



The Parish - by Terence O'Kelly

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The Parish: A further article of historical interest by Terence O'Kelly

How often do media advisers (agony aunts) say "go and talk to your vicar"? We in Abinger, and many thousands of people in mainly rural parishes do not have a vicar. These writers are probably mostly townies, and think that a parish priest is always a vicar. What is wrong with the good old English word "parson"? What is the difference between a rector and a vicar?

In the early Church the local Anglo-Saxon landowner might have had his own chaplain, but when a parish was formed, with the manorial chapel becoming the parish church, the priest became Rector (Latin "Ruler"; now political correctness translates this as "Leader") of the parish. As the Bishop did not want to be financially responsible for an insolvent parish, no church would be established unless the rector had an endowment, which in those days, meant land. The amount was usually about the same as that of a self-sufficient smallholding, about 25 to 30 acres; this was the Glebe. It was usually given by the Lord of the Manor, and in return he had the right to appoint the incumbent. In Abinger, in 1890, the glebe was 95 acres, so in the past, benefactors must have added substantial amounts to the original land, and Abinger was regarded as a "good living".

Once installed, the Rector could not be removed except for serious misdeeds, and had freehold for life. In addition, he could hold more than one parish, and Abinger Rectors also held parishes as far apart as Cornwall and Yorkshire. One was also prebendary of Norwich. Many were also Rectors of Wotton or Shere. It seems likely that for at least a hundred years Abinger was served by curates under absentee rectors. In addition there were the tithes. The principal of tithes, giving a tenth of the income to the church, dates back to Old Testament times, and was brought to England when St Augustine came here in 597 AD. (It was probably about 100 years before Christianity reached Abinger). There were the Great Tithes, levied on grain and wool, and the Lesser Tithes, levied on anything that could be assessed - smallholdings, traders, tradesmen, etc. difficult to assess and to collect.

Initially the tithes were split four ways, to the Bishop, the Rector, the upkeep of the Parish Church, and the poor of the parish. Later, when dioceses accumulated endowments, the

bishops were not allowed to take their portions, and the tithes were split three ways, Rector, Church and Poor. It sometimes happened that a patron would give away his patronage, usually to a religious house, perhaps in thanksgiving for safe return from a crusade, or recovery of a sick child. The result was inevitable! The Abbott or Prior did not appoint a rector, a post he kept for himself, but appointed a deputy (Latin *vicarius*), at a stipend, usually about a third of the income. (Dorking patronage went to Reigate Priory, and when that closed, to Lewes).

When a large parish was split, the new parish also had a vicar, with the mother church retaining the tithes, e.g. Coldharbour. The vicar usually had to reside in the parish, hold specified services, and be ready to baptise, marry and bury his parishioners. Plural holdings were not allowed. After the Reformation many vicars were appointed by lay Patrons, who also kept the tithes. In later years plural holdings by rectors were forbidden, and the clergy stipends paid directly, so many of the differences have been eliminated. More recently, with falling congregations and fewer ordinands, plural holdings are again common, with some parsons looking after several parishes.

In 1889 the Glebelands Act allowed a rector, with permission of the Land Commissioners, to sell his glebeland, with the proceeds invested by the Ecclesiastical Commissioners, who then paid the incumbent the interest on the sum. Previously, the permission of the Bishop, Patron and a diocesan court was needed, and this procedure had been followed when a small part of the glebe was sold to provide land for the school. The rector of Abinger, the Rev. T. P. Hill, immediately took advantage of the Act and applied to sell 45 acres. Mr. W. J. Evelyn, the Patron, did not approve, and formally objected to the Commissioners.

He was overruled, and the sale went ahead; in fact Abinger was the second such sale in the country. The total realised was £8,385. This sale allowed the development of all the houses from Furzen Wood to the Common Gate at Pasturewood House.

Epitaph on an old tombstone
*Here lies Will Smith - and, what's
rarish
He was born, bred and hanged, all
in the same parish.*

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