THE SOCIAL IMPACT OF THE CHURCH IN VICTORIAN STAMFORD

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Editorial comment – This article contains references applicable and relevant to around the year 1998. Readers should take account of this and make the necessary allowances.

To historians it is one of those well-known facts that until the present century, church and state in England were inextricably mixed so that any discussion of the social impact of the church can cover the whole spectrum of social, personal, civic and political life.
Tonight, I am going to consider two aspects of the social impact of the Church:

- how the church system was integrated into the secular social administration of the town;

the social side of religion itself: the various charitable works it undertook or stimulated, and a look at how the different denominations and sects within the town saw and reacted to each other.

The emphasis will be on the 19th century but I shall be taking examples from earlier as well as the 20th century. I chose the 19th century because it was an age of transition; a time when the old medieval institutions that had governed the country for hundreds of years were seen to be inadequate for a country undergoing the massive upheaval of an industrial revolution. And of course, we were the first in the world to undergo this; there were; no guidelines; no precedents! The upheaval was not less because Stamford was a small conservative country town on the sidelines of such changes. If anything, it perhaps made it more difficult; the need for change was less, yet was demanded by the spate of new legislation. It was perhaps the native conservatism of our town fathers, and a subtle adaptation of the nationally imposed legislation, that helped retain Stamford's character and uniqueness.

Today, unless one lives in a Muslim state or in Northern Ireland, we have a problem of perception and understanding as to how church, state and social life could be so inextricably mixed. Curiously, we quite accept it with secular institutions - could anything be more medieval than parliament? - but in this post-Christian age we do not extend the same tolerance to the Church. We have less sympathy for, and certainly less understanding of, medieval church institutions done up in new, sometimes not so new, clothes playing such an important part in social life. This is particularly so since most of these roles have long been taken over by the state or purely secular charities.

1851 RELIGIOUS CENSUS

There is no doubt over the statistic that today well over 95% of the population does not regularly go to church, and I think we are well above the average in Stamford with about 3% church attendance. It is most probable that a majority of the country does not even believe in the traditional Christian view of God. It is therefore very hard for us to imagine today the impact the Church had on everyday life, say 100 years ago, where virtually everyone believed in the Christian idea of a personal God and well over 50% of the population were regular churchgoers. As this average figure included the large new industrial cities where the churchgoing habit had largely been lost, it shows how solidly churchgoing were the smaller traditional towns such as Stamford. We are lucky in that we have some precise figures to substantiate this claim, as right in the middle of the century, at perhaps the apogee of Queen Victoria's reign, 1851, the year of the Great Exhibition, a unique religious census of England and Wales was undertaken. Every Anglican incumbent, every Roman catholic priest, every dissenting minister was asked to fill in a return for attendances on Mothering Sunday, 30 March. The report, published in January 1854, concluded that 54% of the nation attended a church of some sort on that day, though modern historians have modified this figure to between 47% and 54%. While we think this an amazingly high figure, the Victorians thought it low and were shocked at the number of people who were *not* going to church. They were also shocked by how many dissenters there turned out to be, almost two thirds of Anglican numbers; particularly as before the fear had been of Roman Catholics, who turned out in fact to be fairly thin on the ground.

One may argue about the accuracy of the census: the method of collecting, that the adjustments to account for people going to church more than once were extremely crude, that Stamford presented its own special problems - censuses being always held during fair week distorted the numbers of people in the town - but all these do not detract from the value of the survey and what it tells us about the church in Stamford. It shows us, for example, that church attendances on that Sunday were 79% of the population – 6776 out of a population of 8933. While, of course, this does not mean that 6776 people attended church, even using the census report's own crude calculations for double and triple

churchgoers, it gives us a figure of 59% - 5% above the national average - which is what I suppose we should more or less expect.

Actual figures may surprise us. Remembering that the town's population was only half what it is today, it was recorded that 850 people attended the evening service at St Michael's and, if one includes the Sunday school, well over 500 attended the morning service at St Martin's. Isn't it interesting that these are the most poorly attended churches today? In fact St Michael's was so poor that it was closed during the 1960s. It is also interesting to note that over 1,700 children attended the town's Sunday schools on that day, 500 of which were in the non-conformist schools. This is an extremely high proportion of school age children and probably reflects a number of reasons: piety (possibly more on the parents' part than the children themselves), getting the children out of the way for a while in crowded home conditions, and the patchiness of day school education - we mustn't forget this was 20 years before the Forster Education Act and 30 years before compulsory state education.

The report also shows the relative support for the various denominations in the town. Roman Catholics were fairly thin on the ground at 3-4% of churchgoers, as the *Stamford Mercury* had also noted when the first RC chapel was being built in All Saints' Street in 1825, but this was about the national average. Dissent was much less strongly represented in Stamford than nationally - 29% of the churchgoing population as opposed to the 44% national average. This meant the Church of England was stronger - 67-8%, rather than the national 52%. Again, this confirms what we suspected: that Stamford was a very traditional and conservative town, with traditional beliefs, following the national established church.

This, then, is the background. Let us now take a closer look at the church's influence upon town life. Just as we cannot appreciate fully the impact of Christian belief and strong churchgoing habits on the community, we are even less able to comprehend the part the church played in the civil administration of the town. The Anglican parish was the hub of the community and at the beginning of the 19th century carried out a wide range of duties that today we should see as the province of local government.

It was:

- the centre of the Poor Law administration and after the 1834 Poor Law Amendment Act was the basis of the groupings that made up the Poor Law Unions,
- responsible for road maintenance and attendant paving and lighting (though it had the main arterial roads taken away from it during the 18th century with the establishment of turnpike trusts),
- had the power to charge a separate church rate for the maintenance and repair of the parish church,
- the basis for collecting tithes to pay the stipend or salary of the parson,
- usually the stimulus for and controller of parishioners, and
- generally ran a number of charities that had accumulated through the centuries.

One of its major functions, therefore, was that of a statutory body with the power to raise taxes and, as such, was the centre of the civil administration of the town. Developed to administer a late medieval community, when there were no such things as dissenters (that is, non-conformists) and we were all part of one national church, there was no problem; but from the Reformation onwards society was not so homogeneous. There were considerable numbers of dissenters and Roman Catholics in the town who would grumble like the rest of us over the Poor Rate or Highways Rate, but would have a much more substantial and stronger objection to paying tithes for the stipend of the Anglican parson or paying rates for the repair of the parish church.

THE VESTRY

On the other hand, the system for its day was quite democratic. Parish administration was carried out by means of the vestry, a meeting of all parish residents with property qualifications (that is, a ratepayer but after 1869, merely an occupier) and was a very direct form of government. One did not elect members to represent you, but as a qualified

parishioner you went along to take part directly and vote. It was almost an Athenian form of democracy. From the huge number of *Stamford Mercury* reports of vestry meetings, in Stamford they seem to have varied in size from a handful to over 200. From 1831 onwards legislation made it possible to streamline the system and elect smaller 'select vestries' to undertake parish business, but this opportunity was not taken up in Stamford. It seems to have been aimed at the larger towns and cities.

This vestry was chaired by the rector or vicar (which of course gave him considerable power in addition to his right to appoint one of the two churchwardens) and met annually and as occasion demanded to elect officers and officials, and set parish rates. For example, in the early years of Queen Victoria's reign Stamford parish vestries were electing churchwardens, overseers of the poor, poor law guardians, surveyors of the highway, turnpike trustees, improvement commissioners and trustees for the various parish trusts, as well as appointing various officials, such as the parish watchmen, to carry out parish duties and fulfil legal requirements. As many of these posts carried a salary as well as to authority, the commissioning power of the vestry itself was considerable.

The other side of the coin of Catholics and dissenters having to pay for things they didn't want - tithes and the church rate - was that they were equally represented on the vestry. As long as they fulfilled the residential and property qualifications, it didn't matter whether parishioners were Anglican, Roman Catholic, Dissenter or even atheists (though there were not many of these around at the time). All parishioners had their rights and could vote on the full complement of subjects, including the purely ecclesiastical. We therefore have the curious anomaly of Catholics and dissenters electing Anglican churchwardens as well as setting parish rates and the like. This right remains even today in vestigial form; any parish resident has the right to be on the church electoral roll and vote for the churchwardens at the annual vestry, a meeting that still precedes the parochial church council AGM.

The powers of the parish were gradually eroded during the 19th century. I have already mentioned the removal of arterial roads maintenance to turnpike trusts, but in the 1830s came much larger inroads into the parish's powers. The Poor Law Amendment Act

of 1834 was the first large dent and removed the ultimate responsibility for the "care" (I put that word in inverted commas) of the poor and destitute. From then on parishes were formed into unions, which in Stamford's case stretched from Clipsham to Stibbington, and while individual parishes still elected guardians to sit on the general board, parishes thereafter were hardly more than tax assessment and collecting areas. Sweeping in on the coat tails of the Great Reform Act of 1832, the Municipal Reform Act of 1835 made a formation of the borough council possible. This in turn led to further inroads in the secular powers of the parish with the creation of the Stamford Improvement Commission in the early 1840s. This removed from the parish things like roads, lighting, paving and embryonic planning controls. The demise of the parish as a secular body came in 1894 when an act established secular church councils as a further part of local government reform. Thus, within a space of 60 years the parish had been transformed from being the administrative hub of local government to being a secular irrelevancy. The situation is summed up by the position of the incumbent; he was demoted from being *ex officio* chairman of the old parish vestry with powers of both patronage and appointment to not being even a member of the new parish council unless standing for the election like anyone else. In Stamford, this demise should have been felt more strongly as there were no succeeding secular parish councils, the remaining powers devolving onto the more distant borough council. It is telling of the gradual decline of the old parish system that this was hardly noted at the time.

ADMINISTRATION OF THE POOR LAW

I want now to look in a little more detail at some of the functions of the parish in its heyday. Perhaps the largest social function the parish played in the life of the town was in the operation of the Poor Law. At the beginning of the 19th century the system of poor relief was based on Elizabethan legislation passed to deal with a very different society - an agrarian economy and with problems quite different from those of industrialisation three centuries later. One of the major problems in the 16th century had been caused by dissolution of the monasteries carried out by Elizabeth’s father, Henry VIII. The

monasteries had been an important source of relief for the poor, not only in direct aid but by sheltering from the world large numbers of monks and lay brothers. The end of direct relief, together with the release into the wider world of the large numbers whom the monasteries had previously sheltered, caused huge problems. It was also complicated by the change of farming practices in many parts of the country, that is, the turning over of large tracts of countryside to relatively labour free sheep farming, the practice that Thomas More railed against in his *Utopia*. This dispossessed many and added to the problem of able bodied, or “sturdy” vagrants as they were called, wandering the land. They were the phobia of the Elizabethans and one of the major stimuli behind their poor law legislation.

The basis of this poor law administration was the church parish – thus the problem was transferred from one church organisation to another – and it was charged only with looking after its own poor and destitute. The problem of "sturdy vagrants" was merely shunted on to the next parish. Unfortunately, not all the wandering poor were "sturdy vagrants' and the old poor law could not cater for the truly destitute stranded away from their birthplace. It was therefore a great disincentive to the mobility of labour by the poor in a changing world. The other great debate in the early 19th century was that of outdoor relief. The old poor law allowed support to be given to families living in their own homes, who though possibly working still were too poor to support themselves - the parish workhouses were reserved for the destitute and homeless. This had led to the depression of wages and pauperism as employers saw that they would be made up to subsistence level by the community. This sort of abuse was patchy throughout the country and it has been claimed that the East Midlands suffered from it less than many other parts. However, the figures I shall produce in a minute show a different picture. There was therefore a very strong case for reform but like so much legislation, today as well as in the 19th century, it was a case of trying to save money as much as reform the abuses.

The new poor law, that is, the Poor Law Amendment Act of 1834, reformed the administration by grouping parishes into unions, and, for the first time in centuries, Stamford became the centre of a sensible administrative district, the Stamford Poor Law Union, a union of thirty-seven parishes stretching from Clipsham in the north to

Stibbington in the south; from Tixover in the west to West Deeping in the east. Parish workhouses were replaced by a single union workhouse, built on the Barnack Road in 1836 at a cost of £3,645, situated where there is now a turn-of-the-century terrace set back from the road, a little before you come to Newage's. This workhouse was demolished in 1902 and replaced by a new one in Ryhall Road. This was, until recently, the St George's Home and the site is now occupied by the Whitefriars old people's homes. The other great change was the prohibition of outdoor relief and the establishment of the principle that life inside the workhouse must not compare with that of the poorest who were surviving outside. Arguably conceived from the best of motives, it left a pretty stark choice for those unfortunates who had to choose between starvation and the workhouse. I come from a generation old enough to have heard first hand tales that illustrated the horror of going into the workhouse that still persisted at the end of the century. Having said this, outdoor relief was not entirely abolished in Stamford and there are a number of references to it in the *Stamford Mercury*, though as a report in 1851 [23.5.51:3.1] notes, "the check on vagrancy" (that old bugbear) "continues". It was, as I said before, a case of our town fathers adapting national legislation to local needs.

There are numerous literary illustrations of the harshness of the operation of the new poor law, *Oliver Twist*, for example, but real-life examples, I think, have more poignancy. I shall give only one to set the problem at our own doorstep. In September 1838, Catherine Whaley of St George's parish received little justice from the system. Three weeks previously, her husband had run off leaving Catherine and their five children destitute. The Whaleys had been married eight years, but then it was discovered that the marriage had been bigamous. Mr Whaley had previously married another woman, with whom he had lived for three months! Catherine's children were therefore "bastardised" (as the *Mercury* delicately puts it) and were dealt with accordingly by the law. The three children born before the 1834 Poor Law Amendment Act had to be sent to the parish of their birth, so one was sent to Little Gonerby near Grantham and the other two were put in the charge of St George's parish in Stamford. The other two children born after 1834 took on the birth parish of their mother and were sent with her to St John's. Gonerby was in the Grantham

Union so that child was sent to the workhouse there. There was only one workhouse in the Stamford Union, the new one on Barnack Road, so it is possible the two St George's parish children may have had a little more contact with their mother, but this would have been severely limited.

Ah, but the system did save money. In March 1839 the *Stamford Mercury* [1.3.1839:4.6] reported that nationally the new system was saving 36% upon the cost of the former system: £4,808,735 in 1837 as against £7,511,219 in 1834. In the Stamford Union the saving was much greater at 45%: £3,609 against £6,599, with the six Stamford parishes averaging 42.5%: £1,508 against £2,621. In the *Mercury* piece on the national picture stress was placed upon the savings made in administration and employment of officers and, additionally, the Stamford figure is probably distorted by proceeds from the sale of the former parish workhouses put up for auction in the second half of 1836. But the *Mercury* explanation doesn't account for the bulk of the saving which was almost certainly due to the elimination of outdoor relief. Isn't it strange that no reference is made to this by the contemporary report when it was one of the major reasons for the legislation. Perhaps the world wasn't so old fashioned then, the official explanation only containing one half of the story, and that the unimportant half. It shows what a long training our modern politicians have had.

As an aside, it is not clear where all the former parish workhouses were. The site of the St Martin's one is known because it survives in Water Street, until a few years ago occupied by Hopkins the electrician and recently converted to a house. It still retains on its south side the large windows by which the inmates were able to see to carry out their prescribed work. For others we know the street or area, for example, the St John's workhouse was in Scotgate, but not the precise location.

Let us then recap on the Church's position. As we have seen, the parish first administered the poor law totally and then, after 1834, elected guardians to the general union board and acted as a poor rate raising and collecting unit. The parish's responsibilities were diminished, but it hit the incumbent even harder. Instead of having to deal only with his parish overseers over whom he could exert influence, he now had to deal with a large

organisation of 37 local parishes, from Clipsham to Stibbington, which appointed their own full-time officials as well as relying on the parish overseers. Having said this, such were the mores at the time that it is unlikely that any parson would have disagreed with decisions such as given over Catherine Whaley. It was in keeping with thinking of the time which in turn was in accord with the contemporary Christian principles and interpretation of theology. But practically, it did remove the direct dealing with problems from the local community and substituted bureaucracy for personal contact.

THE CHURCH RATE

One area of great concern to everyone in the early 19th century parish was the church rate. This was the right of the parish to charge a general rate for the repair of the parish church. In a homogeneous society where the whole population supported the national church, it would have been a sensible system, but when there were considerable numbers of dissenters and Roman Catholics about – and if you remember, between 30 and 35% of the churchgoing population in Stamford was non-Anglican (or just over 13% of adults in the town's total population [using Mann's calculation]) - then it was bound to cause trouble. The dissenters and Roman Catholics had a legitimate grievance in resisting paying for the repair of a building they disliked intensely, was the home of a national church which they felt to be doctrinally wrong and which they only entered unwillingly (before their own registration) to be married or buried from. There was also a feeling that the whole matter of quarrelling over the church rate or tithe (which I shall come to) was unseemly and un-Christian. It is interesting to note that in November 1838 the *Mercury* printed a long extract from the London *Globe* on this very subject stating that the feuding and wrangling over these things was promoting a general spirit of contention and animosity in congregations.

Despite this, there are numerous examples of the church rate being levied in Stamford to repair our six (as there were at the time) medieval parish churches: for example, St Mary's called emergency vestry meetings in 1841 to levy a rate to deal with the huge split that had appeared in the church causing the chancel to separate from the nave; and the

church rate was used to help finance the various repewings of Stamford churches that took place during the 1840s and 1850s. But there were also moments of levity in the vestry meetings. At a St Mary's vestry in April 1852 a dissenter complained that he was being charged for payments made to the church organist and choir as part of his church rate. These were not part of the fabric and therefore illegal. Some wag pointed out that this individual's house had a rateable value of £11 when it was worth well in excess of £20 and as the *Mercury* says, "It was resolved...to make him pay one way if he would not another". Other oddities, but of a more generous nature, can also be recorded, as in May 1851 when the St Mary's vestry voted itself an additional and voluntary church rate to allow a young girl in the parish to emigrate to New Zealand. The rector was himself emigrating and was to escort her. If one were really cynical one might wonder if this might have been a cheap way of getting the fare of the rector's personal maidservant paid, but the *Stamford Mercury*, normally quick to pick up such things, made no such comment.

For many years the church rate had been stoutly resisted, especially in the towns, not only by the dissenters and Roman Catholics but also by many Anglicans who had accepted that the situation was unfair. There had been a great outcry in St Michael's parish over the rebuilding of the church which had collapsed in 1832. The rector's attempts to enlist help from the parish for rebuilding was met by strong resistance, and in the end it was rebuilt totally by subscription. This, however, is a special case as the parish felt, not without reason, that it should not foot the bill for rebuilding as the responsibility for the church's collapse lay firmly at the door of the rector. If you remember, he had had the "brilliant" idea of enlarging the church's seating capacity by pulling down every other one of the medieval columns, not apparently realising that columns have a structural significance.

Church rates staggered on until 1868 when Gladstone abolished them, but there is one interlude in between which, if it had succeeded, would have had major repercussions today. The church rate had been abolished in Ireland in 1833 and an attempt was made the next year by Lord Althorp to do the same for England. Althorp's bill placed the responsibility for the cost of repairs to England's ancient parish churches at the door of the

Treasury. Though the bill passed comfortably through the House of Commons, it got lost in the dying days of Lord Grey's Whig government and was never resurrected. But what a change it would have made! It was not until 1977 that state aid was made available for church repairs and even today the roughly £10 million pounds given to churches by the state is rather more than counterbalanced by the £17 million taken back in VAT (just to keep the lecture topical!). Gladstone's approach in 1868 was quite different from Althorp's. In the intervening years, the growing unpopularity of the church rate had led to the principle of church repair by voluntary subscription or contribution, as at St Michael's, being widely accepted. All Gladstone did was to capitalise on this. It was very sensible at the time, with well over half the population committed to the Established Church, and additionally let the government off an extra financial burden, but it makes it very hard for us today when a tiny proportion of the population bears almost the whole cost of this major part of the nation's heritage. Actually, to be technically correct, Gladstone did not abolish church rates, he just made them voluntary instead of compulsory. Every Anglican parish still has the theoretical right to levy a church rate, but you can refuse to pay. That's why they're never levied!

TITHES

The other great grievance of non-Anglicans was having to contribute towards the stipend, or salary, of the Church of England parson through the payment of tithes. Again, this was a medieval custom that ultimately derived from biblical Judaic practice and meant that a tithing, or tenth, of all gain that the land produced was to be given to the church. Originally this had been in the form of produce and was the reason for the great medieval tithe barns that still dot the land. Tithes had always been unpopular and people would go to infinite ends to under-declare or get out of paying. The general attitude is summed up in this late 17th century song from John Dryden's play King Arthur, and set to music by Henry Purcell. One particularly rumbustious song sung by a chorus of yokels has a verse:

We've cheated the parson, we'll cheat him again,
For why should a blockhead have one in ten.

One in ten, one in ten,
For why should a blockhead have one in ten.

In Stamford the amount paid in tithes depended on the holding in the open fields. The position was regularised with the Tithe Act of 1836 which allowed the commutation of tithes in kind for a cash payment, a tithe rentcharge based on the average price of wheat, barley and oats over a period of seven years. After the act these sums were generally assessed at about two thirds of the real value of the tithe, but incumbents were happy as previously they had been lucky if they had been able to prise half out of unwilling land owners. The tithe rentcharge, being set by a tithe commissioner, saved a tremendous amount of unseemly wrangling between land owners and incumbents. In actual practice, cash payments had been made for some years and it was in May 1828 that James Torkington, the Stamford Town Clerk, came to an agreement for a cash settlement with the Rev Thomas Wilkinson, vicar of All Saints', the largest and most influential parish in the town. It was then agreed that the vicar would receive £370 per annum in lieu of the great and small tithes. This was based on about 1,200 to 1,300 acres of the Stamford open fields lying in All Saints' parish and a tithe of about 6/- per acre (or 7/6d when the poor rate, highways rate and land tax were added).

Accordingly, in May 1839 All Saints' became the first parish to be assessed under the new system. The tithe commissioner, Mr Rawlinson, accepted the principle established by Torkington and Wilkinson and set the tithe at the same level, £370, though based on a more recent set of averages. I imagine the new vicar, Nicholas Walters, was delighted, not only because £370 per annum was a handsome salary in those days, but because he had scored a personal victory over the Town Clerk. He had secured the small tithes of £30 (for potatoes, clover, etc.) that Wilkinson had been persuaded to forego.

Other parishes were not long in following All Saints' example, but as the century progressed tithes gradually fell into disuse. However, it was not until 1936 that the tithe rentcharge was finally extinguished after some civil disobedience by East Anglian farmers. It is not within the scope of this lecture to explain how this was compensated for; suffice it

to say that sorting out Anglican clergy stipends was a very long process involving the Ecclesiastical Commission and Diocesan Boards of Finance. They were only finally sorted out, if anything can ever be said to be finally sorted out in the Church of England, as recently as 1976 with an *Endowments and Glebes Measure*.

REGISTRATION

The other major area where the established church became an arm of the state was that of registration - births, deaths marriages - and as before it became a grievance of Dissenters and Roman Catholics. At the beginning of the 19th century they were not allowed to be married or buried from their own churches (unless you were a Quaker or a Jew who had had special acts of parliament passed for them). The need of the modern state to have more information about its own people led in 1812 to an act of parliament in an attempt to get the information in the parish registers recorded more formally. From now on registers had to be given proper protection and quarterly returns of births deaths and marriages had to be made to the diocesan registrar. Dissenters and Roman Catholics were deliberately excluded from this process because, as the church historian Chadwick says, "their ministers were of insecure tenure, their chapels impermanent [and] their registers chaotic". That, as far as the last criticism is concerned, the same applied to many Anglican churches did not make any difference, and so for another quarter of a century Dissenters and Catholics had to use the parish church for marriage and burial.

But 1836 was not 1812 and during the intervening period the restricting Test and Corporation Acts had been repealed and the Catholics emancipated. The situation was resolved in the latter year with a series of registration acts. From then on Dissenters and Catholics could be married from their own churches, as long as they were licensed. The Star Lane Independents were licensed in July 1837, as were the Roman Catholics at about the same time. The acts also relieved pressure for burials in the already overcrowded parish church graveyards, but this problem in Stamford was not solved for another twenty years, until the new town cemetery was opened off Little Casterton Road in 1854.

EDUCATION/SCHOOLS

It was, I think, the Jesuits who said, "Give me the child for the first seven years and I'll give you the man."

They were. of course, talking about education; more precisely education into a particular mode of thought. The churches at this time were certainly not slouches in putting this axiom into practice and were the great stimulus for the advancement of education. There is no doubt they were doing this for altruistic reasons, but there is equally no doubt they were each operating their own agenda. In this age, before universal state education, schooling was given to those who could afford to pay for it, and for those who couldn't, it was provided at a profit by the supplier - the commercial profit of the private schools, or the profit to society of a better educated people who emerged from schooling as sympathetic or an adherent to your particular brand of Christianity. In either case, the promotion of social order and the habit of obedience to one's social superiors was also an essential ingredient.

You probably have a vague memory from your schooldays that the first schooling for the poor was provided by Sunday schools, popularised and put on a national footing by Robert Raikes from 1780 onwards. While this interpretation is generally correct, like so many things we learnt at school it is a little simplistic. In Stamford, for instance, the Stamford Grammar School, or Radcliffe's School as it was then known, was founded in the 16th century to provide education for a number of poorer boys; and the Wells Charity or Petty School was endowed and established in St Peter's Street in 1604 to educate as many boys as his old house would accommodate, according to the will of Stamford shoemaker Edward Wells. Bluecoat School was founded in 1704 and was able to educate and clothe about 40-50 poor boys.

The first Stamford Sunday school, on the other hand, seems to have been St Martin's, founded about 1785. By 1801 it had about 270 children attending, though this is in conflict with the opinion of William Wilberforce, the famous reformer, who passing through Stamford in 1798 commented, "At Church, miserable work. Remnant of Sunday school, eight children! I have never seen a more apparently irreligious place". However, it was not

long before other parishes had set up their own Sunday schools and the Dissenters were quick to follow. While religious instruction would be given in all schools, instruction in the three Rs would also be given in the Sunday schools. There is a note in 1822 that the Independent Chapel (now URC) Sunday school in Star Lane was giving reading and spelling instruction to about 100 children. For the majority of these poor, the Sunday school would be the only formal education they would receive.

By the early 19th century, schools were being set up by the dozen. Alongside the large number of tiny dame schools, for example, Miss Bee in Barn Hill, the Misses Lowe in St Mary's Place, or Miss Wakefield in Broad Street, more substantial establishments were set up either by the parishes directly or with strong religious connections. In 1815 money left over from a lying-in charity helped establish the National School for Girls (later St George's School) which with the Bluecoat school for boys became one of the major schools for the poor of the town. The name National is significant because it meant the school had almost certainly accepted a grant from the National Society for Promoting the Education of the Poor in the Principles of the Established Church, and therefore had a particular religious affiliation.

The National Society was founded in 1811 but three years later a non-denominational society, the British and Foreign Schools Society, was founded to counter this established church influence. Though claiming to be non-denominational, it inevitably had strong Dissenter influence. In 1838 when the Bluecoat School was rebuilt and expanded on St Peter's Hill (now the Masonic Centre) to cater for 150 boys instead of the previous 40-50, it stated its education would be according to the British and Foreign Schools Society system. They had presumably accepted a grant from them. In this case there was no inevitable Dissenter connection, for only sixteen years before the author of Drakard's *History of Stamford* had been fearful that Bluecoat, like the girls' National School, was going over to the Madras system, which had Anglican associations. However, the result was that it attracted large numbers of Dissenters' children and went down that path. Because of the mix of its children, it decided not to teach the catechism which aroused the fury of the Anglican clergy. They were so agitated that they refused to attend the first

public examination at the school in 1839 which led the *Stamford Mercury*, a paper itself with strong liberal/nonconformist leanings, to accuse them of bigotry.

It was inevitable there would be a school in the town under dissenter influence to counterbalance the growth of the Anglican parish schools. St Martin's day school was founded in 1833 and the new building of 1855 by the London architect Henry Clutton still survives today as the Stamford High School music school on the corner of Kettering Road. Later there followed St John's School on the corner of Scotgate, All Saints' School in Austin Street and St Michael's School on the corner of Recreation Ground Road (now the site of the Salvation Army). As well as this, the Anglican parish would have considerable influence in the other schools. The vicar and churchwardens of All Saints' awarded the lease of the Wells Charity School and this same triumvirate of incumbent and churchwardens in St George's parish dominated the National School. Side by side with the day schools the Sunday schools flourished to give the number of 1,700 attending on a typical Sunday as we saw earlier in the 1851 religious census figure. As we have seen, they taught the same subjects as at the day schools and in many cases the same day school masters and mistresses taught the Sunday schools in the same buildings.

From the 1830s the government made small grants available for school building and during the 1840s these expanded hugely. It is most likely that the Stamford parish school building programme benefited from them. From 1840 grants were conditional on the schools accepting independent inspection and management, but as we have seen from the Bluecoat case above, and numerous other earlier examples, Stamford was already doing this. In other ways Stamford was conventional and followed accepted practices - the monitorial system of teaching in the earlier part of the century and the discredited 'payment by results' system in the 1850s and 60s. When the Forster Education Act was passed in 1870, Stamford was so well endowed with schools, all the major ones with strong religious connections, there was no need to establish new Board Schools. The result today is that of five primary schools in Stamford, three of them are Church of England schools, and of the other two, one of them, Bluecoat, has strong religious associations.

LIBRARIES

Alongside the schools we must not forget the libraries, for again, the church was the first institution to provide such facilities. Church or parish libraries go back to the Middle Ages and there survives today a medieval chained library in Hereford (All Saints, recently moved to the cathedral). St Wulfram's at Grantham also has a surviving chained library, and a library was established at St Mary's Stamford in the early 17th century by Richard Bannister, churchwarden but better known as an eye surgeon. Not all the works in the parish libraries were religious but naturally they were what we should call rather heavyweight, with a preponderance of theology and the Church Fathers, plus a smattering of commentaries, philosophy and the natural sciences. The library at St Mary's, which still survives in the church, is distinguished because by the early 18th century it had been reformed and in 1721 had become one of the earliest lending libraries in the country. At least one book remains there that retains its contemporary list of borrowers on the flyleaf. This lending library predates considerably the first public subscription library in Stamford which was established in 1770. Wider public readership was only attained by the establishment of the Stamford Institution in 1842, but this secular library was rivalled by a parish library set up by All Saints in 1846, where the poor of the parish could borrow books every Monday morning for their edification - from Mr Maxey's establishment in St Peter's Street. It was, of course, not until 1906 that the present public library was established in a refurbished Portico, High Street, where it still remains.

GENERAL CHARITY

I said I was going to talk about the social side of the general charitable nature of the various churches in the town. Obviously, what we have just been considering - the poor law, the rates, tithes, education – all were important in a wider social context and there is evidence to show that Stamford followed national movements inspired by Christian and humanitarian concerns. For example, in June 1832 the *Stamford Mercury* records a proposal to establish an anti-slavery society here and similarly notes celebrations in the town when abolition of slavery in the British colonies was achieved the following year.

What I wish to avoid now is merely a list of good works or individual charities run by the various religious groups. It would take a whole lecture just to run through the annual Stamford social calendar listing things like the regular charity balls - Lying-In Charity just before Christmas, Dorcas Charity just after, etc.- or the annual appearance of the soup kitchens in winter. These do not seem to have been treated as emergencies at the time for they were so regular as to be part of the annual calendar. The only variation was their number, which depended on the severity of the weather. Another important feature of the social round was the religious lecture. They were extremely popular, though to our eyes hardly distinguishable from sermons, and individual lectures regularly attracted audiences of well over a thousand. It rather puts into the shade what we consider the undoubted success of these museum lectures. To show how far this extended, during the 1830s and 40s even the smallest parish in the town, St Mary's, not only had a curate but also a separate lecturer (just as Boston retains today).

The Victorians still have a very bad press today and one of the most serious charges against them is that of hypocrisy. Nowhere, apparently, is this better illustrated than in contrasting, say, the establishment of the Church of England Temperance Society tea-room in Broad Street (now the dry cleaner on the corner of Ironmonger Street) with the alcohol problems suffered by the clergy themselves: for example, MacDougall of St Michael's who had to be protected by his friends after becoming 'tired and emotional' in church one day, or Micklethwaite of Little Casterton being found staggering drunkenly up Nags Head Passage one day in 1907. But this is as much our hypocrisy as theirs. In making these judgments, we are ignoring the equally blatantly obvious cases of double thinking that pervade our own society, but at the same time we wilfully misunderstand the Victorian epoch, which was grappling with changes in society that were the equal of anything we see today. And they were doing this, unlike today, in a world less used to change. Also, until numbers become statistically significant, individual cases can only be anecdotal.

We may also find it difficult to understand the feelings of guilt felt by the Victorians - they would call this contrition - but can we imagine today state sponsored national Days of Humiliation and Fasting? There were at least four of them during the 19th century: 1832

and 1853 for cholera, 1854 for the Crimean War, 1857 for the Indian Mutiny. Man made wars perhaps need contrition, but for Acts of God such as cholera we find this a little harder to take. The days themselves were commemorated during the week and, as the *Stamford Mercury* remarked in 1854, they were "not marked by large church attendances but all businesses (were) suspended". These days also illustrate what an age of transition the 19th century was. The stimuli for the days were perhaps feelings left over from less rational ages, but as the *Mercury* shows, they were not generally well supported and other sources tell us that they were actively opposed by the more advanced. This opposition included Roman Catholics and Dissenters who were protesting against the established church connection, and within the established church itself, Anglo-Catholics who saw the days as government interference in church affairs.

The categories I've illustrated show the major concerns of the Victorians: education and the care of those less fortunate than themselves, spurred by strong religious convictions but tinged with a primitive sort of guilt. We can certainly say that what they did was patchy and ineffective, even that they were being hypocritical and selfish and paying lip service to good works, or that they were not living to the biblical standards they set themselves. We may even take a Marxist view and see the Victorian Bourgeoisie doing just enough to protect itself from the unbridled disaffection of the urban poor. All these criticisms may be true in part but they fall into the trap of judging a previous generation by our own standards and are therefore not very useful. It is much more fruitful to judge them on their own terms and then we can see how the age reacted to the severe problems they were facing.

THE DENOMINATIONS

For the final section tonight, I said I would look at the different denominations in the town to see how they interacted with each other, or more accurately, how they were viewed and reacted to by the townspeople. I shall start with the Dissenters. Since the second half of the 17th century dissenters, that is, all the Protestant non-conformist groups, had been barred from public office, particularly from standing for parliament. During the 18th century and the Age of Enlightenment there had been a growing toleration, so that by 1828

the removal of the legal barriers of the Test and Corporation Acts was little more than a formality. The Independents (later the Congregationalists, now the URC) had a chapel in Stamford before 1680 but this was burnt down by the mob on the death of Queen Anne in 1714. A new chapel in Star Lane replaced it in 1720, and the present chapel in almost the same position was built in 1819. The Methodists first built here in 1803 on their present site, and that chapel, with the lovely carvings of Faith, Hope and Charity on the gable, still survives behind the present 1880s Gothic chapel.

The General Baptists, who had good 16th and 17th century antecedents, were recorded in Stamford during September 1829 holding a mass baptism by general immersion in the River Welland; the first time this had happened in Stamford for 100 years said the *Stamford Mercury*. This became a regular event the novelty of it attracting ever growing crowds, up to 1,800 a few years later. Flushed by their success the Baptists were able to build themselves a chapel in 1835, significantly on the banks of the Welland in Bath Row. It survives as the pair of buildings that come down to the street front just west of the Bath House. However, the General Baptists did not fare well as they were recorded in the *Mercury* as having gone by 1846, and there is no trace of them in the 1851 religious census. I think I may know why.

Some years before, two young Church of England curates, William Tiptaft and Joseph Philpot, serving in parishes near Oxford, became great friends and after studying and praying together grew so disillusioned with the Church of England that they seceded. They became itinerant preachers in the John Wesley mould, but were, what we should call today, Strict Baptists. William Tiptaft, who was a natural if fiery preacher, came from the east Midlands and had two sisters living in Oakham and Stamford. His Stamford sister was married to the brewer Joseph Phillips, and who, reading between the lines, was caused endless embarrassment by her brother. On one of Tiptaft's frequent visits to Stamford he met Dr Merveilleux (pronounced Mirvilow), doctor at the infirmary and a strong Independent of Star Lane Chapel, who actually lived on this very site [Stamford Arts Centre] - his front room is now the booking office. Merveilleux was so impressed with him that he arranged for him to preach in the Assembly Rooms next door in October 1831. With

his local upper-class connections, Tiptaft drew a large and miscellaneous audience including the cream of society. Unfortunately, his normal open-air-from-the-back-of-a-farm-waggon preaching style didn't go down too well with the cream of society, especially as he was not only haranguing the Church of England but the general dissenters as well. Many walked out and the rest stayed to shout. His sister, Mrs Phillips, is reported as commenting "William is mad!"

The uproar was such that the Assembly Rooms could never again be hired for Tiptaft, but Merveilleux was so impressed he immediately left the Independents and determined to build a chapel for the strict preaching of the gospel. This was more difficult than imagined for, after the uproar, it would be difficult to get a site and the intention must at all costs be kept from the ears of the Marquess. Merveilleux secretly acquired a piece of land on the waste to the north of the town and the chapel, built entirely at his own cost, was erected in 1834. This is the North Street Particular Baptist Chapel. Tiptaft's friend, Philpot, became minister – perhaps Tiptaft was too restless a soul to settle yet in one place – and such was the fervour of the preaching that numbers grew, and a gallery had to be added in 1838. This is perhaps why the general Baptists disappeared; they faded away or were absorbed by the competition. It is worth adding that Joseph Philpot, who married Tiptaft's niece and settled in 10 Rutland Terrace, became famous in his own right as editor of *The Gospel Standard* which we are told circulated widely among the troops during the Crimea.

Perhaps beyond the scale of dissent are the Mormons, or the Church of the Latter-day Saints. This new sect, only founded by Joseph Smith in America in 1830, had established a chapel here in Gas Lane as early as 1836, eleven years before Brigham Young led the Mormons on their mammoth trek to establish Salt Lake City. Though seating only fourteen people, the Stamford chapel was exclusively a religious building. People were very suspicious of such groups and typical is the case at Ryhall in May 1849. While holding a total immersion baptism ceremony in the River Guash, they were set upon by the local rowdies and received a severe ducking, and a second attempt two weeks later met with the same fate. However, today, they are still firmly established in Stamford at 16 Broad Street,

having moved there about 15 years ago from what is now the museum education room and store.

As I hinted when outlining the 1851 religious census, there was a traditional fear of Roman Catholicism in England, and this went back to the 16th century. There still lingered the old Elizabethan concept equating Roman Catholicism with treason and as late as 1780 London had been paralysed for four days by the anti-Catholic Gordon riots. Like the Dissenters, Catholics were penalised and could not hold public office, but while removing barriers from Dissenters was relatively easy, removing them for Roman Catholics was a much thornier problem. However, with the development of an industrial society it was quite clear that it would be impossible to continue sanctions against large sections of the population on grounds of religion, and Catholic emancipation in the long-term became inevitable. It was finally achieved in 1829 by the Duke of Wellington, Prime Minister, helped by the conversion of Sir Robert Peel to the cause, though it was the final nail in the coffin of the old Tory party already in its death throes.

On the local scene, there had been enough toleration in Stamford for the Roman Catholics to build a chapel in All Saints Street as early as 1825 and by 1834 this had been rebuilt. On the other hand, the run up to emancipation had seen a petition presented at the town hall opposing concessions to Catholics and at the same time the British Reformation Society "to educate Catholics in Protestant beliefs" visited Stamford. In 1837 further diatribes against Catholicism are recorded in the *Mercury*, but what is more surprising is that this anti-Catholicism continues all through the 19th century, though now the debate turns on purely religious arguments rather than political ones. For example, in one of the winter lecture series in the 1850s (these are the sort I mentioned before as attracting audiences of over 1,000), two of the lectures seem to be devoted entirely to anti-Catholic propaganda, while as late as 1877 Roman Catholicism was controversial enough to provoke public disorder. In January of that year a visiting lecturer to the Oddfellows Hall, a Dr Hammond, a recent convert to Rome, provoked "a scene of the wildest disorder and confusion" and had to be escorted back to the Midland Railway Station surrounded by a mob of several hundred people. [Waterfield's, *Annals of Stamford*, 26 January 1877.]

But it was not just against the other denominations that hate and vituperation were directed in the 19th century. The Church of England was just as happy to turn on itself and hand out harsh criticism to fellow members whose behaviour did not accord with their own. The introduction of the Tractarian ideas of the Oxford movement from the 1830s onwards is a suitable case in point. There had always been a tension within the Church of England between high and low, Catholic and Protestant; and while Protestantism had dominated the church since the reign of Elizabeth, its Catholic nature had never been forgotten. It received fresh impetus under the influence of Newman, Keble and Pusey. The idea of the transcendence and mystery of God expressed in worship, a Church with authority, together with a dash of Romanticism looking back to the Middle Ages and the Gothic Revival in architecture, made Tractarianism very attractive to the younger more progressive clergy, especially those who worked in the urban slums. The same sort of dissatisfaction that had pushed Tiptaft and Philpot to extreme Protestantism pushed these other priests towards Catholicism. Unfortunately, the fear of Roman Catholicism was so great that it extended to any perceived Romanising tendency within the Church of England itself. Not that it expressed itself in Stamford very early. The Reverend Dennis Edward Jones, who came to St John's in 1833 (and stayed 50 years), was accused by the *Stamford Mercury* in 1845 of introducing Puseyite practices into his church, but upon examination it seems that he had only taken to preaching in a surplice and had introduced chairs on each side of the communion table. But even this was seen to be Romish in an intensely Protestant town. Eleven years later when the architect Edward Browning restored St John's and painted the medieval angels on the roof in bright colours, the *Stamford Mercury*, still on the offensive, attacked this for making the church as gaudy as continental Papist ones.

However, despite this and other hysterical outbursts, one in 1879 directed at the 'tin tabernacle' in Water street - an offshoot of St Martin's erected to take the poor excluded from the main church because of the appropriated pews - and another in 1882 screaming that "Ritualism or semi-Romanism (was) creeping into Stamford", Anglo- Catholicism did not really come to Stamford until 1890. It was then introduced to St Mary's by an aristocratic young incumbent who immediately instigated a major restoration of the church

by the famous London Arts & Crafts architect John Dando Sedding. He paid three quarters of the cost of this himself. It is interesting that this young rector, Carew Hervey St John-Mildmay, came to Stamford just at the same time as his Bishop, Edward King of Lincoln, was being prosecuted in the courts for Anglo-Catholic practices, for such outrageous things as making the sign of the cross and having lighted candles on the altar during the communion service. Internecine warfare of this sort was getting the Church a very bad name. But Mildmay was a very forthright young man who did not mind stirring up controversy and his antics at St Mary's had the town stirred up for years. By this time there was another newspaper in Stamford, the *Stamford and Rutland Guardian*, a paper that would give *The Sun* a run for its money in tackiness and pandering to the basest instincts, and it had a field day over what was going on at St Mary's. Surpliced choirs were a high church novelty at this time and the *Guardian* thought it highly amusing to see Mildmay driving his surpliced choir down the aisle "like a flock of sheep", and at the archdeacon's visitation poked fun at the "meek and gentle way" the assembled clergy "glowered at each other during certain ritualistic practices". More seriously the journal *The Protestant Observer* thundered, "No Evangelical churchman can look to the future without anxiety. The ritualistic ornaments are intended to teach those false doctrines to the eye which in due course may be heard from the pulpit. Where will Mr Mildmay end? Having started with his face towards Rome, will he ever reach the end of his journey? (In Mildmay's case, the answer was yes, though not without a bit of dabbling in Spiritualism first!). But what Mildmay was chiefly remembered for outside the church was the non-religious impact of his work. He was the man who got rid of the carillon that had played hymn tunes on the St Mary's bells since the early 18th century, and had stopped the centuries old practice of ringing the curfew bell each evening.

St Mary's continued to cause controversy in the town, for after the brief interlude in the first few years of this century when one of the rectors suddenly declared himself to be a socialist and was forced to leave town by the Marquess, there was a great deal of fuss when the church began to use incense in the 1920s. When this was done at a joint service, it provoked intense letters of protest to the *Mercury* by other Anglican clergy of the town.

This was perhaps the last time when this sort of inter-church rivalry showed itself so openly, and while similar attitudes simmered under the surface until the 1950s, there has been a marked sense of co-operation and ecumenism since the 1960s. But it is at just this time that the general public found the churches to be less relevant in their lives and stopping the inter-church bickering perhaps came too late.

What then are we to conclude from this individual, perhaps idiosyncratic, trip through the social aspects of church affairs in the 19th century? The biggest changes affected the Church of England as it had to come to terms with the change from being an arm of the secular administration to being a purely ecclesiastical organisation. All the churches had to adapt to living in a new industrial age, and the transition was putting a strain on all sections of the community. How did they do? Well, first of all they were largely reactive to change rather than pro-active. With a few notable exceptions they reacted to change by battening down the hatches.

The churches were worried by the 1851 religious census and saw that they were not getting to church as many people as they imagined or hoped for. However, the census was an isolated and unique event and a single point on a graph is no use for predicting trends. Even so, there was a general suspicion among more intelligent churchmen that numbers were on a downward slope and an appreciation that the Churches were not being effective, especially in the larger industrial cities. The Evangelicals, and later the Anglo-Catholics, had made some inroads here, but were under-resourced and the Church at large did not, or perhaps could not, capitalise on these initial moves. This led some Anglo-Catholics to go down the road of Christian Socialism (which in one of its wilder manifestations saw the red flag flying from the tower of Thaxted church during the 1920s), but their efforts were small compared with the size of the problem, and were anyway overtaken in this century by state involvement.

Typically, the Anglo-Catholic movement came late to Stamford - at the very end of the century – and, being Stamford, was concerned more with ceremonialism, church restoration and personal piety than with mass evangelism or social reform. The brief flirtation with Christian Socialism in the first decade of the new century was soon brought

to an end by the combined hostility of the parish, town and Marquess, and the personal inadequacies of the rector.

The other great debate, that between Christianity and science, is hardly visible in Stamford. I stand to be corrected in the light of future evidence, but all the indications are that if one looked at church affairs during the second half of the 19th century one would not know that Charles Darwin and the theory of evolution even existed. The Stamford Institution did a little on him but this merely emphasises the growing gulf between the secular and church worlds.

In general, the Church was largely at a loss as to how to come to terms with the changing situation it faced during the 19th century. The removal of the secular powers from the Church of England was a marvellous opportunity to redirect its energies to tackle the problem of falling church numbers and develop a new spirituality in an industrial world increasingly dominated by science. That it failed to do so and was content to retreat into internecine warfare was a huge missed opportunity. It has only been since the Second World War that remedial action has been applied. All we can hope is that it is not “too little, too late”!

John F H Smith.