



THE COWLEY FATHERS

Fr RICHARD MEUX BENSON,
THE PARISH OF COWLEY S. JOHN
&
THE SOCIETY OF S. JOHN THE EVANGELIST



This record was compiled by Ruth Waddle and Edward Williams to mark the visit of Br Keith Nelson, Superior of SSJE to SS. Mary and John Church, July 2026.

Br Keith Nelson, the Superior of the Society of S. John the Evangelist shares thoughts on the legacy and impact of Father Benson.

Father Richard Meux Benson was the principal founder of the Society of St. John the Evangelist. For Fr. Benson, Christ is always *more*: always a higher height, a deeper depth, inviting us beyond the life we know now into something “greater than we can either ask for or imagine.” Fr. Benson made the power of the risen Christ real for others – so real that it was worth offering oneself up to it entirely, in soul and body.

To the sleepy, establishment-minded Church of England in the mid-nineteenth century, a life lived with such passionate abandonment to God was unthinkable. While the first communities of Anglican sisters had been founded in the 1840s, consecrated religious life was still enormously controversial in the Church of England by the time he, Fr. Grafton, and Fr. O’Neill quietly made their own vows of poverty, celibacy, and obedience in 1866. Yet the mentors and peers who formed Fr. Benson, the theologians and priests of mid-nineteenth century Oxford, embodied a new spirit flaring to life in the English Church: a Christian discipleship both ancient and scandalously new that risked everything for the sake of a God who risked everything for us.

Rather than making this life of the glorified Christ a remote, ethereal horizon in some distant future, Fr. Benson devoted his whole being to a God who makes heaven real here and now supremely in the person of Jesus. “Do not think of that as if it were a world far away,” Benson urges. In another place, he writes,

We must lay hold upon the glory of Christ as the basis and life of the eternal kingdom. The triumphant glory of the incarnate Son of God, the Redeemer, is the fundamental principle which sustains the universe he created; permeates it; quickens it; develops it in purposes of expanding power, elevates it as an object of the Father’s love. God’s decree shall make all who enter this eternal kingdom to share the glory of the eternal Son.

The wisdom and witness of monastic life, at its best, points to the reality of the kingdom present here and now, even as we yearn for

the “freedom of the glory of the children of God” in its fullness. We engage that consoling, transfiguring, and at times crucifying invitation in religious *community*. But this, we believe, is the common calling of every disciple of Jesus: to practice loving and being loved by forming, and being formed by, communities of love. The wisdom and witness of monastic life, at its best, points to the reality of the kingdom present here and now.

Life in religious community powerfully shaped Fr. Benson’s vivid apprehension of heaven. This is a vision desperately needed in our time. In many ways, we have lost both the urgency of our desire for heaven *and* our sense that our ultimate healing and wholeness can only come by participation in community. Benson writes:

The glory of heaven is the love which rejoices in all the glory of God, as manifested in all that are around. There the saints shall rejoice, each in the glory of all. All that we have, we possess along with the rest as the common gift from Christ to all the members of his body. All that Christ imparts to others is no less our own because it is manifested in them.

From *The Universal Humanity of Christ* by Fr Benson

Although, therefore, our Lord was born amidst the relationships of earth in his life of humiliation, he took upon himself the common humanity of all nations. There was nothing in him to limit his character, or his affections, or his interests. He is the Son of Man. The whole human race claim him as their offspring. He is the Seed of the collective humanity, — the Seed of the Woman (Cf. Gen 3:15), . . . conceived by the Holy Ghost . . . in womb of the blessed Virgin, the Mother of God. And as he has thus within himself the humanity from which all the nations of the earth have been derived, so must he gather unto himself a Church from amongst all nations of the world.

There is nothing in any race of men which he does not share as the Son of Man. As each nationality is formed by the loss of some element essential to the perfect nature of the individual Man, so also each nationality contains some element essential to the perfect nature of

man, - and therefore essential to the perfect exhibition of the mystical Christ.

The humanity which Christ bears cannot act in its fulness until the disintegrated humanity shall be restored by being gathered up into his headship as the principle of divine life to each and all. It would be impossible to have a heaven made up only of Anglo-Saxons, or French, or Hindoos, or Chinese: or even out of the majority of the nations of the world. The most savage and degraded nations have some element of human nature which makes them what they are.

They are not only capable of being restored in Christ, but their restoration is essential.

EAST OXFORD FATHER BENSON TOUR



Published by Oxford City Council, 2011

**THE LIFE OF Fr
BENSON
(1824-1915)**



**Fr BENSON,
THE SOCIETY OF
S. JOHN THE
EVANGELIST
(The Cowley Fathers)
and SS. MARY AND
JOHN CHURCH**

6 June 1824

– Birth of Richard
Meux Benson

“He was made of ‘cat
gut and iron’”

“Thin, wiry and
ascetic, though full of
energy”

1848/1849 – Richard
Meux Benson is
ordained deacon by
Bishop Samuel
Wilberforce in
Cuddesdon and then
priest, starting work
immediately as
assistant curate to the
Vicar of S. Mark’s,
Surbiton



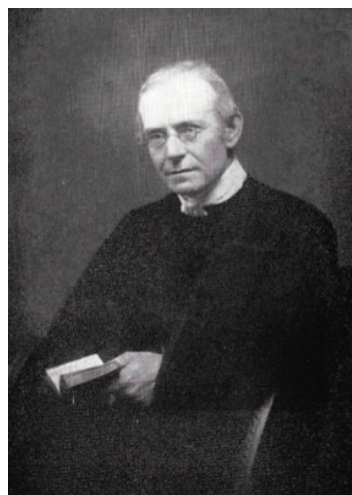
1849 – Fr Benson helps
the Liberal Party form
the National Freehold
Land Society

1850 – Richard Meux
Benson becomes vicar
of Cowley S. James and
chooses to live in a
workman’s cottage in
the parish rather than
in rooms at Christ
Church

“Father Benson
preached regularly
and his sermons,
packed with
knowledge, could last
as much as three
hours.”

1855 – With Henry Leake
– leader of the Wesleyan
Reform Movement - Fr
Benson sets up a school
for poor boys and founds
the Benefit Society to
buy land to rent out as
allotments: the Poor
Allotments and Bread
Charity

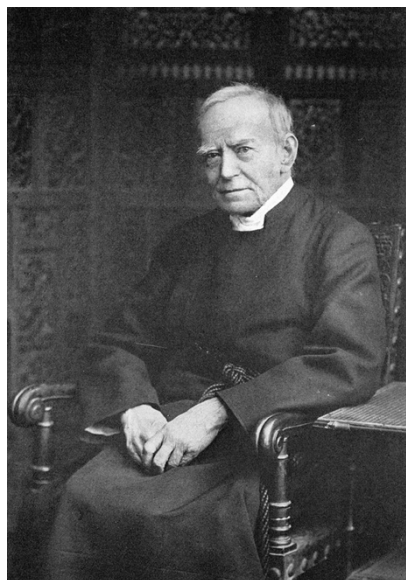
1854 – An assistant
curate is appointed to
help Fr Benson whose
congregation had
grown immensely



1860 – Fr Benson helps
Sydney Smith, a Cowley
Yeoman, to form the first
Oxford Men’s Building
Society

1858 - Fr Benson leads the first retreat for Anglican clergy since the Reformation

1864 – Fr Benson successfully persuades the Church of England to involve nuns in missionary work



“...the modulations of his voice were like music, and his language and diction were perfect”



“...what Benson got from Pusey was ‘the passion for holiness, for the experience of the knowledge and the love of God’”

“It was to be a company of mission priests and the dedication to S. John, the beloved disciple, was no accident...The life of what was to become known as the Cowley Fathers was enabled by the full round of monastic worship...and a deep commitment to his growing parish.”

Dr Geoffrey Rowell, The Church Times, January 2015

1858 – The Iron Church of S. John the Evangelist opened in Stockmore Street

1862 – The decision is made to build a new ‘district’ church (later SS Mary and John)

1866 – Formation of SSJE (The Cowley Fathers) and Frs Benson, O’Neill and Grafton take a vow to live in celibacy, poverty and obedience

1867 – Formation of the Sunday School, Coal and Clothing Club, the Lying-in Club for pregnant women, a Soup Kitchen and free coal delivery

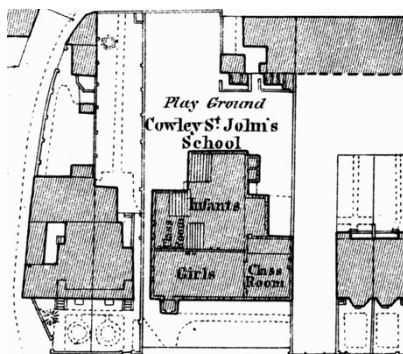
From 1867 – adult education, lectures and events organised

1868 – Church Commissioners establish Cowley S. John parish boundaries

Founding of Horticultural Society
Fr Benson sets up the first free Cowley S. John

1869 – Fr Benson
becomes the first Vicar
of Cowley S. John
Founding of Cowley S.
John Musical Society
and Needlework
Society

*“There must be a lifting
up of every faculty of
our nature to take part.
And so our office is not
complete unless it is
sung, because there is a
part of our nature
which is not taking its
share. Our whole
nature must thus rise
up to God”*
Fr Benson



mixed school, managed
by the Cowley Fathers

1868 – **SSJE move to
Marston Street**

1870-79 – Fr Benson
travels to America to
found a branch of the
SSJE

1871 – Erection of a
permanent building in
Princes Street to house
the mixed Cowley S.
John's School (the
building still exists
today)

Establishment of
Reading Room with
instruction in reading,
writing and arithmetic
Two guilds, a mothers'
meeting and a local
Temperance Society
were set up

1872 – Opening of
Cowley S. John Infants
School for 5-8-year-olds
on the Cowley Road

1874 – The first Cowley
Fathers go out to India
to open a mission for the
poor

1873- Fr Benson
purchases the land
which will be the site
of SS Mary and John
Church
Foundation of S. John's
Hospital for the
Incurables

“One Sunday School outing in 1875 took a party of 50 children on two houseboats from Christ Church Meadow to Nuneham.”

Fr. Benson envisaged a Church building that would speak of God's work in nature and grace in every bit of its ornamentation. Lacking the means to realise this plan at once, he left many uncarved blocks of masonry at the tops of pillars and alongside windows, hoping that money would soon enable the Nave to "exhibit a view of Old Testament History in the capitals of the pillars and the corbels of the windows." A memorial Calvary to Fr. Benson has stood near the Church entry since 20th November 1917.

From A Guide to the Parish Church of St Mary and St John, East Oxford

Consecration of the New Church, Cowley S. John.

By delaying the issue of our Magazine, we are able to record the Consecration of the New Church, on Nov. 6. The previous day had been very fine, and it was hoped that we might start in procession from the Hospital adjoining, but it was to be otherwise. All through the night it rained, and there was scarcely any cessation when morning came. Occasional gleams gave hopes of a bright day, and the proverb did not fail of its truth, "rain at seven, fine at eleven."

1875 – Mr Mardon

Mowbray is commissioned to design the new parish church

1876 – The building of the new church begins, and the Cowley Fathers make plans for a

daughter church of S. Alban the Martyr in Charles Street

1877 – A new school room for infants is erected in Temple Cowley Road

Establishment of Junior Temperance Society

1880 – A girls' school is built as part of the Mission House complex

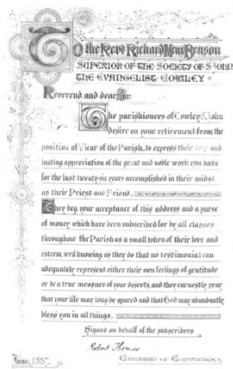
1883 – SS Mary and John Church consecrated (6 November)



But the sky was not sufficiently cleared to allow of any venture out of doors. It was sufficiently fine at 9 o'clock to allow of the school children coming to an opening service, and the Church was fairly filled with about 800 souls of the Parish of the future. They cleared out of the Church about 10 o'clock, in time to let the senior congregation assemble for the great function of the day.

From The Parish Magazine, November 1883

1886 – Fr Benson resigns as Vicar of Cowley S. John



1884 – Bishop Mackarness approves the SSJE Rule and Constitution

1886 – Rev William Scott succeeds Fr Benson as vicar

Reverend and dear Sir,

The parishioners of Cowley S. John desire on your retirement from the position of Vicar of the Parish, to express their deep and lasting appreciation of the great and noble work you have for the last twenty-six years accomplished in their midst as their Priest and Friend.

They beg your acceptance of this address and a purse of money which have been subscribed for by all classes throughout the Parish as a small token of their love and esteem, well knowing as they do that no testimonial can adequately represent either their own feelings of gratitude or be a true measure of your deserts, and they earnestly pray that your life may long be spared and that God may abundantly bless you in all things.

Signed on behalf of all the subscribers,

Robert Thomas, Chairman of Committee, June 1887

**1889 – Fr Benson
resigns as Superior
of SSJE**

**1890 - Fr Benson
travels to India and
thence to America
where he stayed until
nine years later**



*Fr Benson (seated left)
in Boston*

**1889 – Mission Church
opened**

**1890 – Fr Page becomes
Superior of SSJE**

**1893 – Dedication of the
tower**

(8 September)

**1894 – SSJE hand over
St Mary's Road Infant
School to the parish**

**1896 – SSJE Conventual
Church consecrated
(12 May)**

**1897 – Men's Institute
and Gymnasium opened**

**1901 – SSJE Mission
House opened in
Marston Street**



**1899 – Fr Benson
returns to Cowley,
having set up missions
in Canada and the
USA.**

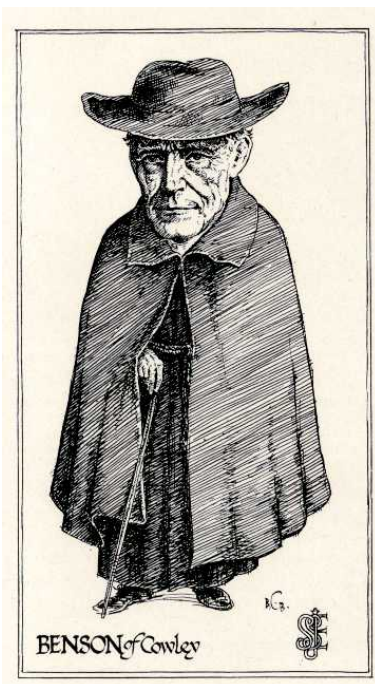


Mission House

**1915 – Death of
Father Richard Meux
Benson (14 January)**

1917 – Fr Benson's
Memorial dedicated
(20 November)

1950 – Fr Benson's
Centenary celebrated
at Cowley S. James



Many came to his funeral. "They came from Oxford and from distant places to show what they felt for our Father." He was, indeed, one of those: a saintly man to whom the Church of England, and especially the Church in Cowley, is greatly indebted.

From the Cowley Chronicle, January 1965, on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of his death.

1943 – Diamond Jubilee
Church Festival

1947 – Gladiator Club
opened for over 18s



*Passion play in church
Gladiator Club*

1968 – Centenary of Parish of Cowley S. John celebrated
The Archbishop of Canterbury headed the scores of clergy from all parts of the world who sent greetings to the Oxford parish of SS. Mary and John which commemorated its centenary with a special thanksgiving service on Wednesday evening... Every organisation in the parish was represented, particularly the religious houses - the Cowley Fathers' choir took part in the singing and the intercessory prayers were led by the churchwardens, the headmaster of the junior school, a member of S. John the Evangelist church, a Scout leader and a nun.

From The Oxford Times. September 20 1968

The work of SSJE in Oxford

Training in the discipline of corporate prayer

Study and mental prayer

Daily recitation of the Divine Office

Retreats for laymen and clergy

High Mass celebrated for solemn occasions and as the great corporate act
of the community

The Song-School training members of the community to sing together

Hospitality to friend and stranger



Go out into the world

Boys' Club

Girls' Club

Gladiator Club

Teaching in schools

Retreats and missions
in parishes

Monastery and mission
houses abroad



USA



South Africa and Canada



India and Japan



- 1980** – SSJE leave Marston Street and withdraw to a small monastery on
Iffley Road
(January)
- 1980** – S. Stephen's House moves into the parish: inaugural Mass at the
Conventual Church
(15 October)
- 1983** – SS Mary and John Centenary celebration (November)
- 2011** – SSJE ceases its activities in England and St Edward's House
Westminster is closed with the three remaining brothers living as
solitaries

The story of a man from the parish whose life was influenced by SSJE: William George Nettleingham

William Nettleingham was born in the parish of Cowley St John, on 16 August 1889; an only child, he was educated at Cowley Modern School, had a trade as a wood carver, served in the 7th Battalion of the Northampton Regiment and died of his wounds on the Somme on 20 August 1916.

He and his family lived near the SSJE monastery and were regular members of the congregation at SS. Mary and John church. It was here that he came into contact with SSJE and was prepared for confirmation by the monks.

During the turmoil of the war William was keen to pray the same prayers as the SSJE at home, and he forged links with recruits from other denominations as a means of expressing his faith. He sensed that the experience of the war was going to have an impact on religious practice of those in the trenches.

He was a woodcarver by trade and used his skills for the SSJE, carving a niche for a statue of St Francis in the League Room and also working on a cross for St Cuthbert's Church in Tsolo, in South Africa.

William's faith appears to have provided him with deep conviction and hope for the future, and a source of support in the immediate circumstances of the



battlefield. He was reported to have been a machine gunner. He was well aware that he might not return alive, as he offered to draw up designs for a carving for a canopy at St Cuthbert's which he hoped a friend could undertake if he was not able to.

While in the trenches he prayed as best he could, sharing his practice with others who were interested. He describes singing carols in a French village and in the Officers' mess in December 1915: "Father Cary would be interested to hear that we sang Cowley Carols at a certain village in France. We did our best, and they did a good deal towards giving us an atmosphere of Christmas and something else to think about."

From

Wartime at an Oxford Monastery, compiled by S. Stephen's House.

FURTHER READING

<https://www.ssje.org/>

<https://cowleystjohn.co.uk/>

<https://www.ssho.ac.uk/>

<https://fsje.org.uk>

<https://anglicanhistory.org/ssje/> (includes a detailed bibliography)

"Records of the Society of St. John the Evangelist (SSJE)". Lambeth Palace Library.

https://anglicanhistory.org/ssje/smith_early/

<https://monumentoffame.org/2013/12/03/the-society-of-saint-john-the-evangelist-archive-now-catalogued/>

<https://www.ssje.org/cowleymagazine/>

AM Allchin, *The Silent Rebellion, Anglican Religious Communities 1845-1900*, (London: SCM Press, 1958)

VA Butler, *Social Conditions in Oxford*, (London: Sidgewick & Jackson, 1912).

Jessie Parfitt, *The Health of a City*, (Oxford: The Amate Press, 1987).

M V Woodgate, *Father Benson, Founder of the Cowley Fathers*, London: Geoffrey Bles, 1953)

Martin Smith (ed), *Benson of Cowley*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980)

The blessing of prayer consists in the very fact of the soul being brought under the gracious influences belonging to a close communion with God.

Fr Benson

A prayer used by the Society of Saint John the Evangelist (the Cowley Fathers), founded by Father Benson, our first vicar in 1866, in thanksgiving to Almighty God for a century of worship and witness at the Parish Church of Cowley St. John.

ALMIGHTY and EVERLASTING GOD, who doth govern all things in heaven and earth; mercifully hear the supplications of us Thy servants. Grant to this Parish all things needful for its spiritual welfare; strengthen and confirm the faithful; protect and guide the children; visit and relieve the sick and afflicted; turn and soften the wicked; rouse the careless; recover the fallen; restore the penitent; remove all hindrances to the advancement of Thy truth; and bring all to be of one heart and mind within the fold of Thy Holy Church. To the honour and glory of Thy name; through Jesus Christ our Lord.
Amen.

This prayer comes from the earliest days of the Society of Saint John the Evangelist. It is presently used to conclude the Chapter Office in which we hear and reflect on our Rule of Life, chapter by chapter, day by day.

O God, you caused your blessed evangelist Saint John so eminently to receive the love of your dear Son Jesus Christ: Grant to us your servants that that we may evermore abide in that love, and accomplish your holy will. Watch over the Society of Saint John the Evangelist for good. Give your elect angels charge concerning us, and make your Holy Spirit to rule our hearts, that our lives may be holy, our prayers acceptable, our wants supplied, our words directed, and our work prospered, to the glory of your Name; through Jesus Christ our Lord.
Amen.



Memorial stained-glass window in the Monastery Church, Boston.

SSJE TODAY

We are a community of men giving our whole selves over to living the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Rooted in the ancient monastic traditions of prayer and community life, and critically engaged with contemporary culture, we seek to know and share an authentic experience of God's love and mercy. We live a common life shaped by worship, prayer, and our Rule of Life.

Fr. Benson devoted his life to sharing his vision of God as a God who makes heaven real here and now in the person of Jesus. How do you experience God's kingdom in the here and now? In what ways can you bring heaven to earth in your daily life and relationships?

Father Benson emphasized the importance of participation in community for our healing and wholeness.

Reflect on how community life has shaped your faith journey. How does the community you are a part of support your growth? How does it challenge you to become more loving and open?

Brother Keith Nelson, Superior of SSJE



The Monastery, 980 Memorial Drive, Cambridge, MA 02138