
FEATURE ARTICLE

The Church Chest

By Molly Kennedy

One of the first things I did when I was elected Churchwarden in 1996 was to explore the contents of the old wooden chest in the church. Having checked that there was nothing that needed immediate attention I decided to shelve dealing with the contents for a later date.

A year or so ago I looked into the chest and found that extra items had appeared in it since I last looked. In particular there was the Poor Book covering a few years around 1750, which I removed because it was rather damp and needed keeping in a drier atmosphere. Since then Sue Burnay has transcribed the book and it makes interesting reading about the lives of the people living in East Ilsley in that period.

Having shown the book to the members of the History Society, I was grateful for the offer of help from Sue Burnay in going through the contents of the Church Chest, and below are our notes on some of the items found in the Chest. Many of the items in the chest date from the period when the Rev. Arthur Ogle was Rector of East Ilsley. He appears to have been very active in many aspects of village life and kept copies of some of his letters, which have been retained the church chest.

Palmer Trust: a brass plate in the vestry of the church records a legacy of £500 in Government Bank Annuities to be placed in the name of the Rector and Churchwardens, dividends arising from this sum to be distributed at the Parish Church on the 21st December annually '*equally amongst such thirty poor inhabitants of this parish and if possible regular attendants at the Parish Church*'. One of the items found in the Chest was an '*Extract from the will of Thomas Palmer late of No. 12 Lambridge in the city of Bath*', dated 1883, together with lists of the recipients covering the period from 1920 to 1950.

The Rector of the Hermitage Team, Derek Brown and Molly Kennedy are the present Trustees of this charity and are having difficulty in finding recipients for the income of the charity because its terms are so specific. However, the extract from the Will shows that the Rector and Churchwardens of East Garston Church were left a similar legacy. I can now approach them to see whether they have found a way to distribute the annual income which may be helpful to us.

Church Fetes: Records of the church fetes were also found in the chest. The fetes seem to have been held every other year and there are records for the years 1925, 1927, 1929, 1931, 1933 and 1948. These are on huge sheets 26 x 16 inches and show the stalls and who ran them, who gave prizes, the proceeds of each stall and the total proceeds. The sums raised were around £80 to £85, although in 1948 the sum was £145. There is no mention of where the event was held, but it was probably in the Rectory garden. The list of those who ran the stalls covers about 40 people, so it was a major event for the village in its time.

World War II: there were one or two items in the Chest referring to wartime in East Ilsley. There is a handwritten list of the names of men and women who were in the Services, at home, overseas and prisoners of war. In an envelope addressed to the Rev. A. Ogle with a twopence – halfpenny stamp are four Air Raid Warden cards in the names of the Rev. Ogle, Mr. R. E. Edwards (Sun Inn), Mr. W. Hibbert and Miss Parry. There are also rotas for Fire Watching duty, from 11pm to 5am daily. There were 28 people listed so it was a fortnightly duty.

Evacuation Scheme: it is quite impressive to read the correspondence from Wantage District Council on arrangements which had to be made to receive evacuees. The Rev. Ogle's wife, Mary, seems to have been in charge and must have been very busy from the 9th January 1939 when the first letter, marked URGENT, was sent setting up the scheme. It seems that 54 evacuees were anticipated for the village, but the correspondence finishes on 12th September 1939, so we don't learn what happened after that.

The following notes on the contents of the tithes folder are from Sue Burnay;

Tithes: there was a substantial folder of papers regarding tithes and their collection in the 1920's and 1930's. these include detailed lists of landowners that fill in gaps in our present knowledge of the changing pattern of ownership in the village. There is also considerable correspondence regarding the collection of arrears of tithes – Messers G and H. Wilson seem to have been the main culprits here!

There are some fascinating letters to and from Rev. Ogle in the 1920's regarding altered tithes and the sale of several plots of the glebe land to the Lockinge Estate and to Mr. Craven. The correspondence has enough information to identify the plots of glebe land and fill in another piece of the jigsaw of who farmed what in the village. One particular plot caused a lot of correspondence – this was a long narrow strip (plot 191 on the tithe map) running alongside the bridle path from what is now Summerdown Stables.

The commutation of tithe rent charges in the 1920's generated a dispute with the Ministry of Agriculture. Rev. Ogle took a lot of trouble to sort out problems concerning the old Church Farm and the re-apportionment of tithes to the owners at that time. The Min of Ag took the simplistic line of apportioning the tithes purely by acreage, but Rev. Ogle explained in one of his letters how the original tithes had been apportioned.

"I have a precise record in a volume prepared for the contemporary Rector, the Rev. Thomas Loveday. This was both a farm and field apportionment and it sets down the precise amount assessed per acre on every one of the 785 parcels of land in the parish. The amounts set down are not uniform even as regards the same description of land but are charged according to known character and quality".

He then goes on to describe how arable land was rated at between 4s and 9s per acre, woodland was uniformly 2s per acre and meadowland from 5s to 12s per acre unless there were some commons, which still had active rights in the 1920's, the rate was only 6d per acre.