

RELIGION AND RECTORS

Middleton had a church before the Norman Conquest but it need not have been an elaborate structure to fulfil the requirements of “a house set apart for public worship”. Its clergy were probably itinerant preachers sent out by the Minster or Monasterium (in this case Beverley), an institution which emerged after the conversion of England to Christianity. They would be a mixed lot with varying levels of education but with a working knowledge of Latin the then international language of the church. The Lateran Council of 1215 was to introduce celibacy, possibly to prevent the growth of clerical dynasties but it is not known how strictly this rule was enforced in East Yorkshire. Middleton’s present church when it emerged in the 13th century was possibly the result of the local Lord of the Manor’s desire for a more prestigious edifice which he could personally control.

For long centuries, when life was short and little changed from one generation to another, religious practice played a big part in the day to day existence of everybody in the country. The religious establishment of England at that time belonged to the one big orthodoxy of Western Europe: the Catholic Church presided over by the Pope who was usually resident in Rome and whose personal and political power had grown following the fall of the Roman Empire.

At a time when illiteracy was the norm the interiors of churches offered the man who laboured in the fields a colourful representation of the biblical story by way of wall paintings and copious imagery. The use of images, which would appear to be contrary to Biblical precepts, was explained by Pope Gregory the Great who, when sending Augustine to England in 597, stated in justification that “for a picture is introduced into a church so that those who are ignorant of letters may at least read by looking at the walls what they cannot read in books” and this served as a model for practice throughout the Middle Ages.

The religious consciousness was also aided in the popular mind by the observance of numerous feast days celebrating saints and religious events which, when added to the mystery of the mass, helped to incorporate and legitimize the world of superstition ever present in the medieval period.

Another feature which was common at the time and which served the dual purpose of raising money for the maintenance of the church fabric and relief of the poor was the selling of home-brewed ales either in the nave or an adjoining church house – a practice described as “a crude precursor of today’s sedate Parish fete”. This poses a question. Could the proximity of the Robin Hood Inn indicate that a building on that site was used for such purposes as it is known that after the Reformation certain of these places were recycled as secular alehouses?

The church’s belief in the individual’s salvation through good works gave a special importance to local benefactors who by making a charitable provision in a will could ease their passage to a better afterlife. Here again a dual purpose was served by helping the less fortunate, (as the religious houses also did), and by contributing to the upkeep of the church. Church management was also helped by the work of the Vestry and churchwardens.

An unfortunate consequence of the Reformation was that the doctrine of salvation through good works was superseded by that of salvation by faith alone thereby causing a reduction in benefactions.

The first name on the list of rectors for Middleton in the Torre manuscript is that of John de Sculcoates in 1236. Sculcoates (various spellings) was an area just north of Hull as it then existed which by 1220 had been drained and used by the monks of Meaux to graze sheep.

The Priors of religious houses and others held land in Middleton:

Watton	2 oxgangs	
Warter	5 oxgangs	
Ellerton	1 oxgang.	
The house of St Giles of Beverley		5 oxgangs
The church of St Peter, York		3 oxgangs
The Prioress of Yugue		1 oxgang
The Archbishop of Canterbury		6 carucates.

An entry in Archbishop Greenfield's register about a Middleton rector shows the international reach of the clergy of that time:-

"August 21 1309: John de Bonovillari, clerk of Odo de Grandison, Knt, holds besides benefices in Lausanne and elsewhere, the church of Middleton super Valle, diocese York. In 1310 he had a dispensation to hold a canonry and prebend of Bella Aqua and the church of Middleton Super vallis in the diocese of Lausanne and York as well as the deanery of Sylvyac, in that of Geneva; this last he obtained by a papal dispensation in which no mention was made of the other benefices."

The Archbishops register also contains the following item for 27th October 1316 "institution and induction of Robert de Hampton into the church of Middleton on the presentation of Queen Isabel, to whom the king had granted the custody of the land and tenements which had belonged to John Wake. November 16 1316 Robert de Hampton, acolyte had letters dismissory" Queen Isabel was the French wife of Edward II.

The changes in religious practice when they came arose not from dissatisfaction from below but rather as a result of the fallout from Henry VIII's marital and economic difficulties. Not that dissatisfaction in high places was a new thing because back in the 14th century Yorkshire born and Oxford educated John Wycliffe and his followers the Lollards had voiced strong criticism of catholic practice and advocated strict adherence to Holy Scripture in religious observance.

Whilst some of his advisers wanted to adopt the stricter continental practices of Martin Luther Henry himself by the Act of Supremacy 1534 was content for the moment to displace the Pope as Head of the Church in England, dissolve the religious houses and sell off their land to local landowners who would then have greater reason to remain loyal to him. In justification of the changes his senior churchmen were able to quote the early church fathers and invoke the pre-papal Christianity existing in England during the Roman period.

Two incidental results of the changes which are worth noting were the obligation for all churches to make available a copy of Yorkshire born Miles Coverdale's translation of the Bible' the first printed English version and the requirement for a register to be kept showing births, marriages and deaths in parishes. Middleton's however only exists from 1678.

But the main thrust of Henry's changes which added to dissatisfaction and resulted locally in the Pilgrimage of Grace were the alterations in religious practice involving the reduction in the observance of saints days and the sacraments.

In the subsequent reign of Edward VI further severe reforms were made, particularly involving church interiors which moved things in a more protestant direction.

With the arrival of his half sister Mary previous changes were countermanded and attempts were made for a full restoration of Catholic practice and return of allegiance to Rome.

The long reign of Elizabeth was notable for the emergence of a new consensus which, in return for outward conformity in religious observance and the use of the 1552 prayer book, a fair measure of private practice was tolerated providing it remained just that – private. She famously did not want “to make a window into men's souls” and what emerged was a subtle balancing of Catholic and Protestant features which was ultimately a hallmark of the Anglican churches of later centuries.

Pope Pius V however made a major mistake when he declared Elizabeth deposed thereby freeing English Catholics from their allegiance to her. This together with the conflicts with catholic Spain and later France served to make the term “papist” synonymous with treachery.

By now the interiors of churches had been purged of many of the Popish fittings. In place of paintings suitable texts from the Bible were displayed on walls. The religion of the word was displacing one of sacraments.

The next reign saw the publication of the Authorized version of the bible, a book which was to become a treasured possession in the humblest of homes, quotations from which were to be a part of everyday discourse.

A hint of a return to high church practice was to be quickly dispelled during the civil wars when Puritan zeal for a purge of any remaining Romish practices reached its peak. This could result in the use of church premises for such blatantly secular purposes as the storage of materials or the stabling of horses. It was during the period of Cromwell's rule that the ale-houses were closed and Christmas abolished. Not popular moves.

It is significant that in the Parliamentary Survey of the benefices carried out in 1650 (during Cromwell's rule) that the Rector of Middleton, George Osborne, is described as a “preaching minister”.

With the restoration of the monarchy and particularly after James II's departure religious practice began to take on a more settled look with tentative moves towards an acceptance of different practices. The Toleration Act of 1689 allowed dissenters (but not Catholics) to meet in their own houses and during the next century the mood turned against religious persecution with few of the laws against worship being enforced although all non-conformists were still subject to civil disabilities.

Practice in the established church began to reflect society's rigid class structure which in time meant that religious observance by the poorer sections began to decline with a consequent move on their part towards other forms of worship or none at all. In country areas and particular the East Riding the Methodist alternative was to make a big appeal.

An examination of the list of rectors for Middleton during the turbulent years of change from 1530-1558 spanning the reigns of Henry, Edward, Mary and Elizabeth show that Robert Barra held office with James Barra as curate during the whole period.

During the time of the civil wars and the first year of the Commonwealth George Etherington held the living from 1617 and as he administered the necessary Parliamentary oaths during the wars it would appear George Osborne's succession to the living in 1650 was due to natural causes. With the restoration of the monarchy in 1660, however, he was succeeded by Matthias Crouch who then held it until 1706. His grave is in the churchyard. All this might suggest that a lot of the changes forced on the parish by the successive alterations in religious practice were accepted by the clergy without much resistance. Crouch himself survived the upheaval in 1689 at the time of the Glorious Revolution.

The coming of Samuel Brearey, a relative of a Lord Mayor of York, and himself later to be interred in York Minster, to the living in 1706 signalled the beginning of two dynasties, each of three rectors which would last for a couple of centuries. Clerical dynasties were something the pre-reformation church sought to avoid but the advent of married clergy and the power of family connections subsequently made this a common occurrence as was the holding of more than one living.

It was during these years that the established church sank into a more passive existence with a decline in religious fervour although Archbishop Herring's visitation returns of 1743 duly record the practices of the then incumbent Christopher Spencer Brearey who recorded 39 families in the parish and stated:

"I read the public service in my church every Lords-day in the morning and preach and read the public service in the afternoon.

I catechize the children and servants (during the season of Lent) every Wednesday and Friday morning and on Sunday in the afternoon. I administer the Sacrament of the Lord's supper in my church four times every year. I have about ninety communicants in my parish, sixty or seventy usually receive and I believe very near that number received last Easter.

I give open and timely warning of the Sacrament before it is administered. My parishioners do not send in their names and indeed I have not required it. I have not refused the Sacrament to any one".

It is perhaps significant that the few illustrations of church services in that period usually show most of the congregation asleep through boredom and the diaries of James Woodforde, a kindly Norfolk parson, record in minute detail the domestic happenings of everyday life but make little reference to religion.

During the 18th and 19th centuries the Glebe Terriers record the names of churchwardens:

Richard Railton	John Lovet	Stephen Oxterby	William Pinder
William Garrett	William Rudd	Richard Bender	William Whitehead
John Newton	Richard Wiles	John Petch	John Garnett
William Wilson	John Hornby	Richard Witty	Wilsh Crowe
Jabez Witty	William Wilson	H Byass.	

The second dynasty was that of the Blanchards whose family was traced in the Lund District to the early 17th century and at Barlby they owned the moated site of a medieval manor house. The first John Blanchard (1760-1827) became rector in 1809 and had the new rectory built. He also inherited 890 acres of land in lieu of tithes allocated at enclosure in 1805.

He was succeeded in 1827 by his son John (1790-1862). There had been a tendency in this period for clerics to stray from a total concentration on the religious duties and he fell into this category. He pursued sporting interests, was a Justice of the Peace for 34 years and a deputy lieutenant for 35 years as well as being vicar of Lund with Kilnwick.

His obituary notice in the Beverley Guardian for 22nd November 1862 paid tribute to his restoration of Lund church as well as recording that he was “diligent in the discharge of his magisterial duties” “To the poor he was humane and charitable”. It goes on to say “A long and tedious illness which he bore with exemplary patience and resignation, while it tamed down the exuberance of his animal spirits, brought out the better part of his nature and he passed his time in a diligent preparation for eternity”.

A Victorian clergyman, the Revd Ellman, had recalled the state of church practice in earlier days “When I was first ordained anything like church decoration was dreaded; the cross or even the candlesticks on the altar were looked upon as Popish. Flowers were considered the same. Anything in the shape or form of ceremony was avoided as much as possible and regarded as Popish. The services were long, the sermons very dry and as a rule above the understanding certainly of the rural working classes”.

The one-off religious census carried out on Sunday 30th March 1851 revealed that 125 persons attended the established church services in Middleton whereas the total for both Methodist denominations was 189. The total population was given as 649.

By the second half of the nineteenth century the atmosphere in the established church began to change particularly in the towns partly through the influence of the Oxford Movement which sought to emphasize the “Catholic” element in church practice and at the other end of the scale by the Evangelists who aimed to bring the upper classes back to a life of personal piety and dedication to social and moral causes. With the later Victorian zeal for building new churches and restoring old ones some of the high church practices began to creep into the rural areas. Middleton’s church was restored in 1873 and in the following year the Driffield Times contained a report of a day of harvest festival services in which there was more than a hint of renewed glory. The church was highly decorated and when lighted up for evening service the effect was “very magnificent!

The report continues:

“The day began with a celebration of holy communion at 8 a.m., which was followed at 10.30 a.m. by Matins, and a second celebration. The grand service of the day was, however, at 7 p.m. when a crowded congregation filled the church. The choir entered singing as a processional hymn, “Come ye thankful people, come.” The service; which was fully choral was sung by the Rev. W.T. Stratford, curate; the choir and congregation joining heartily in the responses, &c. The psalms and hymns were sung with spirit and heartiness. The preacher was the Rev.G.H. Lightfoot, of St Mary’s, Beverley, who took for his text, Genesis viii,xx “While the earth remaineth seed time and harvest shall not cease.” He pointed out the causes which men have for gratitude to God; urged his hearers to stir up their hearts to thankfulness, and in token of their appreciation of God’s mercies to make substantial offerings to Almighty God in return for

the same. - The service closed with the "Te Deum". The offertories throughout the day amounted to £11 18s..which will be devoted towards the purchase of an organ".

The organ was purchased in 1876 at a cost of £200.

Henry Dacre Blanchard (1825-1904) had succeeded to the rectorship in 1863. He was educated at Eton and Trinity College Cambridge and while at school he was one of the boys who cheered Queen Victoria when she passed through on her wedding day. He was said to be an excellent preacher with a poetic gift and a great interest in the welfare of farm servants. He was also a keen supporter of the Foresters and played a big part in the affairs of the school.

At his funeral an old man with tears in his eyes told the Driffield Times reporter "he's the last of the Blanchards. He'll be a missed man. He gave enormous". He left £100 in his will (total £7700) to distribute the income from it on deserving poor persons in the parish who shall not have been in receipt of parochial relief in the previous year.

By the end of the First World War the established order of society which included religious belief and its institutions had taken a blow. On a more material level the Rector, the Rev. E.J.Wilson, felt that the two glebe farms belonging to the benefice with their fluctuations of rent, need of repairs and recurring friction with parishioner tenants were best disposed of and the money invested in government securities. So Horsewold Farm (433 acres) and Middleton Wold Farm (404) acres were sold in 1918.

THE LIVING

Bulmer's Directory of 1892 states

"The living is an ancient rectory, the patronage of which belonged to the provost of the collegiate church of Beverley. After the dissolution of religious houses the Crown presented till 1601, when the patronage was exercised by Thos. Bennington. A few years later Sir John Crompton presented; the next patrons were the Manbys; then followed the Breareys, three of whom were successively rectors. The next patron was Abraham Hoskins, Esq., whose daughter married the Rev John Blanchard, grandfather of the present patron and rector. Its yearly value, when the Liber Regis was compiled, was £15 3s. 4d., but it is now worth about £920. The tithes were commuted at the inclosure, in 1805, for 890 acres of land".

In 1892 the Revd H.D. Blanchard sold the living to Mr Wilson, Solicitor of Melton.