

6 Absentee Rectors

Pluralism

Throughout most of the eighteenth century it was common practice for the clergy to hold several livings at the same time. In general they would live in one of the parishes, usually the most prestigious, and appoint curates to do all the work for them including the parish in which they lived.

The Church of England sank to its lowest ebb at this time, racked by idleness, complacency and plain bigotry. It was a century of gracious living alongside grinding poverty; of barbarous punishments; of slavery and of the rise of industrial Britain. It was the century which saw the Wesleys preaching against the evils they saw around them and the century which saw the first real sparks of a social conscience.

During this period only Benjamin Skinner came close to being the Rector of Purley in fact as well as in name, but even he was absent for much of the time.

Thomas Toovey 1719-1723

William Gostwicke was succeeded by Thomas Toovey MA. He was a graduate of Balliol College Oxford taking his MA in 1719. He was vicar of Watlington from 1711 to 1751 and held both livings after his appointment to Purley. Shortly afterwards he exchanged the living of Purley with that of Swincombe in Oxfordshire. He earned his BD in the same year. While he was rector of Purley it was served by curates, first James Martin and then Deodatus Bye.

Deodatus Bye was the son of Deodatus Bye who was vicar of St Laurence, Reading. He was educated at All Souls College, Oxford taking his BA in 1718. He served as curate at Purley from 1722 to 1727 and later in 1748 became rector of Otterden in Kent.

Thomas Toovey was the son of John Toovey and Elizabeth (nee Blackwell). He born around 1686 and christened 9th November 1686 at Watlington. He was educated at Balliol College Oxford at which he matriculated on the 28th October 1702 at age 16 and took his BA in 1706. He was married at Swincombe on 30th July 1711 and owned a farm which stood on the boundary between the parishes of Swincombe and Bix. Their son George was born in 1723 and was educated at Exeter College, Oxford. They also had a daughter Maria, and several other sons.

Thomas became Vicar of Watlington in 1711 and was known initially there as 'a person of activity and usefulness' He was active in the affairs of the town and transcribed many ancient records. He was however said also to have a quarrelsome temper.

He attempted to bring back some decency to both public worship and the fabric of his church in Watlington and levied a parish rate to pay for the repairs. This incensed the townsfolk whom Thomas described as preferring to be about their businesses rather than attend church. The parishioners elected a warden who was deputed to thwart Thomas's reforms. Thomas tried to get rid of this warden but was counter accused of not having a resident curate, leaving the vicarage in poor repair and neglecting prayers on holy days. In 1731 he forsook his dwelling in the town, which was not the vicarage, and went to live on his farm at Swincombe, some three miles away and was thereafter hardly ever seen in Watlington except on Sundays.

The stipend for a curate at Purley had at one time been £30 pa but when Thomas was considering appointing one, the Bishop of Oxford decreed that a stipend of £40 would be more reasonable. This Thomas flatly refused to pay and continued to serve both churches himself. Eventually however he found that he had to appoint curates to look after Purley, first James Martin and then in 1722 Deodatus Bye. The net result of his parsimony was a sharp decline in attendances and a rise in non-conformity in Watlington.

He retired in 1751 and died in 1756. He was buried in Watlington on November 4th.

James Harrison 1723-1741

James Harrison was instituted on the 6th December 1723 by Bishop Benjamin Hoadley and inducted to Purley on the 24th December by Mr Bint, prebend of Binfield. He had been educated at Merton College Oxford.

Like many other of the clergy he also had a position as private chaplain to a member of the nobility. In James' case this was the Right Honorable William, Earl of Cadogan. When he was appointed to Purley he was already vicar of Medmenham in Bucks, nine miles away, a living valued at £5-12-1 (£45 pa). He gained special dispensation from the archbishop to hold both livings on 30th November 1723. Purley was valued at £12-17-3 (£100 pa)

James had two curates, Deodatus Bye, who had served the previous rector, and Edward Crank. Edward had been born around 1676, the son of Edward Crank of Birmingham. He had obtained his BA from Trinity College Oxford in 1695, his MA in 1698 and his BD in 1708. He was appointed Proctor in 1706 and was for a while tutor to John Willes who later became Attorney General. In 1719 he was appointed rector of Stonesfield, Oxon, moved to Essex to become both vicar of Great Waltham and rector of Hatford in 1721. He became curate at Purley in 1729 and was preacher at Lincoln's Inn from 1733 to 1735. He retained his rectorship of Hatford when he became vicar of Stanford in the Vale in 1732, where he remained until his death at age 79 on 28th June 1756. He was buried in Hatford church where there are many family memorials. His wife gave a silver flagon to the church at Stanford in the Vale in his memory in 1757.

In 1731 the churchwardens of Purley reported that their bell was cracked and repeated in 1734 that it was still cracked. Presumably this is the same one that was eventually re-cast in 1787.

A chalice and paten was presented to the church by Francis Hawes of Purley Hall in 1733, presumably to replace the plate which had been destroyed during the Civil War by something more fitting than had been in use as a temporary measure. This gift was followed by one of an almsdish in 1735 by Frances Twysden.

James died in 1741 and was buried on 29th August.

John Billingsley 1741-1754

John Billingsley LLB had been installed as the sixth prebend of Bristol Cathedral on September 8th 1737. He had been presented to the vicarage of Woodnesborough in Kent on June 28th 1726 and resigned the benefice upon being appointed to the rectory of Newington with the chapel at Brightwell in Oxfordshire on 4th April 1737. Interestingly the man he replaced at Newington, the Rev Dr John Potter had left because he had been elected Archbishop of Canterbury.

Immediately the new archbishop conferred upon John the degree of Master of Arts on 16th August 1737. He continued to hold the benefice of Newington, worth £300 pa by special dispensation from John Potter after he was appointed to Purley on 24th December 1741. By this time the living of Purley had increased in value to £120 pa. He was also chaplain to the Right Honorable Henry Lord Montfort.

For most of his rectorship Purley was served by curates, Robert Hughes in 1742, Andrew Ety in 1743, J Samwell in 1744 and finally Robert Stebbing who served from 1745 to 1758. Andrew Ety had been born around 1690 and was educated at Trinity College Oxford where he took his BA in 1709.

John Billingsley is believed to have been the son of Philip Billingsley who was presented to the rectory of Newington with the chapel of Brightwell by the then Lord Chancellor, Lord Hardwick.

He died in 1754 and was buried at Newington.

Christopher Wells 1754-1766

Christopher Wells BD became rector on 21st March 1754. He also held the living of Remenham in Bucks.

He died on 15th April 1766 and there is some dispute as to whether he is buried at Remenham or in Wales.

Benjamin Skinner 1766-1787

Benjamin Skinner was the son of William Skinner of Didmarton in Gloucestershire. He was educated at Pembroke College Oxford where he took his BA in 1752 and MA in 1755.

He became a fellow of Worcester College Oxford. He was rector of Footscray in Kent before he was instituted at Purley by Bishop Thomas on June 10th 1766. He was also one of the portionists of Waddesdon in Buckingham and Chaplain to the Duke of Marlborough.

He had a succession of curates, David Williams (1762-67), Jonathan Monckton (1768-76), William Toovey (1769-75), John Ellis (1776), James Cochrane (1777), Charles Chambers (1778-79) and Henry Wilder (1780-87)

In June 1777 he set down on paper the profit he expected to make from Purley without any effort on his part. This was in anticipation of Charles Chambers taking on the curacy from Michaelmas. The salary on offer was £30 pa and the parsonage house was rent free.

	£ - s - d
Land Tax	13-6-0
Fee Farm Rent	3-4-8
Curate	30-0-0
Quit Rent	0-2-0
Tenths	1-6-3
Books procured & Orders exhibited	0-2-8
Archdeacons procurations	0-9-8
Synodals	0-3-0
Pensions	0-0-4
Acquittance	0-0-8
sub-total	49-5-3
Repairs (estimate)	1-14-9
Total	51-0-0

Subtracted from the value of the living, now £140, this left a clear profit of £89. He also made £107-2-0 from the living of Waddesdon and was earning interest of £32 pa on a loan of £800 he had made giving a net total of £228-2-3

The value of the living had been assured by an arrangement he had made with John Sherwood of Purley who agreed to pay Benjamin £130 pa for three years from 1766 for the tithes and the right to farm the Glebe land excepting only the parsonage and its immediate surrounds. In return John would pay all parish taxes and keep the land in good shape. In 1769 the agreement was renewed for a further 16 years at the enhanced figure of £140 pa.

Jonathan Monckton was born around 1712 and educated at St John's College Cambridge where he took his BA in 1733 and MA in 1737. For 27 years he was vicar of Sittingbourne in Kent and from 1766 to 1796 was rector of Pangbourne where he died on 20th June aged 84. While he was rector of Pangbourne a relative, Dr Monckton, lived at what became Home Farm in Purley and Jonathan acted as curate on many occasions for both Benjamin Skinner and John Cooper. He had been married twice, his second wife Anne dying in November 1780.

William Toovey's family were tenants of Brightwell cum Sotwell manor and he served as curate at both Purley and Mapledurham. He was vicar of Shiplake from around 1772.

In 1767 Benjamin Skinner reported to the bishop that he could find no-one who was either a professed or a reputed Papist. A few years later Henry Wilder, his curate, did find one Papist and reported that there was no Popish school in the Parish. By 1783 the tone of the questionnaire which was submitted for the triennial visitation had changed and questions on other dissenters were added. In this year Henry Wilder reported one papist and a number of other people who rarely attended church. He regretted that his only means of redress was to fine them one shilling a head for non-attendance in his capacity as a magistrate.

One of Benjamin's servants, Thomas Newbery was obliged to pay a bastardy bond of £40 in 1772 to Elizabeth Probbatts of Caversham whom he had made pregnant. Benjamin married Elizabeth, the sister of Archbishop Moore, at Canterbury Cathedral on 16th Feb 1773. Their daughter Mary was born and baptised in Purley on 25th November 1773. In 1774 he reported that on March 11th the Thames flooded in such a way that the oldest inhabitants had never known before. The water ran into the church and stayed there ankle deep for several hours.

A new bell was obtained in 1778. It was a maiden treble bell cast by Thomas Janaway of Chelsea, the gift of John George Liebenrood. Later, in 1787, Janaway re-cast the fifth bell which was presumably the one reported as cracked in 1731.

The bishop of Llandaff The Rt Reverend Shute Barrington, visited Purley on 27th June 1780 to hold a confirmation service. Two years later he became Purley's bishop when he was translated to Salisbury.

1780 saw the death of the Reverend Charles Chambers MA aged 32, to whose memory a plaque was erected in the church. He had been curate of Purley since September 1777 and left a widow, Elizabeth and son, William (b1778). Dr Henry Wilder of Purley Hall took over as curate and continued to serve Purley until 1787 although in 1785 he became Rector of Sulham which was in his own presentation.

In 1786 there was a Parliamentary enquiry into church charities. The only one recorded in Purley was the Cow money from 1608. From this time there exist many records of the Poor Law administration. Parishes were always trying to get rid of the responsibility for their paupers and if any connection with another parish were found then off they were sent. In 1787 this happened to Jane Grundy who was returned to Purley, where she had been brought up, on 28th May, by the Overseers of St Giles' parish in Reading. She was single and pregnant, her baby was christened Mary at Purley on July 8th and two months later she married Charles Hopson.

Benjamin Skinner died on March 3rd 1787 after many severe attacks of gout.

In 1788 during the inter-regnum, Richard Valpy acted as curate. He had held a rectory in Suffolk from 1787 although he was master of Reading School from 1781 to 1836. Many of his sermons and pamphlets were published.

John Cooper 1788-1800

It took over a year to find a successor to Benjamin Skinner and some of the letters of recommendation for candidates for the post have been preserved. One of the unsuccessful candidates was James Manesty MA who was recommended by the rectors of Englefield, Burghfield and Sulhampstead, for whom he had probably acted as curate.

The eventual appointment was that of John Cooper MA who was rector of Bix in Oxfordshire who was inducted on June 1st 1788. He did not resign the rectorship of Bix and continued to hold both livings. He rarely visited Purley and for most of his rectorship Purley was ministered to by the unsuccessful candidate, James Manesty who served as curate from 1789 to 1803.

James had been born around 1745 at Crandell, Hants and educated at Brasenose College Oxford. He and his wife Dorothy had two children, Charles who became rector of Purley in 1800 and Dorothy who married George Warner in 1803. James died in April 1816 and was buried at Purley. He left lands in Hertfordshire and Essex which Charles inherited.

The rectory was let to a Mr Doe who recorded in 1795 that he planted a larch and a cedar on the rectory lawn. By May 1866 the cedar had grown to a girth of 10 foot 3 inches and the larch to 8 ft.

In 1796 John Cooper was registered in the poll book as both the owner of the freehold and the occupier of the rectory, however George and Hannah Doe were still living in Purley when Hannah died in 1798 shortly after giving birth. It is more likely John Cooper wanted to ensure his vote and did not actually live in the parish.

John Cooper resigned in 1800 and when he died later he was buried at Bix



Purley Church in 1794 - one of Tomkins' drawings of Berkshire Churches [M00290]

