

Case Study: Thaxted

With its focus on the modern diocese of London, Building on History has inevitably found itself primarily focusing on the urban environment. The nearest we've come to venturing into Arcadia was an early trip to a Thameside location in the south west of the diocese. In our sessions we have been at pains to emphasise the importance of the specifics of place and that it is only through the knowledge of a particular parish or church's history that we can hope to learn important lessons from the past which can inform current ministry; and as part of this we have been emphasising that successful ministry in London could take very different forms, from the pauper clergy employed to staff the new churches built in Bethnal Green in the 1840s via the Christian socialist ministries of clerics such as Thomas Hancock, Shuttleworth and Stewart Headlam of the 1890s, the web of engaged lay agency documented by Jeffrey Cox in Lambeth to the remarkable suburban ministries mapped by the late Rex Walford along the route of the North Circular Road. These ministries are all different: but they could all be seen as essentially 'urban'. We have been able to do this because of the remarkable body of work produced by historians of the Church of England over the past thirty years on Victorian and Edwardian parish ministry. Perhaps inevitably because of the association in many minds of secularization and urbanization and industrialization, the majority of this work has concentrated on ministry in the urban setting, as in some sense the front line – despite Robin Gill's indication that in fact church attendance in rural Northumberland could be as deficient as in central Manchester. There have of course been some significant studies of the rural church in the nineteenth century, perhaps most notably the work of Frances Knight, the late Rob Lee and James Obelkevitch, but there has been very little indeed to follow on to take the story into the twentieth century.

That said, it is clear that we mostly have a sense that we do know what that famous figure, 'the English country parson', was about. For many people today, it is probably the first thing that springs to mind if the word 'vicar' is mentioned. It is hardly surprising given that it is an enduring stereotype, not least on television, invoked by everyone from Richard Curtis in the *Vicar of Dibley* to John Betjeman in his fondly remembered TV documentaries. Whereas discussion of urban clergy can unashamedly focus on pastoral challenge and strategies, all too often that of the country parson indulges itself in the celebration of eccentricity and oddity which

the rural church of England can be regarded as fostering in an essentially harmless, way, as if it were some kind of home for mildly deranged gentlefolk. Each it seems, has a hobby.

It would be an interesting project to trace the emergence of the sense of urban and country ministries having very distinct trajectories and identities: the core of the story undoubtedly lies in the early 19th century, and it is something to which I am currently devoting attention. But for *Building on History*, there is also a question as we seek to take its scope beyond the urban environment. Is the historical work on the pastoral styles observed in the city in any sense relevant either to the satellite towns around London or indeed the ‘real countryside’ to be found in so many Anglican dioceses?

Take one example, the Christian socialist ministry which flourished in a number of British urban centres at the end of the nineteenth century and for the first threequarters of the twentieth, from figures such as Hancock and Shuttleworth already mentioned through men such as St John Groser and Jack Boggis in the 1920s and through to figures such as Kenneth Leech at St Matthew’s Bethnal Green in the more recent past. To the latter three of these priests, of course, it would have seemed absurd to suggest that there was no place for such ministry in the rural environment, for all three of them took significant inspiration from the example of Conrad Noel, perhaps the most famous socialist priest in the church of England in the early 20th century. Noel was vicar of Thaxted from 1910 to 1942. They borrowed not only the political message from Noel, but liturgical and pastoral inspiration. Yet despite this, much commentary on Noel has none the less managed to fit him into the country parson stereotype by presenting him essentially as an eccentric who happened to come wrapped in a red flag, a figure of fun. We might expect this of political opponents. Thus the conservative writer on rural affairs, James Wentworth Day, who had been one of the students who had stolen the red flag and Irish tricolour that Noel hung inside his church in what gained notoriety as the Battle of the Flags in 1922, in 1976 had little time for Noel: ‘rather more wide-eyed than Bertrand Russell, [Noel] raised his skinny arms to heaven and in an Oxford voice cried for the day when the gutters of Mayfair would run red with blue blood and the Royal Family would hang from the lamp posts of the Mall. ... He was a high priest not of God, but of treason ... He was not only mad, but bad. He was not only a fool but a clown. ... At Thaxted he collected around him a bevy of so-called Catholic crusaders. This

included a cluster of dishevelled young women who dressed in bright red and were the cause of much malicious local gossip ... Noel was in short an unmitigated nuisance, who roused most of his parishioners to fury and embarrassed his best friends'.¹ Right, in every sense, had prevailed. Noel was now an irrelevance. 'Who remembers the Red Vicar now?' But in fact even those sympathetic to Noel's message end up in certain respects treating him as eccentric, an urban fish out of water in the Essex countryside. He had, after all been put there by an eccentric of another sort, Daisy countess of Warwick, the ex-mistress of Edward VII who had converted to socialism and gave Noel the living not to minister to the folk of Thaxted but to finance his tours to the urban centres of the north to spread the socialist message. And for Alan Wilkinson, for example, for all Noel's charisma and skill as a polemicist, there was something faintly absurd about preaching revolution in the heart of not only the countryside, but of a solidly Tory constituency (Noel's MP was no less a figure than RAB Butler). The sense of absurdity for commentators of all descriptions, of course, was only increased by the Noel's involvement in the revival of Morris dancing, which flagged further eccentricities alongside the socialism of self-indulgent ruralism and medievalism. Noel might have a legacy for the development of English Christian socialism, but this was no model for sustainable parish ministry. It was never going to work. As a despondent Noel himself reflected to the Labour politician George Lansbury in 1920, : 'Thaxted people generally don't understand about things. Some of the Labourers in the pubs on May Day night did not know what May Day meant.'

However, in some ways the very charisma of Noel and the importance of his thought for the Christian socialist tradition have perhaps served to prevent a proper understanding of what was actually going on in Thaxted, and which my own current research into the history of the Christian tradition in the town over the course of the whole of the 20th century hopes to illuminate. For remarkable as Noel as a national figure is, the story of Christian socialism at Thaxted is certainly not that of a heroic if misguided pastor grandstanding at the expense of his parishioners.

For evidence of this, one need only look at another Thaxted priest, Jack Putterill. Putterill succeeded Noel in 1942, and remained vicar until he retired in 1973. He was a talented amateur

¹ *Saffron Walden Weekly News*, 5, 12 Feb 1976.

astronomer; indeed he was also a talented amateur musician, who worked closely with Gustav Holst during the latter's time as organist in the church in the 1920s and would run a parish orchestra which played in services. And if anything he was even keener on Morris dancing than Noel, playing and dancing throughout his life. So far the familiar clerical hobbyist. But there was a further link with Noel in that he was also a convinced socialist: indeed on some issues he was to the left of Noel, remaining an admirer of the Soviet Union's leadership long after Noel had begun to query Stalin's influence. In 1953 he would conduct prayers for Stalin's soul, and would struggle to disapprove of the invasions of Hungary and Czechoslovakia. But Putterill was not the nominee of an eccentric patron. Indeed the patron at the time of his appointment had doubts about whether he wished to see a ministry in the tradition of Noel's carry on in the parish, and as Noel's son-in-law, Putterill looked an unlikely candidate to succeed in those circumstances. The fact that he did so owed much to a determined campaign by parishioners to ensure that a ministry they had come to value would continue in a similar vein. Taking advantage of recent legislation allowing PCCs to write to patrons a formal statement of their own wishes, that in Thaxted had done just that, sending a many sided letter stressing precisely what they thought their rural community needed. Unaware that rural communities were not supposed to want this sort of thing, they wrote asking for a priest who would continue 'The constant and courageous preaching of the interpretation of the Kingdom of God as concretely to be brought about on earth by human effort aided by Divine Grace, together with the social activity which this implies.' ... 'We earnestly desire the appointment of such a man so that the great work of Conrad Noel which has become uniquely embodied in the worship and life at Thaxted Church may continue to be an inspiration to those who regularly worship there as well as to many who live and work in other parishes'.

When Putterill retired some thirty years later, they did exactly the same. In fact one of the most striking things about Christian socialism at Thaxted is that it was not sustained by the dogged insistence of the clergy of the parish or the patron, but by a supportive churchgoing population who knew precisely what they were doing. The PCC was as important as the priest. And for more than 40 years the PCC and a large number of parishioners gave active support to their radical ministers, even at times of acute crisis. Thus during the Battle of the Flags, some reporters claimed that the 'bulk of the church people' in Thaxted opposed Noel. But in PCC elections at the height of the struggle, when opponents of Noel sought to get as many names as it

could on to the church's electoral roll and hundreds of people turned up for the election Noel's candidate for people's warden won a clear victory by 105 to 68, while more generally the vicar's party polled 3172 to the opposition's 786.

In light of this, and its enduring popularity, it would therefore be pretty bold to describe Noel's ministry as not meeting a response from his parish. It is important to stress two further points. One is that this was in no sense a result of playing down the politics within the parish. Noel politicized everything: from empire day, to the Boy Scouts and George V's Jubilee. But this politics ensured a constant dialogue with both supporters and opponents in the parish, who found the church at the centre of the lives in some senses whether they liked it or not. Indeed this leads on to the second point: that many who were not wholly onboard for Noel's political preaching, nonetheless found extraordinary spiritual and human values in the ministry which the politics inspired to which they could not help responding. It was a holistic ministry, sanctifying the lives of parishioners at every possible opportunity from their work to their play and above all at their worship, where the world was brought in to the church, just as the church was taken out onto the streets in the eucharist processions which Noel introduced. Morris dancing looked a much more serious activity in church than it did in the pub garden, and it retained something of its spiritual message for Noel and his successors when it took place in the vicarage garden. As one of his disciples would later put it from the pulpit, after watching a dance under the crossing:

What a demonstration of cooperative beauty that is! No words are spoken, every man knows what to do, and they do it all together, a very model of what Fr Jack used to call 'Christ's new international realm of justice and comradeship, that kingdom of God on earth to which we all look forward.

The services too, spoke not just to fellow travellers making the day trip from London to worship alongside their hero. They were deeply valued by all who took part, not least in the large mixed

choir which sang at all services from the body of the church. Visitors commented not just on the architecture and decorations which made Thaxted so distinctive, but the mood and demeanour of the congregation, captured in part at least by the Boulting Brothers when they visited Thaxted in the 1930s. Eric Milner White, the Cambridge theologian, reported that ‘in all my priesthood, I have never met such a spontaneous spirit, and I know it must be of your erection under God, ... It seemed to me I was back in the days of the Apostolic church’. Likewise Eleanor Farjeon, the children’s author who wrote the words of ‘Morning has Broken’, wrote that ‘I have carried away a feeling about your Church and your words and the day that I will never lose’. The parents of Eric Makeham, killed at Messines in 1917, visited Thaxted for the first time when the statue of St Francis that still commemorates him in the church was erected the following year. They wrote to Noel afterwards that their impressions were ‘at once extremely vivid and yet of a strange dream like quality, and they will always remain in our memory as a precious possession. ... They had been prepared for the grandeur of the church but its ‘exquisite appointments and saintly solemn atmosphere quite transcended our highest expectations ... in the solemn beauty of the services we found a deep consolation.’ Other similar endorsements came from Flora Robson and Sybil Thorndike: but more importantly from many of the Thaxted parishioners. Through such impressions, the model of services at Thaxted had a lasting impact far beyond the core constituency for a thoroughgoing Christian socialism. And even those who were active in opposition to Noel found themselves drawn to its services, including some of the most committed conservatives in the community.

What conclusions do I want to suggest we might take away from this very brief excursion to rural Essex? First, and this is perhaps aimed at my fellow historians more than at this audience, we should be wary of patronising the rural community. It is quite capable of taking on board sophisticated and controversial ministry if presented in the right way. Fifty years after

Noel had first preached, the parishioners of Thaxted regularly received pulpit instruction from the Cambridge scientist and historian of Chinese science Joseph Needham, treating them to discourses on quantum physics, Daoism, the latest science fiction, and sexual ethics as ambitious as any programme of preaching from a university chapel. Secondly, that challenging ministry can benefit even those who are not committed to its core message, and that Noel's patent sincerity and commitment and concern that the spiritual should never be substituted by the political even if his ministry was to be unequivocally political won the respect and engagement of opponents in the community even if not that of those outside. This is a lesson applicable to ministry in all environments, and I would like to suggest that more generally Thaxted suggests the danger of assuming too readily that certain approaches are automatically doomed to failure in one or other pastoral environments because they are more properly associated with urban or rural ministry. In part, this example underlines the point which I indicated earlier has been central to our message: the relevance of the specifics of a parish's history and character as expressed and formed by its history. Noel benefited from the fact that Thaxted's past provided a long history of ecclesiastical tradition that could be mobilised to contextualise his own work. Moreover, Thaxted was a town not a village, and that made a real difference: emphasising the fact that outside the city as much in it, there is a wide range of parish environments about which one should not rush to generalise. And finally, I would hope it would give us at least some grounds for hope that although to date Building on History has focused on making more widely known elements in the church history of the capital, as it broadens its horizons not only can it bring to the task new findings about the modern history of the rural church, but that even the history of forms of ministry more commonly associated with the religious life of the industrial city may not only be of direct relevance to other settings, but may indeed in the right setting and with a contextually sensitive approach produce something rather more productive than eccentricity in rural ministry.

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