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## **The Cheltenham Female Orphan Asylum**

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## The Cheltenham Female Orphan Asylum

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The Cheltenham Female Orphan Asylum was unique among the many orphanages and schools of industry for girls in the early 19th century. Founded by a queen, it had two other queens as patrons and for much of its existence was only for ‘female orphans descended from respectable parents’. If either of the parents of a girl had at any time been in a workhouse or even in receipt of parochial support, she would have been ineligible for admission. As an orphanage for such solidly respectable young girls it was supported and encouraged by the people who lived in or visited Cheltenham in its heyday. Civic interest was also generated by the fact that in a leisure resort such as Cheltenham in the early 19th century there was an ever-increasing demand by the ladies of the town for good quality female servants. The asylum trained girls in domestic skills so that they were able to become reliable servants and take positions in specially selected households.

Perhaps the strongest reason for the asylum’s popularity was that its founder was Queen Charlotte, wife of George III. Both had visited Cheltenham and were well-loved and respected by the people of the town. Queen Charlotte founded the institution on 19 May 1806 as a school of industry with donations from herself, the Prince of Wales, the duke and duchess of Gloucester and Lady Sherborne. A Mrs. Williams of Prestbury was the school’s first governess and the queen herself its patron. In 1807 it was announced that the school of industry

was formed last season and Her Majesty having been graciously pleased to command her name to be placed as Patroness to it, we may safely pronounce that, under Her auspices, this school will be one of the greatest improvements Cheltenham has to boast.<sup>1</sup>

For its first 17 years the school existed in a thatched barn in a lane leading off the London end of Cheltenham High Street at a place known as the Queen’s Buildings.<sup>2</sup>

During the early years the institution seemed to be ‘feeling its way’ as to its objectives and it was not purely an orphanage. In his *New Guide to Cheltenham* of 1825, Cheltenham librarian G.A. Williams described the initial difficulties, pointing out that Cheltenham needed an establishment to assist, reform, and instruct the poor and to stimulate their industry. As resources were minimal, it would be necessary for such an establishment to embrace as many objects as possible. Originally it had been difficult to form a suitable plan which would meet the prejudices, then too prevalent, respecting the education and relief of poor girls and gain the approval of visitors to the town for health or pleasure. On their support the institution would depend. After three years of experimentation the school began to fulfil three main objectives—as a school of industry it taught girls every kind of work; as an asylum it sheltered not only orphans but also poor and friendless girls; and as a house of protection and refuge it saved some girls from falling victim to vice.

A call for subscriptions in support of the institution appeared in the *Cheltenham Chronicle* on 25 May 1808.

School of Industry—subscribers . . . are informed that subscriptions for the year 1808 closed on May 19th and that new subscriptions are now open at Mr. Thompson’s Well, the Library and

Fasana's Repository. As from the recentness of the institution the purposes the charity is intended to fulfil are but little understood... Particulars in the form of printed plans of the school representing the manner in which it is conducted are available from the school. And supporters are entreated to witness it themselves by visiting the school.

If potential subscribers had visited the Queen's Buildings in 1808 they would have found that the asylum contained a committee room, a schoolroom, large and small kitchens, a pantry and scullery and, over each of the kitchens, a sleeping room for the inmates. All rooms were furnished with suitable austerity. Dressers and tables were of plain wood as were chairs, and they stood on plain stone or brick floors. Only wooden spoons and trenchers were allowed. Each girl had a flock mattress on a small bedstead and the dormitories were uncurtained. From John Browne's guide to Cheltenham we learn that in 1807 twelve girls were clothed and boarded and that many more were admitted for instruction. At that time there were more than 40 subscribers each contributing one guinea yearly.<sup>3</sup>

With the ever-growing demand for female servants, on leaving the asylum most girls were instantly engaged in such work as suited their capabilities. They were almost guaranteed employment and were thus protected in a great measure from vice.

The principles of religion and morality loomed large in the objectives of the institution and the girls attended Cheltenham parish church regularly. On 27 May 1806, a week after the school's foundation, the parish vestry ordered that an alteration be made immediately in the west gallery of St. Mary's church to accommodate the girls. It was proposed to rearrange the Singing Desk and the singers' seats and thereby create room in which the girls could sit. Later, on 4 February 1817, it was mentioned that a new singing gallery had been erected and, on 29 July 1818, the vestry resolved to give the school's governess permission to put up at her own expense a door to the seats used by the girls.<sup>4</sup>

In 1823 the institution moved from the Queen's Buildings, which had obviously become unsatisfactory, to a new building in Winchcombe Street (Fig. 1). The site, set back from the east side of the road to Prestbury, was near the entrance to the Pittville estate.<sup>5</sup> The institution also received a new name, the Female Orphan Asylum, although the denomination Old School of Industry was often added to this. A decision must have been taken to run the institution solely for orphans (or half-orphans in some cases). Perhaps one reason why the constitution was changed from a school of industry catering for pauper girls to an orphanage was that orphans had more 'appeal' to the class of people who were now coming to Cheltenham and who were generally not so generous in supporting charities for the poorer classes.

When the asylum re-opened in 1823 the patrons were the duke and duchess of Gloucester and the vice-patrons the bishop of Gloucester and Lord and Lady Sherborne; Lord Sherborne was lord of the manor of Cheltenham. Charles Jervis, the incumbent of St. Mary's parish church, was chaplain to the new institution, H.S. Gibbs acted as its treasurer, and Captain George Stevenson, who had in 1818 bought the land on which the building stood, was its secretary. Finance came mainly from public subscriptions. The government of the asylum was vested in the patrons, trustees and two committees, the Committee of Superintendence consisting of gentlemen and the Committee of Management consisting of ladies.<sup>6</sup>

There were 24 girls in the new institution. They wore a uniform of brown serge gowns, straw bonnets, capes, black worsted stockings, black shoes, mittens, white tippetts, check bibs and aprons and 'duffield' cloaks. Each girl carried around her neck a medal with the name of the institution and her official number on it. A short religious service was held at the beginning and end of each day and the girls had one hour's reading and spelling practice each evening. The strongest emphasis was on religious instruction. Besides the catechism the girls were expected to learn their hymns by heart, as well as the Sermon on the Mount and other texts. The only books allowed were those published by the Society for the Promotion of Christian Knowledge.



CHELTENHAM  
FEMALE ORPHAN ASYLUM.

*Printed & Published by S.Y. Griffith & Co. Cheltenham.*

Fig. 1. Female Orphan Asylum, Cheltenham, built 1823 (S.Y. Griffith, *New Historical Description of Cheltenham* (2nd edn., 1826), ii, fig. at pp. 16–17).

During her last year at the school each girl was to read the bible and testaments right through and to be examined on them.

However, most of the orphans' time was taken up with training for a future life as domestic servants. The institution was still basically a school of industry. The work was so organised that every girl fulfilled one domestic task for six weeks at a time, thus acquiring familiarity with each before passing to the next. As laundry maid she washed the girls' tippets, caps and aprons and the house linen; another day she ironed them. As upper maid she laid the cloth and set the table for dinner, washed up and attended the matron at dinner and tea. As house maid she dusted the schoolroom and the house in the mornings and swept the school after dinner and again after afternoon school; she cleaned the house, stores and clothing room on Tuesdays and Saturdays, swept the walls on Wednesdays, cleaned the irons and grates on Thursdays and wiped daily. As kitchen maid she had to light the fires, clean the saucepans and kettles daily, clean the brasswork, knives and children's medals, clean the outhouses and keep the kitchen in order.<sup>7</sup>

By 1830, from being a refuge for the 'poor and friendless' the institution had become a well-organised orphanage with strict rules as to who was acceptable as an inmate. A girl was recommended for admission by one or more subscribers and they obviously checked her background very carefully to ensure that no 'improper objects' should be admitted.

There seemed to be great concern about the status of the children in the 1820s and 1830s. On 30 November 1829 the *Cheltenham Journal* reported that the intention of the institution was to clothe, maintain and educate female orphans, particularly those descended from respectable parents. It also stated that

for so long as the profession of the institution is adhered to, the middling order of society is materially benefited and the little inmates of the house kept free from contamination; as the introduction of *one* child who has vicious and bad examples before her too often extends its effects to others in spite of the most rigid discipline and order.

Another very important point on the subject of the girls' status emerged in a report which stressed that the asylum only received girls from honest and respectable parents who had brought up their families *without parochial relief* and who had set their children an example of sobriety and moral behaviour. It was this calibre of child which the asylum would train to become useful members of society.<sup>8</sup> In fact, no child would have been considered for admission if her parents had at any time been in a workhouse or had received parochial relief of any kind. This requirement must have cut down the number eligible and it was a far cry from the original appeal of the old school of industry which was to civilise the poorest of children and save them from falling victim to vice.

The method of selection was by well-publicised elections. These took place in the spring and autumn of each year and candidates had to be personally recommended by a governor or subscriber. With the letter of recommendation sponsors were also required to submit documents in respect of each child; the girl's baptism certificate to prove she was not under eight or over eleven years old; certificates of her parents' marriage and of the death of one or both of them; a statement from a respectable medical practitioner that the girl was in good health; proof that her parents had not received parochial relief; and a declaration from the clergyman of the parish as to the general good conduct of the family.<sup>9</sup>

This was quite a formidable list to collect but the absence of any one of those documents would render a candidate ineligible. When the appropriate candidates had been decided, a polling paper was printed and circulated to all governors and subscribers. Annual subscribers paying one guinea were entitled to one vote. Life governors making a donation of 10 guineas were also entitled to one vote. Larger contributions, however, conferred more votes; for instance in 1851 Miss Hinckes who had given £100 had 12 votes, Captain Stevenson (£52) 6 votes and Lady Rolle (£21) 2 votes.<sup>10</sup> The polling paper for October 1847 has survived. It gives the names and ages of the girls, their case histories and the names of the persons by whom they were recommended.<sup>11</sup>

In October 1843 nearly 600 people voted<sup>12</sup> and until the early 1850s the results were published in the local papers. One cannot help wondering what became of the girls who were not selected. To be on the list they had to come from respectable backgrounds, but if they were orphans without relatives or benefactors willing or able to take them in they would probably have ended up in the Cheltenham workhouse. There is no record of what happened to the 'losers'.

In their distinctive uniforms the girls often attended civic and church functions. They were obviously a popular sight around town and such an institution, which combined christian philanthropy and public utility, did not lack funds and the support of the wealthy. Every fashionable library in Cheltenham was an agency for the collection of donations and Hammersley's bank regularly sent contributions from supporters in London. In 1843 the town's three National schools, which taught 1,037 children, were in debt for £250. The Female Orphan Asylum with its 39 children had a credit balance of £229 and its income from annual subscriptions alone was three times that of the National schools combined.<sup>13</sup> The appeal of respectable orphan girls

certainly seemed to favour the asylum's finances for throughout the mid 19th century it was never short of money.

The institution benefited enormously from legacies and bequests. It also received considerable help in the form of regular contributions made in response to sermons preached in local churches specifically for the purpose. Such an appeal on 5 January 1834 attracted contributions of £61 16s. 5d. and another on 14 March £64 0s. 6d.<sup>14</sup>

Another source of income the asylum enjoyed was an annual charity ball. These balls were held in the Assembly Rooms and the Montpellier Rotunda. The Montpellier balls were particularly popular in the 1820s and 1830s because the ladies were allowed to wear their promenade dresses and hats and bonnets. The gentlemen, however, had to wear full dress and, as in the Assembly rooms, no clerks, persons in retail trade or theatrical performers were admitted. The balls were attended by royalty, gentry, military men and anyone else who could afford to be seen.

A notice in the *Cheltenham Journal* of 6 September 1830 announced that

under the patronage of Her Serene Highness the Princess Esterhazy the public are respectively informed that the annual ball of the institution [Female Orphan Asylum] will be held at the Montpellier Rotunda Tuesday September 7 1830, the proprietors having liberally offered the Rooms gratuitously on that occasion. To commence at 9 o'clock. It is particularly requested that no Parties be given on the evening of the 7th.

There is no report of the outcome of this event but a ball attended by the Princess Esterhazy the previous week at the Rotunda attracted 400 persons.

At a special meeting held on 15 June 1833, with James Saumarez in the chair, it was unanimously resolved that as a survey by two respectable architects had revealed that the orphanage was in too dilapidated a state to be worthy of repair a new building should be erected in its stead.<sup>15</sup> Ten years seems an extremely short lifetime for a building but apparently the original construction had never had a proper foundation and consequently, as there was not enough strength in the walls to carry the roof, it was found to be unsafe. The expense of the new building was estimated at £1,400.

Almost immediately books were opened for contributions and in less than a month the total collected was £212 15s. 0d. Perhaps the greatest single contribution to the new asylum was the result of the patron, Lady Sherborne, organising a Fancy Fair in the Montpellier gardens on 20 August 1833. This glittering event began at 12 o'clock when the gates were opened and the Montpellier band, dressed in full military uniform, commenced their performance with *God Save the King*. Contributions were collected until the fair closed at 6 o'clock. Mr. Jearrad gave the use of the gardens gratuitously thus contributing to the success of the undertaking. The admission money alone amounted to £169 and receipts at the stalls £218. This together with subscriptions of £316 realised nearly £650, all within three months.<sup>16</sup>

Matters certainly progressed quickly and the *Cheltenham Journal* reported that on 30 August 1833 there was a special service at Holy Trinity church when James Monk, bishop of Gloucester and patron of the institution, preached a sermon in aid of the building fund. The service raised £50 in collections at the door. Afterwards the bishop, accompanied by the clergy of the district, members of the asylum's two committees and the orphans, went in procession to the site of the new building, where he laid the first stone of the new orphanage.

The new orphanage stood nearer Winchcombe Street than its predecessor<sup>17</sup> and it was entered through a porch which connected left and right to various offices and apartments. These consisted of a committee room, the matron's room with a window into the schoolroom, the schoolroom, a dining room and a kitchen and scullery. There were abundant closets and a beer and

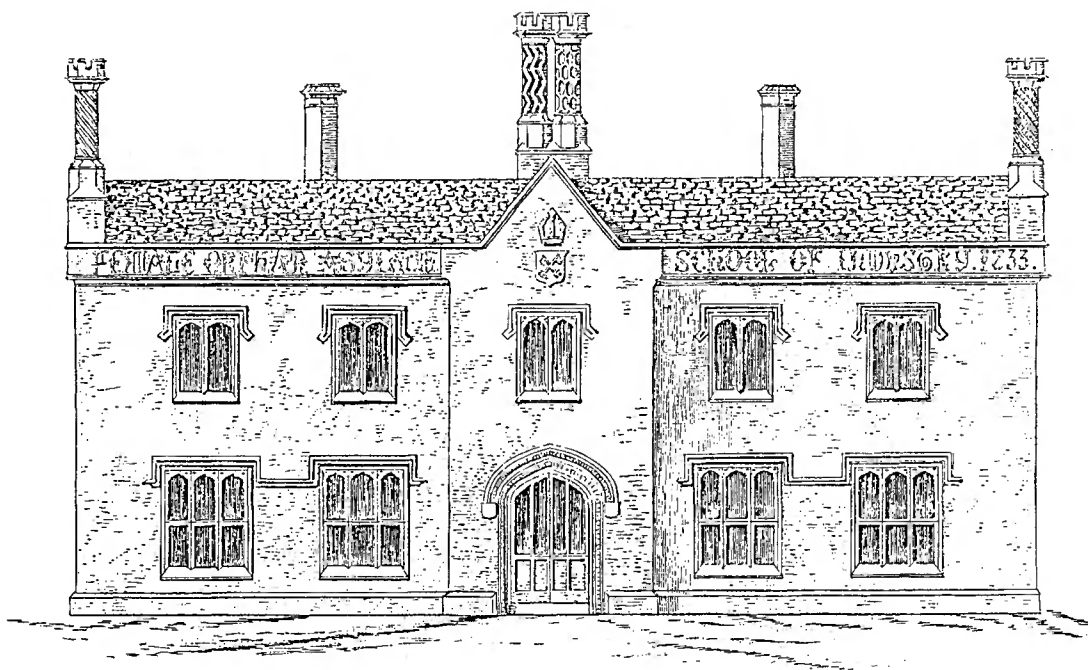


Fig. 2. Female Orphan Asylum and School of Industry, Cheltenham, built 1833 (Cheltenham Library, reference section 63G360).

potato cellar and larder. There was a central stone staircase and the upper storey was divided into three dormitories and sleeping apartments for the matron and housekeeper. The building was designed in the Gothic style by the architect Robert Stokes<sup>18</sup> and the street front bore the name of the institution on its parapet (Fig. 2).

By the 1840s the orphanage appeared to be catering for girls from higher up the social scale and excluding poorer girls more and more. The ladies of the town demanded servants who were likely to remain respectable and they were more than ever willing to support what they regarded a worthy institution. This concern is understandable considering that there was at the time a particular problem in the town relating to young girls. Day after day the magistrates' courts dealt with girls, some as young as seven years of age, charged with begging, drunkenness, obscenity and petty theft. The *Cheltenham Journal* of 4 November 1844 published a letter which regretted the inaction of the justices in closing inns with a bad reputation and referred to 'young girls scarcely arrived at the age of puberty, dragged before the Bench to answer for drunkenness, swearing and disorderly conduct'. It is, therefore, easy to see why the Female Orphan Asylum with its solidly respectable girls was encouraged and supported so enthusiastically.

In 1842 specimens of the orphans' needlework were presented to Queen Victoria. She must have been pleased with the gift for she became a patron of the asylum. She also made a grant of £10 to its funds thus treading in the steps of its earliest friend, her grandmother Queen Charlotte. The queen's patronage would have helped the image of the orphanage enormously and the treasurer's balance sheet that year was very satisfactory. In fact it was the only charitable establishment in Cheltenham at the time which possessed real funds of its own and was not charged with debt. The financial position of the institution was so healthy that at the annual

general meeting in 1844 Francis Close, the incumbent of St. Mary's parish church who acted for many years as chairman of the Committee of Superintendence, said that he had not advocated the cause of the institution from his pulpit that year because the asylum was comparatively affluent. It was not so much the wealth of the charity as the poverty of others that had influenced him. The National schools and the hospital dispensary were crying aloud for support. However, Close indicated that if the asylum ever needed assistance in the future he would have no hesitation in recommending it and preaching a sermon on its behalf. He never did.

One source of income which seemed to increase in importance as the century progressed was the needlework of the girls. There are examples of a pin-cushion and a sampler worked by the girls in the Cheltenham Art Gallery and Museum. On the pin-cushion, in beautiful small stitching, is embroidered 'Cheltenham Female Orphan Asylum & School of Industry instituted on 19 May 1806—Religion is our guide and industry our support' and on the sampler 'Sir Matthew Hale's Golden Maxim—A Sunday well spent, brings a week of content, and health for the toils of the morrow. But a Sabbath profaned, whatsoe'er may be gained, is a certain forerunner of sorrow'. Items like these were produced by the girls for both needlework practice and spiritual instruction.

Sewing had been taught since the early days of the school of industry but by the 1840s and 1850s needlework seemed to take on a new importance as a fund raiser. This is indicated by a report early in 1844 that the children's industry contributed to the funds of the institution; during the previous year the sum collected through their needlework was £66 7s. 0d.<sup>19</sup>

With the patronage of Queen Victoria assured, it seems that the institution again raised its profile in order to attract more subscribers and that it altered its aims as to the future occupation of the girls. It seemed to be training them no longer as mere under-servants and maids-of-all-work but as possible upper servants and ladies' maids. The Committee of Management probably had an influence in this matter, as its lady members would have been aware of what was required in the town. With the massive rise in population there would have been plenty of poorer women willing to work as under-servants. What was needed were girls of a higher standard who would be employable as ladies' maids.

The chairman's asylum annual report for 1851<sup>20</sup> (one of only three known to have survived) makes no mention of girls being taught all forms of housework as they had been in the mid 1820s. It is evident that much of their time must have been taken up with needlework. Townspeople sent items which had already been cut out for completion by the girls. This system was probably devised to eliminate difficulties in getting the size right. The variety of work must have been quite formidable for such young girls and a great deal of organisation and supervision must have gone into the system. The girls would certainly have been experienced needlewomen by the time they were old enough for employment.

Strict attention to religious and moral instruction continued in the mid 19th century. On leaving the orphanage a girl would be counselled by the chaplain and given a bible, prayer book and other 'good books'. On entering domestic service she would be provided with a suitable outfit, which included a shift and some stockings. Although removed from the protection of the asylum the orphans remained under the watchful eyes of the Committees, and after a certain term of service rewards were made for good conduct on production of a testimonial. The practice was that each girl who could prove good conduct was presented with a gratuity of a guinea on completing her first year of service. The reward fund was first mentioned in 1839 and was still in operation in 1892.<sup>21</sup>

Two of the surviving annual reports, for the years 1851 and 1855,<sup>22</sup> are printed in booklet form. As well as giving the chairman's report, they contain a list of orphans in the asylum with their dates of admission, ages on entry and status as full or half-orphans. Also included is a full



set of detailed financial accounts and a calculation as to the funds needed for the following year. Also listed are the subscribers, life governors and other benefactors, giving their addresses and the value of their donations. Both reports contain the full rules of the institution and a price list for needlework. The reports mention that on entering the asylum a girl had to bring with her a pair of stays, two shifts, two flannel petticoats, one upper petticoat, two pocket kerchiefs, two night caps, two pairs of coloured worsted stockings, two pairs of shoes (one of which must be new), hair and tooth brushes and the sum of 5s. 6d. for a box. As these items were quite expensive, perhaps they were provided for less well-off orphans by their sponsors.

In 1851 there were 244 subscribers, 51 life governors and 16 benefactors. The grand sum of £114 had been raised by charity sermons at Holy Trinity and Christ Church. Subscriptions, donations, needlework, charity boxes and interest on investments and bank accounts amounted to £646 2s. 5d. The 1854 report, as well as revealing that the main officers of the orphanage were the same as in 1851, also gives the names of the trustees and of the members of the Committees of Superintendence and Management. This is the first full record of the names of the men and women involved in the management of the institution.

On 26 January 1867 the *Cheltenham Journal* reported that the Committee of Superintendence had revised the orphanage's constitution and abolished the rule excluding girls whose parents had received parish relief. It was the end of an era. Since the 1820s the Committee had tenaciously upheld the 'parish relief' rule, but attitudes towards orphans had evidently modified. Under another reform introduced in 1867 girls might be admitted at the age of seven and permitted to stay until the age of eighteen. Changing attitudes and circumstances had obliged the Committee to reassess the place of the orphanage in Cheltenham society.

The annual report for 1892 records that the orphanage had 234 subscribers and 44 life governors; 83 of the subscribers paid less than £1 each. Subscription income totalled £285 12s. 11d. and small collections £2 13s. 0d. This represented a considerable drop in income since 1854; not surprisingly the treasurer's account had an adverse balance of £86.

A major reform that affected the orphanage was the passing of the Education Act of 1902.<sup>23</sup> The Act, which co-ordinated education provision nationally and harnessed voluntary schools more firmly to a state system, provided for the orphanage to be subject to inspection under the auspices of the Board of Education. When the orphanage was examined on 1 October 1903 it taught twenty one girls a wide range of schoolwork. Five other girls, aged over sixteen, received instruction only in scripture and drill. The examiner reported that the order and tone of the school were excellent.<sup>24</sup>

In 1906 it was decided to rename the institution the Cheltenham Girls' Orphan Asylum.<sup>25</sup> That year marked 100 years since its foundation and to celebrate the centenary the staff and orphans were sent to Weston-super-Mare to have a holiday by the sea. By 1910 the institution was run as a boarding school in which the girls received normal school lessons. Another change of name, to the Cheltenham Girls' Orphanage, was reported in 1923. It was felt that the old name was no longer suitable and sometimes led to misunderstanding. Queen Alexandra, the third queen to be patron of the institution, had expressed her approval of the change of name.<sup>26</sup>

In 1930 guardianship by the Committee of Superintendence ceased and the children's committee of Gloucestershire county council took control of the institution. Presumably, as with other orphanages, the building was used solely as a 'home' and the girls attended local schools. By 1953 the building had been renamed yet again, appropriately as Charlotte House,<sup>27</sup> and it remained in use until its demolition in 1958.

The Cheltenham Female Orphan Asylum, in all its forms, existed for 152 years and at its demise was one of the oldest charitable institutions in the town. Its history mirrors that of the town itself, reflecting the prevailing characteristics of Cheltenham throughout the period.

Charlotte House was demolished to make way for a petrol station and a car park and its site was later occupied by a block of flats.<sup>28</sup>

### Notes

1. J. Browne, *Historic and Local Cheltenham Guide* (1807), p. 42.
2. *Post Office Map of Cheltenham* (1820): copy in Glos. R.O., photocopy 711 (66C).
3. Browne, *Chelt. Guide*, p. 42.
4. Glos. R.O., P 78/VE 2/2.
5. H.S. Merrett, *Plan of the Town of Cheltenham and its Vicinity* (1834).
6. S.Y. Griffith, *New Historical Description of Cheltenham* (2nd edn., 1826), ii, pp. 13–14.
7. A. Platts and G.H. Hainton, *Education in Gloucestershire: A Short History* (1954), pp. 64–5.
8. *Cheltenham Journal*, 10 May 1830.
9. Cheltenham Library, reference section 63G350.
10. *Ibid.*
11. Glos. R.O., D 1950/Z 5.
12. *Chelt. Jnl.* 30 Oct. 1843.
13. Platts and Hainton, *Educ. in Glos.*, p. 65.
14. *Chelt. Jnl.* 5 Jan. 1834; 14 Mar. 1834.
15. *Ibid.* 15 June 1833.
16. *Ibid.* 26 July 1833.
17. Merrett, *Plan of Chelt.* (1834).
18. H. Colvin, *Biographical Dictionary of British Architects 1600–1840* (1978), p. 784.
19. *Chelt. Jnl.* 29 Jan. 1844.
20. Chelt. Library, reference section 63G350.
21. Gloucester Library, Gloucestershire Collection P 14.7.
22. Chelt. Library, reference section 63G350.
23. 2 Edward VII, c. 42, s. 5.
24. *Cheltenham Examiner*, 27 Jan. 1904.
25. *Ibid.* 31 Jan. 1906.
26. *Cheltenham Echo*, 27 Jan. 1923.
27. Glos. R.O., K 910/M 37/2/19.
28. Cheltenham Borough Council, planning application TPA 1153 C (1957); S. Blake, *Cheltenham: A Pictorial History* (1996), no. 130.