

Doing the Duty of the Parish: Surveys of the Church in Hampshire 1810

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The standard of pastoral care provided by the 18th-century Church of England received a notoriously bad press both from its contemporary Evangelical critics and from its Victorian successor. The very gradual rehabilitation of the Hanoverian church's reputation during the last century from the charge of pastoral neglect has stemmed in no small measure from the publication of primary sources and records such as these edited by Mark Smith for the Hampshire Record Society. The process of scholarly revisionism began over ninety years ago with the publication in 1913 of R. E. G. Cole's edition for the Lincoln Record Society of the *Speculum* of the Lincoln diocese during the episcopates of William Wake and Edmund Gibson, and more especially with Canon Ollard and P. C. Walker's five volume edition in the Yorkshire Archaeological Record Series of the returns to the queries issued by Archbishop Thomas Herring to the clergy of the Yorkshire diocese at his primary visitation in 1743. Ollard and Walker's largely favourable findings about the diligence of the eighteenth-century clergy in the parishes were quoted approvingly by Norman Sykes in his *Church and State in England in the Eighteenth Century* (1934), which is usually credited with being a landmark volume in providing the first positive general assessment of the Georgian church.

Since Ollard and Walker, and since Sykes, a steady trickle of published editions of visitation returns, *Specula*, and other surveys of the church, have been produced, which is itself testimony to the opening up of diocesan and county record offices to the academic community during the twentieth century. Although often antiquarian in focus, taken together these publications have shed a much brighter light on the workings of the Hanoverian church, often complicating the Victorian stereotypes about what the eighteenth-century church was doing on the ground, and in some cases challenging and overturning our understanding of that church as a pastorally lethargic and somnolent institution. Those interested in the workings of the Georgian church in Hampshire are now particularly fortunate, since prior to the publication of the current volume, Professor W. R. Ward published *Parson and Parish in Eighteenth-Century Hampshire: Replies to Bishops' Visitations*, which was an edition of the returns to the visitation queries of 1725, 1765, and 1788 (and its companion volume on parishes in Surrey, where the rest of the Wiltshire diocese lay). With Mark Smith's new volume we now have printed sources giving information on each parish in the county from the early

eighteenth to the early nineteenth centuries. Smith's previous work has largely been concerned with the fate of the church in Lancashire, where his pioneering study of the church in the parishes of Oldham and Saddleworth challenged conventional wisdom about the church's inability to cope with the pressures of urbanisation and industrialisation in the north of England. Here he turns his attention to one of the church's most southerly dioceses (which includes the Isle of Wight), and he has used this opportunity to assess the functioning of the church as an institution more widely. What light, then, do the surveys of 1810 shed on the church in Hampshire, and in what ways does this volume contribute to our understanding of the Georgian church?

Instigating the surveys (or, despite the title of this volume, perhaps more correctly survey in the singular, since strictly speaking the volume is an edition of one survey, with supporting material) was Bishop Brownlow North's method of finding out the answers needed to respond to two parliamentary demands for information which were forwarded to him by the archbishop of Canterbury. These concerned the residence or non residence of the parish clergy, and the strength of dissent in the parishes. As such the Hampshire returns provide the historian with detailed information for each parish on the patronage of the living, the name and residence status of the incumbent, the name of the curate, the number of parishioners the parish church or chapel could accommodate, the total population figure for the parish, and the existence of non-Anglican places of worship. In common with best practice as it had developed during the previous century, Brownlow North's survey took the form of a printed questionnaire, with spaces in between the questions for the reply.

In editing the clergy's returns to the bishop's questions, Smith has undoubtedly benefited from compiling the most recent addition to the published genre, and he has been able to learn from previous editions to present his material in the most effective way possible. He has also benefited from the spate of studies which, during the last twenty years, have addressed the issue of the state of the Hanoverian church, which means he is able to cross reference his Hampshire findings with those from other regions. Some of the earlier editions of these kinds of primary sources were little more than a transcription of the original material, with little or no editorial comment or annotation. Smith has wisely chosen to present us with a 'full dress' edition. The book is also very handsomely produced, but – one small quibble – although it was an excellent idea to have included a contemporary map of the county which shows the whereabouts of the parishes, it is not easy to pick out individual parish names without a magnifying glass, and it would have been useful to have included a key which would have greatly helped the reader in finding the precise location of a particular parish. The edition also includes a transcription of the petitions to the bishop for non-residence in 1809 and 1810, and a useful series of appendices contain a letter from Brownlow North to his chief diocesan administrator, a list of the number and types of non-resident incumbents, and a table of the values of the livings. There is also a comprehensive index, and four delightful virtually contemporaneous prints of the exteriors of four of the churches, and a slightly later painting of the interior of Portsmouth church.

Ironically perhaps, these responses, which provide us with a rich picture of some aspects of Hampshire church life, are, Smith argues, the product of a lack of information at the diocesan senior level, given that there are no records of an episcopal survey of the Winchester diocese after Brownlow North's primary visitation conducted as far back as 1788. This meant that the bishop did not have the information he needed to answer the parliamentary queries and this necessitated initiating the 1810 survey. Smith also implies that there are no similar surveys for other dioceses, which might indicate that Brownlow North had been particularly lax in this respect, since other bishops seem to have had the information required already to hand. However, it seems likely to me that the returns for the Canterbury diocese concerning residence and non residence in 1810–11 (found at Lambeth Palace Library, VG 2/7) were actually a response to the same parliamentary questions, and given that information had been collected for that diocese as recently as 1806, at the primary visitation of Archbishop Manners Sutton, this suggests not only that the archbishop was keen to get as accurate and as up to date information as possible for his own diocese to the questions which he had directed to his fellow archbishops, but also that the need to initiate the Winchester survey does not necessarily reflect badly on Brownlow North's administration.

Be that as it may, Smith has done a meticulous job in editing the responses and he provides often very full

biographical information (usually taken from the Oxford and Cambridge university registers compiled by Venn and Foster but also supplemented by contemporary sources) on all the clergy and patrons mentioned. These rich annotations reveal certain early nineteenth-century oddities. For instance, at least two of the Hampshire clergy received premature notices of their death in the *Gentleman's Magazine*. Smith's editorial notes also indicate that the Hampshire church had its share of colourful characters. There was the eccentric James Cookson, rector of Colemore, who once announced from the pulpit: 'I have forgotten my sermon, but I will read you a true account the battle of Waterloo.' There was also Richard Durnford, the curate of Chilbolton and a keen fisherman who enjoyed the delights of the river Test (and as such might have belonged to the common stereotype of the angling cleric). But Durnford was also a much loved pastor, standing up for his parishioners' rights, providing them with poor relief, allotments and a school. This is germane to Smith's broader conclusion that much about the Hanoverian church was not as it appears at first sight. The Hampshire clergy in 1810 included a number of notable clerics, ranging from the High Church William Howley, the vicar of Andover and future archbishop of Canterbury, to David Williams, the rector of Ludshelf, who was a keen promoter of the Sunday School movement. Jane Austen's brother James, the rector of Steventon, was also a member of the 1810 cohort. As a snapshot of the clergy who were in post in Hampshire, the biographical material demonstrates the longevity of a number of clergy – some were born in the first half of the eighteenth century, and some lived on into the second half of the nineteenth century – and this is a reminder of the difficulties involved in trying to sum up the overall ethos of the clergy at any one time.

The real significance of this volume, however, lies in Smith's masterly and substantial sixty-five page introduction which extracts as much juice as one could possibly hope for from what are often pretty dry sources. Smith has deftly scrutinised the responses to the bishop's questions, and places the Hampshire evidence within a broader national context. In particular, Smith's analysis takes the argument and debate about the state of the early nineteenth-century church forward in a number of suggestive ways. His findings are especially significant in the highly detailed consideration of clerical residence and non-residence, which goes behind the figures to look at what was actually happening at the parish level. This raises an important issue which future historians will need to apply elsewhere: how should we interpret the 'official statistics' as presented in Parliamentary returns, or culled from surveys such as these? For example, although only 47 per cent of the Hampshire incumbents were deemed to be 'fully resident', Smith's investigations demonstrate that in reality the pastoral provision was much more complex than this figure might suggest. He draws our attention to the 'messy "ecclesiastical geography"' of Hampshire which complicates what we might mean by 'resident' and 'non-resident'. There were, for example, a number of divided parishes which could mean that even if an incumbent was resident in one part of the parish, he could not be in the other. But Smith also argues that, measured against other variables, such as geography and size, the issues of non-residence and pluralism (the often-called 'twin evils' of the eighteenth-century church) may have been of lesser importance for their detrimental effects on the delivery of pastoral care. In any case, echoing the evidence found for other counties and dioceses, Smith notes that most pluralism was of a localised nature, and that long-distance pluralism was rare. He observes that some of Brownlow North's relatives benefited from pluralism of this type – a point which at first sight would seem to confirm some of the stereotypes we have of the workings of the Georgian church, but Smith shows that, in terms of pastoral care, these parishes were often very well looked after, having well-paid curates. In any case, some of the large parishes had chapels of ease which helped with the issue of size (echoing his findings from the Lancashire parishes of Oldham and Saddleworth); moreover, Smith wryly points out that in terms of the effective deployment of resources, the real scandal for the church would have been to have a resident clergyman in a parish with a tiny population.

The discussion of non residence is supplemented in the appendices with a transcription of the petitions for non-residence submitted in 1809 and 1810. Some of the requests for non residence will seem familiar to the modern academic administrator accustomed to reading student excuses for not submitting work in on time, and might seem to play into the hands of the church's critics. But Smith argues that most of the cases are above suspicion, and these were genuine problems of ill-health and old age (which were inevitable in a world before pension plans and retirement packages). Some of the petitions were for 'technical' non residence since the incumbent asked to live in a house which was actually nearer the church than the 'official'

one. And ill-health and disabilities can be found in the returns themselves: one cleric had difficulty in putting the answers in the right box because of problems with his eyesight.

Smith's findings about the backgrounds and career patterns of the Hampshire clergy also deserve some comment. He notes that the clergy was, by this date, an almost exclusively graduate profession (and links with New College, Oxford were particularly strong). And – mirroring evidence from elsewhere – the clergy came predominantly from clerical and middling backgrounds; this was not an aristocratic profession. But Smith's most important conclusion is that incumbents and their curates came from essentially the same social and cultural milieu, and if there was any significant difference between the two groups it was that curates tended to be younger than the incumbents, and they would eventually progress to a living. This is a crucial finding since some studies, especially of the north of England, have emphasised the gulf between curates and tenured incumbent, likening curates to a clerical proletariat. Smith does observe that there were a few bitter curates (but are there not in any profession?) such as James Hartington Evans the curate of Milford who finally ended up as a Baptist minister, but his was an unusual case.

As far as church accommodation was concerned, Smith concludes that this was, on the whole adequate, although there were a few parishes such as Newchurch (where the chapel of ease at Ryde could accommodate fewer than a quarter of the parishioners) and Portsmouth (where the population had grown very rapidly) where this was a problem, and may have resulted in some parishioners attending dissenting meeting houses. One clergy's response is particularly suggestive of the ways in which parishioners in one parish attended church, with husbands and wives going to separate services to allow their partner to stay at home to look after the children. This meant that, in this instance at least, not all the parishioners would have been expected to attend at any one time. How typical this arrangement was needs further exploration, but it might mean that in practice the parish church did not need to be able to accommodate the entire population and this finding will have implications for the ways in which we consider the issue of church accommodation. As far as the existence of dissent is concerned – which has been used by some historians as an indicator of the dissatisfaction parishioners showed to the church – Smith observes that nearly three quarters of Hampshire parishes claimed to have no dissenting meeting. No doubt this figure must be handled with care: clergy may have deliberately suppressed the information, and dissenters in one parish may have gone to another parish to attend a meeting, but Smith argues that there was no correlation between non residence of the incumbent and the existence of dissent, and he suggests that a more crucial factor was the size of the parish. In any case, he also points to the long held phenomenon of double allegiance whereby parishioners attended both parish church and meeting house, which makes the existence of dissent a more complex indicator of attitudes towards the church than some interpretations have held.

Smith's analysis of the state of the Hampshire church in 1810 is, then, generally up-beat. His one area of reservation is the working of the episcopal visitation system (since, as noted above, the reason why Brownlow North needed to conduct the surveys that make up the core of this edition is that he had not had a hands on visitation since his primary one over twenty years previously), and here Smith challenges a recent opinion that the Winchester diocese did have regular episcopal visitations. Rather, Smith argues, these were held by the vicar general and were likely to be largely revenue raising. He also gives more credit to the archidiaconal visitations. Smith may very well be right about the lack of episcopal visitations, although as one used to an endless round of internal university inspections and reviews, and given the positive things Smith says of the state of the church in Hampshire, would it be stretching the evidence too much to suggest that Brownlow North might more favourably be seen as using a streamlined procedure where monitoring was devolved to the archidiaconal level (in modern parlance might he have pioneered a 'light touch' quality assurance system)? In any case, Smith does applaud some elements of the bishop's senior administrative team, notably J. H. Glee, the bishop's steward, and rightly points to the need for a proper exploration of the role played by the laity at all levels of diocesan administration.

There are a number of further reflections which also spring to mind. First, it would be interesting to know if there was any follow-up correspondence arising from the 1810 survey, and if so, could this be published too? Second, I hope Dr Smith envisages editing the Surrey returns (also part of the diocese of Winchester), and certainly the Surrey Record Society should commission him to do so. Third, there is the larger question of

who will use this edition? One of the frustrations of editing material such as this (I write as someone who did a similar project) is that it is not used by historians working outside church history. How many social historians ever consult publications such as these, let alone use them in their findings? Recently Mark Goldie has wondered why historians working in the early twenty-first century seem so hung up with challenging the judgements of Victorian critics, and gently chided some of us for not moving out of a historiographical framework established nearly one hundred and fifty years ago. Part of the response would be that, despite a large body of work which has now challenged Victorian perceptions, a great many historians of the eighteenth century working outside church history depend on, and rehearse, the Victorian church's judgements about its Hanoverian predecessor.

One final note. Left with such a wealth of information, I am tempted to reflect that this material, if collated with that found in all the other published and unpublished surveys, *Specula* and visitation returns relating to the church, from the late seventeenth to the mid nineteenth centuries, and teamed up with cognate material currently being prepared for the AHRC funded [Clergy of the Church of England Database](#) [2] (1540–1835), in a fully searchable online database, would make an enormously rich resource for both historians of religion and for social historians. Bringing together all the source material of this kind would finally put the Victorian myth of the eighteenth-century Church of England firmly in its place.

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