

SAVE OUR PARSONAGES

NEWSLETTER



No. 14

Autumn 2008

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DIRECTOR'S REPORT

Review of Clergy Terms of Service – Update

This year we can celebrate a significant success. The most pressing matter has been our contribution to the debate about the clergy freehold, and specifically the impact that the abolition of the clergy freehold and the imposition of ‘common tenure’ has on parsonages. Our campaign looked highly unlikely to succeed at first but ended in victory. The proposal to transfer ownership of parsonages to the diocesan authorities was rejected by General Synod, and so the status quo is preserved: the incumbent continues to have the veto on sale of the parsonage while in ownership and occupation. However this will not apply to priests in charge and other posts.

‘Vulnerable Parsonages’ Project

Our policy is to be proactive, and last year we identified the need to get information about what parsonages are currently deemed ‘unsuitable’ by the diocesan authorities. The committee is very grateful to the Revd. Mervyn Wilson for taking this project on. Mervyn wrote to 41 diocesan secretaries. He received replies from 20(48%), of which only five (15%) provided the information. Of those refusing who gave reasons, these were that the information was not readily available, or that it was confidential, or that it was commercially or pastorally sensitive. The plea of unavailability is puzzling, since we understand that diocesan surveyors all have lists of the parsonages in their custody and are well aware of which are categorised as ‘unsuitable’ – indeed it would be very odd if they did not. Furthermore, we can’t see why the information should be confidential, or indeed commercially sensitive. Mervyn therefore sent another letter to those who had not replied or been negative, asking for their reasoning on these points, and clarifying that we were only asking to see existing lists. Of the 35, ten responded including five who had not replied before. Most repeated that no list was used or available, the others said the information was confidential, one saying they had no good houses left. A depressing exercise, and we will have to think what to do now.

We got some revealing comments. For example, the diocesan secretary of Birmingham Diocese said he ‘was not prepared’ to give us a list, which ‘is nothing whatever to do with you.’ He described us as an ‘external organisation.’ Since our members and committee are all Church members, some of us clergy, and one a member of General Synod, we wonder what we have to do before we qualify as ‘internal’!

SOP Code of Practice – Update

Part of the difficulty the Church Commissioners and the dioceses had with our Code of Practice was that it seeks to address both the dioceses’ procedures (and the need for better consultation), and the appeal procedures, which are the responsibility of the Church Commissioners, and therefore it covers two separate bodies. Your committee is now therefore working on a new strategy of putting a consultation procedure to the dioceses in one code, while separately addressing the Church Commissioners’ appeal

procedures. Whether this will be any more successful remains to be seen, but the signs are not very encouraging.

Charitable Trust – Update

The aim of the Rectories and Vicarages Trust is to preserve church houses for Church use (see earlier newsletters for details). We have been discussing it with a number of bodies, including among others the Landmark Trust, Marshall's Charity and the Bishop of Dudley, with varying degrees of success. We have now drawn up a constitution and put the new body in place in the first instance as an unincorporated association. We have not yet applied for charitable status.

Publications and Events

We've had a very successful year for events and links. I have written articles for several other societies and publications, including Church Building, the Georgian Group, the Twentieth Century Society and the English Clergy Association. Our members have participated in the current Country Life competition to find 'England's Best Parsonage' (our patron Michael Higgins is one of the judges), and we have had a joint tour of East Anglian parsonages with the Georgian Group, which proved very popular and a great success.

Publicity

This year we've had letters in the Times, Sunday Telegraph and Church Times, and have been mentioned or quoted in the Financial Times, Church Times, Country Life and various local newspapers. I have also participated in discussions on parsonages on local radio.

Parsonage poll

Following their article which reported *inter alia* our comments on the state of our battle against the great parsonage sell-off, Church Times conducted a poll in May which asked the following question: 'should the Church continue to sell its historic parsonages?' The result was: yes, 28%, no, 72%. It confirms what we have always said, that the diocesan bureaucrats don't listen to the people.

'The Old Rectory'

My book 'The Old Rectory' is to be published next year. I repeat my request for all your ideas and useful information about rectories and vicarages please. Your contributions will be acknowledged.

New members

We always badly need new members. Could you all please help? You can download the 'subscription and standing order' form from our website at any time and give it to friends and colleagues. Please advertise us. Explain the importance of joining us.

Your ideas

Your committee cannot win the battle to save parsonages without your help. We need you to be proactive, communicate with Church authorities, and write to the media, whenever you read something that needs to be challenged, or hear misguided or ill-informed views being expressed. We also need you to spread the word about us – in the case of this year's sale of Stoke by Nayland vicarage, the house had been put on the market before the PCC had heard about our existence. If parishes do not know about us we cannot be proactive, and this is vital. Spread the word!

AJSJ

OTHER NEWS AND COMMENT**AGM**

This year's AGM will be at the rectory, Bishops Nympton, Devon, by very kind invitation of the Revd. Dr Andrew and Mrs Jan Jones. The invitation together with the minutes of the 2007 AGM is on the separate sheet enclosed with this newsletter.

'Supporters' and Standing Orders – Update

The renewal of subscriptions by those of our members who do not pay by standing order is a constant battle and usually results in a lapse of several months each year for which we, of course, lose vital revenue. I'm delighted to say most of you now pay by standing order and I urge the rest of you to do so without delay. If any of you still have a standing order at the old £10 rate, you may care to increase it to the current £15 please, or make a donation to cover the balance. Thank you!

Donations

Thanks are due to those of you who have kindly made donations or enhanced subscriptions. Particular mention this year should be made of Barry Bracewell-Milnes, Ian Cairns, Desmond Jenkins, Adrian Leak, Ian Sherwood, Elizabeth Simon and Edward Underhill.

CAF Cheques

Members are still obviously confused about the status of SOP. A number of you have recently attempted to pay subscriptions with CAF cheques, but as we are not a charity we cannot cash these cheques. In several past newsletters I have tried to explain that SOP under present law cannot be registered as a charity. Our affiliated body, the RVT, will qualify for registration with the Charity Commission in due course, but that is a quite different matter. CAF cheques cannot be banked by SOP.

Email

Could any member who has not given me his or her email address, please supply it now. Please also notify us of all changes. It was only possible to contact about half of you (those who had given me email addresses) to advise you of our events this year

such as the parsonage tour, because of the urgency (in the case of the Country Life competition) and postal costs.

Members' expertise

We are continuing to implement the many useful suggestions we received from your feedback (see also 'website' below). In that feedback, which we discussed in detail in our 2006 issue, four members said they had experience in fund raising. As you know, we badly need a marketing manager both for SOP and for the proposed RVT, and this position is still not filled – so if one of you could volunteer, this would be enormously appreciated.

Website - Update

At the time of my last check we had had 3117 'hits' on our website. The Revd Jeremy Hummerstone very kindly continues to manage it for us, and has now updated it so that you can post your comments directly on our site. Please look at the website and make use of this availability.

Members' feedback

One of our members, the Revd MPM Stewart RN, suggested that we each ask our parish priest to set up a link from the parish website to the SOP website. Could I ask you all to do this please? Please let me have details when you have done so, and we will set up a reciprocal link from our site to the relevant parish.

Back Issues

We still have back issues of the newsletter. Some complete sets from 1995 to date are still available, though we have very few copies of the 1998 issue. We offer a full set (12 issues) for £20, a full set minus the 1998 issue for £15, or any single issue for £2. Please help us avoid waste and swell our coffers - they make good reading, they could even become collectors' items!

Our committee

We have listed the current members of our committee on page 3. We have also set up a Working Team, which consists of ex-committee members who kindly still help out with specific tasks. These are Angela Cook, Jeremy Hummerstone and Diana Morgan.

AJSJ

CASEWORK

Brigstock St. Andrews, Peterborough

This handsome c.19 house has been under threat for many months despite the fact that it is part of an important site, which the parish is intent to conserve with the help of English Heritage. The latest news is more optimistic and it seems that it may now be saved. However, the diocese still has its eyes on the surrounding amenity land, the important and still unspoiled Saxon manor. It is trying to get this land transferred to glebe, which might allow development of the site. The parishioners still have work to do to prevent this.



Brigstock Rectory

Chew Stoke, Bath & Wells

In March last year Bath & Wells Diocese told a combined meeting of the Chew Stoke and Nempnett Thrubwell Parochial Church Councils that Chew Stoke Rectory was to be sold. The house was built in 1589 for the Rector Sir John Barry. It is perhaps the last remaining fine medieval house in Church ownership (it was pictured in our last issue) and has been in the service of the Church for centuries. The archdeacon and diocesan property manager attended the meeting. The property manager stated that the house would be sold 'regardless of the opinion of the PCC'. The archdeacon hinted that they might get some money from the sale, but if they did not co-operate, there would be no money forthcoming. In a letter of 5th April, the archdeacon wrote to the PCC saying that a diocesan grant might be possible but he would only support

the PCC if the matter was not referred to the Church Commissioners (the PCC's only legal recourse if a diocese refuses to listen to its wishes). In reply, the PCC immediately wrote a long and reasoned letter to the archdeacon requesting detailed information about the rationale and justification for the proposed sale. The requested reply had not been received before the subsequent meeting on April 22nd, at which the motion to sell the rectory was overwhelmingly rejected by the combined PCCs.

By April 2008, a full year later, despite several reminders by the PCC secretary, the archdeacon had still made no substantive written reply to the questions in the letter. SOP finally had to email him and the Diocesan Secretary direct pointing this out. There followed a series of abortive email exchanges. It was clear that the diocese had no intention of supplying a proper and detailed written case for the sale. Dioceses have a duty to consult and it is necessary for the PCC to be able to see the diocese's case in order to consider the matter and make a formal reasoned appeal to the Church Commissioners.

The priest in charge resigned her post and the house became vacant. On April 22nd the archdeacon called another meeting at which he repeated, despite the vote against, that the house would be sold. The justification for the sale was that a house would only be required as a 'house for duty.' Chew Stoke Rectory was considered too large for this role. It was also stated to be in a poor state of repair (despite the fact that the diocese has legal responsibility to keep parsonages properly maintained).

The idiocy is that the diocese has to buy a bungalow as a house for duty at great expense, so after selling the fine old house (no doubt for a fraction of its true value due to its own failure to maintain it) the profit, as usual, will go to the banker or developer who buys it. The parish will get little or no compensation, and will continue to be required to pay an ever increasing parish share to the diocese. A typical story.

Denstone, Lichfield

This fine house by G.E. Street, the Victorian architect whose master work was the Law Courts in the Strand, London, is under threat. The PCC is united in its opposition.

East Coker, Bath & Wells

The situation of this fine Late Georgian house is still fluid. The diocese has told the PCC that it intends to sell it, unless they are prepared to provide substantial financial support.

Edale, Derby

The future of this pleasant stone house of about 1880 is still uncertain.

Ingleby Greenhow, York

We reported on this case, and on the well-argued appeal to the Church

Commissioners which was, as usual, turned down, without any ring-fencing of funds from the sale, in last year's newsletter. SOP subsequently received a copy of the official Statement of Reasons. We complained to the Church Commissioners that the statement gave the impression that the specific issues raised by the churchwardens had not been properly explored. Surprisingly, their pastoral division thanked us for our observations and said they were reviewing the way in which they approach their decisions. We are at least grateful to them for listening to our concerns.

Pinchbeck, Lincoln

The bitterly opposed sale of the very fine vicarage in Pinchbeck in 2001 (how much more is it worth now?) was one of our more notorious cases. After the sale, there was no car park for the church, and parishioners had nowhere to park in safety. The diocese had to put forward a scheme to plough up the peaceful churchyard. When we last heard, it had made three planning applications, all refused, and was trying again, even though it had been held that a car park on that site would have an adverse effect on the church and setting of three other listed buildings.

Stoke by Nayland, St. Edmundsbury and Ipswich

This fine late eighteenth century vicarage was sold off very quickly before the PCC could get in touch with SOP. There was considerable opposition but not enough to save the house. Anthony Jennings and Noel Riley had a meeting with the archdeacon who was unrepentant and took none of our points except that he agreed that the diocese was not prepared to spend money on maintenance.

St. Endellion, Truro

This fine early rectory, part of a group with the church, and associated with the celebrated St. Endellion Music Festival, was, incredibly, put under great threat last year, despite total opposition from the parish, the Friends, and the Festival alike, and despite the fact that the bishop had earlier promised it to the new incumbent and assured the PCC that he would live there. Now at last there is better news. The combined strength of an action group, united opposition, supporters including the Lord Lieutenant and John Betjeman's daughter, and independent analysis of diocesan accounts showing increasing sums spent on bureaucracy, has forced the decision to be reversed, or at least put on hold. The new priest in charge will now live there and lead the diocesan contribution to the Arts and Spirituality project. Very good news, but the sad message is that parishioners only succeed in these battles if they show great determination or are influential.

LETTERS

We are always very grateful to members for writing to us. The following are extracts from, or comments on, letters we have received during the year.

Derek Sawyer (our St. Kitts correspondent!) has very kindly written from Basseterre, St. Kitts, West Indies, enclosing a very interesting photo of St. Thomas's Rectory, St. Kitts, reproduced here. It is the only wooden rectory left in the island, although now used as a church hall. As you can see, it is rather a charming vernacular structure. The parish priest for St. Thomas is The Revd. Fr. St. Clair Williams.



St. Thomas' Rectory

Christopher Tull, from Challacombe, North Devon, writes:

My old rectory was at Bishops Nympton near South Molton. I left in 1999. In my time I used every bit of the house and grounds as part of my work. When I went there in 1975 the diocese wanted to replace it, but by the mid-1990s they decided it was a really sound and useful house and one to be kept. My policy was never to grumble, to show great appreciation for everything they did for the house, and wherever possible to do things to improve it - like painting (with help from parishioners), repairing boundary walls etc. I also restored all its grounds and a wonderful walled garden. Eventually it was decided to bring it up to date, so shortly before I left central heating was put in, secondary glazing, and roof felting. Had they sold the house in 1975 they might have got £17,000 for it. Today it is worth a fortune. Towards the end of my time the Bishop of Exeter took a party of Church Commissioners round the diocese to see differing kinds of sound parsonages. Mine was shown to them as a good example of an older house still in use. The party even posed for the camera in my cellar!

It's a long story, and has a happy ending, but I was not without critics in the early days. Andrew will have to pick it up from when I left. I know he loves the house. I had the advantage of having lived all my life until 1999 in large old rectories, so I knew a bit about them!

(The reference is to the Revd Andrew Jones who is hosting this year's AGM at this house – Ed.)

Ian Cairns, from Selling, Faversham, Kent writes:

Thank you for your letter of 14th November and for the interesting newsletter. Of course I admire and support the efforts of Save Our Parsonages but is it all too late? Fifty years ago the Church of England was a national Church. It tried, usually successfully, to be there for everyone, not just its core supporters, and most people, whether regular churchgoers or not, were quite familiar with its teaching and liturgy. Its regular services of matins and evensong tended to be undemanding, but often uplifting, opportunities for people to get to know each other so that communities were drawn closer together. Many of us were drawn into the more demanding rite of Holy Communion but that was not at all compulsory.

Then, maybe early in the 1960s, the Established Church seems to have turned in on itself and decided to become just another sect, which would cater mainly to the converted. The old services were replaced by the Eucharist, which tends to scare off anyone who is interested but not very committed. Then came the liturgical changes, such as the dreaded Series Three, which drove away many previously regular churchgoers. The parish priest would often start calling himself "Rod", "Ken", "Chris" or "Tony" so as to make himself more "a man of the people" and the sale of our rectories and vicarages was perhaps part of the same process : a deliberate attempt to alter the status of the parish priest, who previously tended to be a respected and often influential figure in the community as a whole.

I'm sorry to go on like this and I know that many people in the Church won't agree with me and people outside the church no longer care. I believe, however, that unless the Church of England attempts to re-establish itself as a national Church and not just an inward-looking sect, it will soon die and we will have lost more than just our parsonages.

I enclose a modest cheque and do wish you every success.

Desmond Jenkins, from Penarth, Vale of Glamorgan, writes:

In 1950, the Rector at Tockenham/Wootton Bassett, Wiltshire, William Herbert Cooper, aged 101, passed away. He was the oldest clergyman in the country. In 1952/3 I ministered as 'lay' reader there. In 1954 the diocese demanded that the rectory (a large four storey building) be sold. A builder from Wootton Bassett bought it for £1200. Subsequently Brigadier Haigh of Plessey Swindon bought it for £500,000. It was then sold five times, on the last occasion for £1.5 million. The

Church finance commissioners(?) are obviously incompetent. 'Selling the family silver.'

John Coverdale, of Ingleby Greenhow, North Yorkshire, writes:

Brian Marsay and I attended a meeting of the Church Commissioners in their palatial offices at 1 Millbank, London on 7th February 2007. We were there to oppose the Diocese of York in its wish to sell off Ingleby Vicarage and to absorb the resulting funds with no benefit to the parishioners of Ingleby Greenhow (or the current united benefice).

The Vicarage was erected by the De'Lisle family 150 years ago for the express use of the incumbent of Ingleby and the general benefit of the parish. As recently as 1961 the then Lord De'Lisle deposited funds with the diocese the interest from which was to supplement the stipend of the vicar at Ingleby solely.

In 1862, the vicarage was sold to the diocese for 6 shillings (30p) and it is patently obvious that the conditions relating to its sale were to secure the building's use, in perpetuity, for the incumbent and parishioners of Ingleby Greenhow.

On the formation of the current united benefice, the installation of the Revd. Dr. Anne Heading as Vicar of Ingleby could not proceed until the future of the vicarage was resolved. To this end, and in order to conclude the lengthy interregnum, the Ingleby PCC allowed the vicarage to be classified as glebe property on a temporary basis. We were naive. At Millbank, Brian and I were able to win every moral point without difficulty, but the commissioners' argument was simple "it is now Glebe Property so we can do with it as we please". This argument prevailed.

Ninety percent of Victorian vicarages have been sold in the last 10 years for in excess of £100,000,000. The social damage arising from this policy is immense. Who can trust the Church of England to listen to those who so generously support it? The De'Lisle family have also lost the vicarage which they provided at Penshurst. Ingratitude and short-termism reflect badly on the Church.

We at Ingleby are not contemptuous of authority, and well recognise the financial difficulties which beset the Church, but to sell the obvious choice of Vicarage for the united benefice, and to house the incumbent on the geographical extreme edge of the benefice, in a house with no parking, out of sight in a cul-de-sac, and having no space for a parish meeting, indicates a lack of reasoning. It also fails to meet the diocesan specification for a priest's house. I could go on.

Finally, when the Commissioners announced that they had found in favour of the diocese and asked if we wished to comment, we pointed out that the meeting had both commenced and concluded without a prayer. So we suggested as a gesture towards Christianity in the face of rampant commercialism, one of the three or more bishops present could offer a prayer for enlightenment. A somewhat startled Bishop of Truro

mumbled a few hesitant words. As Brian and I left the splendid building we learned that it was to be vacated by the commissioners. One suspects that the Almighty had also left, but some while earlier!

JC

P.S. I have pondered the manner in which to write this report since February, and the delay in so doing serves to illustrate the disappointment I feel with the secular attitudes which have characterised the whole affair. It is over four years since I went to Penshurst to consult Lord De'Lisle, and in between times Brian and I have met the Archbishop of York and many other worthies. We offer our thanks to the many people who have supported us as we battled for the vicarage to continue in the role for which it was given. I have recently learned that some bishops make incumbents sign an undertaking to agree to the sale of the vicarage as a condition of entering the living. Astonishing!

Best wishes and many thanks for your help.

(This is the Ingleby Greenhow 'post mortem' report which John Coverdale, who represented the PCC at the appeal hearing, kindly sent us (see 'casework' for more details) - Ed.

The Revd Edward Underhill writes to us from St. George's Vicarage, Gateshead with a legal question. He asks if it is true that 'if the churchwardens in an interregnum do not agree to the parsonage house being sold, then it cannot be sold, as presumably anyone appointed would have nowhere to live'. This is one of those 'frequently asked questions' so it's useful to publish our answer.

'In answer to your question, sadly, the churchwardens have no right of veto over sale of a parsonage in an interregnum, only a right to make representations against the sale, and sometimes not even that – see the report on the sale of Clifton Hampden Vicarage in last year's newsletter. That is precisely the problem we are up against. The position is governed by the Parsonages Measure 1938 or the Pastoral Measure 1983, depending on whether there is a benefice reorganisation. If the house is transferred to glebe, the 1976 Glebe Measure is also relevant. This now also gives a right to object, but the objection amounts only to a right to appeal to the Church Commissioners, whose decision favours the diocese in the great majority of cases. Still, it is always worth appealing.'

(We always welcome questions from members on legal matters affecting the sale of parsonages and do our best to answer them – Ed.)

Ian Sherwood writes from Istanbul:

Advice from the Great City to the Church in the English provinces is not easy. There are however two reforms, amongst some others, that might stand the Church of England in good stead.

One reform concerns elections. Elections to the governing structures should be limited to those who contribute funds - whether the contribution be the widow's mite, ten pounds a month, or multi million pound gifts. In this way all who are given to whining can pull up their socks, or simply be deflated. All elections from parish church councils to general synods would then be effected by people who actually support the temporal structures of the Church as opposed to people who make token gestures of support. "Give, and vote!" might be the salient motto of reform. Electoral rolls should not be a scoop of unsuspecting casual attenders at the Liturgy, but of those who actually ensure that the church buildings and parish clergy are supported. Interestingly the vast majority of decent English people take no part in such elections, thus diminishing the authority of much that is decided in the governing structures of the English Church and preserving the vast majority of folk from its annoying fashions and bizarre obsessions. God moves in a mysterious way, His wonders to perform.

The second reform concerns the multiplication of bishops and bureaucrats. This multiplication is odious. The bishops' contributions to the life of the nation and their enhancement of the apostolic ministry is slim. Indeed, at times, their contribution is antagonistic and harmful in its promotion of Islamism. Pomposity and rudeness abound in their ranks; currently the Bishop of Chichester is out of his diocese again, and sojourning in the Great City without having the courtesy to inform the local community. In recent times, bishops have a natural tendency to multiply their numbers, exhausting the finances of the Church when primary concern should be for the support of the Church at the coal face. A retinue of expensive diocesan staff now comes along with every bishop, each member claiming to be "bishop's officers". Individually these are not bad people - quite the contrary! Yet they are an exhausting claim on the pockets and historical patrimony of the faithful. Their ever-expensive bureaucracy, ever-widening abstractions, multiplication of conferences, travel and other expenses are destroying the temporal life of the Church and deepening a sense of crisis. A proposal that at least half the suffragan bishops, and nine-tenths of diocesan and ecclesiastical bureaucrats could be instructed to stay at home would be healthy. Let them claim their salaries and accrue their pension rights; they do have bills to pay. Then let time, retirement or death, purge the Church of this bureaucratic dead weight at the top and quietly curb the growing extravagance and obesity of episcopacy and bureaucracy. The absence of this dead weight from the governance of the Church will cause natural repairs to the finances of the Church, assist hard-working clergy, and bring healing to the annoyance shared by all reasonable people. That help is needed if the dignity of the average rector and the vicar is to be maintained, and if the evil deconsecration of church buildings and shameful impractical sale of parsonages is to be halted. Christ is risen!

On Friday 22 September 1815 the artist John Constable sat on a table tomb in the churchyard of Dedham and sketched the church tower, with its north porch, together with the east side of the vicarage. He was 39 years old and within a few months he would pluck up courage to make a proposal of marriage. For now he did what had become like reading a book to him, which was to make a picture of what he saw. Something of the proximity of a medieval tower and the newly-built Georgian domestic architecture may have caught his eye.

With an artist's freedom Constable exaggerated the height of the tower by giving it a slenderness that its vast bulk of knapped flint does not offer in reality. He noticed the statues that still guarded the top of the church tower and the porch. In the small gap between the church and vicarage he could just see the ancient holly hedge, now grown almost to roof-top height. He marked the heavy lintel above the vicarage front door, which was repeated in the window directly above it. He saw the curious battlemented roof-line, found only on this side of house, a response perhaps to the medieval masons' design far above on the tower. Over the vicarage roof-top he could see the heavy Tudor chimneys of the Merchant Weavers' House, and a tree which provided shade to the High Street. It is not known who has the original sketch today. Some 25 years ago it was with the auctioneers Sotheby's, but its whereabouts is now unknown to them. A reproduction of it has been used as the cover of the Parish Magazine since 1985 and also is still found on a postcard sold by the church.

The earliest mention of Dedham vicarage dates from 1254. The names of the clergy who have lived in this house (or one on this site) since 1322 are known. Established by the monks of Butley Abbey, Suffolk, this outpost of their patronage was in their gift until the Dissolution. Decline in the value of the vicarage glebe, together with dissatisfaction with the ministry provided by the new patrons, the Duchy of Lancaster, led in 1577 to the establishing of a separate office of lecturer, whose income was initially from voluntary giving by the parishioners and who was housed elsewhere in the parish at his own expense. In the 1580s clergy from the area met in the house for secretive *Combination Lectures*. The Minutes of their meetings still exist and have been recently published, together with biographies of those who attended [1].

In 1610 the vicarage had 'a hall with a parlour and chamber at one end and a shop and chamber at the other; to the east, extending in front of the west end of the church, was a row of four shops with upper rooms and another, smaller, house' [2]. In 1692 William Burkitt was appointed both to the office of Vicar and Lecturer. During his eleven years in office he successfully gained support from wealthy patrons and succeeded in purchasing the 'rectorial tithes' (to ensure that the patronage remained local), together with a house for his successor as lecturer. He re-endowed the lectureship to provide a reliable income for the lecturer, and established a charity for the education of children; both of which endowments are active today.

In the mid-18th century small buildings in the vicarage front garden were let to tradesmen. In 1810, soon after the appointment of Thomas Grimwood Taylor as vicar, they were let as three houses [3]. This additional income would have helped in his plans for the vicarage. In 1815 the vicarage was substantially rebuilt, 'in a vaguely gothic style, to designs by M. G. Thompson'[4]. An undated plan of the house with Thompson's signatures is to be found in Lambeth Palace Library. It was this new building which Constable sketched with such interest, and which is the earliest picture of the vicarage to survive.

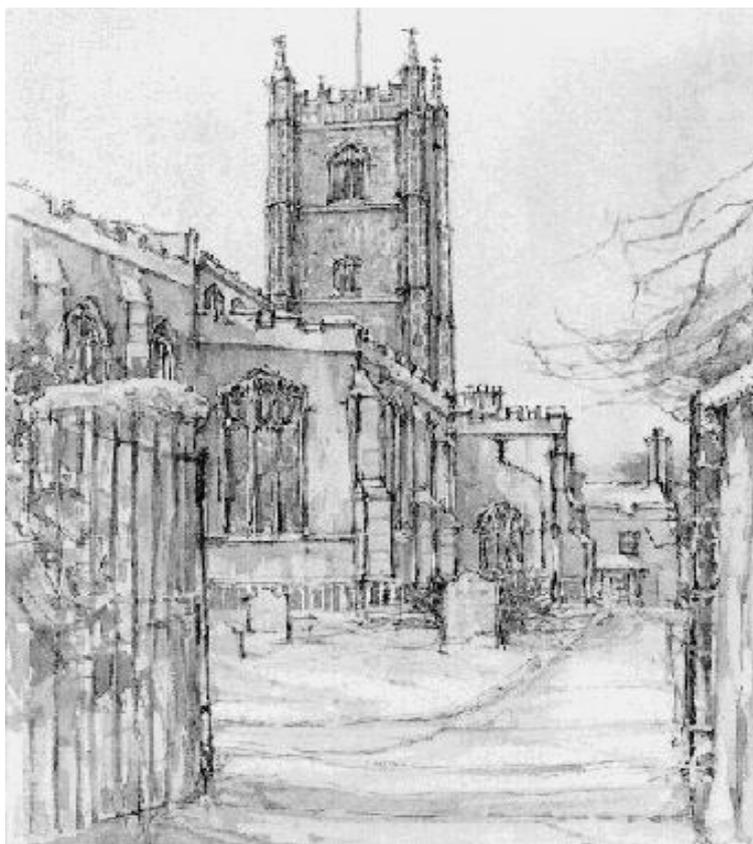


Dedham Vicarage by John Constable

A red-brick house (since painted Suffolk pink) of two storeys with attics at the rear, it retained its medieval cellars. A variation in the roof line when viewed from the south, suggests it may have once been two houses, though there is no evidence to confirm this. By 1818, when Thomas K. Cromwell published his *Excursions in the County of Essex*, he was of the opinion that the vicarage was one of 'the principal gentleman's seats at Dedham' [5]. To emphasise the point he included a full-page engraving of it.

Yet by 1839, when Edward Chauncy Ellis became vicar, the house was not found satisfactory. The benefice income in Dedham had been mostly 'in kind'. With the reduced circumstances of the parish farmers were often unable to pay church tithes. Little maintenance may have been done. Following the *Tithe Commutation Act*, church lands and dues in Dedham were re-assessed and, from 1841, paid in cash. With this fresh source of income Ellis commissioned, in 1844, an extension of the vicarage to the south-east [6], so as to enlarge what had been the dining room into a principal drawing room. The room already had a fine pair of curved doors; these were retained, but in a reoriented room. A bay window was added to give more light to a room in the north-east of the building. We do not know whether he was happy with the result; however three years later, in 1847, he accepted the living of the adjacent parish of Langham, which had a smaller population and church building but a far greater income [7].

As early as 1834 attempts had been made to unite the well-endowed lectureship with the meagre vicarage benefice. The late 19th-century saw a decline in the fortunes of the village. The Tuesday market ceased and the lectures which had once been one of the attractions of it, were heard by only very few. The office of lecturer became a sinecure for those who also held the office of headmaster of the Dedham Grammar. In 1872 the benefice was worth £170 a year, whereas the lectureship was worth £430 [8].



In 1906 Frederick Given Wilson was appointed vicar. By 1908 he had secured a charity scheme whereby, after the resignation of the then lecturer, the two incomes

should be combined. Although this did not happen until the resignation of the last 'sole lecturer' in 1918, (which was also when the old Lecture House which Burkitt had bought from his predecessor Mathew Newcomen was sold), in anticipation plans were drawn up by Ipswich architect Raymond Wrinch for another re-ordering of the vicarage. For the first time there would be a bathroom and lavatory in the house. In the process the number of bedrooms was reduced from eleven to nine (which was still more than the bachelor vicar Given-Wilson would have needed). He must have been content in the house, for he became the longest serving vicar of Dedham, retiring in 1950, after 44 years.

Many artists visit Dedham but few appear to consider the view of the vicarage Constable once sketched worthy of their time. An exception was Alwyn Crawshaw, who in his 1995 Channel 4 television series *Crawshaw Paints Constable Country*, recreated the view, commenting on the differences in the intervening 180 years. In 1997 local artist Terry Jeffrey also paid homage with his painting from the east gate of the church, showing the churchyard under snow [9].

In the past sixty years the vicarage has undergone two further refurbishments to make the house suitable for its purpose. Today it is a comfortable home with meeting rooms and a Parish Office that can be used without making unreasonable demands on the family which live in it. There is also a Guest Apartment which has served as a haven for people from all over the world, seeking the kind of inspiration that this special part of England can offer. Writing in celebration of England's finest parsonages in *Country Life* (4 June 2008), John Goodall observed that, 'In the right circumstances, even relatively modest buildings can look remarkable. A case in point is the vicarage at Dedham, Essex...'

This writer is grateful that, because of the stewardship of his predecessors and the generosity of his parishioners, this remarkable vicarage continues to serve its original purpose as a parsonage more than 750 years after it was first designated.

[1] *Conferences and Combination Lectures in the Elizabethan Church, 1582-1590*, ed. Patrick Collinson, John Craig, Brett Usher (Church of England Record Society, volume 10, 2003)

[2] 'Dedham: Church', *A History of the County of Essex: Volume 10: Lexden Hundred (Part) including Dedham, Earls Colne and Wivenhoe* (2001), pp. 179-183.

[3] *Ibid.*

[4] *Ibid*

[5] *Excursions in the County of Essex*, Thomas Kittson Cromwell (2 vols, published 1818-1819)

[6] The initials of Ellis and (it is presumed) his family are to be found inscribed into the bricks on the outside of the extension, together with the date 1844.

[7] This was one of many such anomalies until the revision of the method of clergy pay in 1968

[8] *Imperial Gazetteer of England and Wales*, John Marius Wilson, 1872

[9] He generously gave both the painting and the copyright to Dedham Parish Church

The Reverend Gerard Moate is Vicar of Dedham, Essex.

A NEW ANGLE ON SAVING THE PARSONAGE

Anthea Jones

The vicarage house of St George's Stockport is a well-built late Victorian house with a generous garden, forming one of a group of buildings: church, vicarage and school. They have their own access road, and the whole site is an attractive enclave between two main roads in Stockport. They were built by two local benefactors, Major George Fearn, J.P. and Wakefield Christie-Miller, at the end of the nineteenth century, to serve a new parish.

The background to the parish is interesting. Stockport was a growing industrial town. One of the new churches built to serve the population (70,000 in 1891) was St Thomas's, and in the 1875 the ancient parish of St Mary's, Stockport, was split to create a parish for St Thomas's. Here the incumbent was a High Churchman, which did not please all his parishioners. Four men met the Bishop of Chester in December 1890 to discuss forming another parish. They had a suitable site available, and also the necessary funds. The Bishop agreed, and on 27 March 1891 the patronage of St George's was vested in five trustees, the Bishop and four others.



St. George's Stockport – the vicarage house in happier days

Major George Fearn was a local brewer, and in 1886 had become a partner in Bell's Hemphaw Brook Brewery. His partners, the Bell family, were nonconformists, and perhaps for this reason he did not publicise his financing of the new church. When

Fearn died in 1911, by his will he created a charitable trust to assist in the maintenance of the church, the bells and the schools. The second benefactor, Christie-Miller, was a local hat manufacturer, although by the time that St George's was built he was living in London. He had developed a large area of housing in St Thomas's, and he provided the site for the St George's development.



The staircase at St. George's

Hubert Austin from the Lancaster firm of architects, Paley, Austin and Paley, designed the church, which is regarded as Austin's major work. It was described by the bishop as 'a cathedral on a small scale', and the other buildings were to be in keeping. The initial estimates of cost were £25-30,000 for the church, £5000 for the schools, and £2000 for the parsonage. As ever, the estimates proved to be underestimates. The infant school was built first, and was finished in 1893, the site for the new parsonage was agreed in 1896, and the church was consecrated in 1897. The

house, like the church, was not skimped.

What a sad sight it is now, boarded up, vandalised, and apparently being left to deteriorate so far that it cannot reasonably be restored. The diocese wished to sell the house some years ago to an owner thought willing and able to maintain it, but it seems that ownership was not entirely in its hands. The incumbent wished to sell the house, but since then there has not been an occupant. It cannot be to the advantage of the churchgoers to see the house declining, and with it one demonstration of nineteenth century religious spirit is being lost.

Historical information is drawn from S. Jones, *The Foundation of St George's Church, Stockport* (PCC St George's Church 1993).

Anthea Jones is the author of A Thousand Years of the English Parish, published by Windrush Press (2000).

A VIEW FROM MY PEW – THE INVISIBLE CHURCH

Angela Cook

June 2008 saw the publication of a report based on research by the Von Hugel Institution at Cambridge University into the Church's current contribution to national welfare provision. The researchers were greatly surprised by the amount of contribution made by church volunteers to every community across the land providing lunch clubs, care for the young, old and disabled, education and training, youth work and any other need perceived by communities.

Jesus Christ exhorted those who came to hear Him to clothe the naked, feed the hungry, care for the sick and visit those in prison. He did not mention the homeless but perhaps that was not such a problem in His time although shelter for the wayfarer certainly was an issue.

I wonder what He would say to us now about people forced to move away from the place where they were born or spent their working lives, leaving behind the elderly and vulnerable, with far less support than they need, because the price of housing is far too high.

Recent surveys (BBC Country File June 2008, and David S. Walker, Bishop of Dudley, "Private Property & Public Good" in "Changing Rural Life" ed. Martineau, L.J. Francis & P. Francis) highlight the perceived most important issue facing the countryside today, which is the lack of affordable housing.

Also Dr. Stuart Burgess, the Government's Rural Advocate and Chairman of the Commission for Rural Communities has handed the Prime Minister a report about releasing the potential of England's rural economies. The proposals within it include a Rural Finance Forum, the creation of a rural innovation initiative, the development of networking practices for business support programmes and a new compact between the Government, insurance and rural industries to improve response to shocks caused by weather and disease.

This sounds exciting until one realises that all those who would benefit from the employment opportunities and make in return a contribution to the community will have left the area because they do not have anywhere to live. It seems that a request for housing the people needed does not feature in a significant way.

The Von Hugel Institute report exposes a most important fact, namely that the contribution made by church volunteers is not picked up and shown in the state data system on charitable activities. There is no cohesion between that which the Church offers and what the state provides. The Church might make it its business to see what the state does not provide, but the state authorities are not, apparently, able to see what the Church does, and most of it goes unrecognized except by the clusters of people helped by the voluntary activities.

I believe this lack of awareness is not confined to the state authorities but is common among the general population and who can be surprised by this?

Very many churches are locked during the day. Many rural churches are served by visiting parsons on Sundays but not on every Sunday. With no parson in the parish the parsonages have been sold, adding to the detriment and decline of the village. Congregations are dwindling and increasingly made up of the elderly. The young have moved away for housing and employment. Where do people go for help? To Social Services, of course! The Church has become invisible, an irrelevance in peoples' lives.

A contribution to this problem of being invisible is the practice by the Church of raising money and then handing it to other agencies to further their work, notably in the fields of education and child care.

I believe that the Church has and still is missing a huge opportunity for witnessing to Christ in the field of housing. An in-depth look at all parsonages, both former and in use sold between September 1983 & December 1990 show 828 houses, many of which could have been used to provide homes in one way or another for those in need, either as apartments, divided into two or even offered for use by small businesses, with the attendant benefits to communities that they would bring. All the rents could be realistic but affordable, bringing a supply of income to Church funds. Instead, parsonages are sold to prop up diocesan finances, only just plugging the gap in overall expenditure. Now we learn that capital is being used for the third time to make good the Clergy Pension Fund. The Dispersal of the Vicarages and use of capital is tantamount to eating the seed corn. The various funds are maintained for now, but a void is being created at the base; at the roots of church life in rural areas with no young people to contribute financially, spiritually or with Christian action in their communities.

It is strongly argued that the Church needs the money from the sales now for clergy pensions and stipends as well as mission. It will be pointed out that there is no-one to administer such an undertaking and that other bodies can do this. Indeed paid workers will be needed, but is it beyond the organising ability of people within the Church to develop a scheme? Is the provision of proper business planning for such an activity really beyond the skills possessed by Anglicans? The New Testament urges us to use all the talents we have amongst us. An Act of Parliament ought be no problem.

The mission of the Church is the cure of souls and to spread the Gospel, but so much more is being done in outreach in God's name. The Von Hugel Institute report recommends that the Church establishes ways to develop an integrated place in social and community work. That would be for rural as well urban areas. The issue of affordable housing is crying out to be addressed. Sheffield Cathedral's new project for the homeless is perhaps the opening of the door for the Church. There have been other projects but they have had the added difficulty of finding buildings; ironic when the Church owns so many.

Such schemes run *directly* by the Church would do much to raise the profile of the Body of Christ on Earth. The Church has its buildings for worship, but it needs to leave the building, to be completely visible and accessible as somewhere for people to turn to, for whatever the need.

The re-establishment of a Christian presence in communities should help to revive congregations in church. The need for true worship and understanding of the Word is as paramount as ever, but so is a need for the collective and overt practices of the tenets of our faith. In rural areas very many people need affordable housing but the Church so far has not helped with this problem.

What would Jesus say? How would He challenge us about this? Maybe He would remind us that as lights we must not be hidden. As well as the church a lighted Christian house full of people all the time would be the equivalent of the light placed on the stand and hopefully would meet with His approval: Matthew 5 vv 15&16.

Angela Cook is an ex-committee member of SOP and a member of its Working Group.

CODE OF PRACTICE

Our Code of Practice for sale of parsonages is set out again below, together with the text of the letter with which it was sent to all 43 dioceses.

What we said was:

‘Dioceses have often made use of a vacancy in an incumbency in order to carry out their objective of selling the parsonage.

In taking these decisions to dispose of parsonages, little regard has been accorded to the heritage of the Church or its fine buildings. Indeed, some archdeacons and diocesan secretaries have even expressed hostility to the concepts of the conservation of, or even the community value of, traditional church houses.

No account has been taken of the fact that in many cases the parsonage was given by a benefactor, patron or previous incumbent expressly for the benefit of the parish in perpetuity. This sounds a harsh comment, but it is true on the evidence.

In some dioceses, regular routine maintenance and repairs are not being carried out. The reason given for failure to maintain has usually been that funds are insufficient because there are priorities elsewhere.

Because of those failures of maintenance, the Church has been unable to reap the proper reward in terms of the selling price of parsonages on disposal, or even of market income from lettings of parsonages during periods of vacancy. Indeed, our evidence suggests that in some dioceses there is no firm letting policy, and many have been left empty for long periods, wasting money.

More seriously still, our files show that these sales of parsonages have often been carried through in the teeth of opposition from churchwardens and PCCs, with little serious dialogue, and much resultant damage to the relationship between the diocesan authorities and the parish. Peshurst and Pinckbeck are just two of many recent examples.

Parishes often feel they have secured no financial or other material benefit from the proceeds of such sales, because those proceeds are usually taken away and placed in a central diocesan fund, worsening the blow to the parish, which by losing its parsonage has at the same time lost a valuable facility for local fundraising and community life.

There is a widespread perception at parish level (whatever the true position may be) that diocesan officials have little regard for their views. In any case, the parish perception is that the diocese has often already made the decision to sell, and thus the representations of the churchwardens, PCC, and other objectors will not be taken

seriously, or even, sometimes, referred to the Church Commissioners for review under the provisions of the relevant Measures, principally the Parsonages Measure 1938 and the Pastoral Measure 1983. There is also a widespread perception that the Church Commissioners are not a fully and transparently impartial review body, and this causes further discontent.

Our files suggest that there is a fund of talent, goodwill and local knowledge available to the Church through its vital workers at parish level, for which present policy has insufficient regard, so these skills are not being harnessed to proper advantage. Thus, the broad mission of the Church has suffered.

In many of these cases of parsonage sales, the local community at large, not just clergy and churchgoers, has felt the loss of a vital amenity for local events, fundraising and meetings, as well as pastoral care. This has led to loss of morale and the decline of the whole community, as well as churchgoers, with great loss to the mission of the Church.'

CODE OF PRACTICE FOR PARSONAGES

In this code of practice, Save Our Parsonages sets out the framework for a partnership between the bishop, the archdeacon, other diocesan officers, the parish priest, the PCC, the churchwardens, any parishioners who wish to be represented and where appropriate the patron of the living (all below called ‘the parties’), regarding the future of parsonages.

Within the framework of practice and the law, the parties agree that it is important that the Church is seen to represent natural justice as well as to abide by ecclesiastical law in all dealings with parsonages.

Accordingly, whenever and as soon as it is contemplated that the role of a parsonage is to be changed, or the parsonage is to be altered, modified or sold:

1. The diocese shall call a meeting, prior to any action being taken, which all of the parties shall be invited to attend, to be held on a stated date, subject to agreement on a revised date if necessary.

2. The meeting must consider:

(i) The house, its state of repair, its convenience and maintenance cost;

(ii) Pastoral gains or losses consequent on retention or disposal and/or replacement;

(iii) Economic losses as well as gains consequent on proposed disposal;

(iv) The historic and conservation value of the house and garden.

3. If disposal of the existing house is proposed by any party, retention or adaptation for alternative pastoral use must be considered first.

4. If there is disagreement on costings, the PCC and diocese must jointly obtain a second independent survey report, such report to have evidential value equal to any original survey.

5. Following the meeting, a report shall be prepared and agreed.

6. The parties must then seek to reach agreement on the appropriate course of action. An action plan must be drawn up and signed by the parties.

7. If the cost of maintaining the existing parsonage (or an identified potential liability) is agreed to be significantly higher than the diocesan average, it may be retained on condition that additional funds are found, to assist the diocese in maintenance. A local trust fund may be the solution.

8. Subject to 7 above, if unanimous agreement cannot be reached, the matter must be put to independent arbitration.

9. Arbitration procedure shall be as follows:

(i) A committee of the Church Commissioners or an agreed third party shall arbitrate.

(ii) The chair of the tribunal shall not have a vote in the decision making process.

(iii) The process will at all times be fair and transparent.

(iv) All parties must be given equal time to make their case.

(v) The diocese should put its case first.

(vi) All parties must have the right to make a final statement.

10. It is acknowledged that many parsonages were built or improved from local benefactions by patrons, incumbents or others, whose intent was that they should be held in perpetuity for the parish. It is further acknowledged that diocesan 'ownership' of parsonages derives from Measures, not from acquisition by the diocese for financial consideration at market value. If, therefore, it is agreed or adjudged that the parsonage is to be sold, the diocese shall, before placing any proceeds from the disposal in a diocesan account, consult with the PCC to determine whether there is a case for those proceeds to be 'ring fenced' for the benefit of the parish or benefice (for example, to be credited to a parish fund for maintenance and repair, and/or to compensate the parish for lost meeting facilities) and if so, they shall, to the extent necessary, be so 'ring fenced'.

