



## NOTORIOUS VICARS OF ST MILDRED'S CHURCH, TENTERDEN

Hugo Norman is shown as being the first Rector of the parish as from 1180 and carried on for the next 60 years. If the records are correct, he is by far the longest serving incumbent of all time. In 1240, he resigned and the position was filled temporarily by Richard of Canterbury, at Norman's suggestion. This situation lasted for some 10 years when the position became vacant again. Peter de Depenham, approved by the Abbott of St Augustine's, Canterbury, was appointed but died shortly after in 1252. Pope Innocent then directed that the King's nominee, Henry de Wingham, be appointed; but the local parishioners, egged on allegedly by the Abbott, arranged for an armed band to '*disturb his possession of the Parish*'. An affray took place in St Mildred's Churchyard during which Henry of Smallhythe was killed. The churchyard at the time would have been completely open, the line of '*shops*' not having been erected until 25 years later. King Henry III arranged for the relevant Justices to pardon all concerned and Wingham stayed on until he was made Bishop of London.

All went well until 1346 when William Mogge was appointed Rector of the parish in the King's patronage. However, 10 days later, he was replaced by John Everying, previously Rector of Trottscliffe, there again reportedly '*in the King's gift*'. But there seems some doubt as to whether it was at the recommendation of the Abbott of St Augustine's. What is certain is that all future appointments were nominees of the Abbott almost until the Reformation in 1553, when the holder of that position was removed.

The final appointee of the Abbott was William Broke in 1512 who served until 1539. However, all the '*in-fighting*' which affected English court life in the 16th Century was reflected in the ways of the Church, and in 1522, it was directed that two Aldermen of the City of London should in future present any nominees. But this lasted only a few years until Thomas Cromwell, King Henry VIII's Chief Minister, appointed Commissioners to oversee the running of religious institutions. In the place of the two City Aldermen, he appointed Richard Layton, '*a cleric of salacious tastes*', as Commissioner – unfortunately there are no details of how he came to earn that reputation!! Layton put forward Peter Baker as Broke's successor in 1539, the former soon getting into trouble for '*acting in the old faith*'. Baker died in 1545 and was replaced by Richard Thorneden, a Layton nominee and a '*time-serving turncoat*'. Thorneden, because of his other activities in the diocese, was seldom in Tenterden, the parish being run by the curate Richard Bostocke. The latter was later taken to task for preaching '*a marvellous abominable and seditious sermon*' at Easter 1546 (presumably against the views of the new Church of England!) and was sentenced to 2 months in the Marshalsea Prison, before being restored to his original position on presentation of a bond for £100. Thorneden changed his allegiance when Queen Mary began her reign in 1553, eventually laying information against John Frankesh, Vicar of Rolvenden, which resulted in the latter being burnt at the stake at Canterbury in 1556, having spent the night with other martyrs in the now-defunct north porch of St Mildred's.

When Mary died in 1558, Elizabeth I became Queen, and although martyrdom occurred (this time of Catholic sympathisers), there is no record of Tenterden Vicars being affected. However in 1571 George Eley was made Vicar of Tenterden and had troubles of another kind:

- his involvement with Nathaniel Tilden over taking Communion
- presented by his own Churchwardens for neglect of the church and churchyard
- his quarrel with Dame Martha Whitfield over the use of the North Chancel door

The next incumbent to merit attention was John Gee, Vicar 1633-1639. When 4 families intended to emigrate to New England in 1635, Gee had to certify that all were sound members of the Church of England, although they were all, and in particular Nathaniel Tilden, non-conformist in attitude, becoming in their new land members of churches with Puritan leanings.

When John Gee died in 1639, he was succeeded by Humphrey Peake, perhaps the notorious of all the Vicars. He was already Rector of Kingsnorth and Acrise, and had no intention of taking up the post at Tenterden. His

income was estimated to be £500 per year (Vicar of Bray passing rich on £40!!) but failed to provide a curate in his place permanently or allowing the parish to pay for a preacher. His other faults were:

- at Easter 1640, refusing the sacrament to some parishioners who would not pay one shilling as offerings; and then reporting them to Canterbury for not taking communion
- charging one shilling for the ringing of the great bell at funerals – unheard of previously
- charging two shillings and sometimes four shillings for a marriage instead of the usual one shilling and sixpence
- charging ten shillings for a curate to preach at a burial

A petition from the parishioners was referred to the Houses of Parliament, the result of which was '*Mr Barry to be the parishioners' Lecturer to preach every Sunday at Tenterden, and also Fridays*', and that Peake should '*permit Mr Barry the use of the pulpit without let or hindrance*'. After a time, Peake ignored the orders of Parliament and was summoned to the Bar of the House to be reprimanded. No further adverse criticism was recorded against him before his death in 1649.

He was replaced by the said Nathaniel Barry who soon became involved in a dispute with the Cromwell government over the collection of tithes. In addition, it was somehow proved that he had not been appointed in the required manner. [NB During the Commonwealth, no bishops were recognised and therefore Canterbury had been ignored.] In 1654, he was moved to the post of preacher at St Mary's, Dover, and George Hawe put in his place by the Lord Protector himself. Apart from also being involved in the non-collection of tithes, Hawe appears to have performed well for his Puritan masters, until the Restoration of the Monarchy in 1662. He, along with 80 other ministers in Kent, refused to assent to the Act of Uniformity, which required acceptance of the new Book of Common Prayer, renunciation of the Solemn League and Covenant, and acknowledgement that taking up arms against the King was unlawful. Hawe was removed, to be replaced by Nathaniel Collington, the former then starting with the help of some 300 Presbyterians, the church which as from 1746 used the Old Meeting House in the Ashford Road, and is now called the Unitarian Church.

There followed a succession of Vicars who were academically qualified and were suitable for the placid days of the 18th Century. Great work was done to help the poor of the parish, which was church-led, and things were fine after the previous centuries of the Reformation and the Civil War. But then came two changes

- the appointment of Philip Ward as Vicar in 1830
- the Victorian attitude to the poor which led to the building of workhouses

Philip Ward came to Tenterden with a wife and 5 children, and the couple soon increased their family by another 5. His wife was of course Horatia Nelson, the daughter of Lord Nelson.

Philip had immediately maintained that the existing vicarage was in a poor state of repair and was not suitable for his large family, the Wards living in The Pebbles for 2 years. Horatia is recorded as soon settling down to her new life as a Vicar's wife, and both gained a good reputation for helping the poor. Philip himself, within a few years of becoming the incumbent, became embroiled in a 10-year litigation about payment of tithe money. His claim for an increased yield was eventually agreed and he went from £200pa to £450pa.

Philip Ward was succeeded by the Rev Mereweather whose only claim to fame was the complete refurbishment of St Mildred's. The main work included the installation of pews in what had previously been a vast empty space. Ward had estimated that in his days the church held '1000 souls', but the pews must have reduced this number by at least half. The remainder of the period from then until the present time has seen a further 10 Vicars. David Trustram told me that he was the 57th and there had been 10 Rectors up to the 14th Century. Out of all this number, 3 had become Bishops, 1 the Dean of Canterbury and 3 Chaplains to the Monarch.

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