

IMPRESSIONS OF CHINNOR WITH EMMINGTON AND SYDENHAM

If I were arranging this account in chapters I suppose I could look back to my becoming (in the first place) Rector of Chinnor, Rector of Emmington and Priest in Charge of Sydenham and read this section with the words "WHY? HOW? WHEN?" Why did I become your rector? How did I become your rector? When did I become your rector?

The answer to the first question goes right back to the early nineteen-twenties when my father, after the Great War, did something which was quite extraordinary in those days and went to Oxford as an undergraduate when he was nearly fifty years old. Although I was too young to understand it I remember it happening and I very soon began to feel that I, too, would like to attend the mysterious place which had had such an influence on my father's life. I wanted to go to Oxford - in spite of the fact that in those days we always lost the Boat Race (what a welcome change that is now) and what rubbed salt into the wounds was that boys I knew at school contributed to six of the Cambridge wins! And so I went to Oxford, from 1935 - 1938, in '45 - '47 and again in '56 - '57.

I flew over Chinnor from Booker in Sept. and Oct. 1942, when I was a gunner subaltern attached to the Glider Pilot Regt. (my naval activities came years later), did simulated emergency landing on one of the late Joe Hill's fields and broke the tail skid of my Tiger Moth. I can never look at the "Lacey" memorial window in St Andrew's Church without reflecting on that event. Those young men were killed flying over this area about a year before I was doing it myself.

In 1946, with the stamps still wet on my "demob" papers, I returned to the University to study for a post-graduate diploma in education and share "digs" with Sam Day, newly demobbed as an Army Chaplain, who was taking the Oxford degree in theology.

When I had my vocation to the ministry I went to Ripon Hall, on Boars Hill, and I was sent out to preach at evensong in St Andrew's Church, as a student, and you will find my name in the service book under August 1957. I preached about David, Bathsheba and poor Uriah the Hittite (the first lesson, I remember) and I recall that in those days the choir ladies wore black gowns and caps. A few months before that I had stayed, with my wife and Robert, at the old rectory so I remember that highly inconvenient building. Then in June 1960 I was offered the living. How well I recall my interview with the churchwardens, Jack King and Joe Silver (both of them, sadly, no longer with us) on a sizzling hot June afternoon, beside the lily-pond at Highacres; and then, the following day, I went to see the patron, Cdr. Wykeham-Musgrave, at Barnsley Park, in Gloucestershire. Sam Day, of course, had mentioned my name in the right quarters but it was not just a kind of nepotism. I do know that two or three other priests had been offered the three parishes but had turned them down. Why, I do not know? The living might have been as happy for them as it has been for my family and for me. It will be a wrench for us to leave because we feel we have made so many friends here.

Now for my impressions of the parishes over the years. I think those impressions are really summed up in the notion of change and yet permanency.

I sometimes think of those old knights and their ladies whose brasses are to be found in St Andrew's Church (at one time they were the target for hundreds of brass-rubbers). What would they think if they came back after six hundred years? They would note the greatly increased size of the village and the complete shift of its centre from the area around the church, but the church itself and the hills and the flat South Oxfordshire plain would still be much as they saw them in the middle ages. Emmington would have been much the same as it is now, but a little more populated, with poor little peasant's hovels and a tiny little rectory. Sydenham would have been a similarly poor village but with an influx of new settlers who had fled from London, I believe, to escape the Black Death; and the church would not have had its distinctive wooden spire.

In the seventeen years I have been here the changes I have noticed fall, I think, under three headings which I will call Environmental, Social and Religious.

The first environmental change I would note is that Chinnor's air is cleaner. There are only two cement works chimneys instead of three and they have electrostatic precipitators which catch the dust. We no longer have that whiff of rotten eggs when the wind is in the S.W! During my first twelve months here I did not go away for my usual fourteen days with the navy and my blue-black chaplain's uniform hung undisturbed, in a cupboard, inside one of the bedrooms. Nevertheless when I went to get it out again a year later, there was a film of white cement dust on the shoulders and collar! That sort of thing does not happen now.

Next, of course, there has been all the house-building. When I arrived the late Marjorie Wedgwood (Hon.Parish Worker) presented me, with her typical thoughtfulness, with a little street map she had done on the back of a postcard and the only complete new developments on it were Elderdene, Cherry Tree and Beech Roads, the Avenue and the Old People's Bungalows. Glynswood was under construction and soon afterwards we had the public enquiry relating to the Mill Lane Estate - at which I was one of the numerous objectors to the plan! Like others, I feared traffic congestion in Mill Lane. That public enquiry was closely followed by the one concerned with David Eggleton's scheme for housing development on his fields to the East and South of Chinnor. It was absorbingly interesting, lasting as it did for over a week in the village hall, with a "counsel" engaged to put the developers' case, and it had all the fascination of a trial as the objectors were cross-examined but without the threat of imprisonment hanging over anyone. And I can think of one objector at least whose motives looked a little dubious under the cross-examination. One felt that if some people had been quite candid they might have said "We know people have to find somewhere to live; but must they live here?" Anyway, the patient assessor from Whitehall heard all the arguments and eventually turned the scheme down. But that did not stop the development of Chinnor. It went on with lots of in-filling and is still going on in Glynswood.

When all the construction was in progress it must have been a very uncomfortable time for the occupants of the new houses. I remember, one winter night, calling on Ivor Orrey in Cowleaze and brushing off clods of clay on his doormat. "I should think you'll be jolly glad when the road is made up and you have some clean tarmac outside" said I. "But the road has been made up and all that mud is on top of the tarmac" said

he! And we all know how the old drainage systems in the High Street and Station Road always fail to cope with the rainwater rushing down the roads, higher up, which were not there when they were first installed if there is a bad storm. I once saw a heavy manhole cover sitting on top of flood water gushing up from below it, just like a pingpong ball on a jet at a fairground rifle range.

The great social change during the last seventeen years is the "growth up" of Chinnor. You can see it in the church records and in the recent history of our schools.

When I arrived here the population had already risen from about one thousand to three thousand and the older inhabitants of the village had been swamped by the influx of young families. Now I estimate that the three villages have about seven thousand people and that population is older and more stable. There is a great turnover of houses being bought and sold but more people are staying here for longer. You can see it in the church records. During my incumbency I have baptised nearly a thousand infants and adults but the baptisms are falling off a bit (4 this year against 77 in 1967) and there are far more weddings and funerals than we used to have. The old school was bursting at the seams when we arrived (our younger son's comment was "Mummy, this school is much too small." What he really meant was that he and forty other five-year olds were squashed into a room that would have comfortably housed twenty!) and so a new building, the one to the West of the school campus, was opened in 1967. It was immediately filled and some of the old classrooms on the "school corner" had to be taken into use again. Then the second building to the East of the campus was built and filled immediately. Temporary huts went up as well and at one time there were over eight hundred children on the campus. I have detailed all these events in a report I submitted to the governors and parents when I resigned as chairman of the governors in February 1983. Consequently I pushed and pushed for more accommodation (even getting John Hay, then M.P., to come and look at the situation) and Mill Lane School was built and filled. There was even a project for a small secondary school in Mill Lane. Now, each of the primary schools has one or two empty classrooms.

Nevertheless, the population is still young - and fluid. Dr. Mary Watson goes round with cards to mark the first anniversaries of a baby's baptism, the last being an invitation to Sunday School, and she will frequently take a pack of, say, eight cards only to find that four of the intended recipients have moved since her last visit. Part of the reason for this, I believe, lies with Chinnor's housing. A little open-plan home in Oak End Way is all very well when the babies can be packed off to bed at six o'clock and mother and father can have the living area to themselves for the evening, but the situation is much less comfortable when "teenagers" have to find somewhere to do their homework. Do any of you know, by the way, Dr. Reedy's explanation for Chinnor's high birthrate? He said he did not know whether it was caused by the cement dust or by poor television reception on the new estates.

Other sidelights on social change in the former three parishes and in Aston Rowant and Crowell are also provided by the growth and popularity of the library. It is hard to credit, now, that the voracious reading habits of our intelligent population were catered for, a mere ten years ago, in one small room in Lower Road. And there is also the growth and proliferation of clubs and societies like this one which seem to book

every hall and room every night of the week. Soon after we arrived here we were worried by the way in which the village functions seemed to clash and my wife had the bright idea of putting a large calendar in the Post Office, on which organisations could mark their coming events, to avoid clashing, and we wrote round to all the secretaries we could think of to tell them about it. But we had only one reply. I really think it was a touching example of "noblesse oblige". It was from Col. Clarke-Brown on behalf of the South Oxfordshire Hunt! It would not work. Chinnor was already starting to behave like a town and clashing interests could not be avoided.

Where religious changes are concerned the first thing I would note is the growth of an ecumenical spirit. I think it really started at my induction as rector. I had asked for the leaders of other denominations to be invited and one of them was Fr. Carter, the Roman Catholic scholar (he had a hand in the Jerusalem Bible) who was the priest in Thame and who also had the Roman Catholics of Chinnor under his wing. He said Mass for them on Sundays in the Reading Room. He came along and a few days later he arrived on my doorstep with a present for me. He said "I believe you've something to do with the Navy, so you'll know what to do with this." It was a bottle of Plymouth Gin! A little later he was the first Roman priest to preach in St Andrew's Church since the Reformation - attired in a surplice for the occasion. His own idea, not mine.

There has been an infusion of new life in the Methodist and Congregational churches. Seventeen years ago the Methodist Church in Chinnor was rather like Sir Walter Scott's description of the Scottish Episcopalians at the end of the Eighteenth Century - "A shadow of a shade" - but, largely as a result of dedicated lay effort, it is now a very live church. We have valued their friendship and cooperation and I shall always treasure the letter of good wishes they sent me on hearing of my impending retirement. In Sydenham the Methodist chapel unfortunately had to be closed and sold about ten years ago. The Congregational Church, which did not join in with the United Reform Church, had no minister when I came here. Then it had three in fairly quick succession before it came under Mr. Millar's leadership and now it appears to thrive. One day someone should write its history because it represents a very old tradition of Dissent in Chinnor which probably goes back to the Eighteenth Century.

Where the original parishes of Chinnor, Emmington and Sydenham are concerned the most significant change was the creation of a united parish (not benefice) in 1973. The merger was not uncontroversial (people do not like to lose some measure of independence) but it was absolutely necessary. The secretary of the Diocesan Pastoral Committee had proposed to me that Sydenham church should be closed on the grounds that it was very poorly attended and the parishioners would not be able to afford its upkeep and the upkeep of the Old Schoolroom and Mrs Crowdy's house.

One should not blow one's own trumpet but, for the record, and historical societies are supposed to be concerned with records, I feel I had a lot to do with saving Sydenham Church and the Old Schoolroom. I suggested the creation of a united parish with one P.C.C. and one set of accounts, which was gladly accepted by Chinnor and Emmington and, rather more reluctantly, by Sydenham. In fact there was a thoroughly nasty public meeting; but we came together and began "bearing one another's burdens" and I felt well rewarded when one of the opponents of the

scheme later said publicly that it had "done nothing but good" for Sydenham! Recently quite a lot of new life has been breathed into the village via Mrs. Curtis's Sunday School and the hard local effort that has gone into making the restored schoolroom into a thoroughly useful parish hall.

I also instituted one physical change here in Chinnor - the clearing and levelling of the old portion of the churchyard, which became impossibly untidy every summer in spite of intermittent "blitzes" on the grass and weeds. In sheer desperation I once got a party of Borstal boys working on it for the whole of one Saturday. David Eggleton showed them how to use sickles and crooked sticks and they were repaid with a packet of cigarettes each and tea in the church hall. But that sort of thing could not go on; we advertised thoroughly in the press and marked all the illegible old stones and kerbs and rusty iron railings that we were proposing to take out and then, one day, the work started and I was immediately on the receiving end of a torrent of complaints from a lady who, neither before nor since, has ever darkened the church doors. Weakly, I said I would leave the kerbstones round her family grave if she would promise to keep the grass trimmed. But she never has.

I have been glad to preside over two major restoration works - the bells, which were silent in 1966, and our beautiful organ. I suppose we all hope to be able to leave behind us some little permanent reminder of our presence on this planet. I know that I have two. In my last parish church my name is inscribed on a tablet. Unfortunately they got the dates of my incumbency wrong. Unfortunately, also, it is carved in granite so nothing much can be done about it. Also, up there in the bell-chamber of St Andrew's Church, my name may be found inscribed on a bell. It is quite accurate and it should be there for some time!

Where the spiritual work of the church is concerned I feel, as I hinted earlier, that the biggest and best change has been in ecumenical relations. We do cooperate. We do exchange pulpits sometimes. We do work very hard for Christian Aid. (How well I remember Rosamund Essex, looking just like a bishop, preaching in the Congregational Church.) We get together for the Women's World Day of Prayer, Good Friday and Remembrance Sunday. And that sort of thing was not happening seventeen years ago. The most remarkable of the changes has been in the service of remembrance at the war memorial. My first Sunday in Chinnor coincided with that annual celebration and what a small turnout there was: just a small party of the Royal British Legion, the Buffs and a few spectators. I remember that I was wondering what connection Chinnor had with the Royal East Kent Regiment. I was not familiar with the Royal and Ancient Order of Buffaloes! For the ceremony now, with the participation of all the uniformed youth organisations and the ecumenical service afterwards, we are greatly indebted to Fred Atton and his inspired organisation of the Royal British Legion and the Silver Band.

For me, however, one thing has remained constant over the years - the pang I have felt at reading all those names from the Great War, all the Howletts and Marriotts and Witneys. How dreadful the casualties must have been for quite a small village.

One would like to be able to say that as the population of the parish has increased so church attendance has gone up, in proportion, but of course it has not. There has been an increase, but not a two or threefold increase and confirmations remain stubbornly at only about 25% of baptisms. But the influence of a parish church is not only to be measured in the numbers of faithful worshippers every Sunday. What is to

be made of the numerical results of Our Blessed Lord's three-year ministry? Twelve Disciples - one betrayed Him - one denied Him. All the rest went away; and even the women, who showed more moral courage, had lost faith in Him. That would be a pessimist's view. The optimist might say "Yes, but St. Paul tells us that five hundred people, obviously his followers, saw him between the Resurrection and the Ascension." Nevertheless his Feeding of the Five Thousand, the Sermon on the Mount, the Sermon on the Plain and the great gatherings in Capernaum and Jerusalem were not productive of great numbers of adherents. But his ministry had touched many lives; and the three churches touched many lives. A fairly ordinary Saturday and Sunday with a wedding and, say, three babies to be baptised, in addition to the regular services and Sunday School, will bring about five hundred people into church which is one reason why I always preach at baptisms, weddings and funerals. I once asked a bishop (and a very good bishop too) to come and give an address at the funeral of someone we both knew and to my surprise he refused, saying he had never done such a thing and would not know where to begin. What a lot of opportunities he must have missed!

What we clergy call the "occasional offices", christenings, weddings and funerals, give very great interest, and occasionally some humour, to a parson's life. I have probably committed numerous "gaffes" but the one that stands out most in my memory came about because I had agreed, most unusually, to take a christening on a busy Saturday afternoon; but the arrangement had not been quite finalised. So, on the preceding Sunday morning, giving out the notices, it was with horror that I heard myself saying "There will be a wedding on Saturday at two p.m. and there will probably be a baptism at four-thirty"! Then there was the bride, on a dark November afternoon, who was very, very late - so late that she caused a false alarm, via the signalling system we have for indicating to the organist (who cannot see the porch), that a bride is about to make her entry - a wave from me to someone by the light switches when then puts on two bulbs that can be seen by the organist. I, kicking my heels in the porch waved to a lady in the churchyard. "Good afternoon Mrs. Croxford." The boy on duty (who had never done it before) switched on the lights, the organist began playing the Bridal March, the photographer had to use flash bulbs to take the photographs outside the church!

Usually I tell brides that they must not be late because it puts such strain on the bridegroom's nerves. He, poor chap, is sitting there with the organist playing soft music and a hundred or so people staring at the back of his neck and he does not know whether the bride has had an accident on the way to the church or whether she has simply changed her mind about him.

I had a very happy wedding to take recently. The bride, an ex-member of our choir, had elected to come in to a hymn; so I found myself walking up the aisle pursued by a very good soprano voice singing "Guide me Great Redeemer"! Like most parsons, I suppose, I could go on talking about weddings in a similar vein for a long time.

I love baptisms, but I do not think I could do as some clergy do and concentrate them all on one Sunday in the month. My "record" was nine babies at one service and it felt like being in the middle of a conveyor belt! Adult baptisms are in a class of their own for meaningfulness and sincerity and I have always been profoundly moved by those I have taken.

One is also profoundly moved by one's ministry to the very ill and the dying. I do not think I feel afraid of death because I have seen so many ordinary people turned into heroes and heroines in the face of it and I have frequently felt, in the presence of the dying, that I have been at the very gates of Paradise.

You may remember, at the outset of this talk, that I mentioned change, and yet permanence, in these villages of ours. The changes have been material - population, houses, schools etc. The permanence is spiritual, intangible, yet most enduring. In spite of our increased population we have maintained the characteristics of a good village. There is a lot of care for the children, for the sick and for the old. I always feel that, if you are in trouble, this is a jolly good place to be in. And I feel that the care springs from a Christian spirit. One can think of many instances of that spirit, not necessarily confined to Church-going people, but the one that will always stick in my mind was put there by Edith Bodger. It happened during that fearful snowfall the year before last.

Edith arrived at church (remember that she was over eighty and had, at that time, badly ulcerated legs) at seven-thirty on a Sunday morning equipped with her own special instrument for clearing snow (Ivy Bank held a sort of arsenal of such useful artefacts). And her reason for doing so, in her own words, was that she thought she had better get up early and come down "in case some old person slipped on the icy church path." Of such is the Kingdom of Heaven. Fortunately, by the way, there was a good strong man who had anticipated such an action on her part, there to do it for her.

My wife and I will be very sorry to leave Chinnor, Emmington and Sydenham.