

# ◆ Sir Richard Hotham's chapel at Bognor

by Ron Iden

*This article examines the dispute, 1792-7, between Sir Richard Hotham and his former friend the Revd Thomas Durnford, vicar of South Bersted, over the licensing of Hotham's private chapel. The dispute is the subject of a collection of correspondence of Archbishop Moore held at Lambeth Palace Library. The collection includes details of the agreement hastily negotiated after reconciliation in 1797, although how the reconciliation was procured remains a mystery. The particular issue explored here is why Hotham chose not to resolve the matter normally by Act of Parliament. Instead, he prolonged hostilities by prevaricating over the degree of public use he intended for his private chapel, seeking to accommodate the distinguished visitors to his newly-created seaside resort.*

In many of the 'watering places' and other fashionable areas established in the 18th and early 19th centuries, extra provision was needed for church accommodation. This was often met by the building of a proprietary chapel (one built and maintained privately by either a group of trustees or a wealthy individual) which, with the status of a chapel-of-ease, would meet little opposition from the local incumbent. In many cases, however, and often when the proprietor was a large landowner erecting a chapel for private domestic use and charging high pew-rents for a selected congregation, parochial rights were encroached upon, or the parish priest was otherwise offended by extreme Evangelicalism or the religious doctrine preached. In the Established Church tradition, such proprietary chapels possessed no constitutional or parochial rights themselves and were seldom consecrated; the bishop had the power to grant (or alternatively to revoke) licences for ministers to perform the duties of these chapels, but only with the consent of the incumbent of the parish in which the chapel lay.<sup>1</sup>

When Sir Richard Hotham, the 'founder' of Bognor (then a tithing within South Bersted parish) built a private chapel next to his own house in the 1790s, consent for its licensing was withheld by the vicar, the Revd Thomas Durnford. South Bersted was a peculiar under the jurisdiction of Canterbury diocese, in which the Archbishop served as bishop; and the appeasement of the vicar between 1792 and 1797 is the subject of a fine collection of correspondence and legal opinion on the status of Hotham's chapel, preserved at Lambeth Palace Library.<sup>2</sup> Others involved in the dispute were

Archbishop John Moore, Sir William Scott (commissary of the Archbishop and vicar-general for the province of Canterbury), and George William Dickes and the Revd Francis Tutte, respectively the Archbishop's registrar and chaplain at the time of the dispute.

Richard Dally's assertion in 1828 (reiterated by others since) that consecration of the chapel was the main issue in the dispute and that 'all difficulties were overcome' is misleading.<sup>3</sup> Hotham stated in 1797 that he would 'on no account think of having it consecrated', concurring with the Archbishop's view that this would be detrimental to the parish should Bognor fail 'as a place of great public resort'.<sup>4</sup>

Hotham's initial relationship with Durnford was described by Dally as 'a close and intimate acquaintance'.<sup>5</sup> Hotham had arrived on the Sussex coast in 1784 at the age of 62 in search, it is said, of rest and recuperation.<sup>6</sup> His choice of Bognor, however, may well have derived from personal connections with Durnford's family.<sup>7</sup> The connection is a tenuous one, but Hotham evidently relied heavily on the vicar's knowledge of the local terrain and landholding for, as Durnford reveals in his letters, it was he who purchased 'upwards of 1,300 acres' in and around Bognor for Hotham's benefit.<sup>8</sup> And the significance for a hitherto poor parish of Bognor's inauguration as a purpose-built seaside resort had inspired Durnford to record in his parish register the laying by Hotham of 'the first Foundation Stone of a Public Bathing Place' on 18 January 1787.<sup>9</sup>

In August the following year Hotham applied to the Archbishop to replace an existing gallery on the

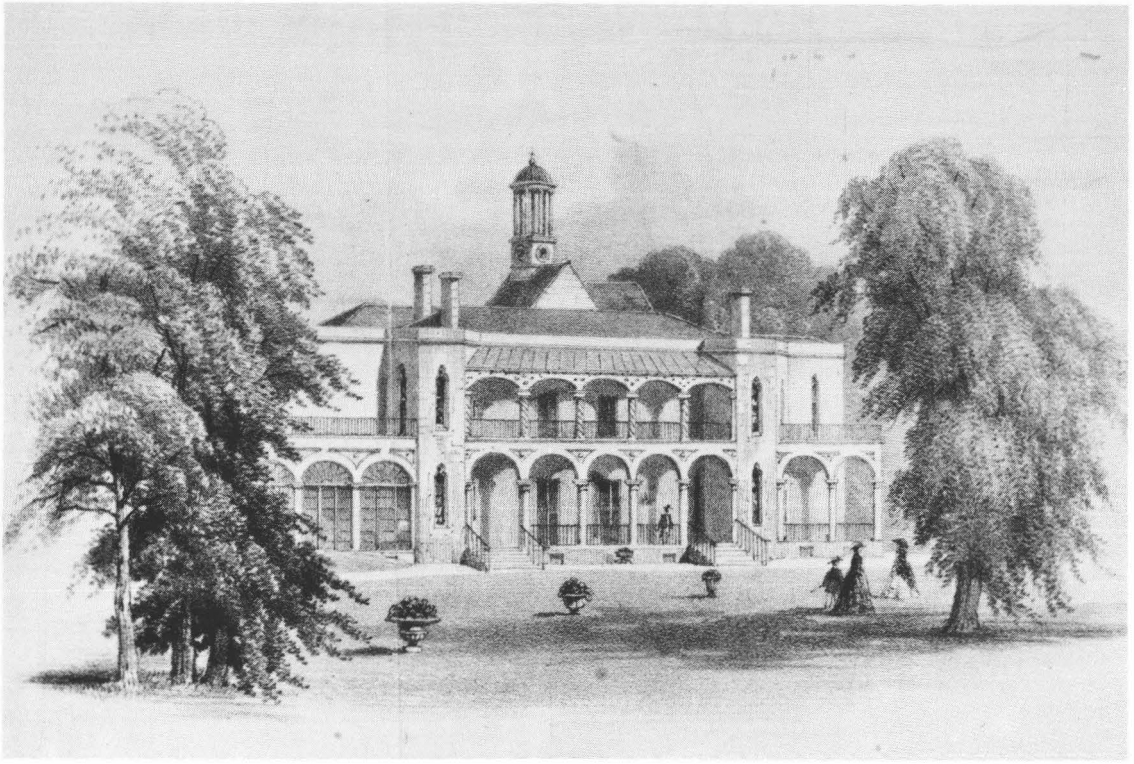


Fig. 1. Bersted Lodge, formerly Chapel House, showing the roof-line of the chapel, around the clock-tower (from sale particulars, 1857, in WSRO UD/BR/10/12).

north side of the parish church at Bersted, with 'a convenient and proper' gallery for himself and his household, complete with its own entrance, staircase and windows, and reserving the space below the staircase as a burial vault for himself. These and other improvements were duly made at a cost of £600.<sup>10</sup>

On 12 August 1793, by which time Hotham had completed some 30 houses and the success of his venture was more assured, the Duke of St Albans laid the corner-stone of a new chapel attached to Hotham's own residence, Chapel House (now Hotham Park House). By all accounts the occasion was a grand affair attended by 'upwards of 120 persons'.<sup>11</sup> But already the vicar was uneasy. Correspondence with the Archbishop had opened in October 1792 when Durnford alerted him to Hotham's intentions, which included the pocketing of the chapel pew-rents, so that the Archbishop might

. . . guard against any thing being done injurious to the Rights and Interests of the Vicarage; which must otherwise be the Case,

as the Burdens of Duty will be greatly increased, without any emolument annexed to it . . .<sup>12</sup>

Two years after the stone-laying, a visitor complained of the crowded accommodation at Bersted Church. Hotham's chapel was still 'not quite finished' and indeed the vicar's intransigence was to delay the opening for a further two seasons.<sup>13</sup>

The reasons why the friendship turned sour are fairly clear. In the presentation of his case to Sir William Scott early in 1796, Hotham argued that as 'some of the most respectable Families in the Kingdom', these short-term visitors would be no burden on parish expenses, he would be paying a 'satisfactory stipend' to an ordained minister as well as taxes on well-furnished houses, and the absence of christenings, marriages or burials absolved him from any dispute with the incumbent over surplice-fees.<sup>14</sup> Durnford, on the other hand, was naturally opposed to a plan which would rob the Bersted congregation of its newest and wealthiest members and benefit Hotham by way of income from

pew-subscriptions. Hotham's 30 houses already occupied land which had previously yielded vicarial tithes, and the absence of chapel surplice-fees was hardly to his advantage.<sup>15</sup> Lastly, but by no means least, there was Hotham's prevarication over the precise purpose his chapel was intended to serve.

What is less clear is firstly why this dispute lasted so long and secondly what exactly intervened to bring about the 'perfect reconciliation' in the summer of 1797. There are references throughout the correspondence to letters which apparently have not survived and the answers may well have lain hidden in these and in undisclosed meetings and conversations. Of the 47 folios in total, 33 are concerned with the final month and a half of negotiation over legal points to facilitate a temporary licence for the fast-disappearing season.

Hotham's reluctance to disclose to what extent the private chapel was intended for public use borders on duplicity. At the time of the stone-laying ceremony in 1793, he assured the vicar that he was building no more than an oratory for purely private use, although Durnford recognized it as 'evidently intended for a Place of Publick Worship'.<sup>16</sup> Why, after all, had he expended time and money in erecting a large gallery at the parish church for the use of himself, his family and household, merely to repeat the operation at his own house? Dally's assertion that the chief reason was the distance to Bersted Church (roughly  $\frac{3}{4}$  of a mile) is hardly credible.<sup>17</sup>

In his initial approach to the Archbishop in October 1792, Durnford spoke of being 'credibly informed' of Hotham's intention to build 'a large Chapel', which suggests a break in communication between the two protagonists even at this early stage.<sup>18</sup> The response from Lambeth on this occasion and following the start of building operations ten months later, was that no proceedings could be taken on rumour alone and 'till the Purpose discloses itself in some open and unequivocal Manner'.<sup>19</sup> But not until 30 January 1796 when, presumably, the chapel had been finally completed, did Hotham appeal directly to the Archbishop, 'as none but your Grace can now interfere'.<sup>20</sup> Hotham himself spoke of the matter as concerning 'Public Worship at a Public Place'. Indeed, the size of the completed chapel implied just that; a later description refers to 'A very elegant Chapel . . . 60 ft by 42 ft, pewed all round with handsome Galleries over, an Altar-piece, Pulpit and Vestry, painted wainscot color, and furnished in a style of chaste simplicity: an excellent

turret Clock, and various Rooms in the roof'.<sup>21</sup>

There is what might be seen as similar prevarication in Sir William Scott's summary of the case presented to him by Hotham which, in Sir William's words, deserved 'serious Consideration in many particular Circumstances, as being entirely new'.<sup>22</sup> The proprietor had built a chapel 'under his own roof' for the purpose of divine service for himself and his family, 'not meaning any private pecuniary advantage either to himself or any other Person' (no mention here of pew-rents). He wished also to accommodate the 'overflowing visitors' who were now too numerous for the parish church. Furthermore,

. . . It is meant that the Vicar and the Parishioners at large shall be without any cause of complaint whatsoever, as they are not to be admitted, therefore there can be no possibility of alienating the Affections from the Vicar.

Here, perhaps, was the real bone of contention. Hotham's private chapel was for public use — but only on a selective basis. His new resort of 'Hothampton' was for the *haut monde*; a select haven from the rowdiness then blighting Brighton. St Alban's Chapel (otherwise known as 'Hothampton Chapel') would emphasize that exclusiveness and also save his distinguished visitors the indignity of mixing with village yokels. Furthermore, Scott seems to imply that, as merely temporary occupiers of the newly-built dwellings on which Hotham paid taxes and furnished 'exactly as if they dwelt under the same Roof with himself', his chosen congregation were on equal footing with his family and thereby reinforced the status of a private chapel.

Hotham had 'fallen between two stools'; and that was possibly why he was unable to resolve matters by applying for a private Act of Parliament, the normal course of action had his chapel been intended for all-comers. Among the series of suggestions presented by Dr Scott to break the impasse was that of obtaining a licence through application to Parliament in defiance of the diocese and incumbent; that was deemed likely to prove 'ineffectual' and 'an improper attempt to break in upon the general Discipline of the Established Church'.<sup>23</sup>

Whether Hotham was deliberately clouding the issue is open to question. Faced with heavy expenses of landownership and the upkeep of property in Surrey as well as in Sussex, had he relied on his

friendship with Durnford to save him the additional cost of a private Act of Parliament? Did Durnford later suspect an ulterior motive in Hotham's early improvements to the parish church — another ingratiating action of a social climber perhaps? And was Hotham's choice of the Duke of St Albans to lay the foundation stone and the use of his name for the dedication significant? Hotham had been a member of the St Alban's Tavern group during his brief political career a decade earlier.<sup>24</sup> But the Duke's connection with Hotham remains a mystery; was he by coincidence visiting the new resort at the time or was this a ploy by Hotham, already aware of Durnford's opposition, to appoint a minister as chaplain to nobility?

Durnford's claim of 'all Our former differences buried in total Oblivion' in July of 1797, given Hotham's allusion, fifteen months before, to 'a man of Mr Durnford's Cast', whose 'most gross ill treatment' had caused him to all but abandon his chapel, and had 'driven away' his family from the parish church in favour of Sunday worship in a private room, is equally baffling.<sup>25</sup> This one letter reveals both the degree of acrimony which then prevailed and uncharacteristic despair on the part of Hotham, who on numerous occasions in his life had won over formidable opposition.<sup>26</sup> Few men over 60 would have launched themselves on such an ambitious project at Bognor. But at Bognor he found himself thwarted by the local parson. So why the change of heart? Did Durnford grow as tired of the quarrel as Hotham? Did the Archbishop proceed with his offer in January 1796 to act as mediator?<sup>27</sup> Nothing intervenes in the Lambeth correspondence and no final explanation can be made.

Though hostilities had ceased, and Hotham was dividing his time between Bognor and his other home at Merton, the finer details of the peace treaty had still to be legally resolved. Hotham's proposal was to appoint the Revd Archer Thompson from London as chaplain for three months in the summer.<sup>28</sup> As compensation for Thompson's refusal to divide the pew-subscriptions with Durnford, Hotham would convey to the vicar and his successors 40 of his 45 seats in the gallery at Bersted Church, together with £10 per year from his estate. In reply to queries from the Archbishop, Durnford wrote twice to George Dickes in the final week of July 1797, waiving all claims to the subscriptions, but expressing reservations as 'Steward to the Succession of the Vicarage'.<sup>29</sup> Under the faculty terms

the gallery seats were attached to certain of Hotham's houses and might prove a future liability through damage or dilapidation.<sup>30</sup> The vicarage would benefit more from an annual payment of £20, secured by endowment on part of Hotham's *land*, than from the £10 per annum allied to the gallery seats. But even this arrangement foundered a week later with the realization that the Mortmain Act prohibited the devise of property to ecclesiastical uses.<sup>31</sup>

Finally, with 'the Company . . . big with expectation' at Hothamton, the Archbishop approved an interim arrangement whereby the vicar received £10 each from Hotham and Thompson, in the hope that 'all things will be settled to the Satisfaction of All Parties' before the next summer.<sup>32</sup> The chapel was opened on Sunday 13 August 1797, just four years and a day after the stone-laying ceremony.<sup>33</sup>

The final item in the Lambeth collection, dated 18 October 1797, is a presentation for the Archbishop's sanction of a 'conclusive agreement'. Durnford would continue to receive his annual £10 from Hotham and Thompson, the former to be 'perfectly secured to the Vicar's satisfaction' — echoing a desire three months earlier to 'bind Sir Richard Hotham to the Settlement'.<sup>34</sup> Hotham had reached a separate three-year agreement with Thompson regarding a sixty-guinea salary for his fourteen-week summer engagement. That was to be made good with income from subscriptions the excess of which would be shared with another clergyman officiating out of season on Sundays when Sir Richard was not attending the fortnightly Morning Service at Bersted Church.<sup>35</sup> Accordingly, on 13 December 1797 the Vicar General act-book records the granting of a licence to the Revd Archer Thompson for three years.<sup>36</sup>

The chapel's subsequent history has been covered in some detail elsewhere.<sup>37</sup> Hotham died on 13 March 1799 and was buried at South Bersted, followed by Durnford in December 1800.<sup>38</sup> In 1801, the vicar's successor, the Revd John Phillips, was licensed to officiate at the chapel pursuant to an agreement with Colonel Richard Scott, who had purchased Chapel House along with much of the 'Hothamton' empire in August 1800.<sup>39</sup> Following a succession of owners and officiating ministers, the chapel was demolished around 1859, its last recorded use being a grand (private) occasion in 1841.<sup>40</sup> Only the clock-tower remains today, its mechanism still in working order.<sup>41</sup>

As a footnote to the dispute, it is worth noting

an entry in the diary of John Marsh the musician, who had settled in the area in 1787. On 25 June 1821 he enquired about the delay in opening the new St John's chapel-of-ease in the Steyne at Bognor, erected by a local speculative builder, Daniel Wonham, for the growing township. (The chapel was financed by subscriptions and pew-rents and consecrated by Archbishop Manners Sutton on 25 January 1822.<sup>42</sup>) He was told that the Archbishop 'had come to a determination never to grant another licence to officiate at any chapel that was not endowed and consecrated'.<sup>43</sup> Was this, perhaps, an

oblique reference to the succession of ministers at St Alban's chapel and the troubles experienced by his predecessor?

### Acknowledgements

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### NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> F. L. Cross & E. A. Livingstone (eds), *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church* (Oxford, 1964), 1133.
- <sup>2</sup> Lambeth Palace Library (hereafter LPL), Moore Papers 4, ff.1-47.
- <sup>3</sup> R. Dally, *Bognor, Arundel and Littlehampton Guide* (Chichester, 1828), 19. The chapel was described as 'not consecrated' in the Vicar General act book (LPL, VB I/12, p. 392).
- <sup>4</sup> LPL, Moore Papers 4, f.25r.
- <sup>5</sup> Dally, 17.
- <sup>6</sup> J. B. Davis, *The Origin and Description of Bognor, or Hothampton; and an Account of Some Adjacent Villages* (London, 1807), 77-8; and G. Young, *A History of Bognor Regis* (Chichester, 1983), 8-9. For details of his earlier life see Young, 1-8; and C. S. Nicholls (ed.), *The Dictionary of National Biography; Missing Persons* (Oxford, 1993), 331.
- <sup>7</sup> Chichester Institute of Higher Education, Gerard Young Collection (hereafter CIHE, GYC.), file GY.5002, f.2/D4.
- <sup>8</sup> LPL, Moore Papers 4, f.2r.
- <sup>9</sup> West Sussex Record Office (hereafter WSRO), Par. 19/1/1/4, f.28; and Davis, 81. In the Archbishop's visitation returns of 1758 (LPL Ms.1134/5, ff.21, 24) it was stated that the parish contained 'not a Gentleman's house' and no pensions, etc. with interest had been given to the church or poor.
- <sup>10</sup> WSRO, Ep.IV/2/28 (Act Book), f.17; and Ep.IV/13/2 (faculty papers); and Davis, 87.
- <sup>11</sup> *Sussex Weekly Advertiser*, 19 August 1793; and Davis, 81-4.
- <sup>12</sup> LPL, Moore Papers 4, f.2v.
- <sup>13</sup> Lady Newdigate-Newdegate, *The Cheverels of Cheverel Manor* (1898), quoted in Young, 24-5.
- <sup>14</sup> LPL, Moore Papers 4, f.11r.
- <sup>15</sup> LPL, Moore Papers 4, f.37v.
- <sup>16</sup> LPL, Moore Papers 4, f.4r.
- <sup>17</sup> Dally, 19.
- <sup>18</sup> LPL, Moore Papers 4, f.2v.
- <sup>19</sup> LPL, Moore Papers 4, ff.3r, 6v, 7r.
- <sup>20</sup> LPL, Moore Papers 4, f.9r.
- <sup>21</sup> CIHE, GYC, GY.320 (sale particulars, 1812); also notes in GY.5004, f.2/T.7. Davis, 23-4, describes the chapel as 'commodious within, and very neatly distributed, having

- also a boarded floor'. J. Osborn's *Visitor's Guide to Bognor and its Vicinity* (1852) mentions 'some very valuable paintings' of the Entombment of Christ, the Descent from the Cross and the Transfiguration, mounted over the altar. John Marsh's diary (see note 43) in 1817 (**31**, 141) and 1818 (**32**, 55) refers to the chapel's barrel-organ. The location of a sketch he made in September 1805 (**25**, 45) is unknown.
- <sup>22</sup> LPL, Moore Papers 4, f.11r.
- <sup>23</sup> LPL, Moore Papers 4, f.11v.
- <sup>24</sup> Sir L. Namier & J. Brooke, *The History of Parliament: the House of Commons, 1754-1790* (London, 1964), II, 643.
- <sup>25</sup> LPL, Moore Papers 4, ff.13, 23r.
- <sup>26</sup> Young, 1-8.
- <sup>27</sup> LPL, Moore Papers 4, f.10r.
- <sup>28</sup> *Gentleman's Magazine* **LXXV**(I) (1805), 191; **LXXV**(II), 979. Dally, 19, says his father, the Revd Seth Thompson, officiated at 'Sir Richard's death' in 1799. Marsh's diary (see note 43) **19**, 66, confirms that both Thompsons preached at the chapel in August 1798.
- <sup>29</sup> LPL, Moore Papers 4, ff.35-8.
- <sup>30</sup> WSRO, SP 2076 (sale particulars of Hotham's estate, 1800; each house included a pew in the gallery of South Bersted parish church).
- <sup>31</sup> 9 Geo. II. c.36.
- <sup>32</sup> LPL, Moore Papers 4, ff.41r., 43r., 44r.
- <sup>33</sup> *Sussex Weekly Advertiser*, 21 August 1797.
- <sup>34</sup> LPL, Moore Papers 4, ff.25r., 46r.
- <sup>35</sup> LPL, Moore Papers 4, f.46.
- <sup>36</sup> LPL, VB I/12, p.398.
- <sup>37</sup> R. Iden, 'Sir Richard Hotham's chapel', *Bognor Regis Local History Society Newsletter* (hereafter BRLHSN) **29** (August 1993), 12-15.
- <sup>38</sup> Young, 39-40.
- <sup>39</sup> LPL, VG 2/6, f.63; VB I/13, p. 93. *Gentleman's Magazine* **LXX** (1800), 891.
- <sup>40</sup> *Sussex Agricultural Express*, 16 October 1841; 23 October 1841.
- <sup>41</sup> R. Iden, 'Time to remember', *BRLHSN* **31** (August 1994), 7-11.
- <sup>42</sup> WSRO, Ep.IV/2/28, ff.73b-95.
- <sup>43</sup> Henry Huntingdon Library, California, HM 54457 (John Marsh, *History of my Private Life* **1-37**). Microfilm copy at WSRO, MF 1165-1170. The entry quoted is from **33**, 124.