

The Episcopate of Bishop Benson 1877-1883
and the beginnings of Truro Diocese and
Cathedral:
The Umbrella and the Duck.

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Abstract

The first Bishop of Truro, Edward White Benson, saw the building of a Cathedral as the centre piece of his vision for Cornwall. The foundation stones were laid in May 1880, only three years after his enthronement. The building itself, the ability to raise money for it in impoverished Cornwall and the use of Cathedral Canons for training, education and mission for the whole diocese were intended to inspire faith and make the Cathedral the mother church for all Christians in Cornwall. The Cathedral revived an imagined vibrant medieval Church in Cornwall, some of whose saints were named in the Canons' stalls and whose bishops, Benson believed, were his predecessors. Benson failed to unify Cornish people around this vision. Methodism was far too strong in Cornwall and remained so for many decades after he left Cornwall in 1883 to become Archbishop of Canterbury. Here Benson was no more successful implementing the vision on a wider stage. The state, not the church, became the umbrella organisation that started to reach everyone at local and national level. Nevertheless, Anglicanism in Cornwall did revive in Benson's time and disagreements between Anglicans over styles of worship and other matters were partially sorted out by Benson, both as Bishop of Truro and as Archbishop of Canterbury. Benson's interest in history further encouraged Cornwall's interest in its Celtic past. An increasingly pluralistic culture enabled a reviving Anglicanism to take its place alongside Methodism in Cornwall, without ever coming close to replacing it.

Shortly before Benson arrived in Cornwall, a Baptist minister suggested that the sturdy non-conformist people of Cornwall needed a Bishop no more than a duck needed an umbrella. Cornish people appreciated Bishop Benson and the

Cathedral he helped to inspire. By and large they chose not to shelter under the umbrella of the Church of England. In the words of Edward Fish in a letter to the *Royal Cornwall Gazette* published on the 5 January 1877:

“Looking around on this great Non-conformist county we did not need a bishop any more than a duck needs an umbrella. My statement as a Non-conformist is this, and I do but echo the opinion of thousands in the county, we do not need a bishop.”

TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER 1;	Introduction. The background to the new diocese: the development of diocesan consciousness in Cornwall	p 5
CHAPTER 2;	Putting Cornwall in the British context	p 45
CHAPTER 3;	Bishop Benson: his character and effect on Truro diocese	p 108
CHAPTER 4;	Benson's vision for a new diocese, part 1	p 148
CHAPTER 5;	"We have a free field for experiment" :Benson's vision for a new type of cathedral, part 2	p 178
CHAPTER 6;	"An astonishing stream of patriotism": secularism and pluralism in the Cornwall of 1880	p 214
CHAPTER 7;	Rivalry and co-operation: Anglican-Methodist relations in Cornwall 1851-1910	p 250
CHAPTER 8;	Conclusion	p 292
Appendices;	Other events of 1880.	
	Appendix one: fundraising in London	p 309
	Appendix two: reconciliation in Cornwall	p 312
	Appendix three: St Augustine's church, Kilburn opened in 1880	p 323
Bibliography;	Primary sources	p 324
	Secondary sources	p 330