

Ewelme's Holy War

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Sometime in 1819 Ewelme's Rector, Dr William Van Mildert was greatly displeased. One of the villagers, Amos Norroway, had registered his cottage as a place of religious meeting, and a Methodist Preacher Mr Heafford, was preaching to some village labourers. *"This caused the Rector great offence and Amos was waited upon by his curate whose eloquence, failing to induce the peasant to shut his door against the preacher, he told him that unless he would desist from permitting the visits of the dissenter, he should hear further about it."*

The above lines printed in a lengthy article in the Durham Chronicle of 1st April 1826, were copied from a report in the 1820/21 AGM of the 'Society of the Protection of Religious Liberty' by Mr Wilks, its secretary. The scathing article is clearly intended to expose and embarrass Dr Van Mildert, in 1826 the newly appointed Bishop of Durham. A high churchman and eminent theologian he became a passionate opponent of the Protestant non-conformist movement and wrote against *'the disloyal who were finding the new Methodism attractive.'* Dissenting congregations had increased rapidly since the end of the Civil War amongst the illiterate rural population. In 1672 Watlington had four houses licensed to hold meetings, whilst Baptists and Quakers became active in Benson. Dissent was slow to arrive in Ewelme as in 1801 only two villagers attended the Methodist meetings in Wallingford. (Most likely Amos and his wife Sophia - then in their early 20s).

As Amos had refused to obey the Curate's command, the humble labouring man was summoned to the Rectory. (The Chronicle prints a full verbatim account of the exchange, abridged here, although not giving credence to the reporter). The Rector began his harangue. *"Norroway, what is it I hear? I understand you encourage a Methodist preacher at your house."* Amos replied, *"Yes Sir, I do. He has been several times, and here is the license of the house."* The Rector read it and denounced it as a forgery. When Amos stated it had come from the Bishop's office at Oxford by Mr Heafford himself, the Rector countered - *"Why, any house or any blockhead may be licensed for eighteen pence. Well, what is your reason for holding meetings at your house?"* Amos explained, *"Because by the preaching of the gospel, I have been led to see that I am a sinner and am desirous that others should go to Heaven as well as myself."* The Rector demanded the name of the preacher's dissenting denomination adding - *"What is your preacher? Is he a shoemaker, or cobbler, or what?"* Amos said, *"He is a preacher of the gospel; and belongs to a Missionary Society in London and follows no trade or business besides."* Asked where he preached Amos answered *"At Watlington, Chalgrove, Stadhampton and Ewelme, besides other places."* When the Rector retorted he *"...thought it a mean and scandalous trick for such a fellow to enter villages and lead the best of the people away from the church."* Amos defended, *"The gentleman means no such thing, Sir, he comes to instruct the ignorant, and teach poor people the way to Heaven."* The Rector countered *"Why, all the people of this parish belong to me, and if I suffer any person to lead them astray, I must be answerable for them; but if they will not come to church that they may be saved, that is their own fault."* When the Rector suggested Amos go and hear him preach *"...as good doctrines as that fellow."* Amos responded *"Sir, I have never attended at church since the Lord gave me to see that salvation is all of grace, through faith in Christ."* Asked if grace was not found in the church Amos answered scripturally *"Yes, I believe the grace of God is in his church; but then that church is a congregation of good and faithful men."* The infuriated Rector then threatened, *"Norroway, I am highly offended with you, and unless you give up your meetings, you shall feel the effect of my displeasure; but if you give them up, I will take no further notice of it. However, if you do not, I will do all in my power to make you, for I am determined to put a stop to them; so, you may go about your business!"* Respectful to the end Amos replied *"Sir, I cannot promise to give them up. Good morning Sir"*.



Left: Ewelme's Primitive Chapel and Right: The former Wesleyan Chapel (now the Village Store)

An outraged Mr Wilks told the AGM – *“Thus, they parted; and scarcely was it credible, the poor man was served with notice to leave his cottage. But shall he quit? No, not if I spend the last fragment of my fortune! He may quit that cottage, but there shall be reared for him in that village another, and he shall not be perforce a wanderer! On the front of that cottage shall be placed this inscription, ‘AN ASYLUM FROM PERSECUTION.’”* The Norroway's were rehoused in Ewelme - with or without the inscription - as they had the satisfaction of seeing the Wesleyan Chapel built in 1826 (now the village shop), with a smaller Primitive Methodist Chapel following in 1849. The 1851 Census records Ewelme's population as 673 and on the Census day 220 attended the church and 178 attended the two chapels. Those figures included the Norroway's, as Sophia died in 1864 aged 84, and Amos in 1868 aged 86. (His mother Esther had died in 1839 aged 90!) Amos had to go into the church then, as they were buried in the churchyard. (Later non-conformists were buried in the new Municipal Cemetery in Wallingford). The Wesleyan Chapel was disused by c1914, but the Primitive Chapel functioned into the early 1960s under the evangelical Kathleen Poupart.

As for Dr Van Mildert, he was allegedly aggrieved at being passed over for Canterbury by his predecessor at Ewelme, Dr William Howell. Despite his renowned theological learning it was conjectured that he didn't quite fit the mould, being the son of a failed gin distiller! He left Ewelme in 1820 becoming the Bishop of Llandaff, Dean of St Pauls, and finally, from 1826, Bishop of Durham, where he co-founded Durham University. He died at Bishop Auckland Castle in 1836, being the last of the line of Prince Bishops, a once-powerful mediaeval political appointment dating from 1075.

Ewelme Village Archive