

THE WAYWARD VICAR OF WOLLATON

by

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One of the facts of life of local history studies is that we discover little concerning the personal lives of ordinary people of early periods, and much of the little we do find out arises from situations in which these individuals got themselves into legal trouble. Ecclesiastical court records are a valuable resource if only because they tell us much about the lesser crimes and shortcomings of people from the late Middle Ages onwards. On the other hand, even the records of the court proceedings usually give only the barest details of the offences committed, though direct quotations of offensive spoken words sometimes add fleeting touches of colour.

It is thus of some interest when these court records are supplemented by literary material which fleshes out and enlivens the description of the offensive behaviour and characterises the offender on a very personal level. It happens that for one Nottinghamshire individual in the second half of the 16th century, we have a vigorously-written and witty doggerel 'poem' describing his minor crimes and characterising him in detail. This, combined with other documentary material, gives us an uncommonly full picture of the career of a flawed but also endearing cleric of this period.

A set of documents in the Middleton (Willoughby family) of Wollaton Collection is labelled 'Presentments Against the Vicar of Wollaton'.¹ Of the papers, there is nothing unexpected in those numbered 30c, 30d, and 30e. These papers present statements to the commissary of the Exchequer of York complaining of the behaviour of Parson Undern, the vicar of Wollaton. The charges in 30c relate that during Christmas season a few years previous Undern lost all his money while playing at cards and dice in Nottingham, and later defaulted on other debts. He is also charged with borrowing a horse of one William Weste and failing to return the animal. Document 30e contains a similar account, but 30d, which is dated 30th April 1560, adds other charges, such as that Undern went absent and as a consequence left two infants to die unchristened, that he was guilty of 'canvasinge' a young girl of 14 or 15 in a blanket, and that he hurried the parishoners at Communion in order to return to the gaming tables.

The interesting document, however, is 30b, which goes over much of the same ground, but does so in the form of a poem of 96 lines. The text is edited below (Appendix). Apart from its energetic style, the chief literary quality of the verses is its use of extended metaphors. For example, in stanzas 3, 4, and 5, the card-playing of the parson is compared to various stages of a church service, namely sermon, song and shrift. In stanza 6, the act of pawning the horse is compared to binding someone as an apprentice, and in stanzas 7 and 8, the betting of the money gained therefrom is compared to racing the horse. The final act of losing the money received from engaging the animal is figuratively described as knocking out all its teeth in line 46. The somewhat wry and ironic attitude of the speaker is abandoned from stanza 13 onwards, and outright condemnation is combined with aspersions about the clergyman's sexual habits, which are not specified directly in the formal presentments.

It would be exaggerating to say that the verses are a piece of great literature, and indeed many would characterise them as doggerel. On the other hand, few examples of this type of poetry survive from such an early period, particularly with the kind of personal touch and irreverence displayed in the verse.²

The fact that the verses have been collected together with the rather more serious presentments suggests that they may have been used as evidence in actual proceedings against the vicar. On the other hand, one would think that the undeniably flippant tone of the poem would detract from its credibility in such circumstances. In this context, it is curious that the author of the poem first asks for anonymity in the last stanza of the poem,

then proceeds to identify himself as William Birche, 'dwelling not halfe a myle from a churche', in a concluding note. It may be that the writer was initially apprehensive that the poem might be considered libellous, but upon further reflection decided that there was little chance of it being treated so seriously, even by the victim of the satire. The fact that the poem appears in the end to have become a kind of presentment suggests that this opinion was somewhat misguided.

Apart from these presentments and the poem based on them, do we know anything further about the notorious Undern? We do know for one thing that he became vicar of Wollaton on 22nd August 1559, and that his patrons were Gabriel Barwycke and John Hall, executors of Henry Willoughby.³ The latter fact may explain why these documents are in the Middleton Collection. We also know that he probably was rector of Langwith, Derbyshire in 1565, definitely became vicar of St. Mary's, Nottingham on 4th October 1572, and resigned on 11th April 1578.⁴ From these records, we do not know anything of his behaviour in these posts, but it does appear that for all his troubles, Undern had influential contacts and was not left without a position.

There is, however, one further source of information about our parson, which gives more detail about his adventures, and provides further confirmation of his suspect moral character as well of his shameless ingenuity. In the Act Book of the Archdeaconry of Nottingham there are five mentions of William Undern, presumably the same individual.⁵

The first, dated 28th January 1569/70, is a charge brought against a William Rowbothome for ministering in the parish of Selston without authority. According to the record, William Undern brought to the churchwardens of Selston a sequestration of the vicarage, which he claimed to be from York, but which he did not show them. Another member of the parish, a Mr. Jay, claimed that he did see the sequestration, but it was granted to an Arthur Wyche. In any case, Undern apparently accepted 20s. for his interest in the sequestration, on condition that William Rowbothome was allowed to serve as vicar. From these details, it is not clear exactly what degree of culpability Undern had in the matter, but it does appear that he may have been involved in a serious deception of the parishoners for monetary gain.

The second case is dated 27th May 1570 and concerns a charge by Elias Okeden, vicar of Greasley, to the effect that William Undern and his wife Katherine did not appear at Greasley in response to a public proclamation. The exact nature of the offence is not made clear, but in any case Undern and his wife were excommunicated as a result. It is not known how he managed to extricate himself from these charges, but apparently he carried on somehow, as he makes more appearances in the court records.

On 22nd January 1572/3 Undern was cited to answer unspecified charges (presumably not the old ones relating to Greasley) while he was vicar of St. Mary's in Nottingham. He denied the charges and was ordered to appear again to give his response. He did not appear as ordered on 12th February and punishment for non-appearance was reserved. On 26th February, Undern was initially held in contempt, but after the court was informed that he had a good reason for not appearing, namely that he was being held in prison(!), he was excused to appear after his release. Undern did appear before the court on 2nd April, at which time he asked for leave to appeal his case to the Archbishop of York. Nothing further about Undern is recorded in the ecclesiastical court records. Presumably, if he lasted as vicar of St. Mary's until 1578, he must have avoided serious punishment. The only fact that we know about his activities after this time is that he was a prebendary of Southwell between 1576 and c. 1588.⁶

From various records and some personal poetry which luckily has survived, we thus can construct a picture of the dubious career of a 16th century Nottinghamshire cleric. Whether

or not this kind of pattern of dishonesty, sin, and laxity was common is another question. We do know, however, that the common parishoners of the time were not always willing to put up with such behaviour, and sometimes resorted to ingenious methods to make their disapproval known.

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REFERENCES

¹N[ottingham] U[niversity] M[anuscripts] D[eartment], Mi LM 30 (a–e). The presentments (but not the verses) are quoted from in Historical Manuscripts Commission, *Report on the Manuscripts of Lord Middleton preserved at Wollaton Hall* (1911), 150–2.

²A somewhat similar doggerel poem satirising the prebendaries and ‘singing men’ of Southwell Minster was written in c. 1608 by Gervase Lee of Southwell, which earned him a fine of £500 in the Court of Star Chamber. It is quoted in W. Dickinson Rastall, *History of Southwell* (1787), 400–402.

³K. S. S. Train, *Lists of the Clergy of Central Nottinghamshire*, Thoroton Soc. Record Series, 15, pt. 2 (1954), 50.

⁴*Ibid.*, 30.

⁵N.U.M.D., Act Book, AL, 1565–1574.

⁶Train, *op. cit.*, 30; Borthwick Institute of Historical Research, York, probate register 23, fo. 756, contains the will of Judith, widow of a William Undern of Staythorpe in Averham, gent., proved 23 March 1588.

APPENDIX

Verses regarding the Vicar of Wollaton

In the following edition, the punctuation is editorial. Words in pointed brackets (< >) are interpolations, and letters in braces ({}) represent expansions of abbreviations.

(1)

<The> p{ar}son of Wollarton manye men saies
 <Had> verye evill fortune in the twelve daies.
 <It> felle on a Saterdaye morne
 <He w> olde to Nottingh{a}m to cheapen some corne.
 But corne was so deare he lyked not ye pryce, 5
 wherefore he lefte ye market & went to the dyce.

(2)

He wente to his Inne his horse to Sett vpp,
 then went he to debdales to seeke for some lucke.
 There mett he w{i}th companye that pleased his eye,
 But there the begyled hym, the foole colde not see. 10
 They tawght hym at hasard, his money to loose,
 And then lyke a Bussarde, from thense he gose.

(3)

Vnto Ralphe Bamfordes then faste colde he hye,
 So{m}me luckye grownde yf he might espye.
 And after there folowed bothe better & worse, 15
 mr p{a}rson was liberall, he emptyed his purse.
 And at the same tyme he made such a s{er}min
 that he openid his purse & shot all at Randon.

(4)

He made to tryme S{e}rvyse w{i}th descant so fyne,
 But or ever he endid, the clocke stroke nyne. 20
 So{n}ne vp then he rose, and went to his Inne,
 He was as cleane shriven of wytt as <sinne> .
 But the Losse of his money so sore did him pa<yne>
 That he sware by his wond{es} he wolde haue it agayne.

(5)

And as he so studdyed for his greate losse, 25
 he went into the stable & said to his horse,
 'we two must go coniure for ought I can see,
 But yet a newe m{aste}r I haue found for thee.
 ffor I am so S{e}rvid Synce I cam to towne
 That yf I muste kepe thee I muste sell my gowne.' 30

(6)

He bounde his horse prentyce vppon a condicion,
 and then of the money he toke p{ro}fyt possession.
 To tarye for Indentures it was not the Lawe,
 wherfore for Suche tryfell{es} he paste not a strawe.
 But w{i}th horse in his bosom, then did he ryde poste, 35
 he thought it so moche it wolde neu{er} be Loste.

(7)

He retorned to bamnford{es} before he did beyte,
 he wente very faste, feare of cominge to late.
 and when he fou{n}de company w{hi}ch wolde not starte,
 then placed he hym selfe wyth an humble h<arte> , 40
 and pulled oute his horse & set open his mouthe,
 The fell he to the Card{es} to kepe him fro{m} slouthe.

(8)

The p{ar}sons horse was eu{er} formoste in the Rase,
 when the chamberlen clapte hym he mendid his p<ase> ,
 And wolde never turne what so eu{er} was said, 45
 Tyll his m{aste}r had lefte never a tothe in his head.
 then thought the p{ar}son, this is a wonderowse thinge,
 wherfore he was fayne to pledge his golde Rynge.

(9)

He borrowed then money & went to it amayne,
 thinkinge his golde rynge wolde bringe all agayne. 50
 But all wolde not S{e}rve, fortune dyd frowne,
 then waxed m{aste}r p{ar}son wery of his rowme.
 wherfore he thought beste an ende for to make,
 & when all was gone, he took vp a stake.

(10)

The did the gamsters laughe him to scorn, 55
 Sayinge, 'm{aste}r p{ar}son, it is fayre morne,
 and this day is Sondag, we do you assure,
 wherfore it is tyme to go Serve yo{u}r cure.'
 But when that he spied that cleare day was broke,
 he put vp his pypes & his leave he toke. 60

(11)

The homeward{es} he went w{i}thout any doute,
 He rode trymly to the towne, but he went home a fote.
 The losse of his money did him suche deare
 that he said S{e}rvyse w{i}th a slepy cheare.
 But they y{a}t dyd robbe hym & left hym vnbonde,
 it is tyme that Suche a curate were hanged vp ronde. 65

(12)

His goode wydowe at Cossall she made made greate mon <e>,
 to see m{aste}r p{ar}son come on foote home.
 Though she was Sory, no man her blame,
 for she thought that her horse had bene stricken lame. 70
 But when vnfeynedly she knewe of the case,
 She m{er}vayled that her horse had peared his pas <e> .

(13)

But it was but a plage y{a}t hathe hym so coste,
 Because this good p{ar}son did once make his boste,
 that he colde haue the wyves of his p{ar}ishe at will, 75
 His abomynable & stynkinge luste to fulfill.
 But I iudge y{a}t to be false so god me Save,
 That a woman wolde Synne w{i}th suche a knave.

(14)

But he that dothe evill & thereof make his boste,
 to ye slaunderinge of them y{a}t he lyveth by moste, 80
 And he lyke a Ruffyne stylle Runeth at lardge,
 dysinge & Cardinge & leaveth his chardge,
 And hathe not at home his studdye entendid,
 is worthy of all men to be reprehended.

(15)

But pray m{aste}r p{ar}son to Amend nowe in tyme, 85
 and preache to his p{ar}ishoners god{es} worde devyne,
 Sheweinge them the plages w{hi}ch to Sy{n}ne accorde,
 Lyke a trewe sheparde of god the lorde,
 and not to be a Ryngleader of theym to Synn,
 Leste that Hell open & swallowe hym in. 90

[dorse]

(16)

Nowe farewell m{aste}r p{ar}son, I must departe,
 my candell is owte, it is very darke.
 I pray you, be not offendid w{i}th this,
 for my name you knowe full well what it is.
 But hartelye I pray you do no man tell 95
 what I am nor where I dwell.

ffy{n}nis q{uo}d will{ia}m Birche
 dwellinge but halfe A myle from a church.

Explanatory Notes

- 2 *the twelve daies*: i.e., of Christmas.
- 4 *cheapen*: sell.
- 13 *Ralphe Bamfordes*: This individual is mentioned in two chamberlains' rentals printed in the *Records of the Borough of Nottingham*, 4, ed. W. H. Stevenson (1889). On 18th October 1548, a receipt is recorded 'Off Rauffe Bamford, taillor, for his house and taverne . . . viiis' (95), and another on 20th December 1552 is recorded 'Off Raffe Bamforthe for a housse and a taverne next under the Armorye . . . viiis' (104). It thus appears that the tavern was under the Armoury, apparently part of the Guildhall in Weekday Cross. Bamford is also named in a churchwarden's levy of 1583.
- 49 *amayne*: with full force.
- 63 *deare*: harm.
- 72 *peared*: diminished.

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