

Restoration and 'repewing' of Deddington Parish Church

By the mid-1850s the parish church was described as being in a degraded state. Rain was coming in through the roof of the north aisle, the problem being exacerbated by a lack of drains round the foundations of the church. The walls were consequently in a very wet state, in some places decaying from being saturated with the rain running down them.

On the initiative of Charles Faulkner, a special Vestry meeting in May 1856 resolved to sanction the expense of draining the foundations of the north side of the church and installing down pipes, to be financed by a church rate of 3d. in the £.

It was noted that the earth was up to 3 feet above the walls on the north side of the church, causing the walls to decay, the inside to become damp and pews to rot.

Subsequently, a Vestry was held in the Town Hall in October 1857, chaired by the new Curate, the Rev. J.H. Burgess, to receive a report by the Diocesan Architect, Mr. G.E. Street, about remedying the present dangerous state of the church building, and the necessity of removing the gallery without loss of sittings. It was resolved to proceed with the restoration of the whole church and provision of additional sittings, to be funded by voluntary contributions rather than a compulsory rate.

The following month, Samuel Wilberforce, the energetic and forceful Bishop of Oxford, preached two sermons in aid of the church restoration fund, which had already received generous pledges from 63 subscribers. Collections totalled £43 10s. 4d.

There was strong opposition to the restoration and new seating in some quarters, compounded by antipathy on the part of low church Evangelicals towards the Cuddesdon trained Burgess, who was suspected of Anglo-Catholic leanings.

The Risley diaries contain the following record of a meeting of the church restoration committee in January 1858:¹

A rather disgraceful meeting took place - headed by Mr. Field, Mr. D. Faulkner, Mr. Mitchell, Mess. Scroggs & others - who indulged in the most abominable insinuations as to Doctrine etc. (not founded in Truth) against Mr. Burgess - branding him as a Puseyite & Romanist, Mr. Mitchell stating that he preached up the Doctrines of Regeneration and Transubstantiation - More than half of the 3 hours & above was consumed in this manner.

At the annual election of churchwardens by ratepayers at the Easter Vestry in April 1858, with the Rev. Burgess in the chair, the Curate nominated Henry Churchill, solicitor, as Vicar's churchwarden. Charles Faulkner proposed the re-appointment of Henry Franklin as Parish churchwarden, and Samuel Field, the leading solicitor in the town, who was not present, was proposed by John Scroggs, a local auctioneer. Both nominees secured 8 votes each, and the Rev. Burgess exercised his casting vote against Field. C.D. Faulkner thereupon asserted that the Curate had thereby elected both churchwardens himself, and demanded a poll of all the ratepayers.

¹ Smedley-Stevenson, *op. cit.*, Vol. 32, p.403, 6 January 1858.

Two days after the Easter Vestry, a circular letter to ratepayers appeared, signed by 'A Fellow Ratepayer', urging ratepayers to vote for Henry Franklin. "There is a certain party in Deddington who are systematically and resolutely determined to insult and annoy Mr. Burgess in every way in their power. Mr. Field ... has recently shown himself their leader." Field was accused of obstructing the current restoration of the parish church, and the new pews.

Samuel Field's supporters actively canvassed ratepayers ahead of the public poll, but Field withdrew the day before the poll, circulating an open letter explaining his position. "I am very sorry to learn ... that this circumstance has again called into action feelings of irritation and bitterness ... and that threats of an unworthy, ungenerous, and, I may say, of an unchristian character, have been made, in order to compel men to vote contrary to their conscientious convictions."

The *Banbury Guardian* next published a letter from 'C.F.' setting out the background to the above contention over the appointment of churchwardens. Faulkner explained that the need to rectify the threat to the stability of the south aisle posed by the gallery had led to the decision for the restoration of the whole parish church, and the provision of new pews, by voluntary contributions.

The south aisle of our church, which has stood at least 700 winters, about 30 years since had a most unsightly gallery erected against it, obstructing one of the windows. This has helped to force the old side wall out of position, before much out of repair, which has caused the roof to draw four inches from the nave.

Faulkner's letter highlighted the generosity of subscribers, including £205 from the Rev. W.C. Risley and family. Field and his three supporters, on the other hand, had each contributed £2, the minimum sum necessary to be eligible to vote at the restoration committee. Faulkner asserted that the object of Field's party was to thwart the restoration and new pews, and to insult the Rev. Burgess. The day after the Easter Vestry, Field's seconder said he would vote for Franklin in the poll.

Charles Faulkner followed up the above correspondence with a lengthy letter to the *Banbury Guardian* explaining the object of the proposed 'repewing' of the parish church, involving replacing the existing box pews by open benches, and with extensive quotations pointing out the social evils of the pew system.

He wrote that the box pews each occupied 50 square feet, with backs 6 feet high, and were two feet above the level of the floor, requiring three steps, and had been compared to "a railway train". The pew system, he said, was outmoded and unchristian, and "the poor were left to feel their poverty more acutely in church than anywhere else".

The same issue of the *Banbury Guardian* also carried a letter from 'A Lover of Consistency', containing various insults towards Charles Faulkner and questioning his integrity. It was claimed that Franklin's supporters had resorted to bribery and intimidation. Field was praised as a staunch defender of Protestant rights against Popish innovations emanating from Cuddesdon. Faulkner was criticised for various inconsistencies, including being a "mighty champion of Puseyism . . . for never since the days of the far-famed Vicar of Bray has man possessed a *conscience so elastic!*"

In another insult, alluding to Faulkner's passion for collecting antiquities and other objects of curiosity, the letter speculated "is it too much to assume that he would swear by the Koran, should some worthy Mahomedan send him a rare and valuable fossil?"

Despite these frictions, the fund raising and restoration work continued apace. By June 1858 the church restoration fund stood at £1,016 8s. 8d. The *Oxford Journal* reported in February 1859 that a new vestry had been erected, and the box pews replaced by handsome oaken benches. Gas lighting had been installed, together with hot water pipes by way of heating.

Church relations in Deddington were to continue to be bedevilled by the antagonism between high church and low church Anglicans until beyond the 1880s.²

New churches were built at the beginning of the decade in both Hempton and Clifton.

St. John's church in Hempton was opened in June 1851 as a licensed unconsecrated chapel. The site, building and adjacent school room were donated by the Rev. Dr. William Wilson of Over Worton House (and Curate of Deddington). It appears that by 1860 it was not in a flourishing state, however, and was transferred to trustees.

St. James's church in Clifton was consecrated in June 1852. The architect was J.C. Buckler. The cost was c.£1,000, of which £700 was contributed by the Rev. W.C. Risley. After the service, nearly 400 were bountifully entertained by the Rev. and Mrs. Risley to beef and plumb pudding. Thereafter Risley officiated at both services on most Sundays.

² See the Coggins Scrapbooks, Volume 2 (1855-1888).

<https://www.deddingtonhistory.uk/coggins,george1846-1920-scrapbooks>