

Chapter XIV Chilton Trinity

Bridgwater in the later days, by the Rev. A. H. Powell, 1908

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CLOSELY adjacent to Bridgwater, away towards the winding stream of the River Parret as it wends its way to the Severn Sea, lies the little village of Chilton. Now-a-days it has small title to fame or to recognition save its antiquity, and the interest of its ancient history. In the old days, when the villages were not, as now, eclipsed by the towns, but were friendly rivals to them, Chilton had some importance of its own. It was a Hundred of itself, known as the Hundred *Chilton Trinitatis*, from the dedication of its small yet beautiful parish church.

From before the days of Edward the Confessor — and it may well be, long before then — the tiny village has preserved its personality and its existence. The quiet pasture and corn lands have provided employment and sustenance for the population, whose lives were assuredly set in peaceful surroundings, and whose sober wishes, one may well believe, never learned to roam. We hear many times, in the days after Domesday, of the Chilton family, who owned the place, with many other manors. There were Sir Johns and Sir Robert and Sir Thomas de Chilton, a great and flourishing family, who reigned there. Later on the property passed into the possession of the family of de Wigbere or Wigborough, who took their name, it is said, from their manor of Wigborough near South Petherton. In the year 1327 Richard de Wigbere is recorded to have held the manors of Chilton, Huntstile, and Wigbere of the King in chief by the service of being door-keeper to the King's chamber, and by the rent of forty shillings a year. It is not the purpose of this brief sketch to relate the story of the other manors connected with Chilton, or to refer to the chapels of Huntstile and Idstock, which many centuries ago were annexed to Chilton Church. All this is past history, and belongs to mediaeval times.

The earliest Rector of Chilton Trinity whose name is known was one Richard de Sancto Claro, who was appointed to the benefice in the year 1309, the patron being William de Wykebere, a member of the powerful family mentioned above. Richard was succeeded in 1323 by Simon de Ellesworth, and then follows a change

in the patronage. For by this time the Augustinian Canons of St. John in Bridgwater had risen to some prominence, and several benefices had been allotted to their Religious House. Among these, of course, was St. Mary's, Bridgwater, and now Chilton Trinity Church was added to the list. From the year 1340 to 1529 the Master and Brethren of St. John's Religious House in Bridgwater appointed their *vicarius* to serve Chilton parish, and the patronage remained in their possession until the time of the dissolution of the monasteries, when it reverted to Queen Elizabeth. Since then it has continued to be vested in the Crown. Curiously enough. Queen Elizabeth herself appointed no fewer than five Rectors of Chilton, the last of whom, one Richard Powell, lived on until the seventh year of the reign of James the First.

From very remote times there had been close connection between Bridgwater and Chilton. Some of the early Chantry Priests of St. Mary's were promoted to the rectory. The Church itself was always said to have been a daughter church to Horsey, now on the other side of the river, and such traditions are usually not without valid foundation. Thus it is probable that the priests of Bridgwater, Horsey, Idstock, Huntstile, and Chilton were in constant communication with each other, and that they frequently visited each other's domains. Within Chilton Church, in the fourteenth century, there were lights and images to St. Mary and to St. Katherine, and in a will dated 1530, John Myllor bequeathed for the *sustentationem luminis* of Blessed Mary of Idstock, one cow. Idstock is there described as *Capella de Chilton*. When the dissolution of the Religious Houses of England came at the middle of the sixteenth century, and when St. Mary's, Bridgwater, was stripped of almost all its property, Chilton Trinity escaped the great spoliation. The Church possessions were retained by that Church, and a considerable proportion of them remain in Church hands to-day.

By the time, however, that the eighteenth century had set in, a new current of ideas as to the Church, Nonconformity, Religion, Religious toleration, and all kindred matters was flowing

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fast. Queen Anne was a determined opponent of Roman Catholic views, and was a staunch adherent of the Church of England. Her successors, the Georges, cannot be said to have contributed anything to religious thought or power, save to belittle it. George the Third, of course, was a well-meaning, pious man according to his lights, but none of the sovereigns of the House of Hanover could be termed religious men. There were no successors to the fervent convictions of such sovereigns as James the Second, or Queen Anne, until Queen Victoria came to the throne.

From 1714 to 1837 the laxity, indifference, and laissez-faire of the nation in religious matters was great. Deism flourished ; controversy prevailed ; slackness and lassitude reigned. Enthusiasm was feared ; it was openly discouraged. A deadness in religious life unhappily supervened, and the activities of men for the most part ran along other channels of action and of thought. *In 1714, when George the First ascended the throne, he undoubtedly found a vigorous religious life in England such as had not been known for two centuries. It had for the most part sprung up since 1688. All promised well. The Church had rest from her enemies ; the land was at peace ; Churchmen were eager to evangelise the kingdom. But a subtle danger remained, and that one danger spoiled all the fair prospect. A King, William the Third, had rescued the Anglican Church from supercession ; a Queen, Anne, had fostered it and nurtured it. George the First was prepared to protect it and to patronise it. The State, in fact, had come in too successfully. It dominated the Church and the bishops. It had restricted the powers of Nonconformists and of Romanists ; it had given the Anglicans a clear supremacy. Bitter indeed was the price which Anglicanism had to pay, for George and his ministers now insisted that the Church should not be too active. They frowned down all enthusiasm ; they insisted upon a moderation which was colourless, and upon a barren uniformity which was lifeless.¹ The story of the eighteenth century in Bridgwater, were it to be written in full detail, would amply

bear out this view. The calm, perhaps, of that period may have been a necessary stage on which to prepare for the activity of the century which immediately followed it.

William Aleyn became Vicar of Bridgwater in 1669, and in 1678 William Aleyn is recorded as having been inducted to the rectory of Chilton, by appointment of Charles the Second. The same man, no doubt. He is the first, so far as can be discovered, to hold the two benefices together. William Aleyn died in 1720, and Benjamin Bulkley succeeded him at St. Mary's. He passed away in 1723. At Chilton, however, there is no record of any successor to William Aleyn until 1723, when Laurence Payn was appointed by George the First both to Bridgwater and Chilton. He appears to have been, as the documents belonging to the Bridgwater Corporation amply disclose, a man of extreme eccentricity, and during his short rule of nine years the benefice of Bridgwater suffered severely, while corresponding losses accrued to the diminishing possessions of Chilton Trinity Church. Moses Williams succeeded in 1732 to both livings, which he held until 1742, when the Rev. John Coles, a man of considerable force of character, followed him in the Vicariate of Bridgwater Town. Thus, before his time, three Vicars of Bridgwater had also held Chilton, and Mr. Coles, no doubt, served the two cures from the first.

Henceforth the two benefices were united, and a document dated February 15th, 1749, is of some interest as bearing upon the habits and customs of the time, and in other ways. It is signed by Edward Bath and Wells. This was Bishop Edward Willis, who held the Bishopric from 1743 to 1773. It was signed "*at our house in James Street, Westminster.*" A petition, the document shows, had been presented in the previous December by the Rev. John Coles, pointing out the desirability of permanently uniting the two parishes. Although previous Vicars had held both positions, the appointments to them had always been made separately. Chilton parish, it was averred, "*is small, consisting of not more than fourteen families, four of which only attend the parish Church, the rest*

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living in hamlets intermixed with other parishes at so great a distance that they usually resort to other Churches" Of Bridgwater it was said that "the town and parish are very populous and extensive, and the duty very great." Of course there was then only one Church, St. Mary's. Before this time an Afternoon Preacher had been appointed for St. Mary's, so that the absence of the Vicar " is supplied by him when Divine Service is performed at Chilton, which of late years has been every other Sunday in the afternoon ; heretofore but once a month". Chilton parish had apparently fared badly as regards its ministrations since 1678, in William Aleyn's time. Probably the Bishop had insisted upon the appointment of an Afternoon Preacher for Bridgwater, so as to set the Vicar free for the Chilton service.

In response to the petition, his Majesty, with the advice of the Right Honourable Philip Lord Hardwicke, Lord Chancellor, thereupon agreed to the union of Bridgwater with Chilton, stipulating that the right of advowson and patronage should remain in the possession of the Sovereign and his successors. There it remains unto this day.

Not many events since then have stirred the pulse of Chilton Trinity. The River Parret altered its course long ago, leaving on what is now the opposite side of its stream a considerable part of the parish which once was on the Chilton side. Few parishes in England have more puzzling or complicated boundaries. There was once a Rectory House. There is none now. Much of the Church land has been alienated too.

In 1728 a writer described Chilton Church as being "a neat structure, covered with lead." The lead is now nowhere to be seen. There was also an endowment in land, given by Edward Colston, for a charity school. This, too, has now passed out of mind and memory.

Thus the two old neighbours. Lord Briwere's flourishing town and John de Chilton's little village, are friends and neighbours still. Nine centuries of experience and of contiguity have not severed them, although scarce one thing to-day is as it was when Domesday Book

was written. The kindly Parret washes the banks of both parishes, and even it, too, as we have seen, has changed its way. But the bells of Chilton Tower and of Bridgwater steeple ring out to each other across the green lands that lie between, telling, we will hope, a mutual message of love and goodwill that will not have passed away ere nine centuries more roll on their chequered course.

Notes

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- 1) A H Powell's *Sources of Eighteenth-Century Deism*, 1902, p. 15.

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