

EWELME CHURCH

by George Cannon

Taken from Glimpses of an Oxfordshire Village, ed. By Anne Chisholm

At the Turn

In 1901 the successor to the Reverend Henry Kingdom Simcox, Rector of Ewelme, was the Reverend Charles Thomas Cruttwell, graduate of Merton College Oxford. In 1904 the newly appointed Regius Professor of Medicine at Oxford was Sir William Osler - he was the 21st holder of the title. With the Regius Professorship went the Mastership of the Almshouses, a post created by King James 1 in the 17th century and applied ever since. This new co-operation of Church and Almshouse was to prove most beneficial to both, as well as being of great benefit to the whole village community. Unlike some holders of the position of Master of the Almshouse before and since, Sir William, and his family, came to love the village right from his first visit. When he came to occupy the part of the Almshouse allotted to his office, it gave great delight to the almsmen in their ancient dwellings for he was the first Master in the memory of any resident to live in. This was probably the first act that endeared him to the people of Ewelme. He noticed that many things had been neglected over past years and the original wishes of the Founders had been ignored, among them the practice of daily worship in the Chapel built for use by the Almsmen. Sir William insisted that, whilst he was in residence, the daily attendance at worship should be restored and maintained, giving due thanks for the generosity of the Founders, the Duke and Duchess of Suffolk in 1437. Sadly, the current position is limited to a 15 minute service once a year in St. John's Chapel attended by most of the Almspeople and the Trustees who are visiting Ewelme for their July meeting; the service is usually conducted by the Rector.

Some of our Rectors

During the past century there have been eleven changes of clergy, including the Reverend Cruttwell. The Reverend Humphreys stayed for the longest period between 1923 and 1944. Our present Rector, the Reverend Martin Garner was inducted in March 1994 and has the care of four churches which include Ewelme, Brightwell Baldwin, and Cuxham with Easington. He took on a United Benefice which was formed during the time of the Reverend Peter Renshaw. Because each church has its own Patron a new incumbent is chosen in turn by the Crown for Ewelme, by Merton College for Cuxham, and by Brigadier J N B Mogg, the Patron at Brightwell Baldwin. Like one of his predecessors, our present Rector and his wife made it their duty to visit and introduce themselves to the people in each parish. They work together, sharing the task of Ministry among the people in the Benefice. During this century the Church of England has undergone a number of changes, Liturgical Changes, and the Ordination of Women to the Priesthood among them. The church here has resisted changes to the forms of worship and clings tenaciously to the Book of Common Prayer rather than the Alternative Service Book and others. It decided about six years ago that it did not wish to appoint a Woman Priest but a new poll now might decide otherwise for the make-up of the village itself is changing. There is still a choir referred to kindly in a recent funeral address as 'the geriatric-choir' whose membership was smaller than it was thirty years ago, but the older members, mostly women, have certainly served for many years.

When I arrived in 1970 I encountered a strange situation in the church to do with what I might call the old choir and the new. The old choir consisted of those members who had

served for many years but who sang chiefly at the morning services. The young choir had been formed by a young and very competent musician who had come to live in the village. It should be explained that a new housing estate had been built which catered for young families buying their first homes, with father probably commuting to work outside the village. The new choirmaster came from this new estate and there seemed to be a definite antagonism towards its residents and any efforts they made to integrate into village life. When I was first asked to assist with the morning service, as Ewelme's first Licensed Reader, I was told by the Rector that 'We change in the bell tower.' So I did - with the old-choir. That evening I was assisting at the Evening Service and went to the bell-tower to change, as I had done in the morning. The Rector came looking for me to say, 'The young choir changes in St. John's Chapel.' Christian love and charity did not extend to the two choirs until some time later when Catherine Hare acted as mediator, and both choirs got together and changed in the Muniment room as one body. There is now only one, rather depleted, choir which is lacking in males but nevertheless gives a very good lead to Sunday worship and other occasions requiring a choir. There are also some younger members beginning to show an interest. They are all under the care of Dr James Garnett, who is also our Organist.

E W L May

The Rector in 1970, when I arrived, was the Reverend E W L May, an ex-Royal Air Force Chaplain. He had studied at Oriel College, Oxford, had gained his rowing Blue, and was interested in Extra-Sensory Perception and keen on Science. Sometimes his addresses were above the heads of non-scientific people but he was very thought-provoking. Because of his interest in ESP he was often questioned about the presence of 'ghosts' in or around the vicinity of the church. He would quietly indicate that he had been aware of certain manifestations but would not be specific. He loved to talk about the times he had been called upon to exorcise unwelcome spirits during his ministry, but I remember well his twinkling eyes and enigmatic smile as he recounted these events. It was during his time that the old electric lighting system was changed. The nave had been lit by electric lamps suspended from above and placed in the aisles so that only people sitting at the ends of the pews could easily read the words of hymns and prayers. A new system of reflected light from the roof was installed and the lighting greatly improved. After his retirement the Rector still retained an interest in flying and occasionally flew a light aircraft from Winkfield Airfield near Windsor. He also kept a keen eye open for UFO's and reported sightings and demanded explanations from the Authorities about these matters.

Reverend May retired in 1974 when the Sheffield Report was beginning to be implemented in parishes throughout the country. The effect on Ewelme was that the Living was 'suspended' for 5 years and, before a new presentation to the Living could be put into motion, investigations had to be made about the possibility of Ewelme sharing its new incumbent with some other local parish or parishes. We were already linked with Britwell Salome. Rural and urban parishes alike had to be subjected to a new system of clergy allocation. Eventually it was decided that we should come under the care of the Rector of Brightwell Baldwin, the Reverend Ieuan Williams. The old Rectory of Brightwell Baldwin was sold and our Rectory in Ewelme became the residence for our new Priest-in-Charge. The Reverend Williams took office here in 1977 and stayed until 1980. Upon his retirement he came to occupy one of the Almshouses; he still takes the occasional service as well as singing in the choir. He also had had the care of Cuxham with Easington churches which, some years later, became part of our United Benefice. Britwell Salome ceased to be part of the care of Ewelme but the United Benefice of the churches of Ewelme, Brightwell Baldwin, and Cuxham with

Easington came into being in the time of the Reverend Peter Renshaw in 1985.

Martin Robertson Talbot, MA

His was, sadly, a short-lived incumbency. From the very beginning he made it his task to know each of his parishioners and I recall the times he came to show me his notebook with the names of people he had managed to see and note down. He had a very practical side to his nature. I recall the time when the all-night stove in the School House had filled the place with evil smelling and noxious fumes. He had come to discuss some school matter but realising the dangerous nature of the stove he took off his tweed jacket, rolled up his sleeves and raked around with his hands to feel for any obstructions. Eventually we were to finish up with an eight-feet-long flue from the stove, through the thick outer wall, to the outside of the house. He reminded me of a wartime poster; it read: '*Don't be so heavenly minded as to be no earthly use!*' Following an accident on the motorway, he was diagnosed as having cancer. Visiting him at the Rectory on one occasion he spoke of his approaching death with amazing cheerfulness. He loved music and used to say that he could teach anyone to sing. He looked forward, above all things, to meeting Beethoven. He sat in a wheelchair at the Christmas Carol Service and his wish was that at his funeral service the Reading should be the beautiful words from St John's Gospel, '*In the beginning was the Word...*' He died early in the New Year of 1983 - much loved and sadly missed.

Henry Kingdon Simcox

Although this Rector's incumbency took him only eighteen months into the 20th century, he did leave his mark upon the village having served from 1889 until he resigned on July 2nd 1901. He was very conscious of his duties towards the Almsmen and the maintaining of Christian and virtuous behaviour among them. A local newspaper, dated 29th March 1901, noted that the Reverend Simcox and his Churchwardens did not agree on all issues. The article speaks of a discussion concerning the state of the churchyard, the Rector's authority over the churchyard and his right to claim certain fees and charges for services. The matter was debated by the Parish Council and advice was sought from the Church authorities over these sensitive issues. He did resign a few months later and this may, or may not, have had anything to do with the dispute referred to above. A Parish Council Minute, dated 29th November 1900, illustrates the Reverend Simcox's concern for the welfare of his poorer parishioners. It records that the Rector had asked the Ewelme Trustees to provide new labourers' cottages in place of two cottages which the Trustees had taken for other purposes.

The Reverend Charles Thomas Cruttwell MA

Several residents will recall one or both presentations of a pageant held in the grounds of Ewelme Manor. The pageant was written by the Rector's daughter, Prister Cruttwell, and portrayed the history of the village through the ages. It involved most of the community who made and wore splendid clothes representing historical characters. It was first presented in 1908 and the proceeds went towards the new Reading Room. The Rector himself was an authority on the history of Latin Literature and Early Christian Literature. The second pageant took place in 1951 on the evening of Friday July 27th and two performances on Saturday 28th. The cast was made up of more than 150 people. This time a sum of money was allocated to the School.

During his time a minor 'revolution' took place in the church at Ewelme. Visitors to the

building nowadays may notice that hooks are fixed to the pews on one side of the church but not on the other. The hooks were not for coats or umbrellas but for hats - men's hats. The sexes were segregated much to the annoyance of young, courting couples particularly. Mr Herbert Winfield recalls his father, also Herbert Winfield, telling of the occasion in 1905 when he had gone to church where the custom was for all couples to be separated after entering the porch. This particular day people ignored the directions of the sidesmen to sit one side or the other, male or female, and sat where they would, together. It must have caused quite a stir but the rebels got their way and couples sat together in church thereafter. This was another milestone in the life of Ewelme Church and a day no doubt remembered by the Reverend Cruttwell himself.

The Reverend Joseph Arthur Dodd MA

At the foot of the pulpit and the Rood Screen is a small tablet marking the burial of this Rector who came to Ewelme in 1911. He was immensely interested in the history of the village and the guide book produced by him, and based on work done by the Reverend Napier of Swyncombe, is the best of its kind. Like Napier, he spent much time researching the documents relating to the history of Ewelme and its Church and Almshouses. He also used material written by William Wigan Harvey, the first Rector to be appointed after the severance of the Regius Professorship from the Living of Ewelme which had lasted for over 250 years. With these two predecessors the Reverend Dodd was able to build up a fascinating picture of the Church's and the village's past. As an example, there is, in the corner of St John's Chapel, an old oak pew, which is the only surviving piece of furniture from the days when Ewelme Church boasted a fine Jacobean Pulpit with its sounding-board and hour-glass. There are in existence engravings by Skelton of the church before these alterations which took place in the days of Dr Burton in the 1830s. The Reverend Dodd's guide points out many fascinating details regarding these things.

Changes in the Church

When his book 'Chiltern Country' was published in 1934, Ewelme was described by H J Massingham in the following words: *'The place looks like a model exhibit of the past, not a village where people live. It is so well preserved you would think that its natives must be waxed and polished every day before breakfast and that a curator of human souls hands them a tablet of good conduct lessons every Monday morning of the week. ... Really, the most living things about Ewelme are its watercress beds.'* He revised his thoughts in a 2nd Edition, 1940-43, when he wrote, *'I wondered what could have possessed me to write of Ewelme so many years ago as though it were self-conscious and stood upon its dignity. ... This visit was one of repentance. These words are those of reparation.'* The watercress beds are no longer functioning but the 'vile pine pews' which Massingham referred to are still there, though some, which stood at right angles to those in the body of the church near the rood screen, have been removed. The area on the south of the church is now used by the Pram Service mothers and children who meet once each month. This group celebrates its 7th birthday in March 2000 and it is ironic that, when the area was cleared and a suggestion made to the incumbent that it would make an ideal Children's Corner, his reaction was, 'That is anathema to me!' This new group has been in action for just over five years and came into being during our last interregnum. It gives mothers with very young children an opportunity to meet informally and share worship together in their own 'corner.' There is a story which I cannot vouch for personally that, after the first meeting, one lady decided that she would not come again because 'nobody did anything to my pram.' A warning that one should be

careful about the choice of words for the title of a group.

Other alterations include the removal of the organ from the rear of the Church to the organ chamber. There was once a gallery behind the large curtain across the bell-tower. The oak lectern was made in Birmingham at the cost of £28 and brought to the Church in 1903. The beautifully painted altar and reredos in St John's Chapel is the work of J Ninian Comper, dated 1902. Latest of all is a fine piece of work done by a local craftsman, Mr John Burbidge. Some members of the choir had often commented about the difficulty of descending the steps from the Choir down to the Nave. Carrying their books, holding up their robes and treading safely was becoming hazardous. A handrail was suggested and eventually the Parochial Church Council asked Mr John Burbidge if he could design something appropriate to blend in with the ancient Rood Screen and do the work in similar design to that of the screen. The result is a fine piece of work adding to that of those craftsmen of over 5 centuries ago.

Visitors

Our Visitors' Book records people visiting from all parts of the world. Many speak of return visits after having lived here or have had some other connection. An often repeated comment is, 'Thank you for being open!' This reflects the fact that many churches feel that, for security reasons, they have to be locked. Fortunately, Ewelme has not suffered much from vandalism. Perhaps the worst incident of this century is the vulgar disfigurement of Comper's altar front in St John's Chapel. Fortunately, a former Headmaster of Ewelme School, Mr Peter Sykes, was an accomplished artist who produced the illuminated genealogical chart based on the shields around the tomb of Thomas and Matilda Chaucer. He carefully removed the offensive work of the vandals and restored the altar frontal.

An audacious act of vandalism followed the theft of money from a wall box for donations. A large, metal chest was placed on the floor near a table at the rear of the church. It was thought that this would be more difficult to vandalise. However, one morning one of our ladies entered the building and was making her way to the vestry when she noticed a lot of broken glass on the floor near the Rector's stall. Looking up it was obvious that someone had broken the clerestory window and entered the church by means of a rope. Having done this it was easy to open the church doors from inside and remove the iron chest. It has never been recovered but a more secure way of receiving donations has since been devised and the church remains open during the day. Long may it continue to do so.

One often associates cats with churches. Ewelme is no exception and for quite a few years we had a tabby which was often mentioned in the Visitors' Book. He originated as a local pet which apparently was not fed very regularly so wandered off to pastures new. He was adopted by people in the Almshouses and found his way up to the church. It was not uncommon to find 'trophies of the chase' in church and I recall finding a dead baby rabbit in the centre aisle shortly before a service. Miss Celia Haddon, a journalist from London writing an article on cats, (*Weekend Telegraph* 2/10/93) came to visit our church to see our much-mentioned feline. The tabby has since disappeared but a 'ginger' one seems to have taken over.

The current Visitors' Book records the visit of royalty to our church. King Constantine of Greece attended a baptism. The Queen came as godmother to Edwina, the daughter of the late Mr David and Lady Pamela Hicks. Earl Mountbatten was also in attendance as well as

the Queen of Sweden. The Prince of Wales came to another baptism in the Hicks family, that of their grand-daughter. That was a much quieter affair on a dismal Sunday afternoon. Queen Elizabeth, the Queen Mother, was also a visitor. One of her ladies-in-waiting, the late Viscountess Patricia Hambleden, lived near the church and would bring her royal visitor along occasionally. At one time a group of children were studying our local history and standing near the tomb of Alice, the Duchess of Suffolk. To the Queen Mother's amusement one of the children pointed her finger at the central part of the tomb and said, 'She's in there, you know!'

The Solemnisation of Holy Matrimony is a function of the Church. Ewelme is a perfect setting for both the ceremony and photographs. Mick Jagger of the Rolling Stones, Jerry Hall and Maureen Lipton have attended weddings here. Brides have arrived in a variety of ways and vehicles. One couple departed from the church in what was described as a horse and cart but which turned out to be the more genteel pony and trap. One couple walked the whole length of the village to their Wedding Reception and another couple recently left the ceremony to be greeted by a deluge of water from the clerestory windows where the roof had become flooded. Many visitors were quite wet. The organist did not include Handel's famous *Water Music* in his repertoire but the organ did, in fact, cease to function. Otherwise all was well.

During the century the church has had to make appeals for repairs, as well for day-to-day maintenance. The old system of special Easter offerings has gone so one source of raising a little extra has had to be replaced by others. Death-watch beetle in the timbers and damp have both been sources of concern. Some attribute the increasing damp to the removal of the old elms from the east end of the churchyard. There is no doubt that damp was taking its toll. With the help of English Heritage and the Historic Churches Trust, among others, funds have been raised to combat the damp. One way money has been raised is through flower-festivals, village fetes, and musical evenings in the church. One of the first of these evenings was a visit by young men from Cambridge University. They sang unaccompanied and their voices blended beautifully as they thrilled us with their talents. They became famous as 'The King's Singers'. They, and many others, have given us pleasure and joy and have helped to keep Ewelme Church going.

Thinking of music in church reminds me of some rather irreverent thoughts which my wife and I once shared in a service of Unity or Ecumenism. I cannot remember which. Three clergy, including our own Rector at the time, stood behind a makeshift altar which had been brought forward. They were dressed in their full 'vestments' and there was much chest-thumping, arms flailing and robes flying in a ludicrous fashion quite alien to the manner to which Ewelme is accustomed. Both of us said that the sight reminded us of Gilbert and Sullivan's *Mikado* and the singing of *Three little Maids from School*. I am not against laughter in church. I think there should be more cheer than there normally is, but pantomime from the clergy, no!

Having mentioned the choir earlier I think it might be interesting to mention one choir outing which took place in September 1910. The men's treat included a train journey to Paddington, entrance tickets to an exhibition, seven side-shows, pocket money and sweets, tobacco, cakes and bananas. Total cost was £10 1s 0d. The girls' treat included tickets, buses, dinners, the Hippodrome and teas. Total cost £1 5s 0d. The cost of the admission tickets for the men and boys was just 4d less than the total treat for the girls. I think there has been another change or two since those days!

EWELME RECTORS THIS CENTURY

Henry Kingdon Simcox, MA. 1889-1901
Charles Thomas Cruttwell, MA. Fellow of Merton. 1901-1911
Joseph Arthur Dodd, MA. 1911-1923
Alfred Thomas Humphreys, MA. 1923-1945
Kenneth Thomas Jenkins, BA. 1945-1952
Arthur Bolton, MA. 1952-1958
Kenneth St-Clair Thomas, MA. 1958-1970
Ernest William Lees May, MA. R.A.F Retired 1970-1974
Ieuan Merchant Williams, MA. 1977-1980 *
Martin Robertson Talbot, MA. 1980-1983
Peter Selwyn Kay Renshaw, MA. 1983-1993
Martin Wyatt Garner, MA. 1993-

These dates do not indicate the actual periods of interregnum but seek to indicate only the continuation of Rectors throughout this century.

* *Priest-in-Charge of Ewelme.*