

An Eighteenth-Century Rector of Wheathamstead

BY JOHN H. BUSBY.

IN 1732 the large diocese of Lincoln was ruled over by Richard Reynolds, LL.D., who had been preferred from Bangor in 1723. The son of a Rector of Laverington, Cambs., and educated at Sidney Sussex College, Cambridge, Richard Reynolds had married Sarah, daughter of Richard Cumberland, Bishop of Peterborough, owing to whose influence he became Dean of Peterborough and Rector of Kingsthorpe where he begat a large family of six sons.

To come back to the year 1732, the Bishop's family had now grown up and owing to their father's position began to fill the most important offices in the diocese of Lincoln. George Reynolds, the eldest, had become Chancellor of Peterborough in 1721 and Archdeacon of Lincoln in 1725; Charles Reynolds, the second son, became Chancellor of Lincoln in 1726; Anthony Reynolds, the third son, was installed as Registrar of the Diocese; and Thomas Reynolds, the fourth son, was a Fellow of King's College, Cambridge, and Rector of Wootton Wawen in Warwickshire.

Now the Bishop's fifth son, in whom we are interested, had come to man's age. His name was Octavian Reynolds and he was baptized at Kingsthorpe, Northants, November 6th, 1707. He went to Westminster in 1722 and passed on to Trinity College, Cambridge, in 1728 becoming a scholar the next year and graduating B.A. in 1732. Destined like his brothers for the Church, he was ordained Deacon February 24th, 1731-2, and priest March 5th following. Preferment came quickly and on his ordination he became Rector of Farthingstone, Northants, and on June 28th, 1732, was made Precentor of Llandaff Cathedral.

In November, 1732, Dr. Wake,¹ the then Rector of

¹ Edward Wake, Christ Church College, Oxford, B.A. 1682, M.A. 1685. Rector of Wheathamstead with Harpenden 1708-1732, Prebendary of Lincoln 1706-1732, Prebendary of Canterbury 1721-1732. He was created D.D. of Lambeth in 1724. He was nephew of William Wake, Archbishop of Canterbury. He died in 1732, and was buried in Canterbury Cathedral.

Wheathamstead and Prebendary of Lincoln, died and the living being in the gift of the Bishop of Lincoln it fell to Richard Reynolds' lot to appoint the successor. It is not to be wondered at that his choice fell upon his son Octavian, who, on November 17th, 1732, was appointed Prebendary of Leighton Buzzard in Lincoln Cathedral and on November 25th, 1732, Rector of Wheathamstead both vacant by Dr. Wake's death. The Prebendal stall of Leighton Buzzard was known as "The Golden Prebend" and the Rectory of Wheathamstead was also of very considerable value, and so at an early age we see one more son of the Bishop's family established and in receipt of a large income, thanks to his father's patronage.

Octavian Reynolds took up his residence at Wheathamstead and in 1733 resigned both the Precentorship of Llandaff and the Rectory of Farthingstone. Evidently he found the cares of Wheathamstead, which then included the Chapelry of Harpenden, rather much. He took his M.A. degree in 1735 and the same year his eldest son was born to him by his wife Clemence, a natural daughter of Sir Thomas Montgomerie, knt. This son was christened in Wheathamstead Church on February 19th, 1734-35, and given the name Richard.

To return to Bishop Reynolds for one minute, not many of his literary remains are extant, but copied out in Wheathamstead Register is a Charge of his, signed by his son. The Charge reads as follows:—

THE BP. OF LINCOLNS CHARGE DATED MARCH 26TH, 1736.

My Brethren and friends, Intending, this summer to make my fifth triennial visitation of this Diocese, which in my stage of life may reasonably be taken to be the last I can propose to make, I shall set myself more immediately and closely to the two main points, i.e., first to receive complaint and make redress of such Disorders in or amongst the members of my Diocese as are grown or growing into notoriety and scandal and secondly to collect a full and true state of the Churches, their edifices and endowments for their effectual preservation from Diminution and Dilapidation, towards which I trust I shall have the ready

assistance of the ministers and churchwardens, the parochial Corporation and standing Trustees for the patrimony of the Church in their respective parishes whose faith and honour are concerned from time to time and especially before all ordinary visitations carefully to survey and honestly to communicate to the Visitant such Decays, Neglects or Injuries within their respective Trusts as cannot be redressed by their parochial authority.

And forasmuch as the offences which come are observed to abound most in those places, where the pastoral care is most Deficient, either through the non-residence of the Minister or his undertaking the service of more churches than he can duly supply or his temporary entertainment of adventitious unapproved or unqualified assistance I must the more contentedly apply myself to extirpate these roots of disorders, and this previous Intimation is made that they who will hereupon order themselves may have praise of the same and that they who persist in their wrong methods till the order of Law makes the regulation may have the less cause to complain of its operation.

(Signed) Octavian Reynolds
Rector.

Octavian Reynolds continued to officiate at Wheathamstead where he resided and more of his children were baptized, of whom more will be said later. The old Bishop died in 1744 and was buried in Buckden Church, Hunts, where the Bishops of Lincoln had a palace, the remains of which are still to be seen. There is no memorial for the Bishop at Buckden but his arms can be seen inside the south porch of the West entrance of Lincoln Cathedral.

However, Octavian Reynolds was soon to come into conflict with his Harpenden parishioners. In 1745 the Rev. George Barnard, M.A.,² who had been curate at Harpenden since 1717, left Harpenden on his appointment as Vicar of Luton and Octavian Reynolds delayed in appointing a successor. The Harpenden people did not favour their connection with Wheathamstead and

² The Rev. George Barnard was buried at Harpenden in 1760, and was the father of Edward Barnard, D.D., Headmaster and Provost of Eton, who was born and buried at Harpenden. D

had tried to become separated during the Commonwealth and so would resent any detraction from their scanty privileges.

In the Wittewronge Papers (Bundle 42) the correspondence relating to this case has been found. The first letter is one from James Wittewronge, Esq., to the Bishop of Lincoln (D^r John Thomas).³

May it Please your Lordship

The Parish of Harpenden has been a distinct Parish (Beyond the Memory of Man) Bounded by Ancient and known Boundaries by itself. The Inhabitants thereof have had (by Long Continued Custom Grounded upon an Ancient Charter) All Parish Rights (viz.) a Church peculiar to themselves, Church and Parish Officers, as Churchwardens, Overseers of the Poor and Highways etc. and a Resident Curate appointed by the Rector of Wheathamstead and Licensed by your Lordship's Predecessors. The Value of the Rectory is full 300 per ann. of which at least half ariseth in the Parish of Harpenden. The Parishioners of Harpenden claim a Resident Curate according to the Ancient Custom, M^r Reanolds the Rector says he will Reside himself at Wheathamstead and do the Duty of Harpenden likewise. But as he has not since Mid summer last done duty oftener than once a day, in which method he has declared to me he Designs to continue. I have with his own Consent (we being good Friends and desirous of ending this controversy amicably) troubled your Lordship with this (have first shewed it to Mr. Rds.) to desire you to favour us with your opinion which I believe will Receive a due regard both from Mr. Reanolds and

your Lordships
Most obedt. etc. J.W.

At the bottom is written :—

A Copy of what I sent to the Bishop of Lincoln.
J. Wittewronge,
7th Sept., 1746.

To this letter the Bishop of Lincoln replied on September 16th, 1746, stating that although Mr.

³ The Rev. John Thomas, D.D., Bishop of Lincoln 1744-1761.

Reynolds was not obliged to keep a Curate yet he must take care to see that the accustomed duty was performed in both parishes, which the Bishop agrees is an impossibility without an assistant curate. The Bishop ends his letter: "I am persuaded that Mr. Reynolds is so reasonable that he wont think of making any alteration in the accustomed duty of Wheathamstead and Harpenden."

Next comes the following letter from Octavian Reynolds himself:—

Sir,

Give me leave to beg the favour of a sight or copy of your letter to the Bp. because by comparing the one with the other I may be the best able to comprehend what all parties require of me, and in so doing I don't question but that I shall endeavour to give full satisfaction, having only this one desire at Heart which is to please all mankind.

I am Sr

Yr. most obedient

Humble sevt.

Octavian Reynolds.

Sunday Morning—Sept 28th 1746.

Wheathamst^d Parsonage.

(Addressed:—)

28th Sepr. 1746

To James Wittewronge Esqr.

Present.

Still no curate was appointed and in a letter dated January 22nd, 1746/7, the Bishop asked to know when the parishes were united. James Wittewronge's reply, of which there is a copy, is as follows:—

May it Please your Lordship

I have inclosed sent you a copy of an ancient deed I have found among my papers that I fancy refers to another which possibly may be at Bugden. I do assure your Lordship I did not apprehend the favour I requested of you would be attended with any expence to yourself for I thought you had a power upon hearing both parties, if you thought proper to order any clergyman in your diocese to perform the accustomed duty of his respective cures and I dare say Mr. Reynolds has

been ordered to obey your Lordship's commands therein. I am grieved to think of the consequence of this Neglect which already I can perceive of for of late Mr. Reynolds has settled to duty of an afternoon, the consequences of which is this that the Poor people either go upon their Innocent diversions or to the Ale House both which runs away with the money paid them the evening before and the rest of the week their Families starve. I need not take up your Lordships time to Enumerate the many bad consequences attending this neglect of Mr. Reynolds but hope soon to hear your Lordship finds you have power to remedy it, which will give great pleasure to the whole parish and your Lordships Most obed.

Humble servant

J. Wittewronge.

(Dated on back) 6th Feb 1746.

The following paragraph has been struck out of the letter following the word " therein " :—

" It is not on my own account I am thus importunate for as my horses are always ready in the stable I can as well go four miles as one to Church but as by Mr. Barnard's care we have at present as constant a sett of Church men as any parish in the Diocese."

The Charter referred to was, I think, one from Henry VIII, dated February 1st, 1537, confirming a Papal Grant of 1320 allowing the inhabitants of Harpenden to bury their dead within their own chapel or chapelyard. The Charter is somewhere amongst the Rothamstead Papers but has not yet come to light.

James Wittewronge had married Martha, eldest daughter of Sir John Strange, then Master of the Rolls, and James had evidently sent his letter and a copy of the Charter to him. There is a letter from Sir John Strange dated February 14th, 1746, saying that he had conferred with the Bishop whom he found " no stranger to Mr. R's Character and therefore the more cautious."

The Bishop then decided that an official Complaint should be made and a copy of what was sent was found in the Bundle :—

To the Right Reverend Father in God, John Lord Bishop of Lincoln etc.

We, the Churchwardens, overseers of the Poor and others, the Principal Inhabitants of the Parish of Harpenden in the County of Hertford most humbly represent to your Lordship that Mr. Reynolds the Rector of Wheathamstead cum Harpenden has for almost the term of nine months not performed the Accustomary duty (having in that time once neglected to administer the Sacrament) and refused to appoint us a resident Curate which (if we are rightly informed) we have a right to by a Custome founded on an ancient Charter; We therefore do Petition your Lordship to Take our Case into your Consideration and do therein as your Lordship shall see proper.

(Dated on back) 27th February 1747.

However, in spite of the Bishop's efforts and the endeavours of Reynolds' relations, no curate was appointed and he was presented at the Visitation before Dr. Andrews for "gross neglect of his parish."

Still no curate came and there is one more letter dated June 30th, 1747, from James Wittewronge to the Bishop complaining and ending: "I shall depend upon the advice of your Ldp and Sir John Strange for I assure you I am not fond of contention."

The reply to this letter from the Bishop is the last of the series and of rather different tone from the rest. It is as follows:—

Bugden 4th July 1747.

Sir

The plea which Mr. Reynolds makes for not keeping a Resident Curate at Harpenden seems to me a reasonable one. He says that a Curate residing there, where the principal Gentlemen of the Parish live makes him not to be regarded at all as Minister of the Parish and I cannot blame a Rector for being jealous of losing the affections of his Parishioners, I only wish that he would do more than I think he does to deserve them. If the Parish of Harpenden has a right to have a Resident Curate appointed by the Rector, as I believe it has, and the Parish will assert that right at Law, I can have no objection to their vindicating their own right, but my Power goes no further than to oblige the Rector to have the accustomed duty regularly performed at Harpenden,

and to prevent all future complaints on this head, Mr. Reynolds writes that he has taken an assistant into his Family, whom he will send to me to be ordained Priest and Licensed. There may be inconveniences from the Curates not residing at Harpenden but if I may advise you, it should be to let the matter rest a little till you see how you approve of the Curate, he has appointed, for as he has the nomination of the Curate, you would not like to have one fixed at Harpenden whom you do not approve of and if he meets with your approbations it will then be time enough to think of means for fixing his Residence at Harpenden, but wait till he is licensed, which will be at the next ordination at Michaelmas.

I am Sir

Your very humble
Servant

John Lincoln.

(Addressed)

To

James Wittewronge Esqr.
at Rothamstead
near St. Albans
Hertfordshire.

Here the case ends and the assistant turned out to be the Rev. Richard Wadsworth, who laboured at Harpenden for many years. Curiously enough old Bishop Reynolds had come into conflict with his parishioners at Kingsthorpe, the main trouble being over the election of a Churchwarden.⁴

In 1748 Octavian Reynolds became Vicar of Leighton Buzzard holding the same until 1759 when he resigned the living to his son Richard who had graduated LL.B. at Trinity Hall, Cambridge, in 1759. The year following Octavian Reynolds was made a Chaplain to the Bishop of Bath and Wells and about the same year came to reside at Harpenden. From 1764 he lived at Bowers House and continued to reside at Harpenden until his death.

Written in Vol. II of Wheathamstead Register is this note: "The Rev. Mr. Reynolds Rector of Wheatham-

⁴"Some Particulars of Dean Reynolds' conduct towards the Parish of Kingsthorpe, Northants." Lansd. MSS. 825, in British Museum.

stead died May 22 at Harden 1773." On May 27th he was buried in Harpenden Church, being the only one of the long line of Rectors of Wheathamstead with Harpenden to choose the latter as his resting place. His son Richard died August 27th in the same year as his father, and was also buried at Harpenden. His wife, Clemence, was buried at Harpenden December 3rd, 1775.

Octavian Reynolds had a family of seven children of whom the eldest has already been mentioned. The second child was a daughter, Clemence, baptised at Wheathamstead in 1736, and who married her cousin, the Rev. Anthony Reynolds, B.D.,⁵ younger son of George Reynolds Reynolds, Chancellor of Peterborough. He was buried in Lincoln Cathedral in 1817, and left a son, Lawrence, afterwards of Little Paxton, Hunts.

Esther, the next child, married at Harpenden in 1766 John Saunders, Lieutenant 54th Foot, and was buried at Harpenden May 14th, 1800.

The next child, Louisa, married at Harpenden in 1759 Charles Ventris Field, Esq., of Campton, Beds. The ceremony was performed by her uncle Decimus Reynolds,⁶ the Rector of Chalfont, St. Giles. Charles Ventris Field was knighted in 1778, being then a Captain in the Bedfordshire Militia.

⁵ On a stone at the West End of the nave of Lincoln Cathedral is this inscription:—

" Also the remains of the
Revd. Anthony Reynolds, B.D.,
Rector of Waldegrave with Hannington
in the County of Northampton
and Prebendary of Welton Revell
in this Cathedral.
He died December 1, 1809, aged 78 years."

⁶ The Rev. Decimus Reynolds, M.A., of Sidney Sussex College, Cambridge. He was Prebendary of Lincoln 1734-1790 and Rector of Chalfont St. Giles 1735-1790. He died at Clophill, Beds, where on the South Wall of the old Church is a tablet with this inscription:—

" Near this place
are deposited the Remains
of the Revd. Decimus Reynolds, A.M.
Rector of Chalfont St. Giles Bucks
In Life infinitely Charitable
and benevolent
In death universally regretted
He died December 7, 1790
aged 81 years."

For an amusing account of him see "The Memoirs of Richard Cumberland," Vol. I, page 323.

Another daughter followed, named Sarah, who died unmarried at Harpenden in 1789.

Next came a son, Thomas, who married at Harpenden in 1773 Susannah Travis and died in 1795, his gravestone still standing in the North Side of Harpenden Church.

The youngest was a son, Decimus, who, according to the *Gentleman's Magazine* for December, 1800, was found shot in Harpenden High Street on December 8th. He was the last of the family to be buried at Harpenden.

There is no monument over the Reynolds' family tomb or anything to show where it is situated. The entry in the Harpenden Register of the burial of Esther Saunders in 1800 says: "1800 May 14th Buried Mrs. Saunders in the family vault in the Church under Mr. J Bassil's and Mr. Floyd's seats."