

Bishop Brownlow North and the 1810 Diocesan Visitation

When a bishop has held his office for nearly thirty years one would expect him to have a detailed knowledge of the parishes and clergy of his diocese. So, Bishop Brownlow North's choleric reaction in 1810 to a request from the Archbishop of Canterbury to provide information about his diocese might be surprising. On Sept 2nd that year, he wrote to his Steward, Mr J. H. Gell, "Sir, a more imperious order than I have received before hath prepared a great deal more trouble and some dispatch".¹ He went on to explain that the Archbishop of Canterbury had sent him (and all other bishops in England and Wales) two orders of Parliament requiring him to provide information about aspects of his parishes. The first required information about the residency of the incumbent and the status and salary of any curates, and the second on the ability of a parish church to accommodate all its parishioners, and on the activities of nonconformists in the parish.

To understand Bishop North's concerns, we need to look at how the Church of England and, specifically, the diocese of Winchester, was managed. At the parish level the incumbent (the parish priest) was not chosen by the church hierarchy but presented by the holder of the advowson to the bishop. The advowson might be held by an individual (usually a landowner) or an organisation, such as an Oxford college. Surprisingly to modern eyes, advowsons could be bought and sold. Under canon law you could not buy one for yourself, but if you bought one it could be used to present a relative.²



Bishop Brownlow North in the gown of the Prelate of the Order of the Garter, 1818 (Henry Howard)

Once in place the incumbent was supposed to be resident in a designated house and conduct two services each Sunday (the Duty of the Parish). Communion was not frequent – the obligation to take communion three times a year (one of which was Easter) was regarded as a

¹ Letter from Brownlow North to J.H. Gell, HRO 21M65/E7/1/317/1

² Simony Act 1588 ([31 Eliz. 1](#). c. 6).

standard. The incumbent might appoint a curate, theoretically as a sort of clerical apprentice, who should be licensed by the bishop.

If an incumbent held another living, then he clearly could not be resident in both. Any non-residence needed to be authorised by the bishop and, in turn, he was required to make an annual return of diocesan non-residence. The reasons for residence were set out by Thomas Secker (later Archbishop of Canterbury) when Bishop of Oxford, in his charge to clergy in 1745. He said that parishioners have the right to expect that their minister would be:

... always at hand, to order the disorderly and countenance the well behaved, to advise and comfort the diseased and afflicted, to relieve or procure relief for the necessitous, to compose little differences, and discourage wrong customs in the beginning, to promote friendly offices, and to keep up an edifying and entertaining conversation in the neighbourhood.³

Jane Austen has Sir Thomas Bertram echo this in *Mansfield Park*, published in 1814:

... a parish has wants and claims which can be known only by a clergyman constantly resident, and which no proxy can be capable of satisfying to the same extent. Edmund might, in the common phrase, do the duty of Thornton, that is, he might read prayers and preach, without giving up Mansfield Park: he might ride over every Sunday, to a house nominally inhabited, and go through divine service; he might be the clergyman of Thornton Lacey every seventh day, for three or four hours, if that would content him. But it will not. He knows that human nature needs more lessons than a weekly sermon can convey; and that if he does not live among his parishioners, and prove himself, by constant attention, their well-wisher and friend, he does very little either for their good or his own.⁴

As the parliamentary requests indicated there was growing concern that parishes were not being served by their incumbents. In many cases, but not all, the absent incumbent appointed a curate, but even when a curate was in place there were concerns over the income that the curate received. Without going into details of great and little tithes, rectors and vicars, glebe lands and surplice fees, many parishes provided their incumbent with an income of a few hundred pounds. An absentee would typically pay his curate a few tens of pounds.⁵

Parliament's concerns were that the work of the church was being undertaken, not by the relatively well-paid incumbent clergy but by an army of underpaid curates. The second

³ Secker, William, *Eight charges delivered to the clergy of the dioceses of Oxford and Canterbury*, London, 1790.

Available at: <https://archive.org/details/eightchargesdeli00seck/page/n5/mode/2up>

⁴ Jane Austen, *Mansfield Park*, London: Penguin (1814/1983), p. 255.

⁵ Author's analysis of data in Mark Smith (ed.), *Doing the Duty of the Parish: Surveys of the Church in Hampshire 1810*, Winchester: Hampshire County Council, 2004.

concern was that population growth, especially in the growing industrial cities, meant that it might be physically impossible for the parishioners to fulfil their legal obligation to attend church every Sunday.

Thus, eighteenth century bishops monitored their dioceses in two ways. The first, and probably the most important, was the visitation. Originally a physical visit to the parishes by the bishop every three years, by the early part of the century bishops began using a printed set of questions for their primary visitation and thereafter relied on the deanery visitations. A second tool was the *speculum*, a register of parishes and priests maintained by the bishop.

For Winchester there are three sets of previous century visitation returns: from 1725, from 1765 and 1788. The 1725 questions, for Bishop Richard Willis, are mainly rather broad and



Sir Francis Chantrey's statue of Bishop North (1822). Now in the South Presbytery Aisle. (Simon Newman)

cover such things as the size of the parish, the presence of non-conformist and Papist (Roman Catholic) groups, schools, charities and local people of note. In 1765 Bishop John Thomas included questions about the frequency of services, both Sunday and communion, the state of the church building, the church yard, rectory and other buildings, the parish documentation and the behaviour of the churchwardens, clerk, sexton etc. It also asked whether the incumbent was resident. This gave him a much more detailed picture of how well the church was fulfilling its role of caring for the spiritual health of its flock. Twenty years later, when Bishop North carried out his primary visitation, instead of creating his own questions he merely reused the sixty-year-old form of

questions used by Bishop Willis, and so had no information on residency.

In 1788 North conducted his primary visitation after being in post for seven years. (As opposed to two years for Willis and four for Thomas.) Winchester was his third bishopric, after being consecrated as Bishop of Lichfield in 1771, aged only 30. As is reported by Tom Kipling in his *Winchester Cathedral Record* biographical article on North:

To the comment that he was young to be a bishop, [Prime Minister] Lord North replied, 'No doubt my brother is young to be a bishop but when he is older, he will no longer have a brother for Prime Minister'.⁶

⁶ R.B. Martin, *Enter Rumour. Four Early Victorian Scandals*, London: Faber & Faber, 1962, p. 141.

The same argument might have been used three years later when the Bishop of Worcester fell from his horse in Bath, and North was again nominated by his half-brother, Lord North. And then again, he was looked after when Winchester, then the richest see in England, became vacant.

In 1790, less than two years after the visitation, North was seriously ill. In June 1791, when he was recovering, he set out with his wife, seven children and several servants in three coaches for Italy, arriving home in October 1795.⁷ For the rest of his life, he split his time between Winchester House, Chelsea and Farnham Castle, where he indulged in his love of botany. His activity in this area was so well thought of that he was elected, in 1800, as an Honorary Member of the Linnean Society (one of only four).⁸

Mr Gell, the Bishop's Steward, responded to North's request by circulating a printed questionnaire. There were two main sets of questions, the first about curates and their remuneration and the second about the population of the parish and the capacity of the church. What is interesting are two questions at the end, almost like a postscript. The first asks for the proper address of the incumbent and the second asks that, if the reply has been completed by a curate, where the incumbent lives and if he has exemption for non-residence. One might argue that the first question could just be a check that Mr Gell had the correct address, but the second is a clear admission that Mr Gell's, and thus the bishop's, knowledge of the diocese was less than complete. [The returns for the Hampshire half of the diocese are in *Doing the Duties of the Parish: Surveys of the Church in Hampshire 1810*, which was published in 2004 in the Hampshire Record Series]. There were 225 replies, but a few missing parishes. Bishopstoke, and Farnborough are just missing. Boarhunt was a donative over which the bishop had no authority. Winchester St Faith, which was annexed to the Hospital of St Cross and used the chapel of the Hospital for worship, also is not present. This may be deliberate as the Master of St Cross was North's son Francis, later to be 6th Earl of Guilford, and the exact responsibility for the cure of souls of St Faith was a significant element in the mid-nineteenth century dispute, often thought to be the inspiration for Anthony Trollope's novel, *The Warden*.

⁷ Tom Kipling, "Brownlow North, Bishop of Winchester", *Winchester Cathedral Record*, Vol. 65, 1996, pp. 37-38.

⁸ Kipling, *op. cit.*, p. 39.

Of the 225 replies 96 incumbents - over 40% of the parishes - were reported as non-resident. The reasons put forward are manifold. Some of these were holding other offices, including being Principal of St Edmunds Hall Oxford (who held two Hampshire livings), a chaplain to the King, the Regius Professor of Divinity at Oxford, the Headmasters of Winchester College and of Westminster School, Dean of Exeter Cathedral, and several canons of Winchester Cathedral. Other absences were more mundane, usually holding another living in the diocese or elsewhere. In one case the incumbent was only technically non-resident: as the rectory was too small they rented a larger house in the parish. One incumbent was "... from mental decay, incapable of attending to business." One curate reported that "... [the] incumbent resides in Guernsey, where he has a school." Given that many of those claiming residency had also held other positions (only around half the parishes were held by non-pluralists) it is probable that their residency was notional. They certainly could not be, in the words of Bishop Secker "... always at hand". In their absence they appointed curates to carry out the work of the church. Some were incumbents of nearby parishes, but the majority were not. A curate should be licensed by the bishop, but of the 129 parishes who answered whether the curate was licensed, only 50 were. Many of the remaining parishes also reported a curate, but did not answer the question.⁹

The survey also asked who the patrons were. The Bishop of Winchester held the advowson of 25 livings in Hampshire (runners up being the Crown and the Queen's College, Oxford with 11 each) and more in the Surrey half of the diocese and elsewhere. Just as Bishop North benefited from family support for his appointments, so he passed the benefits on. "At least 26 individuals received about 70 appointments to 50 churches between 1785 and 1820".¹⁰ Many of these were direct or indirect family members. There is a story, possibly apocryphal, that North was asked if he could find a place for a member of the supplicant's family. North is reported to have replied "Good God, I have enough difficulty finding places for my own family".

Although the instructions for the Visitation survey came from the Archbishop of Canterbury, he was acting on behalf of Parliament. There are no records of how either the Church or Parliament responded to the Winchester survey results. It is always tempting to judge

⁹ Mark Smith (ed.), *Doing the Duty of the Parish: Surveys of the Church in Hampshire 1810*, Winchester: Hampshire County Council, 2004.

¹⁰ Kipling, *Brownlow North*, p. 40.

historical figures by the standards of today, but from this analysis even by the standards of the early nineteenth century, the Diocese of Winchester was failing its flock, and the blame for it must be laid at the feet of the chief shepherd, Bishop Brownlow North.

DICK SELWOOD

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Bishop Brownlow North's monument by Chantrey

Sir Francis Chantrey was commissioned to execute the monument to Bishop Brownlow North (1741-1820), a work which was completed and installed by September 1822. This very fine high relief in marble represents the bishop in profile, kneeling in prayer. Bishop North died on 12 July 1820, and his monument was ordered from Chantrey by the Reverend William Garnier, husband of the bishop's daughter Lady Harriet, at a cost of £1,036 19s. 0d (c. £60,000 now).¹¹ It was initially placed on the north side of the Lady Chapel altar, moved to the east end of Bishop William Waynflete's chantry chapel, and finally to its present position in 1961.¹²

TOM WATSON

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¹¹ Alison Yarrington, "Chantrey's monument to Frederick Iremonger", *Winchester Cathedral Record*, Vol. 62, 1993, p. 40.

¹² Kipling, *Brownlow North*, p. 40.