



**GOD'S GIFT:** Beechwood Hall which later was bought by a Catholic society and became the Beechwood Sacred Heart convent and school

# Catholic priest beat rising tide of hatred

AS Church of England clergyman Father Ed Tomlinson prepares to lead his flock away from St Barnabas' Church into the waiting arms of the Roman Catholic church, we recall denominational divide in Tunbridge Wells

AROUND a century ago, in the years before the First World War, a man was often seen lingering outside what is now Beechwood Sacred Heart School in Pembury Road, Tunbridge Wells.

He was Canon James Keatinge from St Augustine's Roman Catholic Church in Grosvenor Road, and his frequent presence outside what was then a respectable Victorian family home was a sign of his growing desperation.

For it was hard being a Catholic in deeply Protestant Tunbridge Wells. Of the town's 61,000 inhabitants, only just over 300 were practising Catholics at the turn of the century, a tiny drop in an ocean of Anglican conservatism.

For local people were not just indifferent, they were downright hostile. A generation earlier, the influential Earl of Abergavenny had won thunderous applause when he spoke of his fears for "the good old Church of England".

## Absolution

At the annual Christmas dinner at his home at Erdige Castle in 1873 he told guests feasting on venison and boar's head of his dread of "ornaments and vestments, of gestures and postures, of high mass and low mass, of transubstantiation, of confession and absolution, and of other practices which appear to be both Romish and Romanising".

In other words he, like many of his audience, had no time for the Catholics. Local feelings ran so high, in fact, that a series of "anti-confessional" meetings were held in which one speaker claimed: "English homes will soon be destroyed if this practice continues to gain ground." Another warned:

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"Every Englishman's home is his castle yet, when one member of the family goes to confession, the secrets of the house become secrets no longer."

The Rev Dr Cumming, speaking to "a large and fashionable audience", also tapped into his listeners' deep distrust of foreign influence when he explained that in the confession box "very much like a sentry box...the daughter has to whisper into the ears of the priest what which she would not tell her mother, and the son that which he would not tell his father".

All of which must have been deeply depressing for a priest fighting to win support for the church and school which, built on a local foundation established by the Jesuits back in 1838, was by now running on a shoestring.

It was that sense of despair which drove him so often to Pembury Road, for it was on the rambling house, set back behind its banks of rhododendrons and spreading trees, that his hopes rested.

A few years earlier, the leader of the Sacred Heart nuns in England

had shown interest in buying the then Beechwood Hall and turning it into a convent and school. With an international reputation and plenty of funds behind them, they would have given his ministry a fresh injection of hope, and it was a great blow when nothing happened.

However, he never lost faith, and developed the habit of quietly burying Roman Catholic medals and statues in the hedge along Beechwood's front boundary, all the while praying that his dream would come true. And just to make sure, he used a period of convalescence after a bout of illness to visit Sacred Heart convents around the world to ask them to pray for the Tunbridge Wells foundation.

In the end, his determination paid off. When the property unexpectedly came back on to the market in 1914, the Sacred Heart Society bought it. By the following winter, they had moved into the house where the school remains to this day, and on February 2, 1915, a thankful Canon Keatinge led the first mass in the new convent.