

## **The Superior Parish Church, 1690-1840**

By the eighteenth century St. Peter's had become the centre of establishment sentiment, the home of the comfortable and deferential, and the ambitious. The Church of England was still the state church; Dissenters may have been able to practice their religion freely since 1689 but they still suffered from civil disabilities. They could not hold office or go to university, and some Dissenters were tempted to attend the official church once or twice a year in order to overcome these disadvantages, though people on both sides disapproved of such "occasional conformity". Anglican clergymen as a whole came to be regarded as of superior social status, speaking with educated accents alien to most villagers. They increasingly enjoyed a good income with near certainty of tenure (sometimes called "parson's freehold"), but their income came at the price of enjoying more than one living and so leaving many parishes without resident priests. Tory in politics, the Church hierarchy was respected but power lay in the hands of the Anglican laity.

Through this period St Peter's was not always furnished with a Perpetual Curate, as the minister was now generally known. Thomas Goodwin served creditably from 1717 to 1740, but after that, while several perpetual curates held the living for five or six years at a time, there were also significant gaps, as from 1740 to 1745, 1754 to 1769, and 1776 to 1779. At least there was usually a junior and temporary curate-in-charge, badly paid but sometimes an efficient minister. The perpetual curate appointed in 1779, Dr George Turner, never visited the village and resigned in 1783 when he was appointed Archdeacon. He was succeeded by a man of the same name (but without the doctorate) who was also appointed to the more affluent living at Spelsbury. In 1787 the Hook Norton churchwardens went to Oxford to see the bishop in an attempt to procure a resident perpetual curate, but with no success. As a result the second Turner held the Hook Norton curacy as a non-resident for over fifty years, living ten miles away in Spelsbury, where he had enjoyed a privileged living with a Georgian rectory and close contact with the Viscounts Dillon of Ditchley Park. He scarcely ever came to Hook Norton, did not

partake in the parish work, and necessarily lacked the authority of a resident minister.

This situation was common in Oxfordshire at the time, for in the 1780s 100 out of 165 parishes had non-resident incumbents and often the curates-in-charge served more than one parish. One of the sights of Oxford on Saturday afternoons was the rush of Junior Fellows riding out to the rural parishes to lead church services. These young men were called “gallopers” due to their dexterity in speeding on horseback from one church to another. At half-a-guinea per service, haste was essential. In at least one parish the churchwardens kept lookout from the tower for the galloper and, when sighted, ring the bell to summon the faithful!<sup>1</sup>

### **Lay Control**

Much of the life of the church was therefore controlled by the lay members of the vestry, especially the church wardens. This is made clear from the parish records and accounts that survive from this period, stored in the oak chest that was bought in



*Photo of parish chest*

© Photograph by David McGill, 2014

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<sup>1</sup> Anthony Russell, *The Country Parson* (London: SPCK, 1993), pages 101-102. I am grateful to John Wheatley for this reference.

1727, and carved with the initials WH FG CW, standing for William Hall and Francis Green, Church Wardens. It was used to store their records and accounts, including the recording of Births, Marriages and Deaths, as required by the law passed under Henry VIII. There are three locks, with the keys held by the wardens and the curate. The chest may still be seen in the north aisle, though the historical contents are now stored in the Oxfordshire Historical Centre in Cowley.

The church wardens, who were chosen by their fellow “townsmen”, had a huge range of responsibilities. Together with the Overseers of the Poor, they were the “Parish Officers”, whose responsibilities included (in Miss Dickins’s words) “making the rates and spending them, administering the Poor Law, going to law with other parishes, in command of the Constables, the Pounds [for stray animals], the Stocks, and the Dungeon, and, in fact, forming a complete Local Government.” The rates included not only the Poor Rate but also a rate on all members of the parish, regardless of religious affiliation, “to keep the Parish Church in Good and Decent Repair.” They also paid bounties to keep down creatures that spoiled crops, helped passing travellers to keep on moving, and prevented outsiders from becoming charges on the poor rates. The accounts were authorised at vestry meetings that usually met in one of the pubs.

The wardens also maintained the church and made some small-scale improvements. Windows regularly had to be repaired and beams replaced. A clerk’s desk, a reading desk and a pulpit were built on the south side of the nave against the wide bit of wall, stacked one above the other, in the “three-decker” style of the day. In 1739 the south door was fitted, with the names of the blacksmith and church wardens carved on a hinge. Between 1743 and 1755 three new bells were cast. In 1758 the church was whitewashed and “lettered”, probably with the Ten Commandments. The church clock and chimes required attention too frequently and in 1768 new ones were installed. In 1780 the church was paved with Hornton stone and many old grave stones removed. In 1798 a new sundial was erected on the south transept wall, where the date is still visible.



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In the eighteenth century the tower was separated from the church by a partition and used to house church goods and property belonging to the parish. That property included the village's fire-fighting equipment, which was the church's responsibility. In 1731 the officers bought a fire engine – essentially a pump worked by several men - and a leather hose and brass pipe. About the same time they also bought a long pole with a fire hook on the end, used for pulling burning thatch or rafters off buildings. Both engine and fire hook continued to be used until 1896 and may still be seen in the church, though the fire hook is now broken off short.



*The fire engine, used from 1731 to 1896  
© David McGill*

The north transept was also used for secular purposes in this period – as “the School House in the church.” The transept was partitioned off by a wall jutting out into the nave, with a gallery on top for children. The school room was accessed through its own outside door and had a fireplace; the coal for the fire was stored on top of the stone commemorating Isabel de Plessis, whose husband was lord of the manor in the early thirteenth century. The school was regarded as so separated from the church that it was once described as standing in the churchyard!

Church courts still survived and retained jurisdiction over wills and marital matters until 1857 and 1858, but the enforcement of morality depended largely on the civil magistrates. When in 1745 the Overseers of the Poor in Hook Norton wished to press a paternity suit to avoid paying for the upkeep of a child born out of wedlock, the case was taken before a justice of the peace, who enforced the suit. But the case was also taken before the Oxford Archdeacon's Court, which forced the couple to make public penance in St Peter's. For the sad tale in full – and for an extraordinary case of profanity in Hook Norton in 1769 that was taken before the Oxfordshire magistrates – see [Passages in Village Life](#), pages 7-12. **(LINK)**

The reliance on lay members in this age is indicated by the memorial plaques and stones that were placed on walls and memorial stones. St Peter's is not as rich



*Memorials to the Lampett family*  
© David McGill

in them as some parish churches and many are out of view in the north transept. Those visible range from Nathaniel Austin Apletree (whose friends claimed in 1786:

He was but room won't let me tell you  
what,

Name what a friend should be and he  
was that.)

to the generous William Hobbs, who in 1810 “gave to the *Minister and Churchwardens* 5£ in trust to pay the interest for

ever for the *Education of Poor Boys on e[ver]y Sabbath Day*”. There are several stones commemorating the Lampett family, who were the most important people in the village at the time and frequently held church offices.<sup>2</sup>

### The Practice of Religion

Overall, in this period, Anglican religious practices were not demanding. There were few church services, probably morning and afternoon services on Sundays only – afternoon rather than evening because there was no heating or lighting in the church. There were normally just four Communion services a year, at Easter, Whitsuntide, Michaelmas and Christmas. In addition, special Prayers and Thanksgivings were ordered to appease or thank the Almighty on the occasion of cattle plague, military victories or the signing of peace, royal accessions and weddings, or spasms of royal madness.

A major characteristic of the services in Hook Norton was the music. In front of the partition closing off the tower stood a gallery for singers and the church band. There had been a choir in St Peter’s in the Middle Ages, but no record of the music sung before the eighteenth century. A small orchestral band provided accompaniment to singing and also played long introductions and interludes during the service. The instruments originally consisted of violin and bassoon, but by the

<sup>2</sup> Wheatley, “St Peter’s,” pages 2-3; Dickins, *Hook Norton*, 170.

early nineteenth century also included oboe, clarinet and flutes. The singing was complexly arranged, as is shown by the beautifully hand written books of music used at that time, some of which survive in the Village Archive. Most common were the Psalms of David versified, though there were also hymns and anthems and even choral communion services. Separate books were prepared for each individual voice and instrument and the arrangements were so complex that, in the judgment of Margaret Dickins – for many years organist at St Peter’s – it must have been almost impossible for the congregation to have joined in the singing!<sup>3</sup>

The relaxed character of the religion practised in St Peter’s at this time did not give universal satisfaction. Dinah French, who was brought up in Southrop but later emigrated to the United States, remembered being told that at some time before 1786

the church in Hook Norton had not been supplied with an evangelical minister, except a curate whose preaching was more like the Gospel; he was zealous in efforts to promote a reformation in morals – going round to break up the amusements of Sabbath breakers and collect the people to divine service. His preaching and conduct was opposed to the inclination and pursuits of the official members, who, in consequence, had him quietly removed.<sup>4</sup>

The demand for a more evangelical religion, more satisfying to the spiritual aspirations of ordinary folk, explains the great expansion of Wesleyan Methodism in Hook Norton in the 1790s and early in the next century, challenging the Church of England to do better.

Certainly by 1780 the officers of the church were neglecting their duties. The chimes on the church clock broke after 1781 and were not repaired. The school discontinued about 1808 or 1809, though a National School existed by 1833 when it had about 33 female pupils. The church fabric received some attention – some re-pewing in 1811 and 1828, in 1824 a new pulpit, and the rebuilding of the porch in 1825 – but by 1840 the building was in a very bad state. The Earl Talbot, who, as the Bishop’s Lessee from the 1790s to the 1820s, was liable for repairing the

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<sup>3</sup> Dickins, 120-123.

<sup>4</sup> Dinah French’s account, quoted in Dickins, 147-48; for a fuller text, click here.

chancel, paid the church wardens just one pound per annum. By the 1830s the church wardens' accounts were badly kept and not up to date.

Relations between the officers and parishioners deteriorated. People complained about having to pay the compulsory church rate whether they attended St Peter's or not, especially after the new Poor Law of 1834 meant that the church rate no longer included any contribution toward poor relief. In the late 1830s the church wardens erected iron gates to the church yard, probably to stop people using it as a right of way. The gates were promptly ripped down and the curate and wardens burned in effigy, on the site of the traditional Guy Fawkes bonfire in the churchyard.

The trouble indicated how the position of the Established Church in Hook Norton had slipped. The persistence of the old Dissenting sects and the rise of Wesleyan Methodism led to irresistible demands for the removal of civil and legal disabilities, which Parliament granted in 1828. Roman Catholics had traditionally suffered heavier penalties, but bans on public worship and organising schools had been removed in 1778 and 1791 and all civil penalties were abolished in 1829. Soon John Keble was preaching sermons in Oxford that led to a movement within the Church demanding a reinvigoration of the Laudian tradition, a rejection of traditional Calvinism, and the re-adoption of Catholic rituals. The Church found new challenges in this more competitive and schismatic world, as it moved into the more spiritually energetic Victorian era.

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#### References:

- Margaret Dickins: *History of Hook Norton*, pages 116-130, 139-141.
- Christopher Wigg: *St Peter's Church, Hook Norton* (Gloucester, n.d. but after 1949).
- John Wheatley: "St Peter's Church, Hook Norton, Oxfordshire" (typescript, Village Museum and Archive).
- [Ralph Mann]: Articles first published under the pseudonym *Canites* in the Hook Norton *Village Newsletter*, 1987-1989.