

Henry Churchill (1820-c.1875)

Henry Churchill, solicitor, was the son of John Churchill, solicitor, who was Coroner for North Oxfordshire from 1839 until his death in 1863. Henry was articled to Samuel Field, who subsequently took him into partnership, practising as 'Field and Churchill'. At the beginning of the 1850s, he was around 30 years of age.

In 1855 Churchill married Elizabeth Field, the youngest daughter of the late B. Field of Thame, and sister of Samuel Field's wife. There appear to have been no children of the marriage.

Churchill seems to have been a sociable fellow, ready to become involved in local activities, and with a finger in a great many pies.

In the early 1850s, he was an officer of the Deddington Cricket Club. He presided at the end-of-season dinner of the club in 1850. The same year he also presided at the annual dinner of the Sparrow Club. He served as hon. secretary of the Deddington Horticultural Society from 1850-1855.

From early in his career Churchill was involved with various charitable causes, becoming secretary of the Deddington Coal Charity in 1849. Already by 1850 he was one of the eight feoffees (trustees), with his father, of the Deddington Charity Estates. He also supported the establishment in 1854 of a Poor Relief Fund to procure bread for the poor of the parish at a reduced price.

With C.D. Faulkner, he was involved during 1852-1854 with the plans to establish what was to become the Deddington, Heyford, and Aston Benefit Building Society. For a number of years he was elected chairman, presiding over the society's quarterly meetings. When a Penny Bank was opened in Deddington in 1859, Churchill was appointed secretary.

As Vestry Clerk, Churchill was involved in the disputed poll over the filling-in of the Town Pool in the Market Place in 1854, when a number of votes were cast illegally by ratepayers who had not paid their poor rate. Churchill advised that the illegal votes could not be counted, but he was overruled by the Rev. Brogden, who sided with those opposed to the proposal, which had been put forward by John Calcutt, a prominent dissenter.

In 1855 he was appointed Deputy Coroner for North Oxfordshire by his father, the Coroner.

In 1857 and 1858 Churchill was appointed Vicar's churchwarden by the Curate, the Rev. J.H. Burgess, which involved sometimes chairing Vestry meetings in the absence of the Curate.

Churchill believed strongly in the importance of education for the poor. In 1848 he proposed the formation of a Reading Society for the benefit of the young men of the parish,¹ which in due course was to develop into a Public Reading Room and Library in 1858.

¹ Smedley-Stevenson, *op. cit.*, Vol. 29, p.226, 7 December 1848.

He supported the initiative in early 1850 to "restore the efficiency" of the National Schools. Churchill became closely involved with their management, and was secretary of the schools' management committee for eight years from 1856 to 1864, per Risley involving his "incessant attention".²

In 1857 he supervised the provision of tea and cake to about 200 children from the National and Sunday Schools during the annual school treat on St. Peter's Day in the Rev. Risley's park. At the corresponding annual treat in 1859, he presented 80 prizes to day school children.

Upon the Rev. Burgess leaving as Curate in October 1859 following the Rev. Brogden's return, he made a presentation on behalf of the Schools Committee.

As one of the first series of lectures organised by the new Public Reading Room and Library in the Town Hall in 1859, Churchill, who was Vice-President, gave a talk on "The Art of Printing, its History and Progress" to a "most respectable audience, who were evidently extremely entertained by the very interesting way in which this most important subject was handled".

It appears that Churchill bought out Samuel Field from their legal practice around 1860, by agreeing to pay Field £150 p.a., secured by a restrictive covenant, not to practice as a solicitor. In the 1861 census return, Field (57) is described as "Solicitor not in practice, retired".

Churchill accordingly assumed the various positions previously held by Field, including Clerk to the Divisional Magistrates. He was also elected Coroner for North Oxfordshire on the death of his father in 1863.

As regards other interests, it seems he became involved with the Rifle Corps in the 1860s, having command of the Volunteers at Deddington for a period.

To all intents and purposes Henry Churchill was a successful and highly esteemed professional man. Yet at some point during the 1860s this pillar of the community began living beyond his means, and increasingly resorted to fraudulent transactions to try to cover his tracks. This all came out into the open in 1870 when he absconded, disappearing without trace, leaving debts totalling £10,433. It was believed that he had fled to America, where he is supposed to have died around 1875. His disappearance and bankruptcy *in absentia* became a *cause célèbre*.³

² Smedley-Stevenson, *op. cit.*, Vol. 32, p.497, 29 June 1864.

³ See the Coggins Scrapbooks, Volume 2 (1855-1888). <https://www.deddingtonhistory.uk/coggins,george1846-1920-scrapbooks>

