

Wheatley Chapel's Struggle for Independence.

At the time of Mrs Horseman's pantomime burial, the medieval Chapel in Wheatley was a centre of controversy. Forest Hill church building, a slightly higher ranking chapel-of-ease with a measure of independence, gives us some idea of what the building was like. A stained-glass east window of St Nicholas was noted in 1644 by a member of the Civil War Royalist garrison; eighty years later it was still in place, "the figure of some apostle or saint", though the title pane seems to have gone. By the end of the 18th century when it was demolished The Chapel was unable to hold more than a handful of villagers. They complained it could not accommodate anyone visiting relatives in the village.

The Archdeacon found it neglected and in disrepair in 1584. Scholars suggest that parishes were beset with apathy. Care was not taken; money was not bequeathed; congregations shrank. Neglect in Wheatley, however, was not confined to the church: between 1595 and 1611 the Common Brook was constantly dumped with rubbish, unlicensed drink was repeatedly sold, illegal games were held with impunity and the unlicensed building of cottages was routine (*Hundred Court extracts, Wheatley Records, Oxon Record Society 1956.*) Wheatley never had a Golden Age, despite common belief! The building of cottages is significant. It indicates an expanding village population. Confirmation of this lies in the Cuddesdon Registers: from 1628 to 1641 Wheatley baptisms were registered separately from the rest of the parish; the annual birth rate was significantly higher in Wheatley than in the whole of the rest of the parish - Cuddesdon and Denton. Wheatley was outgrowing its mother village in size and importance due to its roadside position. The village has always been a "service station" of sorts and thrived as such.

Edmund Underhill MA, Vicar since they buried old Ralph Marler in Cuddesdon yard in 1606, had a problem asserting his authority over Wheatley, even after twenty five years. There may have been a clash of churchmanship - he was a lettered graduate and may have been a Puritan or at least too much a stickler for his parishioners. He had a web of recusants around him in Wheatley and nearby Holton. He would have taken flak for enforcing the Archdeacon's refusal to allow burial of Mrs Horseman's body. Significantly her friends approached Rector Price of Holton, not Vicar Underhill.

Six months before the Horseman burial, Wheatley male churchgoers, (including almost all the later cast of the burial party) signed a petition in May 1629 to ask the Bishop to stop the Vicar of Cuddesdon appointing their churchwarden. Wheatley Chapel seems to have had a residence for a curate since the end of the 15th century and a curate to live in it since at least the 1570's. The village now claimed an ancient right "beyond the memory of men" to elect, choose and appoint one Churchwarden and one Sidesman each year, independently of the Vicar of Cuddesdon. This would have upgraded Wheatley to a chapel-of-ease from a mere chapel. Despite its age, reputedly founded as an act of charity by two 15th century gentlewomen, it was still totally dependent on Cuddesdon as its parish church. Wheatley was now bigger than Cuddesdon. This was

local politics with a "P". Such petitions were notoriously and craftily vague about dates, falling back on rhetoric - "since time out of mind".

Oxford Diocese was still putting its act together after half a century without a Bishop to speak of. The then Bishop, John Howson (1628-32), was a tolerant and convivial high church man, known for his non-Puritan spirituality and his fondness for a tippie. (He probably enjoyed the Horseman incident since he had a huge reputation as a practical joker.) He had also been Rector at Great Milton and knew the area. It was a good time for local people to make ecclesiastical hay and call shots. The Vicar of Towersey, however, John Cooke who had been curate at Cuddesdon and Wheatley (1577-1606) under Ralph Marler, insisted that his memory of the situation was quite different from that of the villagers. "No Reader," insisted Cooke, "was placed there except by the Vicar or Curate of Cuddesdon" (*Wheatley Records, ORS 1956*).

After Mrs Horseman's burial had been reported, Wheatley and Holton buzzed with the latest on the Archdeacon's investigation which continued until late March 1630. Cuddesdon also found itself in trouble that spring because of the state of Mr Underhill's parish church. "The seats in the body of the church are in great decay and the body of the said church also." Cuddesdon churchwardens defended themselves to the Archdeacon and blamed Wheatley. "The inhabitants of Wheatley being part of this parish refuse to contribute towards the reparation of the said seats. [They say] they are not bound to repair them except they may have seats appointed them in the church." The defence was rejected and the inhabitants of Cuddesdon and Denton were ordered to repair and, "in case the parish do build seats for the inhabitants of Wheatley in Cuddesdon Church then ... Wheatley [is] to contribute thereto. The Churchwarden's [are] to see to those seats and the ruins of the church to be repaired by [St] Bartholomew Day next and to certify thereof" (*Mss TOD Oxon. c56, f28. April 1630*). Meanwhile, back in Wheatley the four accused of illegal grave digging were found guilty and ordered to do penance in public in their respective churches of Wheatley and Holton.

A year later, Abraham Archdale, bachelor Lord of the Manor House on Wheatley (High) Street, threw his weight behind the breakaway movement. His father Richard had made the Catholic will of 1577; his mother had been listed and fined as a recusant that same year along with his brother John. In turn, John was legally "disabled" from inheriting the Manor left to him by Richard. His sister Dorothy had married a recusant and been fined for her own recusancy. The manor household in 1612 had recusant servants; Mrs Horseman may herself have been an Archdale sister. If a Jesuit in disguise walked from Brill, through Oakley, Waterperry, Holton, Wheatley, Garsington and round to Haseley, he would have had no need to step off the land of friendly recusant squires. Abraham Archdale's way of protesting was to support an independent village church and he did it with gusto.

Archdale cancelled a legacy of £40 for refurbishing Cuddesdon church. Instead he offered £100 to the poor of Wheatley, £10 to Oxford University, £5 to the poor of St Martin's Oxford and £3 to the poor of Cuddesdon. In a September postscript he also

cancelled his intent to the buried "in the parish church of Cudgeden [sic], near my dear mother [Mary]." Instead he was to be "buried in the chapel hereafter named. Three hundred pounds [is to be spent] upon my funeral and a monument for me in Wheatley Chapel...[and request to be made] that the Lord Bishop of the Diocese or some other bishop be pleased to consecrate the said Chapel and ground adjoining for a place of burial." His father and mother, Richard (d.1577) and Mary Archdale (d.1622) were to be commemorated with him on the monument. "Lastly," his executor was "to settle what my intent and meaning he well knoweth to be towards the Chapel or Church of Wheatley." Archdale was finally buried in Forest Hill (Cuddesdon Register). Thomas Wicker, curate at Wheatley, witnessed and was presumably sympathetic towards the will; he had a direct interest in an independent Wheatley living. Wicker and his wife were also living in a "church house" in Wheatley on Archdale property. Both were left money for skull-rings by which to remember Mr Archdale. One Mary Weaker or Wicker also witnessed Mrs Horseman's brief oral will. In 1639, just before the curate was promoted to Merton vicarage, "Mary Wickers, wife of Thomas" died (Cuddesdon Register).

Archdale's demand for a chapel monument was as bold as his father's demand for the Rood to be replaced in Cuddesdon twenty years into Elizabeth's reign! Even John Gadbury, mildly for a Gadbury, only asked for burial "in the north aisle of the [Cuddesdon] church, next to Wheatley, as near to the place where my father and mother are buried." (Will, 1629) The description of Wheatley chapel in 1644 makes no mention of an Archdale monument.

Vicar Underhill had had enough. He counter-complained in 1632 that Wheatley had already "lately" held back all their fees and dues owed to Cuddesdon, "in hope of having the Chapel consecrated as a Chapel-of-Ease." If Cuddesdon church, "built after a Cathedral," lost the income from Wheatley, it would be impossible to maintain. He would lose control over the Registrations, over abuses, over excommunicates and over recusants if such a consecration went ahead (See Wheatley Records, Oxon Record Soc., 1956.) Cuddesdon Registers show that he also had a very large family - twelve children born between 1609 and 1626, of whom two died in infancy, one as a child early in 1632. He would have been anxious about his income. Evidently he won his case although he died before the end of 1632 after 25 years in the parish. His final illness also meant there were no registrations of any sort in Cuddesdon parish that year.

The deaths, over such a brief span, of Horseman (1629), Archdale (1631), Underhill (1632), Bishop Howson (1632), Archdeacon Barker (1632) and Bartholomew Price (1633) possibly lowered local temperatures. A new Bishop that same year, John Bancroft, made conciliatory gestures towards Wheatley, assumed to himself the role of Vicar of Cuddesdon and was certainly no Puritan. He also repaired the parish church extensively and built a Bishop's Palace nearby. It was torched only a decade later in the scorched earth policy of the Royalist garrison of Oxford during the Civil War.