

The French Exiled Clergy in Leicestershire from 1792

by *Bernard Elliott and Rupert Evans*

The purpose of this note is to draw attention to an important recent study, by Fr. Bellenger of Downside Abbey, of the French exiled clergy in England¹ and, through it, to a subject that has not received from local historians the attention it deserves, that is the impact their coming had on the development of Catholicism in this county.

The clergy in question are those who would not accept the religious changes introduced into France by the Revolution of 1789 and refused to take the oath required by the Civil Constitution of the Clergy. From the summer of 1792 these non-juring and 'refractory' clergy were liable to be deported from France. Many, particularly those from the dioceses of the north and north-west, chose to come to England: between 1793 and 1800, according to Fr. Bellenger's calculations, 'there was a mean figure of some 5000 exiled clergy on the English mainland'.²

That figure is considerable; and the arrival of so many additional clergy might be expected to have made a substantial impact on the Catholic Church in this country. Indeed it has been asserted, frequently and sometimes dogmatically, that it primed the pump for the Catholic revival of the nineteenth century.³ A further examination of the figures suggests that this claim is not so compelling as might at first appear. The exiles distributed themselves very unevenly about the country. Many stayed for little more than a decade; and the Napoleonic Concordat with the Pope offered exiles a strong inducement to return after 1801. Within a year of its promulgation the number of exiled clergy in England was reduced to 800. After 1815, when the French monarchy seemed firmly restored, only 350 remained here.⁴ The influence of this emigration on English Catholicism is therefore not easy to assess. It would seem that no satisfactory assessment is likely to be achieved until more studies have been made at a local level.

It is not the object here to try to fill that gap, even as far as this county is concerned, but rather to offer a handy tool to that end in the form of a condensed biographical list of those exiled clergy who are known to have been active in Leicestershire.

The greater part of the information contained in this list is derived from the work of Fr. Bellenger.⁵ His book provides an invaluable scholarly basis; but for the local historian the arrangement of its biographical material has some disadvantages. It lists all exiles in England by alphabetical order of surnames regardless of locality. The separate section that contains the biographical details is related to the alphabetical list by an awkward reference code; and as the volume has no index there is no short cut. Our list attempts to supply that need. In addition, although Bellenger's work is wide-ranging, it has been possible to supplement it from other sources, both published and unpublished. This additional material is also indicated in our list.

1. D. A. Bellenger, *The French exiled clergy in the British Isles after 1789: an historical introduction and working list*. Bath: Downside Abbey, 1986
2. Bellenger 1986, as n.1, p3
3. For a survey of the literature see Bellenger 1986, as n.1, pp.5-8
4. Bellenger 1986, as n.1, p.3
5. Bellenger 1986, as n.1, pp.127-280

This list is offered as a starting point for further exploration; but even as it stands it offers some suggestions about the question raised earlier. To some extent it might seem to support Bellenger's verdict that 'the French stirred little more than a passing ripple in the still waters of English Catholicism'.⁶ The number of exiled clergy who served in Leicestershire was small, even relative to the size of the county's Catholic population.⁷ In all the years with which this note is concerned the exiles amounted to no more than ten. The largest number present at any one time was only five. Four at most served here for more than six years. One of those who served longest, the Abbé Dobler, or, rather, Dobbeler, ought to have no part in the list: he was a German, driven out of the Rhineland by invasion and confiscation rather than conscience and while here probably exempt from the discipline that directed the lives of the French exiles; and it is likely that his spiritual—as opposed to musical—services amounted to no more than acting as private chaplain to his patroness, Frances Bowater, in whose train he had entered this country. On the other hand it is evident that the French clergy, however short their stay, were directed to the county to serve real needs and that they actively performed pastoral duties. It is reasonable to assume that the experience of Nevill Holt, centre of a sizable Catholic community, where a succession of exiled clergy answered a pressing need that at the time could not readily be supplied from native sources, is valid for the other centres in the county to which French priests were directed.⁸ If so, it could be argued that, by a happy chance, the French arrived just when they were needed to meet a crisis of pastoral care and therefore, at the least, their presence helped avert a potential decline. More than that, it could be argued further, on the evidence of this list, that they positively advanced the cause. The list shows that the exiles were directed to minister in four Catholic parishes or missions: Hinckley, Holt (which included Medbourne), Husbands Bosworth and Leicester; and these were precisely the centres which, by 1829, had become the largest Catholic communities in the county.⁹ This does not show that they initiated or caused this development, but it suggests that they made a substantial contribution to it—especially if one attaches weight to Bellenger's view that, as a rule, the French clergy were sent to serve only those communities that were considered 'marginal' at the time.¹⁰ If more specific evidence is required it might be found in the careers of two men who seem to stand out among their fellow-countrymen both in length of service and quality of achievement: the Dominican, Charles Caestryck, whose work in Leicester represents a turning-point in the development of a Catholic presence there; and Nicholas Malvoisin who, after a long service to the widespread community of Holt, went on to found what was to become, in 1859, the parish of Our Lady of Victories in Market Harborough, one of the most successful of the new parishes of the period.

Neither a 'passing ripple' nor a tidal wave, perhaps the preliminary tremor of a tide about to flow: that is what this brief survey tentatively suggests. However other influences than those reviewed here must not be ignored. It might not be altogether flippant to suggest that the French exile who contributed most to the Catholic revival in Leicestershire does not figure in our list and probably never even set foot in the county. This was the Abbé Giraud who taught in the school at Maizemore Court near Gloucester attended by Ambrose Phillipps de Lisle and there kindled in the

6. Bellenger 1986, as n.1, p.62

7. A figure of over 400 is suggested for 1773, between 600 and 700 for 1829: T. B. Trappes-Lomax, 'Roman Catholicism', *VCH Leicestershire*, 2, 1954, p.62

8. Nevill Holt Catholic Register, 1772-1854, LRO: microfilm copy MF169

9. Trappes-Lomax 1954, as in no.7, p.63

10. Bellenger 1986, as in n.1, p.55

impressionable youth, who was to become the outstanding figure of the Catholic revival in Leicestershire, ‘the fire from heaven’ that led to his conversion.¹¹

List of French exiled clergy active in Leicestershire, 1792–1846¹²

CAESTRYCK, Charles Benoit: b. 1761?; Dominican, dioc. St. Omer; in Leicester Oct. 1815–1831; [in charge of Catholic mission there¹³ and began building of Holy Cross 1817;¹⁴ served Husbands Bosworth from Leicester Jul. 1820 and Sep. 1824;¹⁵ removed to Glos. 1831–41; returned to Leics. Nov. 1841, with Dominicans at Hinckley, though continuing to serve Leicester;¹⁶ 1842–Nov. 1843 at Gracedieu as chaplain to Ambrose Phillipps de Lisle;¹⁷ then Hinckley where d. 21 Jan. 1844, buried Holy Cross church, Leicester.¹⁸]

DESMOULINS, Jean Baptiste: secular priest, dioc. Périgueux; in England 1792, chaplain at Lincoln’s Inn, London, 1809; in Leics. from 1810; [9 Nov. 1810–11 Sep. 1811 at Husbands Bosworth;¹⁹] officiated also at Nevill Holt until 1814.

DOBLER [or DOBBELER], Clemens: German, secular priest, chaplain to Elector of Cologne at his court in Bonn, where took large part in musical life and knew the young Beethoven; in 1794 on authority of the Elector was escorting the Hon. Frances Bowater to Hamburg when French occupied Bonn; continued with her to England, bringing in his baggage a MS copy of Beethoven’s Trio in E flat, Op.3; in Leicester 1794; there in the same year, with William Gardiner and a Mr. Valentine, performed the string Trio, Leicester thus being the first place in England to hear a piece of Beethoven’s music; settled with Frances Bowater at Old Dalby Hall; last known there 1829].²⁰

DUBOSQ, Jean Baptiste François: b. 1759; secular priest, dioc. Coutances; [in Leics. from 1813, serving at Husbands Bosworth 2 Jun. 1813–1826 when d.²¹].

11. Bellenger 1986, as in n.1, pp.37–38; E. S. Purcell, *Life and Letters of Ambrose Phillipps de Lisle*, 2 vols., London: Macmillan, 1900: 1, pp.4–5

12. This list is based on Bellenger 1986, as n.1, pp.127–280. Additional material from other sources is added within square brackets

13. Trappes-Lomax 1954, as n.7, p.62

14. A. H. Kimberlin, *The Return of Catholicism to Leicester, 1746–1946*, p.17. Leicester: Holy Cross Priory Church, 1946.

15. Trappes-Lomax 1954, as n.7, p.62

16. Kimberlin 1946, as n.14, p.21; but for correct date of move see letter from Caestryck to Phillipps de Lisle, 1831, in Dominican Archives, Newcastle-upon-Tyne Priory

17. Quenby Hall, Leicestershire, ‘The Diaries of Laura de Lisle’

18. Kimberlin 1946, as n.14, p.21

19. Trappes-Lomax 1954, as n.7, p.62

20. W. Gardiner, *Music and Friends: or Pleasant Recollections of a Dilettante*, 3 vols; vols. 1 and 2 London: Longman, Orme, Brown and Longman, 1838, vol. 3 London: Longman, Brown, Grant and Longman, 1853: 1, pp.112–13; 2, p.793; 3, p.377; but for date of Dobbeler’s arrival (based convincingly on date of French invasion of the electorate) and for correct form of his name, see A. W. Thayer, *Life of Beethoven*, revised and edited by Elliot Forbes, 2 vols. Princeton: University Press, 1967: 1, pp.166–69; for last mention of Dobbeler see Trappes-Lomax 1954, as n.7, p.63

21. Trappes-Lomax 1954, as n.7, p.63

LIOT, Jean Rose: secular priest, dioc. Le Mans; [from 1795 at Nevill Holt, where register testifies to his pastoral activity; 1798 removed to King's Cliffe, Northants.²²].

LOUVEL, Christophe: secular priest, dioc. Rouen; in England before 1800; in Leics. from 1815; [active at Nevill Holt 23 Mar. 1815–28 May 1819;²³] removed to Nottingham, thence, 1827, to Foxcote, Warwks.

MALVOISIN, Nicolas: secular priest, dioc. Bayeux; in England from 1804 in Staffs. then, 1821, Leics.; [at Nevill Holt 10 Dec. 1821–1846, then at Market Harborough where he established mass centre at Angel Hotel²⁴].

O'BRIEN, Bernard: secular priest, dioc. Paris, chaplain to Comte d'Artois (the future Charles X of France); in England before 1793, in London and King's Cliffe, Northants.; in Leics. from 1802; [active at Nevill Holt 30 Sep. 1802–20 Mar. 1808;²⁵] removed to Stamford, Lincs. where d.

LE SAGE, Henri Marie: b. 1762; secular priest, dioc. St. Malo; in Leics. from 1808; [3 Feb. 1808—31 Aug. 1809 at Husbands Bosworth;²⁶] removed to Tixall, Staffs. where d. 1821; tombstone records that he was a nephew of the author of Gil Blas.

SAINTPIERRE, Louis Nicolas: b. 1764; secular priest; in Leics. from 1822; [7 Apr. 1822–2 Sep. 1824 at Husbands Bosworth, where d.²⁷].

22. Nevill Holt Catholic Register as n.8

23. Nevill Holt Catholic Register as n.8

24. Nevill Holt Catholic Register as n.8

25. Nevill Holt Catholic Register as n.8

26. Trappes-Lomax 1954, as n.7, p.63

27. Trappes-Lomax 1954, as n.7, p.63