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A table of contents for *The Churchman* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_churchman_os.php

The Oxford Diocese in the Eighteenth Century

HOW THE CLERGY ANSWERED
DR. SECKER'S VISITATION ARTICLES OF 1738

BY JOHN SLEE

(With acknowledgments to the Oxfordshire Records Society)

CHURCH history, like social history of which it is a part, is often exposed to us in its most interesting and intimate light when we look at old local records. The events are at once brought down to a level of life which is familiar—the life in our own district or, in the case of the Church, our own diocese. Here are mentioned the places we know; the characters who lived in them are thus invested with reality and their problems, although of no national importance in themselves, are usually symptomatic of, and can readily be related to, the greater events recorded in more pretentious histories.

To read, for instance, as I have just been doing, the privately published transcription of the Bishop of Oxford's Visitation Returns* for 1738—the earliest surviving in the diocese—is to receive a vivid picture of the quality of the religious atmosphere prevailing in England in the first half of the eighteenth century. It was an important period, for 1738 was the year of John Wesley's "spiritual transformation", and the first seeds of Methodism were being sown at meetings in Oxford.

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First, however, it is necessary to know the circumstances and nature of Visitation in the eighteenth century—although it is still an indispensable part of Church government. Until this time, a bishop, visiting his diocese, relied mainly upon the presentments made by the churchwardens of their several parishes. These officials were required to answer articles of inquiry addressed to them. But as, in the process of time, these answers became more formal than informative, the bishops turned to the clergy, issuing to them articles of inquiry which they answered in writing to the best of their ability.

The earliest known examples of these are those addressed to the clergy of the diocese of Lincoln at the Primary Visitation of Bishop Wake in 1706 and Bishop Gibson in 1718. The returns made to Archbishop Herring's Visitation Articles for the diocese of York have been printed by the Yorkshire Archæological Society. Now the Oxfordshire Records Society have added those of Dr. Secker. These were his Articles :

" Sir,

Being desirous to obtain as particular knowledge as I can of the State of my Diocese, in Order to qualifie myself for being more useful in it, I send you the following Questions : under which, if

* Oxfordshire Records Society, Bodleian Library, 25/-.

you please, after making due enquiry concerning them, to write the proper Answers, to sign them with your Name, and put them into my Hands at the Visitation, sealed up if you think fit, you will greatly assist and oblige

Your affectionate Brother and Servant,

Tho. Oxford."

May 30, 1738.

1. What is the Extent of your Parish? What Villages or Hamlets, and what Number of Houses doth it comprehend? And what Families of Note are there in it?
2. Are there any Papists in your Parish, and how many, and of what rank? Have any persons been lately perverted to Popery, and by whom, and by what means? And how many, and who are they? Is there any place in your Parish in which they assemble for worship, and where is it? Doth any Popish Priest reside in your Parish, or resort to it, and by what name doth he go? Is there any Popish School kept in your Parish? Hath any Confirmation or Visitation been lately held in your Parish by any Popish Bishop, and by whom and when? And how often is this done?
3. And are there in your Parish any Presbyterians, Independents, or Anabaptists? And how many of each Sect, and of what Rank? Have they one or more Meeting Houses in your Parish and are they duly licensed? What are the names of their Teachers, and are they qualified according to Law? Is their Number lessen'd or increased of Late Years, and by what means?
4. Are there any Quakers in your Parish and how many? Is their Number lessen'd or increased of late Years, and by what means? Have they a Meeting House in your Parish duly licensed, and how often do they meet there? Do any of them, and how many in Proportion pay your legal Dues without compulsion? If not, do you lose such Dues? Or how do you recover them? And what facts do you know, which may help to set their Behaviour towards the Clergy, or that of the Clergy towards them, in a true light?
5. Are there Persons in your Parish who profess to disregard Religion, or who commonly absent themselves from all publick Worship of God on the Lord's Day? And from what Motives and Principles are they understood so to do? And what is the Number of such Persons, and is it increased of late? And of what Rank are they?
6. Do you reside constantly upon your Cure, and in the House belonging to it? If not, where and at what distance? And how long in each year are you absent? And what is the Reason of such absence? And have you a licensed curate residing in the Parish? Or at what distance from it? And who is he? And doth he serve any other and what Cure? And what salary do you allow him?
7. Is Publick Service performed twice every Lord's day in your

Church, and one Sermon preached? If not, what is the Reason? And on what Days besides are Prayers read there? Is there any Chapel in your Parish? And at what distance from the Church? And how often are there Prayers and Sermons in it? How often and at what times do you Catechize in your Church? Do your Parishioners duly send their Children and Servants who have not learned their Catechism, to be instructed by you? And do you either Expound it to them yourself, or make use of some printed Exposition, and what is it? Are there any Persons who frequent Publick Worship and are not Baptized? And whence doth this proceed? How often is the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper administered? And how many usually receive it at each Time?

8. Is there any Free-school, Hospital, or Alms-house in your Parish? And for how many and for what sort of Persons? And who was the Founder, and who are the Governors, and what are the Revenues of it? And are they carefully Preserved and employed as they ought? And are the Statutes and Ordinances concerning it well observed?
9. Is there any voluntary Charity School in your Parish? And for how many Boys or Girls? And how is it Supported? And what are they taught? And are they also lodg'd, fed and cloath'd?
10. Have any Lands, or Tenements, or Tithes or Pensions or Sums of Money to be placed out at Interest, been given at any time to your Church or Poor? And what are they? And for what particular Uses were they given? And are they carefully Preserved and applied to those Uses and to no other?
11. By whom, and to what Uses, is the money given at Offertory, disposed of?
12. Is there any other Matter, relating to your Parish, of which it may be proper to give me Information? And what is it?

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As might be expected, the answers to these questions vary from the mono-syllabic negative or affirmative to the vividly descriptive or long discursive. The outstanding impressions one gets from such a diverse collection is that almost all answers reflect the dire poverty of the parishes and often of the parsons; that the questions affecting Roman Catholics and Dissenters are approached tentatively and timidly, sometimes with pity and often with contempt; that funds from a good many charitable bequests have disappeared, apparently by way of the churchwardens. But it is above all clear that, if the parsons of to-day have many problems, the clergy of 220 years ago were no less embarrassed by the waywardness, apathy, and worldliness of human nature.

The Church continued to designate all Roman Catholics as Papists in much the same way as we, as a nation, used to designate all black people as niggers without implying hostility. But there is strong evidence to suggest that it was more afraid of and sensitive to the growing heterodoxy among the people of its flock.

Many clergy, in their answers, were at great pains to minimize the various sectarian breakaways by describing those concerned as "poor and mean", "of inferior rank," "illiterate," or "only puny farmers". The Quakers, for which Oxfordshire was a stronghold, were often poor but were treated with more respect, except when they refused to pay the parson his dues. Most of the Roman Catholics were either rich people or the servants of rich people. Many clergy excused those who did not come to church as being poorly dressed and illiterate, as if feeling for their embarrassment in a congregation.

Perhaps the most harassed vicar in the whole diocese was the Reverend James Edgecumbe, whose incumbency at Kidlington, Oxon., was tied to the Rectorship of Exeter College, Oxford. In answer to Question 10 he reports :

. . . there are, moreover, sums of money annually to be expended out of ye Vicarage, three quarters of an Ox for a Breakfast on Christmas Day in ye morn ; at 3 or 4 o' th' Clock, and out of ye Parsonage and other Estates certain Quantities of Wheat and Malt to be made into Bread and Beer and which are annually distributed on Christmas Day in ye morn. . . .

(He then refers the Bishop to his answers to Question 12 as a continuation of the above story.)

. . . they (the Parishioners) get up at 12 o'clock, run about ye Parish in a Tumultuous manner until 4 or 5, then go to ye Vicarage House, take their Breakfast not in ye most decent manner and by the time Divine Service begins half ye Parish are unfit to attend Publick Worship. The Beer mentioned in Article 10 is, I think, expended wholly on Christmas Day in ye morn and it is of no Service but to make half ye Parish Drunk before Church time. I have preached against it but have not been able to succeed. If your Lordship could think of any method of altering it to a better purpose it will be a thing of great benefit to the Parish.

The Vicar of Woodstock, a very ancient and Royal Borough, then containing only 240 houses, after reporting "scarce any Dissenters . . . formerly a pretty many Presbyterians and Independents but decreasing in late years as in most other places" went on to disclose "an abuse not peculiar to this place, but frequent in Many viz. by ye Negligence of Church-wardens and Profanity of Bakers and Vintners, ye Worst of Bread and Wine often provided for the H. Sacrament. Nothing being more common than to have ye former most Stale, or Coarse, or Musty ; and ye Latter, ye most Sour, or Vapid, that can be got."

This Vicar, who was the Rev. B. Holloway, attributed the decrease in Dissenters "not to any Extraordinary Increase of Knowledge ; or Regard to Unity, Order, etc., but to that general Decline of Zeal and Inclination to Divine Things in any Shape by which men are Nowadays become but too indifferent to Religion in ev'ry Shape."

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Perhaps the most moving appeal on behalf of the poor of his Parish was made by the Rev. Thomas Leigh, Rector of Heyford. He was re-

garded (says a footnote) as an exemplary parson, but he did not fear to speak his mind to the Bishop. After describing the state of his church in the following lines he pleaded for the people. He wrote :

The Church wants whitewashing
 The Pavement of it is very bad
 There is no Paten for the Bread at Communion
 There is never a lock to the Church Chest
 The Register wants to be new-bound and fresh leaves added to it
 The Gates of the Churchyard won't keep out the Hogs
 The Church ways are intolerable.

Then, in a covering note, he says :

I have acquainted my Parish with all the Things with which I complain of to your Lordship, and Beg'd of Them, that They might be reform'd ; but all my Intreaties, and even Threats to acquaint the Ordinary with it, have been to no Purpose. I believe, my Lord, it is not a Disregard to Decency, but Poverty is the occasion of these Things, every Penny comes with extrem Difficulty from them, and I truly think, that there are very few poorer Parishes in Your Lordship's Diocese. I hope your Lordship will excuse the Trouble I now give you.

He had made other complaints besides those listed above. In answer to Question 12 he wrote :

The Ten Commandments with Moses and Aaron and other Ornaments painted upon canvas, are fix'd up between the Church and the Chancel, where formerly the Rood Loft stood. It looks ill, darkens the Church, and in its present situation is not legible ; I would desire your Lordship's leave either entirely to remove it or at least to place it lower or against a Side Wall, where it may be read.

Mr. Leigh, incidentally, delivered his answers by a roundabout way, "for," he says to the Bishop, "I am apprehensive that . . . my Parishioners may be suspicious that I have given some Information against them. This I would willingly Prevent, being sensible it will lessen that Influence which I wish and pray, I may always have over them."

Another of the many parishes in which religious indifference was reported was at Heythrop. Here the Rev. James Martin could not get a single person except the Clerk to come to morning service on Sundays. The Bishop, however, required him to hold one. To the Bishop's order, Mr. Martin replied as follows :

The people of Little Rollright (where he also ministered) have lately adorned ye pulpit for me in a handsome manner. But to be Torn away from them and sent on a Sunday morning to Heythrop to read to the Church Walls (which I am sure would be the case, the Clerk only excepted) ; this, my Lord, is to me a melancholy consideration. . . . Nor will the reading to the walls be the worst of the case. I am already forc'd to be obliged to the Papist at Heythrop for a stable. If I am sent hither in a morning, I must either fast (which will put me into a fever) or be obliged to

him likewise for a dinner : (for no one will dine me) ; That will draw on me something of an acquaintance ; and that acquaintance will draw on me a fresh censure of countenancing Popery.

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Perhaps many of the answers put into its true perspective the present tendency to feel that the world is a much more wicked place than it ever was before. The youth of the time were by no means paragons of Christian duty and virtue. From Brightwell the Rev. John Edwardes wrote : " The Youth of this Parish are commonly guilty of profaning ye Lord's Day by Spending ye Afternoons in Sports and Diversions such as Cricket. I have endeavoured to Prevent it but to no Purpose. If your Lordship will take notice of this Disorder it will be a great obligation to Your Most Dutifull and Obedient Servant."

From Standlake it was reported that " many go fishing, many stay idly at home or go to Ale-house ". The Vicar of Bampton, the Rev. John Edmonds, deplored the fact that " Many of the lowest rank absent themselves from Publick Worship and with a View to Pleasure or Profit or Both ; others out of laziness, making it a Day of Rest in the worst sense ". At Little Rollright the " Young ones don't come to Holy Communion ".

The most general answer to Question 11 as to money given at the Offertory was either " none " or a qualification of it such as " none but what I give myself ". Some even went further and wrote, " No money given at Offertory Time out of Mind." Others added that if people were asked to give money at Holy Communion it would keep them away. Where money was given it was usually distributed by the parson or the churchwardens to the poor and needy who took the Sacrament.

The one mention of Methodism is a very important one. It comes in the answers of the Vicar of St. Ebbe's in the City of Oxford. He writes : " There have been for some time in ye Parish a meeting of about thirty people every Lord's Day in ye Evening who are called Methodists. The Persons who Frequent it are constant at ye Publick Prayers of ye Church and at ye Sacrament. Sometimes a Person in Priest's Orders and sometimes a Lay man of ye University meets them and reads them a Sermon or some part of ye Scripture and concludes with a Psalm and a Collect out of ye Common Prayer. I cannot learn that anything is taught contrary to ye Doctrine of ye Church of England."

This report is annotated from the Oxford Diocesan Papers which state that in 1767 the curate of St. Ebbe's wrote to his Bishop as follows : " I could wish there were as few Methodists (as Roman Catholics) but this little Parish has more than its share of them. I shall endeavour (as I know your Lordship's sense upon this Sect) to make use of all prudent and active means in my power to bring my mistaken parishioners into the regular and reasonable way of worship."

The same footnote explains that the " lay man of ye University " may have been a William Chapman who, in a letter dated September 3, 1736, wrote to John Wesley : " I read five times a week to a religious society in St. Ebbe's Parish." It is noted, too, that the great preacher,

George Whitefield, had also been a member of the same college—Pembroke—as that from which Chapman came.

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There are many amusing touches to the answers. The Vicar of Minster Lovell begins the first answer like this : " A very small parish old and ruinous gives title to ye present noble Lord Lovel." It is not clear whether the Vicar meant this as a snub to my lord or whether it was merely intended to prepare his bishop not to expect much.

In contrast, the Rev. John Ingram, of Chastleton, writes of his local gentry as follows : " The Families of Chief Note here are those of Thomas Greenwood and John Jones, Esquires. And I must do these Gentlemen the Justice to acknowledge that it is in a great measure due to their Care and Good Example that this Parish is Second to None in the Diocese in Point of Order and Uniformity."

Finally, there can be no more pathetic picture than that presented by the Rector of Rotherfield Greys, Dr. Hy. Barker, D.D., who writes explaining there are only four or five houses near the church, with the result that " Mr. Price ye last Rector us'd to toll ye Bell and wait for a Congregation till at last he grew tir'd and left it off ".
