



# Bedfordshire Historical Record Society

## Bedfordshire and the Lincolnshire Parish Clergy

A lecture presented to Bedfordshire Historical Record Society  
on 23 September 2016

by Dr Nicholas Bennett

Kirkby with Muckby-cum-Sparrowby-cum-Spinx  
Is down a long lane in the county of Lincs,  
And often on Wednesdays, well-harnessed and spruce,  
I would drive into Wiss over Winderby Sluice.

A whacking great sunset bathed level and drain  
From Kirkby with Muckby to Beckby-on-Bain,  
And I saw, as I journeyed, my marketing done,  
Old Caistorby tower take the last of the sun.

The opening lines of *A Lincolnshire Tale*, John Betjeman's well-loved poem, capture that familiar landscape, thickly populated with parish churches, their towers and spires rising from the villages and towns of the county. In 1914, on the eve of the First World War, there were some 700 Anglican parish churches and parochial chapels in the diocese. During the past hundred years, some of these have been declared 'redundant', or even destroyed, but the great majority remain as witnesses to the central role of the Christian faith in the history of Lincolnshire communities. The fabric of these buildings, nave and chancel, font, pulpit and reading desk, stained glass and monuments, all tell of the long history of their parishes. But what of the clergy who served them? Go inside one of these churches, savour the familiar smell of hassocks and hymn books, and you will often see beside the door a framed list of past incumbents. They serve to remind us that in order to understand the history of the towns and villages in which these churches stand, we must go beyond the buildings themselves and explore the lives of those who used them. In a parish church, we must begin with the parson.

Let us imagine ourselves, then, opening the door into the church of St Andrew at Horbling, on the edge of the fens midway between Sleaford and Bourne. Immediately inside the door is the font, a fine fifteenth-century example. Here, on 28 December 1904, the Vicar of Horbling, Revd Plumpton Stravenson Wilson, baptised his third grandchild. The tiny infant, named Arthur Michael Ramsey, was to grow into one of the great scholars of the twentieth-century Church, and a most memorable Archbishop of Canterbury. The story is told that in 1977, after preaching at Boston Stump nearby, Ramsey asked to be taken to Horbling. On

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entering the church, oblivious to his companions, Ramsey shuffled round the font, addressing it directly, 'O font, font, font! Where my Christian life began.'

The Archbishop's palpable sense of the past is something that we can all experience in our Lincolnshire churches. The Lincoln Record Society has recently begun to publish the fruits of a research project on which I have been engaged for some years, under the title *Lincolnshire Parish Clergy c.1214-1968: A Biographical Register*. The intention of this project is to help to reconnect our parish churches with those who in the past have ruled them (the 'rectors') or their deputies (the 'vicars'). The rolls of Bishop Hugh of Wells, dating from c.1214, provide the starting date of this biographical register, for although the names of earlier incumbents can occasionally be found in legal records or in the witness lists of charters, it is the systematic recording of institutions by the bishop's chancery that makes the present undertaking possible. It has been less easy to determine when to draw the lists to a close. The most appropriate date would seem to be that of the Pastoral Measure 1968 which in many ways marked the end of an era by giving the diocesan bishop a much more active role in managing parochial resources, enabling the establishment of groups and team ministries, the suspension of patronage and the redundancy of churches, and diluting the historic links between patron, incumbent and benefice.

Lincolnshire comprised historically twenty-six rural deaneries, ranging in size from Ness in the extreme south of the county, with fourteen parishes, to Louthesk and Ludborough with fifty. The first two volumes in this project, published in 2013 and 2016, covered the deaneries of Aslaoe, Aveland, Beltisloe and Bolingbroke, the first four in alphabetical sequence. The third volume, which is currently in preparation, will deal with the deaneries of Calcewaith and Candleshoe in the eastern part of the county.

Where did the parish clergy of Lincolnshire come from? A popular stereotype of the country parson is the younger son of an aristocratic or landed family, a man perhaps like the Reverend Lord Henry D'Ascoyne, the third of Dennis Price's victims in the classic film *Kind Hearts and Coronets*, blissfully unaware of his impending fate as he shows off the architectural features of his church to his murderer:

I always say my west window has all the exuberance of Chaucer without, happily, any of the concomitant crudities of his period ...

Some of our Lincolnshire incumbents did indeed fall into this category. The Hon. Henry Cockayne Cust (Scott Willoughby 1805) was the son of Sir Brownlow Cust, 1st Lord Brownlow. Non-resident at Scott Willoughby on account of the unfitness of the parsonage house ('a mere cottage'), he resided instead in a mansion of his own in his Bedfordshire parish of Cockayne Hatley, where he used his wealth to restore and beautify his Bedfordshire church at Cockayne Hatley ('in a style', as Archdeacon Bonney noted in 1826, 'that surpasses any village Church in the remembrance of the Archdeacon'), introducing historic furnishings which Cust acquired on the continent, including a magnificent pulpit from the church of St Andrew, Antwerp (now in Carlisle Cathedral).

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But if some clergy, like these, were born to wealth and status, another Lincolnshire incumbent had these marks of rank thrust upon him. Henry John Ingilby was instituted to the church of West Keal in 1822 and resided with his family at the Rectory, faithfully ministering to his flock for over thirty years. In May 1854, on the death of Sir William Amcotts Ingilby, Bart., Mr Ingilby learned that he had inherited the extensive Yorkshire estates of his cousin, including the majestic seat of Ripley Castle. This inheritance cannot exactly have been expected. The Ingilby baronetcy, created in 1642, had become extinct on the death of Sir John Ingilby, the fourth baronet, in 1772. A new baronetcy had been created in 1781 for his illegitimate son, John, who was the father of the afore-mentioned Sir William Amcotts Ingilby. On the death of Sir William without issue, it was thought that the estate would pass by entail to his kinsman, Mr Weston Cracroft. It transpired, however, that Sir William had instead bequeathed his Yorkshire property to the Rector of West Keal whose father (also a clergyman) was another illegitimate son of the last baronet of the 1642 creation, though (as Burke's Peerage tactfully puts it) 'whether out of the same mother or not is unclear'.

The startling transformation of Mr Ingilby's circumstances may be observed in the census returns for the years 1851 and 1861 respectively. In the former year we find Mr Ingilby duly in residence at West Keal Rectory, accompanied by his wife, whose profession is recorded as 'domestic duties', his eldest son (another clergyman) and three female servants. Ten years later, by contrast, he was ensconced at Ripley Castle, together with his wife (no longer encumbered with household drudgery), his three children, his niece, his visiting sister-in-law, and a domestic staff that would not be out of place at Downton Abbey: four ladies' maids, a housekeeper, two housemaids, three laundry maids, a dairymaid, a still-room maid, a cook, two kitchen maids, a butler, a valet, two footmen, a boy helping in the butler's pantry, a coachman and two grooms. Five years later, in 1866, Mr Ingilby was himself created a baronet, and his great-great-grandson, Sir Thomas Ingilby, is the current owner of Ripley Castle.

As is to be expected, Lincolnshire gentry families are also well represented in our parish lists. The father of Edwin George Jarvis (Hackthorn 1844) was George Ralph Payne Jarvis of Doddington Hall, the magnificent Robert Smythson house a few miles west of Lincoln. John Cholmeley (Burton Coggles 1811) was the second son of Montague Cholmeley of Easton Hall. The sons of gentry families from other counties also held livings in Lincolnshire. Charles Gery (Haceby 1764 and subsequently Toynton St Peter 1784), although born in Lincolnshire, was the younger brother of William Gery, the squire of Bushmead in Bedfordshire. At the bishop's visitation in 1768 it was reported at Haceby that Mr Gery was not in residence but lived at Bushmead, serving Little Staughton.

But were our clergy all like this, scions of the nobility and gentry? Their background was in fact considerably varied. Some came from military families. Henry Macpherson (Ingham 1888) was the son of an army captain and he himself served as a lieutenant in the Royal Marines Light Infantry before his ordination. Others were the sons of medical men; Justice Chapman (New Bolingbroke 1854) was the son of a surgeon. Lawyers, too, sent their sons into the church. Both Henry Boulton (Sibsey 1821) and Charles Cleaver (Careby 1923) were

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the sons of barristers. And it is not very surprising to discover that some of our clergy were the sons of schoolmasters. Benjamin Johnson (Dunsby by Bourne 1676) was the son of Thomas Johnson, Master of Oundle School.

The first step for a would-be incumbent wishing to secure a living was to acquire letters of presentation from the patron. As we have already seen, during the medieval period the majority of livings were in the hands of religious houses. In 1290 a young priest called Nicholas de Camelton (or Campton in Bedfordshire) was presented to the neighbouring vicarage of Chicksands by the Gilbertine priory of that place which held the advowson. Four years later, Nicholas was instituted to the Bedfordshire vicarage of Cople, also in the gift of Chicksands Priory. Chicksands was one of the few houses outside Lincolnshire of the Gilbertine Order – the only native English religious order, founded in the twelfth century by St Gilbert of Sempringham. Nicholas spent twenty-four years at Cople and then in 1318 he was instituted to the vicarage of Kirkby Laythorpe, just to the east of Sleaford in Lincolnshire. The patron on this occasion was Sempringham Priory, the chief house of the Gilbertines, and it is not difficult to discern a pattern in the ecclesiastical patronage that shaped Nicholas's career. Three years later in 1321 he moved to the nearby vicarage of Aslackby, where he remained until his death in 1340, after half a century serving the church in Lincoln diocese.

Presentation to a living depended ultimately on the patron knowing something about the candidate. The advowson or right of presentation to Fillingham was acquired in the fourteenth century by Balliol College, Oxford, and it is not very surprising that the great majority of rectors of Fillingham were graduates of that institution. Indeed it is something of an irony that Theophilus Leigh, whose Mastership of the College endured for almost sixty years, was unable to secure for himself this valuable living because, during the protracted dispute caused by his election in 1726, the presentation to Fillingham lapsed to the Bishop of Lincoln, who conferred it on one of his own sons, thereby keeping Leigh out of the rectory for forty years.

As is well-known, lay patrons often presented members of their own families. Robert Malebise was presented to the rectory of Mavis Enderby in 1216 by his father, William, and was granted custody of the church until the bishop (Hugh of Wells) should return from the Lateran Council in Rome. The bishop then held an enquiry as to whether the presentation should stand, it being suspected that the patron had fought with the barons against the king during the recent civil war. Fortunately William was able to show that he had been stricken with a 'universal paralysis' two years earlier and that he had never borne arms against the king.

An incumbent, whether rector or vicar, was required to be resident in his parish, although it was possible for him to gain a licence from the diocesan bishop to be excused from this requirement for a limited period. At times, the obligation of residence was openly flouted. In 1337 Frederick Odilie, Rector of Miningsby, was deprived of his living on the grounds that he had failed to comply with the bishop's warning that he should reside on his benefice. A frequent cause of non-residence was pluralism, the holding of more than one benefice at

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the same time. Thomas Crescy (Lusby 1519) was also the rector of Bolnhurst in Bedfordshire where he seems to have resided; he died in 1553 and was buried in the parish church of St Peter Merton in Bedford.

A spectacular example of eighteenth-century pluralism may be found in the career of William Pearce, instituted to the rectory of Miningsby in 1774. A Cornishman by birth, Pearce entered the University of Cambridge in 1763 and spent the remainder of his life there, rising to become Master of Jesus College from 1789 until his death in 1820. It seems unlikely that he ever visited the remote village on the northern edge of the Lincolnshire fens and his neglect may well have extended to the church of Houghton Conquest, of which he became Rector in 1786. Although he remained the incumbent here until his death, the church was described in the early years of the nineteenth century as being 'very neglected' and the chancel, over which the rector claimed sole rights, 'at present very dirty & evidently little cared for'. Pearce died in November 1820 at the Master's Lodge and was buried in the college chapel.

The bracing air of Lincolnshire was clearly too much for some of our incumbents and their families. Septimus Green Wood (West Keal 1855) endured the conditions in the hill-top rectory for as long as he could, but in 1861 he applied to the bishop for non-residence on account of his wife's health: 'the climate of Lincolnshire is much too cold for her, especially during the winter and spring months'. They spent the next eighteen years residing abroad at Nice and Menton in the south of France, before he finally resigned the living in 1879. John Frederic Dawson (Toynnton St Peter 1827) was a Bedfordshire man who visited Toynnton rarely – perhaps only once – during a long tenure of nearly forty-three years as Rector. Baptised on 31 July 1802 at St Paul's Church in Bedford, he was educated at Bedford School and served his first curacy at St Paul's before his institution to Toynnton. He spent some of his time at his family residence, The Woodlands, in Clapham (Bedfordshire), and the remainder at watering places on the south coast such as Ventnor and Brighton, where his doctor warned that 'a residence in Lincolnshire would be very prejudicial to his health'. His first wife, a member of the Wade-Gery family of Bushmead Priory, died in 1860 and shortly afterwards he was married again, this time to Alice Procter, his former housekeeper.

Clergy such as these were able to secure the bishop's licence for non-residence and they suffered no penalty as a result, provided that they employed a suitably qualified curate to exercise the cure of souls on their behalf. In the eighteenth century, an attempt was made to encourage residence by enabling incumbents to mortgage their glebe land to finance the building of a new parsonage house. George Osborne, instituted to Stainby with Gunby in 1803, rebuilt the rectory house in the following year. When Ralph William Lionel Tollemache became rector of nearby North Witham in 1851, he found the parsonage to be 'a poor tumble-down old thatched farm house'. Two years later, this building was destroyed by fire. The rector went to live temporarily at the Blue Bull Inn on the Great North Road, while a new rectory house was built to designs by the architect, Edward Collier Scott Blake.

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Information about the contents of parsonage houses can of course be found among the probate inventories which survive in great numbers from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. This is a subject which could well furnish a lecture all of its own, so I will confine myself here to one aspect – clerical clothing. The assessors of the household goods of Robert Frost (Bolingbroke 1551) appear to have catalogued his entire wardrobe: ‘his best gowne lyned with baies, a gowne facyd with conney, an every daie gowne, a cote of fine clothe, twoo shorte gownes (thone faced with velvytt thither an olde one), a frese cote, a black fustian doblett, twoo paire of olde hose, a jerken of clothe, a prestes capp, a rownde capp, a button capp and two hates, price £4’. Bequests of clothing could be highly prized. When Robert Otys (East Keal north mediety 1538) drew up his will in 1542, he made a number of bequests to fellow clergy: to George Lilborne of Mavis Enderby, a signet; to Thomas Cowper (who was to succeed him at East Keal), a silver whistle, and to Richard Taylor, parson of the south mediety of East Keal, ‘my best bonytt’ and a pair of hose. This afore-mentioned Richard Taylor drew up his own will just a year later, bequeathing to ‘my brother parsone Sir Thomas Cowper my best bonytt the wiche parsone Ottes dyd gyff me’.

Clerical wills and inventories of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries serve to remind us that, with much of their income deriving from glebe land and tithes, it was necessary for the incumbents of country parishes to devote much of their spare time to agricultural pursuits. By the nineteenth century, things had changed, with most glebe being rented out, and the clergy and their families found other ways in which to occupy their spare time. One traditional and quite acceptable means of augmenting a meagre stipend was for an incumbent to take in pupils. Thomas Mitchinson (Carrington 1819) kept a boarding school at Carrington Parsonage, advertising regularly in local newspapers such as the *Stamford Mercury* for ‘young gentlemen to board and educate’, with fees ranging from 26-30 guineas per annum, according to age, with ‘Dancing, Music, Land-surveying and Drawing, at the usual extra charges’. He added, helpfully, that ‘The post from Boston to Horncastle passes Mr M’s house daily’. Another incumbent to supplement his stipend by taking in pupils was William Layng (Creeton 1850). The census returns for 1871 record eleven young gentlemen in residence at Creeton Rectory, and a charming photograph survives, showing Mr Layng with his wife, family and pupils posing for the camera in the rectory garden.

It should not be assumed that the parish clergy and their families devoted themselves solely to study. Some undertook artistic pursuits. The painting *The Poultry Seller* by Richard Heighway (Fillingham 1782) is today in the collection of the Victoria and Albert Museum. William Augustus Holden Thorold (Stainby 1877) was a skilled wood-carver, and made an oak reredos, chancel screen, font cover and other ornaments for Stainby church. Rather less ecclesiastical but perhaps equally skilled were the daughters of Thomas Church (Halton Hologate 1915), whom Bishop Hicks found in 1918 doing ‘nothing but make toy aeroplanes in the attics – very cleverly I confess’. Shortly afterwards, Mr Church became Rector of St Cuthbert in Bedford, so it is possible that some of these aeroplanes may be found in unsuspected places in the town.

There were of course some clergy who excelled in athletic pursuits. Beaumont Griffith Jarrett (Swinstead 1883) won a Football Blue at Cambridge and played for England against

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Scotland from 1876 to 1878. He played as goalkeeper for Grantham Town FC in the year when that club won the Lincolnshire Cup. Perhaps the most remarkable athlete among the Lincolnshire parish clergy, however, was George Henry Hales (Stickney 1883). An athletics blue at Cambridge and President of the University Athletics Club, he was universally known as 'Hammer Hales', holding for twenty years the world record for throwing the hammer. Bishop Hicks noted in 1912, when Hales was nearly sixty years old, 'The big burly Hales met me in his trap & drove me to Stickney. He was at Cambridge the champion *hammer* thrower of the world! He looks it still.'

The theological disputes which have from time to time beset the Church in England are reflected in the careers of the clergy from these two deaneries. John Wycliffe (Fillingham 1361) is of course pre-eminent in the line of English reformers (his non-residence at Fillingham can be seen to sit not altogether comfortably with his reforming views). The disputes of the English reformation, which saw the outbreak of the Lincolnshire Rising in 1536, can be contrasted with the fidelity of those who determined to continue to serve their parishioners throughout all the changes and chances of that period of upheaval. George Lilborne (Mavis Enderby 1522) was born in Brigsley in 1494, ordained priest in 1515, and served the people of Mavis Enderby throughout the Henrician reformation, the dissolution of the monasteries, the introduction of the English prayer book, the catholic reaction under Mary and finally the Elizabethan settlement. He was buried in the chancel at Mavis Enderby on 6 April 1588, the year of the Spanish Armada. Richard Gudall (Raithby-by-Spilsby 1541) was born at Bolingbroke in 1491, just six years after the battle of Bosworth. He, too, was ordained priest in 1515, served as a curate at Leverton, and then as Rector of Raithby from 1541 until his death in May 1586.

The period of the English Civil War saw many clergy, both royalist and parliamentarian, suffer for their views. John Chappell (Irnham 1618) lent a horse to the royal army in 1642 and was ejected from his parish in 1646 as a result. Samuel Drake (East Keal 1659) was said to have fought valiantly for the king during the siege of Newark before seeking ordination, in conditions of great secrecy, at the hands of the Irish bishop of Ardfert in 1647. Robert Haslewood (Kirkby Underwood 1622) and Adam Cranwell (Rippingale 1619) were also sequestered from their livings for their royalist opinions during this period. George Beck, who was intruded in Cranwell's place in 1646, was himself one of the nonconformist clergy ejected from their livings in 1662.

The expansion of the Anglican Church worldwide means that the cataloguer of its clergy must become familiar with some of the more remote outposts of the British Empire. Thomas Earle Welby, briefly Rector of the family living at Newton by Folkingham in 1847-8, subsequently went out to South Africa as incumbent of the church of St Mark in Cape Town. In 1861 he was consecrated Bishop of St Helena where he remained until 6 January 1899 when he was killed in a carriage accident at James Town, the capital of the island. Other Lincolnshire clergy served the church in places as widely flung as Saskatchewan and Bengal, Belize and Burma. Leonard Bell Impson, Rector of Swaton from 1950 to 1957, then went out to be Rector of Kondinin-Corrigin in Western Australia, subsequently serving as Domestic Chaplain to the Bishop of Bunbury. He returned to the United Kingdom where in

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1962 he became Vicar of the Bedfordshire living of Wilden with Colmworth and Ravensden, where he died in 1974.

The narrator of Betjeman's poem, with which we began, recalls the horror of his experience:

The remoteness was awful, the stillness intense,  
Of invisible fenland, around and immense;  
And out of the dark, with a roar and a swell,  
Swung, hollowly thundering, Speckleby bell.

Though myself the Archdeacon for many a year,  
I had not summoned courage for visiting here;  
Our incumbents were mostly eccentric or sad  
But – *the Speckleby Rector was said to be mad.*

Cases of insanity among the Lincolnshire parish clergy were not unknown. Thomas de Craunho (North Witham 1295) was found three years later to be mad; the vicar of Corby was appointed as his coadjutor to provide for the needs of the parish. By 1299 Thomas was said to have recovered but in 1306 the rural dean of Beltisloe reported to Bishop Dalderby that he had visited Thomas at Owston Abbey in Leicestershire (Owston was the patron of North Witham), where he had found him lying in bed, his hands and feet bound with cords, and so mentally disordered that he was quite unfit to exercise his cure of souls.

There are of course degrees of madness and I should like to consider for a moment some examples of Lincolnshire clergy who, for one reason or another, were led into what can only be described as 'conduct unbecoming a clerk in holy orders'. William James Jenkins (Fillingham 1852) was convicted at Lindsey Petty Sessions in 1884 on a charge of assault against one of his servants. In the same year he was charged with indecency before the Bishop of Lincoln and was suspended from his living, but not before the parishioners had subjected him to the traditional treatment of 'rantanning' and burned an effigy, clothed in ritualistic vestments, in a field adjoining the Rectory.

The parish churches of these four deaneries bear ample testimony in furnishings, stained glass and memorials to their incumbents of past generations. There are monuments to William Beauchaump (Harpswell 1349) and Thomas Redyng (Little Steeping 1318) in their respective churches. Thomas Portyngton (Blyborough 1453) later became Rector of Shillington in Bedfordshire where he died in 1485, shortly before the battle of Bosworth Field; he is commemorated by a somewhat worn monumental brass in Shillington Church. The memorial to John Cholmeley (Burton Coggles 1811) is stark in its message: 'His ministry was short, like a warning voice it was heard, it is gone, be ye also ready!'. More cheerful is the east window at Stickney church, renewed in 1923 in memory of George 'Hammer' Hales. Among the panels, one bears crossed hammers, commemorating his world record; another has tulips of the 'Hammer Hales' variety, named after him; a third shows daffodils, in tribute to his presidency of the Lincolnshire Daffodil Society, while in the upper lights are two owls,

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which inhabited the church tower and for which, when the tower was rebuilt in 1900, Mr Hales provided special entrances so that they might continue to nest there.

Finally, should you visit the church of St Andrew at Witham-on-the-Hill, do not fail to look into the chancel where you will see a remarkable medieval-style brass in memory of Canon Leonard Henry Cooley, vicar of the parish from 1900 until 1945, a founder member and sometime Vice-President of the Monumental Brass Society, and in many ways the epitome of the faithful Lincolnshire parish priest, caring for his people in good times and in bad. This survey of Lincolnshire clergy will, it is hoped, serve as a starting point for further investigation, helping to understand the role which they have played in the history of the Church in our two counties and beyond.

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