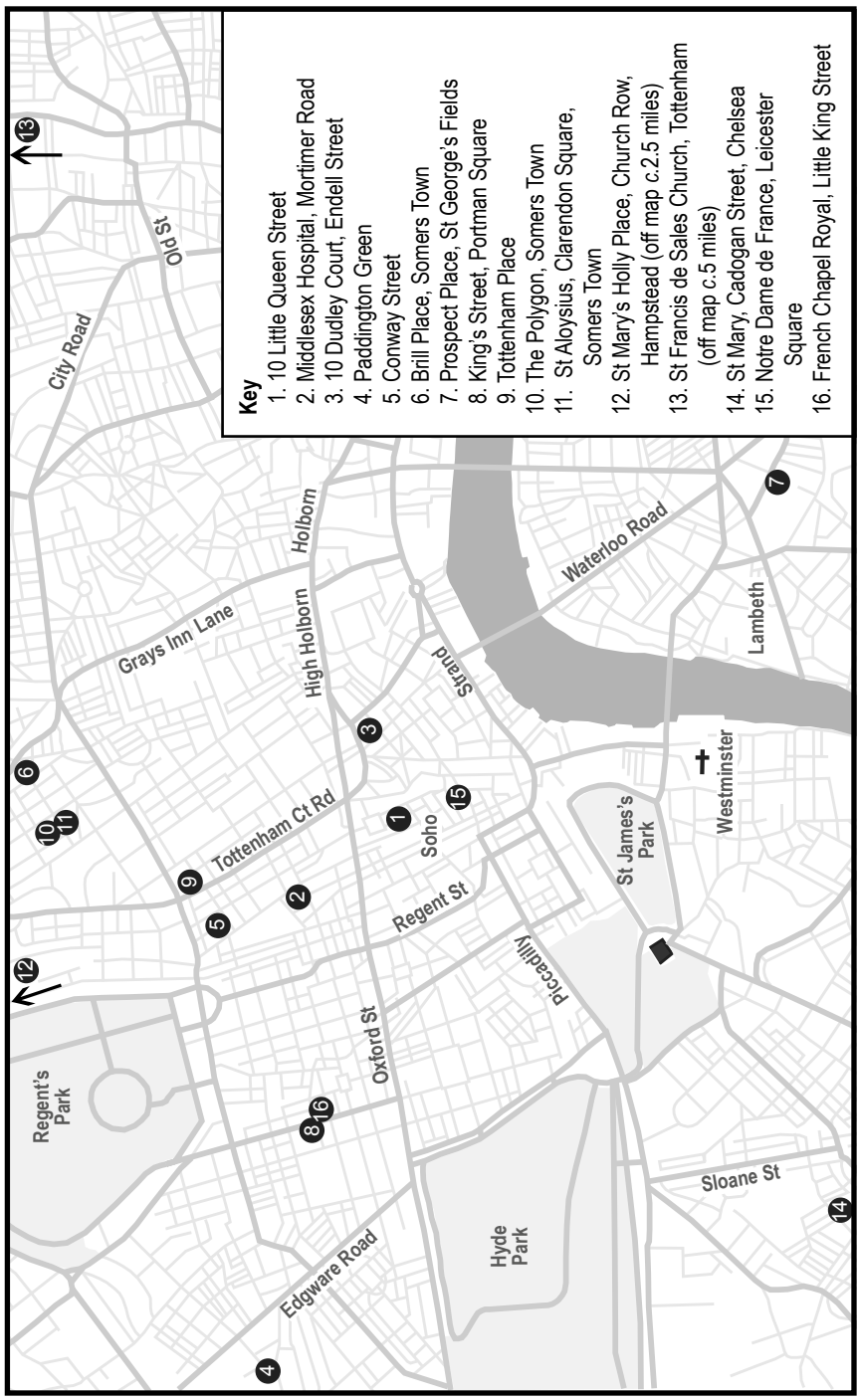
Note on French Catholics in London after 1789

The first chapter of this volume dealt with the French Protestants who took refuge in London. Having expelled the Huguenots, after the 1789 Revolution it was French Catholics' turn to be forced into exile, many of them also fleeing to London. The following account is adapted, by courtesy of the publishers Robert Hale Limited, from Douglas Newton's book *Catholic London* (1950), pp. 276–80, 286, 288, 295–7. It is included here specifically for its references to the Catholic religious exile and to numerous named London places in the period. Compiled by Helena Scott.

In the late eighteenth century Drury Lane ended at the point where Holborn touched Broad Street (now High Street), St. Giles-in-the-Fields, and was continued into the heart of Bloomsbury (there was then no New Oxford Street) by Bow Street, Peter Street and Queen Street (approximately Museum Street) to Great Russell Street. In Queen Street (often called Little Queen Street, no doubt to distinguish it from Great Queen Street, connecting Drury Lane with Lincoln's Inn Fields) was situated the bureau for assisting the refugee priests who crowded into England during the French Revolution.

This influx of French began in the spring of 1791, when Mgr. Jean-François de la Marche, bishop of Saint-Pol-de-Léon (d. 1806), and others who had early stood out against the French Republican government, made their escape to England in smugglers' vessels. By 1792 there were already 3,000 French priests in England, 1,500 of these being in London, many of the others being in Winchester, Jersey and other parts of the 'London district' – that is, under Bishop Douglass (1743–1812; Roman Catholic vicar apostolic of the London district from 1790 onwards). By 1801 the figures had risen to 5,600 clergy and 4,000 laymen in England, independent of the large numbers in Jersey. Among the clergy were thirty French bishops and fifty vicars-general.

Bishop Douglass himself reported that he had five French archbishops, twenty-seven bishops and thirteen vicars-general employed by him. The most notable of these was Mgr. de la Marche of Pol-de-Léon. He took up his residence at 10, Little Queen Street, and, assisted by Abbé Floch (the exiled curé of the church of Saint Louis, Brest) and other priests, provided assistance for his fellow countrymen with an extraordinary energy. He had the help of an English widow, Dorothy Silburn, who spent every day at the



Map 3.2. Places mentioned in the text (Base map: London *c.*1850)

bureau, and with such tireless efforts and sympathy that she became known as 'La Mère des Prêtres exilés'. When, in 1815, she went to live in France, Louis XVIII gave her a pension out of the Civil List and, on her death five years later, aged sixty-seven, the French government put up a memorial to her honour in Roscoff (N.-E. Dionne, *Les Ecclésiastiques et les royalistes français réfugiés au Canada à l'époque de la revolution – 1791–1802* (Quebec, 1905), pp. 19–20).

The need of the exiles was indeed desperate. The priests in particular were often utterly destitute, and many of the laity were in little better case. According to Bishop Ward (Bernard Ward, 1857–1920, the first bishop of Brentwood, a president of St. Edmund's College, Ware, and a historian of pre-emancipation English Catholicism), the Protestant English received these émigrés not only with hospitality but with open-hearted generosity. The king himself exempted them from the operations of the Aliens Act, while all classes showed kindliness, subscribing large sums for their support, the Treasury alone making grants of over £450,000. Oxford University first printed a Latin version of the New Testament for the use of the priests, and later the four parts of the Roman Breviary, both being gifts.

With such co-operation Bishop Douglass, the bishop of Pol-de-Léon, Dorothy Silburn and others were able to provide clothes, means and living accommodation for the refugees, even fitting up large schoolrooms as dormitories when necessary. A wing of the Middlesex Hospital was given over to house the sick priests, and a chapel put into it for those well enough to say or hear Mass. Two English doctors, Vaughan and Oliphant, gave their services, and many Englishwomen, among them the duchess of Buckingham, visited and carried comforts to them (J. H. Harting, *Catholic London Missions from the Reformation to the Year 1850* (1903), p. 223).

The English on their part were impressed by the conduct of the French clergy, who showed themselves to be ready to do all they could, by teaching and other occupations, to provide for themselves; and the same could be said of the laity. As to the spiritual zeal of the priests, it was such that Pitt declared in the House of Commons that it had not been equalled since the earliest ages of Christianity. This behaviour of the clergy, together with the sight of so many of them about the London streets, did much at the critical time of the Relief Bills to break down prejudices as well as familiarize the public with Catholic services, chapels and ways of life.

One of the deepest needs of these exiles was the provision of places to say daily Mass. The bishop of Pol-de-Léon was perturbed at the fact that many celebrated Mass in improper places, such as their own bedrooms, which were sometimes small and dirty, or without lights or vestments; some even used paper vestments, which, says Ward, Bishop Douglass forbade in

the London district. All this led to the opening up of many chapels, and permission to erect chapels in private houses.

St. Patrick's, Soho, was the first chapel to be used, Bishop Douglass paying the expense of the priests' wax and wine; but presently the bishop of Pol-de-Léon opened a church at 10, Dudley Court, Soho, close to St. Patrick's, dedicating it to La Sainte Croix, the Abbé Floch being the director. It carried on from 1793 to 1802. The French bishop also opened a little chapel in Paddington Green for the Abbé Romain of Rouen, who had come to London with about seventy priests, and around whom gathered many more Catholics (Harting, *Catholic London Missions*, pp. 222–3).

At the same time the Abbé Guy Carron, who had arrived in England quite penniless, took two large houses in Conway Street, Fitzroy Square, off Tottenham Court Road, and turned them into a chapel; then, starting without any resources at all, added successful free schools for boys and girls. By 1800 he and others such as he had founded eight French chapels in the London district, the three already named and others at Brill Place, Somers Town; Prospect Place, St. George's Fields; King's Street, Portman Square; Tottenham Place; and the Polygon, Somers Town, as recorded by Bishop Douglass in his diary.

Of these chapels the only survivors are the two Somers Town chapels which have merged into the church of St. Aloysius, Clarendon Square. This district, which occupies a brick-hemmed area behind Euston and St. Pancras stations, was in those days beginning to change hedges into terraces. Drawn perhaps by the semi-rural atmosphere, the Abbé Chantral had established a colony of French émigrés from Jersey, with workshops where French ladies found employment in making vestments and altar linen for their priests. About thirty of these priests were housed in what became No. 32, The Polygon. It was, of course, a Mass centre, but the chapel of the colony was at 6, Garden Gate, at the corner of Brill Place, Skinner Street, and had the charming dedication of 'Our Lady of the Garden Gate' (Harting, *Catholic London Missions*, p. 244).

The Abbé Carron (1760–1821) came from Fitzroy Square to take charge of the mission in 1799. He doubled the existing schools for boys and girls and built others; he supported two hospitals and an ecclesiastical seminary, an orphanage and a providence – which is a night shelter and hostel. He also built the present church in 1808. At the Restoration, when many French priests returned to their country, the Abbé Carron was among them. He left the Somers Town mission in charge of Abbé Jean Nérinckx, a Belgian Capuchin, who was actually ordained at Somers Town by the emigrant bishop of Avranches. During the ministry of this priest a convent school adjoining the church was established by Madame Bonnault d'Houet, the

foundress of the Society of the Faithful Companions of Jesus (Harting, *Catholic London Missions*, p. 246).

The memory of the Abbé Carron is preserved by a memorial tablet and a bust, while some of the vestments used in this church at least until 1950 were his. There is also a memorial to Jean-François de la Marche, bishop and comte de Léon, who was buried in old St. Pancras churchyard.

A number of other chapels were built later by French priests, and some survive, like St. Mary's, Holly Place, Church Row, Hampstead, where a mission was established in 1796 by Abbé Morel (1766–1852) for French families in the neighbourhood. His first Mass was said over a stable in Rosslyn Park, but in 1816 the present little chapel was built and opened by Dr. Poynter, vicar-apostolic. Another of their churches is St. Francis of Sales, Tottenham, established in 1793 by Abbé Cheverus (Jean-Louis Lefebvre de Cheverus, 1768–1836, afterwards cardinal archbishop of Bordeaux; B. W. Kelly, *Historical Notes on English Catholic Missions* (1907), p. 396, where however the name is misspelt Cheireux). St. Mary, Cadogan Street, Chelsea, also seems to have arisen out of the work of several French abbés who cared for their countrymen in the 'village of Chelsea'. Their mission was continued by the remarkable Abbé Voyaux de Franous, who built a church in Cadogan Terrace in 1812; this remained in use until the present St. Mary's was opened in 1879.[1] Abbé Jean Nicolas Voyaux de Franous arrived in London in 1793. By 1832, he had been appointed honorary canon of the Chapter of St. Denis by Louis XVIII (see *Almanach Royal et National* (Paris, 1832), p. 769). He worked as chaplain of the church in Cadogan Terrace until his death in 1840. The French also used the Moorfield and Virginia Street chapels, and many smaller Mass centres.

For Douglas Newton, writing in 1950, the Soho district had for long years been London's French quarter, and he notes that in the parish of St. Patrick's, but south of it in Leicester Square, French Catholics have their own church, Notre Dame de France. It is not an old church as London churches go, having been opened on 8 December 1868, by Père Faure, a Bordeaux priest. It stands on ground once covered by Leicester House, built in 1632 by the family which gave its name to the square. The house was pulled down in 1791, and one of the large circular panoramas so popular at that time replaced it. It proceeded through several failures to the day when Père Faure acquired it and two neighbouring houses in 1865. The panorama building was adapted to worship in a most ingenious way, making the church one of the most interesting in London. It is entirely French and

[1] For fuller details, see *A History of the County of Middlesex*, xii: *Chelsea*, ed. P. E. C. Croot (2004), p. 259.

meets the needs of a large population not only in the neighbourhood but in London, and links with its own French schools and hospitals. It has been served from its beginning to the present by French Marist Fathers, one of whom is Catholic chaplain to the French Lycée in South Kensington.

The church of Notre Dame was a rallying centre for the French in the two World Wars, the Free French, whose headquarters were in London, using it in the last, when it was damaged by bombing. Not only did the Free French help to repair it with their own hands, but, its notable statue of Notre Dame des Victoires having been smashed, a French officer, often dropped in France by aeroplane to act as liaison with the French underground, got in touch with Henri Vallette, a Parisian sculptor, on one of his secret trips. The head of the statue was parachuted into France and brought to Vallette, who secretly made a replica of the statue based on the dimensions of the head. In 1945 the new statue was taken to England and erected in the church to replace the broken one. The rich collection of artworks in the church stems from the 1950s restoration of the church after the bombing and includes the famous murals by Jean Cocteau; these are dedicated to the Virgin Mary and divided into three panels: the Annunciation, the Crucifixion and the Assumption. The murals are simplified line drawings with muted colours, and Cocteau included a self-portrait within the Crucifixion scene on the left side of the altar.

To return to the end of the eighteenth century: near Portman Square, in a turning called Little George Street, the French émigrés erected with their own hands the remarkable little church that once carried the brave name of the Chapel Royal of France. It arose from the imperative need of supplying the ever-growing numbers of refugee priests with a definite central church of their own. The mission was begun under the direction of the bishop of Pol-de-Léon and Bishop Douglass, by a Sulpician, Abbé Bourret, a professor of theology of the Seminary of Orléans. He first set up a temporary chapel in a sort of half cellar, half poulterer's shop in an alley called Dorset Mews East: here Mass and marriages were celebrated, until the Sulpicians of Montreal sent a sum of money, which the Abbé Bourret was able to use for the immediate building of the church in Little King Street (now Carlton Street, near Portman Square).

Funds were short and all were anxious to have a church of their own, and quickly; so the exiled priests themselves set to work on it, digging the foundations, sawing the wood and carrying the bricks. The sight of them working in their shovel hats and white bands made Londoners stop and gape; with them worked lay exiles, some of royal blood. They also gave what money they could towards the building, and there they were helped by English Catholics and non-Catholics too.

The chapel was finished in 1799, dedicated to 'Notre Dame de l'Annonciation', and consecrated on 25 March by the bishop of Aix-en-Provence. He was one of sixteen mitred bishops at the ceremony, together with a mass of clergy, regular and secular, and princes and princesses of the royal blood, all exiles.

Once the church was in use, it was quite a common experience to see from fifteen to twenty bishops seated on the left side of the altar at High Mass, with half of the royal house of France sitting on a similar bench to the right. When retreats were given, French clergy could be seen approaching the altar in hundreds to receive communion from the hands of their bishops. The English who came to share such occasions were reportedly much edified by the behaviour of the priests. In return the French clergy facilitated the restoration of old practices among Catholics, and marked great occurrences with great ceremonials. His Eminence Cardinal Alexandre de Talleyrand-Périgord, archbishop of Rheims, grand almoner of France, officiated at the requiem of Marie-Josephine of Savoy, wife of Louis XVIII, who died in 1810, with all the high ritual of St. Denis, amid a huge gathering of the French and English aristocracy. It was royal and Catholic France transposed for a space to London soil, and when the émigrés were able to return to their own country, the restored king in gratitude bestowed upon the church the title of Chapel Royal of France and granted it an annuity for its upkeep.

It continued to exist almost to our time, serving, it is true, a dwindling French congregation. The comte de Paris made his first communion there in 1850; the prince imperial went to confession before starting on his fateful journey to Africa; Princesse Hélène d'Orléans was confirmed at the altar by Cardinal Manning. The Republican regime caused the name to be changed again to St. Louis of France. Then difficulties arose, financial and connected with the lease, and ultimately this shrine of many memories was closed.

Among those seeking refuge in England were the Benedictine nuns from Montargis, who landed at Shoreham, Sussex, in a state of total destitution. Hearing of this, the prince regent's morganatic wife Mrs. Fitzherbert immediately collected money and went to meet them. Some of the nuns were from old English families, and one, Sister Catherine Dillon, proved to be a friend of Mrs. Fitzherbert's. She carried them all to Brighton and lodged them at the 'Ship', where they were visited by the prince regent, who welcomed them and discussed plans for their future, courteously insisting on their sitting while he was standing. On going to London they found that the prince had furnished a house for them in Duke Street. Here they opened a school, going later to Princethorpe, near Rugby, where in another school they were able to take up their community life once more (A. Leslie, *Mrs Fitzherbert: a Biography* (New York, 1960), p. 84). Many other small groups

and individuals spent a relatively short time in London, and it would be enlightening to be able to trace them all.[2]

[2] For further details, see K. Carpenter, *Refugees of the French Revolution: Emigrés in London, 1789–1802* (1999); A. Bellenger, *The French Exiled Clergy in the British Isles after 1789: an Historical Introduction and Working List* (Bath, 1986); P. Emery and K. Wooldridge, *St Pancras Burial Ground: Excavations for St Pancras International, the London Terminus of High Speed 1, 2002–3* (2011); J. H. Harting, *Catholic London Missions from the Reformation to the Year 1850* (1903); B. W. Kelly, *Historical Notes on English Catholic Missions* (1907); *Catholicism in Britain and France since 1789*, ed. F. Tallett and N. Atrin (1996); and B. Ward, *The Dawn of the Catholic Revival in England, 1781–1803* (2 vols., 1909), and *The Eve of Catholic Emancipation, being the History of the English Catholics during the First 30 Years of the 19th Century* (3 vols., 1911).