

DIVINE DIVINES
– some whimsical reflections on Church of England clergy
The Rev'd Peter Watkins



The Rev'd Peter Watkins is Vicar of St Matthew's, Ealing Common and has always had a fascination with the Church of England and its eccentrics. Educated at Charterhouse, Peter served in the Duke of Wellington's Regiment in Korea and subsequently read Theology at Oxford. A curacy in St James's Piccadilly was followed by an associate-ship at another St James's, in Birmingham, Michigan, USA. He is author of thirteen books including 'The Soul of Wit' about the oddities of the Church of England. He has also been a contributor to the Church Times and for five years wrote their annual Lenten reflections.

There have been countless Anglican divines whose interests were not confined to ecclesiastical affairs or concentrated within their parochial boundaries: scholars, professors, poets, satirists, mathematicians, scientists, naturalists, historians, comics, moralists, diarists, journalists, toastmasters, cricketers, sportsmen, gardeners, eccentric and more. In this paper Peter Watkins reflects whimsically on some of them:

In the Preface of Plum's *The Lie of Hacket* it was claimed that members of the Church of England have been slow to celebrate their own worthies. This was partly 'from the humility of their own principles and education' and partly because there was such a multitude of incomparable scholars to be commemorated that 'such labours would be almost infinite'. I have naturally been interested in the activities, antics and accomplishments of my fellow clergy, although the heyday of Anglican worthies has now surely gone. These accomplishments included both the course and the athletic. Some forty clergymen of the Church of England made a mark in the literature of English comedy, not least amongst them being Sydney Smith, who was described as the Wit of Wits in an Age of Wits.

In the world of science Armstrong's *The English Parson-Naturalist* is a tribute to a host of Anglican clerics, who had both intensely enquiring minds and the time to pursue their various interests in nature. Their curiosity and application has left Britain with the finest natural history in the world covering at least three centuries.

The Reverend William Buckland was a larger-than-life figure in the history of science. He was appointed Reader in Mineralogy at Oxford in 1813, and a little later to the Chair of Geology. He was president of the Geological Society in 1824 and 1840. He became a canon of Christ Church, Oxford in 1825, and, between 1845 and 1856, he was Dean of Westminster Abbey. *The Life and Correspondence of William Buckland* by his daughter, Mrs Gordon was published in 1894. His eccentricity was too much for Charles Darwin who thought that he was driven 'more by a craving for notoriety, which sometimes made him behave like a buffoon, than by a love of science'. He claimed to have eaten his way through the animal kingdom.

Patrick Armstrong wrote:

Crocodile was from time to time served to visitors, so too were mice, cooked in butter. He claimed that the most disagreeable creature he ever ate was mole, the next bluebottle. He is alleged to have one eaten the heart of a French king, shown to him as a curio in a country house.

The witty Richard Whately, historian, political economist, philosopher, and Archbishop of Dublin, composed his *Anticipatory Dirge on Processor Buckland, The Geologist*.

Mourne, Ammonites, mourn o'er his funeral urn,
Whose neck we must grace no more;
Gneiss, granite, and slate – he settled your date,
And his ye must now deplore.

Weep, caverns, weep, with infiltrating drip,
Your recesses he'll cease to explore;
For mineral veins or organic remains,
No stratum again will he bore.

His wit shone like crystal – his knowledge profound
From gravel t granite descended;
No trap could deceive him, no slip confound,
No specimen, true or pretended.

Where shall we our great professor inter,
That in peace may rest his bones?
If we hew him a rocky sepulchre,
He'll get up and break the stones,
And examine each stratum that lies around,
For he's quite in his element underground.

If with mattock and spade his body we lay
In the common alluvial soil;
He'll start up and snatch those tools away
Of his own geological toil;
In a stratum so young the professor disdains
That embedded should be his organic remains.

Then exposed to the drip of some case-hardening
Spring,
His carcass let stalactite cover;
And to Oxford the petrified sage let s bring,
When duly encrusted all over;
There, 'mid mammoths and crocodiles, high on the shelf,
Let him stand as monument raised to himself.

An excellent general history of the clergy is *The Anglican Parochial Clergy – its Celebration* by Michael Hinton. *A Field guide to the English Country Parson* by Thomas Hinde covers that fascinating subject finely and concisely. *The Flesh is Weak* is an intimate history of the Church of England and a delight for those with some appetite for ecclesiastical tittle-tattle, scandal and eccentricity. 'Eccentricity', thought

John Stuart Mill, 'has always abounded when and where strength of character has abounded, and the amount of eccentricity in a society has generally been proportioned to the amount of genius, mental vigour, and moral courage which it contained'. For me Jonathan Swift and Samuel Johnson wonderfully exemplify this. Contemporary 'political correctness' is a disease in relation to eccentricity. Any loss of it is grievous. A. Tindal Hart wrote in *The Country Priest in English History* published by Phoenix House in 1959:

The fact that Hawker kept nine or ten cats which followed him to church and careered around it during service time; that Francis Pickford, the aged rector of Hagworthingham, tamed squirrels during the eighteen-eighties; that Edward Long of White Roothing was fond of kissing little girls; and that Samuel Parr used to smoke his pipe in the vestry and sometimes during intervals in the service itself, would as like as not, be the kind of traits to endear rather than repel.

Not all of the numerous tales of clerical eccentricity are happy and endearing. Such clerics tended to flourish in remote rural regions, West and East, in Cornwall and Norfolk. Social and intellectual isolation no doubt sometimes drove them from a benign or even holy madness over the edge into a debilitating insanity. Some stories seem to hover between the sad and the amusing. The case of the Reverend Morgan Jones of Blewby, near Didcot in Oxfordshire, who was there between 1781 and 1824, is an example. He was a notorious miser. He wore the same coat for forty-three years and repaired his clothes with rags taken from scarecrows. He wrote his sermons on scraps of paper, from sandpaper to old banns certificates. He cadged his meals wherever he could and left a small fortune. Another example is the Reverend Joan Mawer of the parish of Middleton Tyas in Yorkshire. Listening to his sermons required much patience. He taught himself twenty-two languages. He was fascinated by language and derivations. His fascination knew no bounds of decency when it came to sermon length. He loved words more than people and was repaid as he preached to a disappearing congregation.

Not at all entertaining is the life of Frederick William Densham, who lived between 1869 and 1953. In 1931 he became the Rector of Wardeggan, a remote hamlet on Bodmin Moor. He lived as a hermit and died alone. The scandal of the tale is that this deeply disturbed man was left undisturbed by his episcopal pastor, the Bishop of Truro. He never visited his parishioners. He discouraged them from visiting him by erecting an eight-foot barbed wire fence around his rectory. As a further

deterrence, inside the fence he kept between half a dozen and a dozen wolfhounds and Alsatian dogs. When Daphne du Maurier visited him with a friend the dogs sprang snarling upon the fence and they fled in terror.

The sister of another eccentric Cornish cleric had to secure her absent-minded brother to the altar rail with a dog chain and a padlock to prevent him wandering off before the service was over.

However, there are many delightful anecdotes and charming oddities from rural parish life. I was pleased to discover that Octavius Pichard-Cambridge, the celebrated anachronist and Rector of Bloxworth near Poole from 1867 to 1917, taught all his sons not only to look out for spiders but also to be competent cricketers. As time went on, the whole village of Bloxworth was drawn into the game and produced a fine team. Amongst the several curiosities of his life was the fact that behind his rectory stood an abandoned malt house with two vats. Each Sunday evening he filled them up with hot water so that the boys and girls of his Sunday School could have a hot bath.

The clergy have, directly or indirectly, enriched anecdotal history in a variety of ways. I like the story of a nineteenth century Duchess of Monrose, who owned both racehorses and advowsons (the right of presentation to a vacant benefice). She was believed to have threatened the then vicar of the Church of St Agnes in Newmarket with dismissal because at one harvest-time he had prayed publicly for dry weather. A horse of hers, which was due to run on the town course, preferred heavy going.

Another intriguing oddity relates to conjuring parsons. John Seldon, who lived between 1584 and 1654, made this curious entry in his *Table Talk*:

‘There never was a merry World since the Fairies left Dancing, and the Parson left Conjuring. The Opinion of the latter kept Thieves in awe, and did as much good in a Country as a Justice of Peace.’

Jon Aubrey, in *Brief Lives* made two curious notes about conjuring and parsons:

‘My old cousin, parson Whitney, told me that in the Visitation of Oxford in Edward VI’s time they burned mathematical books for conjuring books, and if the Greek professor had not accidentally

come along, the Greek testament had been thrown in the fire for a conjuring book, too!’

John Aubrey wrote of the celebrated Dr. John Dee, who had livings at Upton upon Severn and Long Leadenham for many years:

‘He had a very fair clear sanguine complexion, a long beard as white as milke...He was a great peacemaker; if any of the neighbours fell out, he would never lett them alone till he had made them friends...The children dreaded him because he was accounted a conjuror.’

The book-burners in Edward VI’s time were clearly seeking to destroy any sign of witchcraft or esoteric and magical formulae. They were as crass as all book-burners: they destroyed what they could not understand, and what they could not understand included mathematics and Greek.

To conjure could mean to affect by invocation or incantation, to charm or to bewitch. There were those who were thought to be able to conjure up the devil. Seldon’s conjuring parsons were capable of striking terror in the hearts of criminals. Their spells and curses had force in the superstitious imaginations of those ancient rogues. As a method of controlling criminality it had a great advantage over our modern police force: it was much cheaper.

Seldon was as sad to see such conjuring go as he was to find that the fairies had ceased to dance, but he may have been heartened to read, as I did in 1999, about the merriment created by a conjuring parson. A curate called Mark Townsend had delighted a hundred nuns with his conjuring ricks at Bournemouth. The days of conjuring parsons are not gone. In that year I discovered that amongst the fourteen hundred members of the Magic Circle about a dozen were clergymen.

Thomas Hinde in his beautifully illustrated collection of thumbnail sketches of over a hundred and fifteen parsons touched on the great variety of their enthusiasms. In his *A Field Guide to the English Country Parson*, published by Heinemann in 1983, he referred to the parson in the third person:

...he becomes a world authority on spiders; he invents a theory of history which makes the Druids a tribe of Phoenician pre-Christian Christians; he plants 5,000 rose-bushes in his garden and the surrounding countryside; he runs his own foxhound pack; makes

his rectory into a monastery and turns Roman Catholic; collects folk-songs; breeds winning race-horses or green mice; rides from Land's End to John O'Groats... There seems to be no limit to the variety of his interests or to the obsessiveness with which he pursues them.

Many had a great interest in medicine. They include the great herbalist William Turner. Another celebrated cleric and physician was Dr John Chambers, who lived between 1470 and 1549. He was a physician to King Henry VIII and one of the founders of the Royal College of Physicians in 1518. Thomas Secker, who was the Archbishop of Canterbury between 1758 and 1768, studied medicine as a young man and retained a lively interest in it throughout his life.

Rural clergy, when the only educated persons in their parishes, often used such knowledge as they had to help the sick. Such a parson was Sydney Smith, first at Foston-le-Clay in Yorkshire and then at Combe Forey, who regarded the roles of village doctor and village comforter as two of his essential parish duties. He made herbal medicines for his parishioners. At the age of seventy-four he said of himself: 'I dine with the rich in London, and physic the poor in the country passing from the saucers of Dives to the sores of Lazarus'.

The Reverend Francis Willis ran a fashionable asylum for the deranged in Lincolnshire with such success that he was called up to London to treat King George III during his first mental breakdown. He travelled to Kew Palace, where, with three strong men to assist him, he put his monarch in a straight-jacket. The Whig press attacked his abilities and credentials. His royal patient, during a lucid moment, upbraided him for forsaking the Church to practice medicine. He defended him: 'Our Saviour himself went about healing the sick'. George answered: 'Yes yes, but he had not seven hundred pounds a year for it.' At that point the royal mind was to the point.

Ronald Blythe wrote that he longed to sing of gentry-clergy past and present, known and unknown. 'Parsons like the poet-doctor-priest George Crable, who, calling at the Big House and hearing cries of labour, walked upstairs and delivered a fine boy'.

Ass above in the reign of Edward VI, John Aubrey recorded the burning of mathematical books 'for conjuring books'. He was, as ever, marvellous in his observations of certain mathematical divines. William Oughtred, who lived between 1574 and 1660, was Rector at Albury in

Suffolk for fifty years. Many imminent mathematicians and scholars went to him to benefit from his tuition and from access to his unparalleled library. He had been ordained in 1602, and in 1606 he married Christgift Caryll (one of the old Puritan Christians names). They had thirteen children. He died on 13th June 1660, expiring with joy, according to Aubrey, on hearing of the Restoration of the Monarchy. He attained a unique status as a figurehead for English mathematicians. His attainments as a preacher were not so splendid. Aubrey wrote: ‘I have heard his neighbour ministers say that he was a pitiful preacher; the reason was because he never studied it but bent all his thoughts on mathematiques’.

Edmund Gunter, who lived between 1581 and 1626, was educated at Westminster and Christ Church Oxford. He took Holy Orders in 1615. Aubrey claimed that he was responsible for making young men fall in love with mathematics ‘before, the Mathematical Sciences ere lock’t-up in the Greeke and Latin tongues; and so lay untoucht, kept safe in some libraries.’ But he, like Oughred, sacrificed homiletics to mathematics. Aubrey commented on one of his sermons:

“When I was a student at Christchurch, it fell to his lot to preach the Passion Sermon, which some old divines that I knew did heare, but ‘twas sayd of him then in the University that our Saviour never suffered to much since his Passion as in that sermon, it was such a lamentable one – Non omnia possumus omnes – all things are not possible to all men. The world is much beholding to him for what he hath donne well.”

Nevil Maskelyne, George Pretymann and William Whiston were other notable divines, but the most celebrated was the Reverend Charles Lutwidge Dodgson, his worldwide fame resting on his pen name Lewis Carroll.

It has been claimed that two books of universal renown have come out of Christ Church, Oxford, Dodgson’s college: John Locke’s *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* and his own *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*. The one is seemingly about sense; the other is about nonsense. He created his pseudonym because he thought that his bizarre verses and inspired nonsense would harm his reputation as a mathematician.

He spent forty-seven years of his life in the comparative obscurity of Christ Church, as a diffident mathematics scholar. He was ordained deacon in 1861, but his intense shyness and stammer prevented him from becoming a priest and preacher.

From Tuckwell's great book on Oxford –Tuckwell knew what and whom he was talking about.

‘Of course, he was one of the sights of Oxford; strangers, lady strangers especially, begged their lionising friends to point out Mr. Dodgson, and were disappointed when they saw the homely figure and the grave, repellent face. Except to little girls, he was not an alluring personage...’

‘A man in intellectual range, severe self-knowledge, venturesome imagination, he remained a child in frankness, innocence, simplicity; his pedantry cloaking a responsiveness which shrank from coarser more conventional, adult contact, yet vibrated to the spiritual kinship of little ones, still radiant with the visionary light which most of us lose all too soon, but which shone on him through life’

It is noteworthy that whereas lovely old rectories, vicarages and parsonages now end merely to be residences of the plutocracy many of whom were once intellectual and literary hotbeds. From them came the immense and brilliant output of the offspring of three families: the Bronte, the Benson and the Knox. Is there any parallel in the world's literary history. Such were the childhood homes of Thomas Hobbes, John Dryden, Olive Goldsmith, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Jane Austen, Matthew Arnold, Charles Kingsley, Alfred Tennyson, Samuel Butler, Ralph Inge, Louis MacNeice and more.

Anglican bishops and archbishops, intentionally or unintentionally, have afforded much amusement. Several Archbishops of York were rum characters. In York Minister their effigies, self-satisfied, plump and over-indulged, as if too inebriated with wine and too satiated with cakes, to stir from their couches. One was beheaded for treason; another had such an aversion to women that he would not allow female servants at Bishopsthorpe; another, with no such aversion, was discovered at an inn in Doncaster in bed with the innkeeper's wife; yet another was reputed to have been a pirate before his election to the episcopacy. In 1749 Thomas Hayter, Archbishop Lancelot Blackbourne's illegitimate son, was consecrated Bishop of Norwich.

Herbert Hensley Henson, an able Bishop of Durham, wrote an outstanding autobiography in three volumes entitled *Retrospect of an Unimportant Life*. An excellent biography was written for James Covert about an amusing and erudite Bishop of London and his talented and remarkable wife; Mandell and Louise Creighton in *A Victorian Marriage*. George Lyttleton once remarked that he agreed with Creighton who assured an anxious seeker after truth that it is ‘almost impossible to exaggerate the complete unimportance of everything’. Some modern Archbishops of Canterbury have attracted remarkably accomplished biographers: there was Bell on Randolph Davidson; Lockhart on Lang; Iremonger on William Temple; Carpenter on Geoffrey Fisher; Owen Chadwick on Michael Ramsey; and Hastings on Robert Runcie. All these, in my view, are superior to the biographies of contemporary politicians.

I love the lines from Izaak Walton which Owen Chadwick considers spoke the truth about Michael Ramsey:

Of this blest man, let this just praise be given,
Heaven was in him, before he was in heaven.

He was a divine Divine indeed – full of endearing eccentricities. He wanted his remains to be near those of William Temple. His memorial stone is this in the cloister of Canterbury Cathedral. The perfect quotation, Chadwick thought, was chosen for the end of the inscription. It was from the Greek Father of the second century St Irenaeus; ‘The Glory of God, is the living man; and the life of man is the Vision of God.’ Chadwick considered that Michael Ramsey felt all injustices at home and abroad keenly and also he felt the burden of the Churches. ‘But’, Chadwick wrote, threw it all in faith onto his Redeemer who he saw as a saviour from the world’s suffering, and was deep down light in heart; and this lightness kept bubbling up among his friends in laughter and affection and charm and conversation.

A.N. Wilson in *The Victorians* stated that it was difficult for him to conceive a more agreeable way of life than that of a Victorian country parson. His ideal span of life would have been to be born in the 1830s. He wrote:

... After a short spell – say, five years – teaching undergraduates at the Varsity, one of them would introduce me to his pretty, bookish sister, and we should be married. I should resign my fellowship and

be presented with a college living, preferably a medieval Church, a large draughty Georgian rectory and glebe enough to provide the family with 'subsistence'. By now it would be, let us say, the 1860s and I should remain here for the next forty years, a faithful friend to generations of villagers to whom I would act as teacher, amateur doctor and social worker, as well as priest...

He added that his fantasy-life as a Victorian parson can be lived out when he opens up the diaries of Francis Kilvert. He acknowledged that his dream of being a country parson during the middle to closing years of the nineteenth century was not a pure idyll. There was much desperate poverty in rural England.

Thus ends a whimsy whilst we await the next generation and their gifted oddities.