The Reverend Gilbert Nicholas Smith: 1796-1877

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This account of a Victorian clergyman falls into two parts. The first covers the events of his brief three years in the diocese of Lincoln as rector of Donington-on-Bain and the first incumbent of Holy Trinity Church, Louth. The second relates to the remainder of his life as rector of Gunmarsh, near Tenby, in Pembrokeshire. They are contrasting narratives that demonstrate how differently environment and circumstance can affect how a man inhabits his world and is seen by it.

Part One

Gilbert Nicholas Smith was born, according to the Gunmarsh census of 1851, at Yarmouth in 1796. Nothing is known of his parentage and early years; even his own family appear to have been ignorant of them. He is not among the recorded alumni of Oxford and Cambridge as would normally be expected of clergymen of his time. In 1831 he had a wife, Mary, born at Yeovil in 1796; a daughter, Caroline, born at Broadhall in Wiltshire in 1829; and a daughter, Elizabeth, born at Gatton in Surrey in 1832. There were three other children not then recorded: John Boys born in 1825, Frances May born in 1827 and Edward Gilbert born in 1830. He had been a curate at Yeovil before moving to Gatton as rector in the early 1830s. Which raises the question of how, at that time, a non-graduate from an obscure background could have obtained a living.

It was the move to Gatton that brought Smith to Lincolnshire.

He was a great patron of the fine arts and bought many valuable pictures, marbles etc. from the continent. He purchased Gatton but alas sold and spent the proceeds of more than half the Lincolnshire properties.

So wrote the successor to Frederick John, fifth Baron Monson, who had succeeded to the title and estates of that old Lincolnshire family at the early age of twenty-four, to die eight years later in 1841. Sir Frederick had no wish to spend his days in Lincolnshire and bought Gatton Park as a more congenial residence. He then engineered an exchange of livings between Smith, the rector he found there, and the Reverend C. S. Wynter, rector of the Monson living of Donington-on-Bain.

The lord of the manor of Donington, and overwhelmingly its proprietor, had been Carr Brackenbury, Methodist squire and friend of Wesley; by 1833 his widow Sarah had succeeded and was making a Methodist stronghold of it. The parsonage had been demolished in the 1790s by the Hon. Thomas Monson, when rector, and the village, which had never had a resident squire, had not now had a resident parson for close on fifty years. Its condition when Smith was assigned to it conformed with R. J. Olney’s generalisation of such Lincolnshire villages: “unruly, lawless... with its collection of drunks, ruffians and preachers.” Moreover, it was in a remote part of the county and Smith was to write to his bishop, John Kaye:

The region from Louth to these places is notoriously the most wild and incontinent of any in these parts.

Conditions in general abated ‘the pleasure usually felt on being presented to a living’.

In view of what will follow, in justice to Smith, it is proper to make the point that the move to Lincolnshire was imposed on him. He was uprooted from Gatton and re-planted at a place which, at that time, was as remote as almost any place in the world would be today and more alien and unwelcoming than very many would be. And he was not a young unmarried man; it appears that he had a dependent household of eleven persons including the five children aged eight and under. He had to fend for them as well as for himself on the very moderate £250 living that Donington then offered, but without the house and grounds that should have gone with the living.

In accordance with a custom that was only just becoming a matter of censure, Smith found a home in the market town of Louth from which to serve his seven miles distant cure. Wynter had also bestowed on him that curiosity of the adjacent small parish of Stenigot which had been among his commitments. The Reverend Marmaduke Welbore was rector of his family estate of Stenigot but resided at Swithope, the family seat, which he served. The Reverend John Loft, squire and parson of Market Stainton, another small adjacent parish, also took an interest in Smith’s arrival. He had added the parish of Wyham with North Ormsby to his clerical portfolio and intended to reside there; this necessitated finding a curate for Market Stainton and a tenant for Stainton House, his family home. A rector of Donington, without a house of his own, was an ideal candidate to meet both desiderata and Loft had the bishop’s support to put the proposal to Smith, to whom, however, while the curacy was one thing, the tenancy was quite another. He was subsequently to explain his reluctance to the bishop; such a gentleman’s residence was beyond his means and, if undertaken, likely to have an ill-effect on his children for whom, moreover, there was free education available in Louth.

From the earliest days, Smith was resolved to settle in Louth and to secure sufficient further income there as would enable him to employ a curate to serve Donington and Market Stainton. It appears that the numerous evangelicals of Louth readily took to him and he was soon acting as curate of the small adjacent parish of Keddington. This was through the influence of the Welfords of Louth Park, the proprietors of Keddington, who were also prepared to obtain the offer of the Manby curacy. Smith referred this to the bishop, who were Donington to become a united benefice with any one of four, small, neighbouring parishes, Stenigot, Ranby, Market Stainton and South Witham, all of which were, or would shortly become vacant, then, with the Keddington and Manby income, he could afford to maintain a curate there. The bishop would have none of this, and warned Smith that he had no intention of letting him establish himself in Louth. This critical letter elicited the response; ‘The contents of your Lordship’s letter filled me for some hours with unfeigned surprise and concern.’ Considering his integrity to have been questioned, he referred to the good opinions of him that the bishop had received from the Archdeacon of Winchester and to the regard that a previous diocesan had of him. He defended himself against accusations of neglect of his proper duties, pleading the difficulties of travel and the poor state of his health consequent on the harsher clime in which he had come to live.
These passages took place in the autumn of 1833; there was a cessation of exchanges during the winter before matters came to a head in the spring of 1834. Loft was now on the point of taking up residence at Wyham and, with the bishop's backing, resumed pressure on Smith to take a seven year tenancy of Staunton House. Smith conceded, but insisted on a clause permitting occupancy by a curate in his stead. Loft found it necessary to apologise to the bishop for allowing this loophole but he had to safeguard the interests of his parishioners and: 'Mr Smith has so many projects - so many plans for evading his agreement, that it is difficult to fix him'. At much the same time the Reverend Marmaduke Allington of Swithope was in correspondence with the bishop. Following an interview with Smith he had decided 'at once to end this very doubtful connection'.

I found it was his intention to continue at Louth with a view, I believe, to the new Church building there, or some Curacies more suited to his professional habits.

That last comment would have been a slitting reference by a high and dry clergyman of the old school to Smith's evangelical churchmanship.

It was, however, 'the new Church building there' that kept Smith temporising until he could be assured of obtaining its incumbency. At this point a brief introduction is necessary of affairs in Louth. The Reverend E. R. Mantell was installed as the vicar of St James's Church, Louth, in 1832. Some years later, on return from a period of sickness, he informed the bishop that he was 'as yet very unfit to encounter the warfare of this strange place'. There could be no more economical way of introducing both him and also the community within which Smith had found himself. Mantell was another of the 'high and dry' school and shortly after his arrival the Reverend Thomas Knowles of South Somercotes had warned the bishop that Mantell would not do in Louth as he could not provide the kind of worship that most people wanted. Among the thorns in Mantell's flesh was Isaac Smith, a local man recently returned from London where he had been an active disserter, but who was now a campaigning evangelical within the Church of England. Despite having become a warden of St James, Isaac Smith was leading a movement to provide a second church in Louth to serve the evangelical interest. Such a 'district church' could now be established when the rising population of a parish increased beyond four times the seating capacity of the parish church, subject to a vestry vote and to raising the necessary money. Mantell, like most incumbents faced by the prospect of losing some of their charge and income, resisted the idea but the 1831 census had established that the basic condition had been met and all depended on Smith gaining a vestry majority and being able to raise adequate funds. During the year 1833 and for much of 1834 Bishop Kaye was bombarded by correspondence from Mantell and Isaac Smith with neither of whom he was in sympathy: Smith for a self-righteous veneer covering a basic hostility to the church; Mantell for the incompetent manner in which he dealt with the situation. Whatever his personal feelings were on the basic issue, Kaye's role was to keep both protagonists within the straits of the law with the result that, since Smith was able both to command a majority and to raise the necessary funds (to the amazement of Mantell), the new church was inevitable. It had become inevitable that Gilbert Smith would be its first incumbent.

In January 1834 Mantell was complaining to the bishop that Gilbert Smith was among those campaigning for the new church and Loft was expressing the view that he should associate himself with the Radical Isaac Smith. Gilbert Smith again found it necessary to defend himself: his namesake was supported in Louth by the 'wisest and best', including Mr Knowles 'than whom there is not a clergyman whose character stands higher in the town and neighbourhood of Louth or whose influence is more decided'. In a subsequent letter:

'I am Radical, he is the only one in the Kingdom who will guarantee a thousand pounds to enlarge and support the Church of England.

Here he refers to Isaac Smith's promised donation towards the new church. Smith went on to claim a considerable influence over his namesake, presumably to suggest that it was of a mediating nature, but he had to acknowledge that he had become 'obnoxious at Louth to Mr Mantell'. In February he informed the bishop that those contributing towards the new church were doing so 'on the understanding and upon the condition that I am to receive the nomination'. Confident now of his future in Louth he resisted the final attempts to get him to reside in Stanton House and set about appointing a curate to serve Donington and Market Stainton. He was well aware of how he was regarded by his bishop.

Since the last visitation of the Archdeacon, I have fancied (perhaps it was only fancy) that I have not stood so well in your lordship's opinion.

He then went on to provide some arguments in his favour, of which the most significant was the role of reconciler between the two antagonistic wings of the church in Louth, restraining, as far as possible, the 'exuberance of spirit and party feeling'.

If I am beloved at Reddington and popular at this place where there is such a redundant intermixture of dissenters, my popularity is that of the Church of England.

There is some evidence to support that claim of loyalty to his church and independence of Isaac Smith. At the fraught vestry meeting later in the year, when a majority refused to sanction a church rate, when a helpless Mantell was undermined from his own side by his warden Isaac Smith, Gilbert Smith was the only one of all those present to have the courage to speak in defence of the rate. Later in February, if one may so put it, warned Smith not to count the chickens before the eggs were hatched; there could be no question of a nomination to a living until after a church had been consecrated. He may have been making a final attempt to make Smith rethink his decision on Market Stainton and Donington. But events were moving more quickly than Kaye expected to have realised; possibly because Mantell was so unrealistic about them. Trinity Church, Louth, was consecrated on 3 June 1834 with three trustees of whom Knowles and Isaac Smith were two. They have the right of nomination, the Reverend Gilbert Nicholas Smith became its first incumbent.

While that must have seemed to have been a triumph at the time it proved to be a Pyrrhic victory. In a long letter to the bishop dated 17 October 1836 Smith wrote of a time of 'great trial and painful difficulty' as a result of which 'I now feel that I am called on to resign'. No specific details remain of events during the period of his ministry and Smith's letter is not particularly explicit, but his relationship with Isaac Smith was at the heart of the problem. Some light can be thrown on the situation in which he found himself from letters to the bishop from Smith's successor the Reverend Conrad Makins Wimberley, who was also to resign after a brief tenure of Trinity Church. Wimberley detailed the frustrations he met in dealing with Isaac Smith who counted Trinity as 'his' church which he was determined to control and to run as far as possible as a chapel. The congregation were, in the main, his followers and, when Isaac Smith found himself unable to dominate his vicar, he would, in his own words, 'starve him out' by getting his following, who formed the greater part of the congregation, to withhold the pew rents which were the main source of the incumbent's income. By October 1836 this was in operation against Gilbert Smith who had badly misjudged his namesake and had deceived himself in the belief that he could modify his 'party' affiliations. In his defence it
is apparent that Knowles, a responsible and experienced clergyman, long established in Louth, was also misled and later attempted to amend the situation.) From Smith’s letter of resignation it appears that an initial major mistake had been to consent that Isaac Smith should be Clerk as well as Trustee. With the co-operation of the other two trustees, Knowles being one, that dual office had been ended. Smith knew that this would offend the congregation, being seen as a lack of gratitude, and would further foment his relations with Isaac Smith but ‘felt it, however, our duty to look more at future years than at present consequences’. And those consequences were that his position had become untenable.

What could a nineteenth-century clergyman do if he resigned a living, particularly if he had little or no private income, no connections with a living to offer him and no means to buy one for himself? One way was to seek out another who also wanted to get away from where he was or, perhaps more positively, to be where you were and then to obtain consent from the two patrons. The Reverend Conrad Makyns Wimberley of an old Lincolnshire family, schooled at Grantham, married to a daughter of a Lincolnshire parsonage, was ready to exchange living with Smith and, subject to a few conditions, the patrons of Gunfordst and Donington-on-Bain were agreeable, the latter not unhappy to see Smith go. Informing the bishop and seeking his approval, Smith was able to include, as a softerner perhaps, that Wimberley had been known to the bishop when a young curate. Kaye probably needed no encouragement and the exchange was quickly effected.

Part Two

Whatever may be the interest to Lincolnshire historians of Gilbert Smith’s three years in Louth as revealed by Bishop Kaye’s correspondence, there is nothing there to encourage following him into the outer darkness of Gunfordst. And yet, when one such historian on holiday visited the Tenby Museum, that presumption was challenged. There on the walls of a gallery, containing a surprising archaeological collection, was a portrait of Gilbert Nicholas Smith whose own collection was the nucleus of that on display. Enquiry revealed that he had been a pioneer archaeologist of memorable character. Some account of how he is remembered there, drawn from sources kindly made available by the Museum, while not Lincolnshire history proper, may yet be found of interest to those concerned with men and events.8

Gunfordst, some three miles from Tenby, was a small parish of a hundred souls in Smith’s day with an income of about £200. Three years after his arrival, quarrying on Caldy Island off Tenby revealed a cave containing the remains of long extinct animals. Smith, as will transpire, had an enquiring mind with a particular delight in nature. His interests aroused, he visited the cave and studied its contents on which he made notes. These found their way to Charles Darwin through a kinswoman who lived near Tenby. Darwin was impressed: ‘I have been most interested in what you have sent me. I will read your paper to the Geological Society in the Autumn as I think it well worth communication’. To assist in its preparation he sent a questionnaire which Smith completed but did not return to Darwin, letting the matter drop. However the interest did not and twenty years work in the field ensued during which he delivered papers in person to the Cambria Archaeological Association, the British Naturalists’ Society and, on two occasions, to the British Association.

Smith was too early in the field (‘I had the tumuli and caves all to myself’), too remote from fellow workers who were at that time developing archaeological research and too inhibited by his Biblical faith to be of the first rank of contemporary researchers. He ‘would have been better known as an archaeologist had he been able to recognise the full significance of his own discoveries’ was a comment referring to his failure to comprehend that the human remains he found alongside those of extinct animals were coeval with them. He ‘lived and died an infidel as far as Pleistocene man was concerned’. His lasting contribution was the collection of ‘many invaluable archaeological relics which otherwise might have been irretrievably lost - relics which include examples of the handiwork of some of the most ancient inhabitants of South Wales’. The following extract from one of his notebooks refers to an expedition when he was accompanied by his sons, on holiday from Sherborne School; it tells something, both of him, and of his fieldwork.

Now boys, I said one morning, do you go far into the cave and look for human bones and I will stick to the entrance hall and to the flint knives and arrow-heads. I marked a scene formed by a meeting of the stalactite of the roof with the stalagmite of the floor. There boys, try there, and then I went to work again in the vestibule. I was soon interrupted by a joyful shout from behind the screen! O Papa, here, a human jaw and two arm bones with a shoulder blade.

To his immediate world Smith’s archaeology would, in the earlier years certainly, have seemed little more than the kind of hobby that an under-employed clergyman might take. Of more significance to them, as years went by, was that here was a larger than life character. That character was preserved for posterity by a younger clerical neighbour, the Reverend George Huntington, Rector of Tenby, who, in A Pembrokeshire Parson wrote a memoir of Smith.

Every now and then one meets with marked characters who stand out among their fellows for genius or eccentricity. Such was Hawker of Morwenstow in Cornwall, and such was ‘Smith of Gunfordst’ of which place he was for some half-century Rector.

Smith, ‘fond of nature in every form’:

... was a bee-master and would astonish his friends by walking about with his hands covered with live bees, all of which he said knew him; he knew the habits of birds, and beasts, and fishes, and reptiles; he took an interest in every creature that walked or flew or crawled.

But ‘his study of nature was in the remotest past’ and Huntington, having briefly dealt with Smith’s archaeological work and of the remarkable collection, by then in the museum, continued:

In my opinion, however, and in that of a good many more he himself was the greatest curiosity of all.

He went on to describe Smith, man and parson, as he had known him.

He was a tall, strongly built man with the appearance of a patriarch of old. He did not suffer fools gladly and was quick to sense insincerity, but with those with whom he was at ease he was a stimulating companion communicating an intense enjoyment of life. While fond of children, he was somewhat daunting to them and one of his daughters confessed in later years that she was frightened by him. He frequently demanded of those that were with him, ‘Have you said your prayers?’ and, if unhappy about the motive of any who sought him out, could demand that they kneel and say the Lord’s Prayer. He had no pious regard for places and things: ‘I don’t believe in holy bricks and holy mortar.’ He would take the altar table from its east end position and sit his communicants round it in the nave. His dog accompanied him in church; ‘a better Christian than half my parishioners’. On one occasion following a rural-rectoral chapter he and other colleagues found themselves waiting on Pembridge Railway Station for a delayed train, along with farmers and their wives returning from market. To the embarrassment of his companions he
proposed that they sang hymns and eventually managed to coerce a rendering of the Old Hundredth. Huntington hints that Smith may have been a trial to his bishop on occasions but 'the good bishop winked at his irregularities',

[Smith] had no 'agrieved parishioners' or, if he had, he would have had it all out with them at the Easter Vestry.

No one went to sleep when Smith was in the pulpit. He settled on his topic early in the week, discussed it with others and mulled it over in his early morning study session that began at 5am. His reading provided him with a mass of illustrations, particularly from Talmud legends and travellers' tales. He often took some material illustration into the pulpit to hand round his congregation: 'a flower pot, or a bird's nest, or a piece of old pottery, or an Eastern lamp, or even a fossil bone.' When in the pulpit he preached impromptu in a style all his own, the result being like a necklet of pearls ill-set, or jewels strewn with pebbles. Some idea of his preaching may be conveyed by a running commentary on the reading of Salome dancing before Herod, given when friends of Huntington were in the congregation.

Impudent bussy, dancing lewd and nade to amuse an old debauchee in his cups. So when he sat right enough of her, she promised her whatever she might ask, to the half of his kingdom. Half of his kingdom indeed! It was not his; he was only a tributary of the Roman Emperors. So she asked her mother. And who should a young lass ask, if a man promises to give her anything, but her mother? Aye, but that depends on the sort of mother. So her mother told her to ask for the head of John the Baptist. Nothing but a dead man's head in a dish! A pretty sight, that, for a young woman! A pretty sight of mother, that! So you see that between them both they danced a saint's head off.

Then, glancing at some fashionable folk in church:

Now mind you, good women, where you dance and how you dance, and with whom you dance, for they tell me there is dancing going on at Tenby that would please Herod a good deal more than it would either me or John the Baptist. Now, don't dance your souls away, whatever you do with men's heads, which I dreadsay you know how to turn with your capers.

The 'fashionable folk in church' were those for whom it was an amusement to go out to Gumfreston to hear Smith preach. May it have been that in his later years he would play to the gallery? Even if so, he placed limits on its behaviour and on its tolerance. On one occasion he announced, 'I won't preach till the Tenby people are out of church.' On another:

So young men, you've come here to have a bit of fun out of an old man of eighty, have you? I might ask you to leave the church but I won't; for fools will come to scoff, sometimes remain to pray. Brethren, let us pray for these scoffers.

Huntington was of a younger generation of clergymen and first came to know Smith when he was aged seventy-three. He saw in him a veteran from an earlier age; 'He belonged to a past order of things; one of those whose youth was spent before railways invaded the seclusion of out-of-the-way places.' Being of that past order: living in remote places; endowed with a strong, lively and original nature: confident from the local renown of his archaeological work, Smith could naturally become the man whom Huntington knew in those later years. The eccentric was a natural subject for a memoir but what comes through that memoir is not so much amusement as respect and affection.

'Smith of Gumfreston' was not as other men are, and I venture to think it is something to rescue his name from oblivion . . .

No doubt he was a little tiresome, but what clever man is not? Dr Johnson was, Carlyle was, Thackeray was, Sedgwick was, Thrivell was. You or I, gentle reader, may be tiresome, without their cleverness, their wit, or their originality.

More sense can be made of, and justice accorded to, 'Smith of Louth' when one has learned of 'Smith of Gumfreston'. The young man would have lacked the assurance of the older and would have been noticeably less eccentric, but he would, even so, have been seen as unduly assertive. Marooned in Lincolnshire by one of the county magnates who had clearly discarded him, he had no background, no friends, no university record, no wealth to compensate. And yet he did not keep a low profile; he behaved as an equal in standing, in strength of faith and in learning. He was not subservient, as the likes of Alington, Loft and Mantell would have expected. He did not have the social niceties that the congregation of St James in Westgate, Louth, would require of a parson. Moreover his churchmanship was unacceptable; here is Mantell writing to Kaye in December 1833: [Smith] would gladly get excused residence on his own benefice to exhibit his extempore orations to a Louth audience. Finally, he came of a generation that would acknowledge bishops as 'their Lordships' but could not conceive that they had any interest, let alone authority, in parish matters. Kaye might have been one to recognise Smith's qualities but since he was engaged in restricting pluralism and non-residence which involved emptying the nests of 'the Rookery', as Louth was known for its concentration of absentee rural parsons, he and Smith were bound to be at variance. Had Isaac Smith been such a working relationship would have been possible, then one can envisage that a strong evangelical base for the Church of England would have been established at the Riverhead end of Louth earlier than was ultimately achieved and Gilbert Smith might have become a Lincolnshire worthy. As it was, Greek met Greek with Isaac Smith playing on his home ground. Gilbert Smith, despatched involuntarily into the terra incognita of Lincolnshire, admitted defeat there and retreated into another distant and unknown region. Was it through the providential consequence of quarrying operations that he was able more fully to reveal his potential as man and parson?

Notes

3. Cor B5/4/83/7. Unless otherwise indicated all subsequent quotations are derived from this bundle of Bishop Kaye's correspondence in the Lincolnshire Archives Office.
4. Cor B5/4/86.
5. Cor B5/4/86.
6. The substance of the second part of this paper is drawn almost entirely from records in the Tenby Museum which were readily made available to me, I am grateful for the friendship of the assistance that I received. The following are the items of which most use was made.
   The Rev. George Huntington, A Pembrokeshire Parson.
   Smith's notebooks were of great interest as were reports of his lectures but were not germane to this work.
7. Cor B5/4/69