



Vale and Downland Museum – Local History Series

William John Butler Vicar of Wantage 1847 - 1881

by Martin and Jean Collard

The first point which must strike a 1994 reader of 'Life and Letters' (1) is that Wantage is a totally different place now from what it was in the mid-nineteenth century. It is a commonplace that the 'old order' in England ended in 1914 and that the process was carried a stage further with World War II in 1939 and the birth of the Welfare State in 1946. There is a telling comment in one of Butler's letters, written to his wife from abroad, in which he says that he would be glad to return to his charge at Wantage where he was "monarch of all he surveyed". It is difficult to imagine a modern incumbent of Wantage writing in such terms! In 1850 the population of Wantage was largely agricultural, not to say bucolic, supported by those trades and occupations which were connected with agricultural industry. Not so today. The drift from the land has gathered pace since World War II, and the opening of the United Kingdom Atomic Energy Research Establishment, vast expansion of the motor trade and of home ownership have also played an important part in North Berkshire, now Oxon. In addition, wealth is much more evenly distributed among the population now than in 1850.

When Butler accepted the living of Wantage in 1847, it was safe to assume that very few others were educated beyond grammar school standards and there were no state schools. From his letters (and thankfully so many of these have been preserved verbatim) we can see a man with an enquiring mind, a good classical education to Cambridge University graduate standard, ability to express himself clearly in English and a smattering (at least) of German, French and Italian, and no mean organiser. No wonder such a man at Wantage in 1850 stood head and shoulders above his contemporaries. His status was assured in the Parish and he could communicate on equal terms with his Bishop and with his neighbour Colonel Loyd Lindsay (later Lord Wantage).

But what was Butler really like in appearance and personality? We have three photographs to go by; dated respectively 1846, 1880 and about 1893. These (particularly the last two) show a severe aspect without the least trace of humour. Yet his contemporaries also speak of his kindness, compassion, humility and willingness to listen. Perhaps the following is an explanation. In the first chapter of 'Life and Letters' he is described by a school-fellow as 'very short sighted'. Correction for myopia may have been in its infancy in 1830 but by 1880 surely spectacles were in common use. Yet he is not shown wearing them in the photographs. Maybe he had taken them off for his portraits and this could explain his strained and stern look.

William John Butler was born on 10th February 1818, the eldest of five. The family lived in comfortable circumstances in London where his father was in business. His mother was Irish. Butler was taught locally until he went to Westminster School in 1830. His religious upbringing was conventional.

A Westminster school friend described him as “A boy of more than average ability and acquired knowledge but too evidently conscious of his acquirement and disposed to boast of them and very confident of his own opinion.” This combined with his short-sightedness resulted in much teasing. However, by the time he went to Trinity College, Cambridge, he was no longer a ‘Show Off’. After obtaining a BA in January 1840, he went on a continental tour. Later that year, his father’s firm was in financial trouble and William immediately devised means of maintaining himself by taking pupils, at the same time preparing for Holy Orders. Someone who had a great influence on Butler was the Rev’d Charles Dyson of Dogsmersfield (near Fleet, Hampshire), a man of great learning and ability and supporter of the Oxford Movement. Because of Dyson’s uncertain health, he offered Butler a curacy. This he accepted, being ordained Deacon in 1841 and supplementing his income by tutelage.

Following his priesting in 1842, Butler served at Puttenham (near Guildford, Surrey) and at Wareside (a newly-formed parish just outside Ware, Hertfordshire). During this time he married Emma Barnett, a second cousin. In June 1846 came the offer of Wantage. He wrote to his wife from The Bear Hotel, Wantage: “Owing to the strange difference in singing, the slovenly way of conducting services, I hardly know what I am doing. The sermon was drier than hay, not a word of sense in it ... the churchyard is in an abominable state, and the house (vicarage) stands very low.”

Butler accepted the living with much trepidation. He was only twenty eight years old but believed it to be a challenge and an opportunity of doing God’s service. Taking up residence in January 1847 at the old Vicarage, so cold and dilapidated that his family had to wait some time for repairs to be done before joining him, he wrote to his wife that most of the population “is ignorant and apathetic” and described the church as “neglected” but mentions the wonderful carved stalls in the chancel and hopes one day to fill them with a choir! The nucleus of faithful, mainly older people, gave him their support and his daughter quotes him as saying “Faith, grind and prayer will win all things.” He prepared to keep what was good and trained a future generation to a higher standard.

Butler was indefatigable in his efforts, and teaching was his forte. He gave numerous classes for sections of his growing congregation, taught in the church and the new National Schools, and assisted in the training of teachers.

It came to Butler’s notice that the Dissenters were planning to build a Meeting House “in the small hamlet of Charlton”. He forestalled them by erecting a “simple brick church” opened in August 1848. A new vicarage was also built to plans by George Street, then a young Wantage architect. It was not only in church matters that Butler’s influence was exerted: he was a Governor of the Wantage Town Lands and became involved in such schemes as new drainage and gas street lighting. However, a time was coming when he would meet violent opposition and bitter hostility. Influences beyond Butler’s control were stirring up strong feelings among churchmen. The Gorham Judgement of 1850 (when the secular Privy Council overturned a decision of an ecclesiastical court on a purely doctrinal matter) had shaken the faith of many. Numerous secessions to Rome followed. Protestant feelings were further inflamed by the news that the Pope had “mapped out England into bishoprics”.

At about this time, Butler turned his attention to the reopening of the Parish Church. There was already some apprehension over his “high church practices” and this coupled with a natural resistance to change, fuelled opposition. The storm broke at a meeting of the Vestry (the whole church) called by Butler for 11th April 1852. The object was to approve plans prepared by George Street for the restoration of the Parish Church. We read that this

meeting was “packed with Dissenters” and others genuinely opposed to Anglo-Catholic practices, proposed by Butler. After three hours discussion the vote to approve the plans was put and heavily defeated. Though initially cast down and blaming himself for making his attempt too soon, Butler did not allow this rebuff to divert him from his ultimate purpose. He did not however underestimate his unpopularity in Wantage at this time. In fact he commented that if this had occurred in France during the Revolution, the cry would have gone up “a La lanterne!” It was not until five years later that the opposition was won over, funds raised and work on the Parish Church started.

Nor was Butler free from family troubles. On 14th March 1851, his elder daughter Frances, died aged five years. This was a deep and lasting grief. Thirty years later he wrote to one similarly bereaved, “The death of one’s child is like nothing else. Even when after many years, the wound is more or less healed, the feeling always remains ... of something gone from one’s life - like the loss of a limb”.

It was about 1845, before he came to Wantage, that Butler first conceived the idea of a community of women, but in fact the founding of the community (now known as C.S.M.V.) was undertaken by Archdeacon Henry Manning with Elizabeth Lockart as the first Mother Superior, Butler willingly taking second place. Manning laid great emphasis on penitentiary work and this was continued until comparatively recent times; although Butler saw “The Home” (as he called it) as primarily a teaching community. It was not until both Elizabeth Lockhart and Manning had transferred their allegiance to Rome that Butler was free to realise his first objective.

Harriet Day, a farmer’s daughter succeeded as Superior to the fledgling Community. Though lacking the brilliant gifts of her predecessor, Harriet proved her vocation by her simplicity and humble devotion and continued as Superior for thirty-four years. The Community was first housed in two cottages in Newbury Street, now forming part of St Mary’s School. On 25th July 1855 the foundation stone of St Mary’s Home (now the Convent) was laid in the presence of Bishop Wilberforce and a large number of local clergy and townspeople. In 1856 the new building was completed and the Sisters moved in.

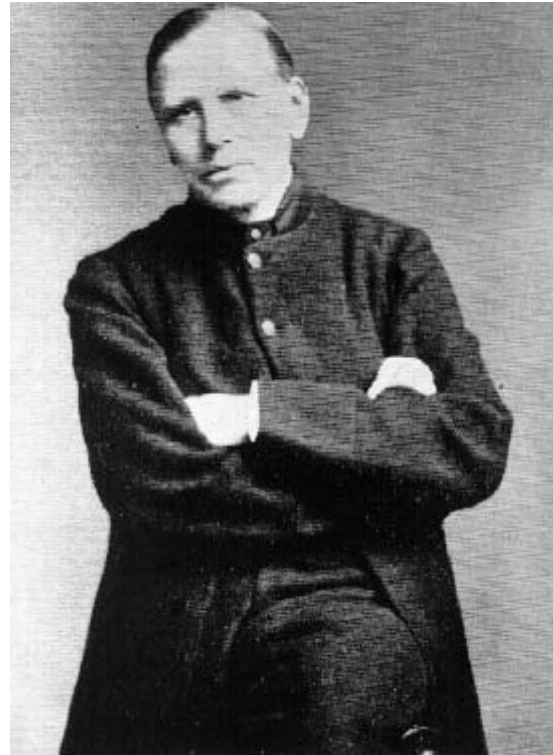
Butler’s interest in education also extended to other projects such as the establishment of St Mary’s and St Katherine’s School (now combined with St Helen’s at Abingdon). 1849 saw the thousandth anniversary of the birth of King Alfred The Great at Wantage and to mark this occasion King Alfred’s Grammar School was re-opened on a site in Portway. Previously, this school (known as the Latin School) was located in Wantage Churchyard in an old building, once a Saxon Church. As one of the Town Land Governors, Butler took a great interest in this project. Nor did he overlook the necessity of training teachers to take the new posts open to them. In “Life and Letters” we read of the many and varied ways in which he was involved in this work.

Reference

(1) Life and Letters of Dean Butler, Macmillan.



Dean Butler - 1846 - portrait as a young man; seated (ppl 004)



Dean Butler - c1880 - portrait as an older man; seated; arms folded (ppl 005)



Head-and-shoulders portrait of Dean Butler; vicar 1847-1880; before Church door - 1875? (ppl 007)



Dean Butler in study; standing with book; c1850 (ppl 008)



Six vicars at doorway of Priory; 1875 (L-R) - W Neville (Curate 1875-1881); W Lovell (Curate 1874-1881); W Starey (Curate 1869-1881; later Tottenham Parish Church); Canon Butler (later Dean of Lincoln)(seated; front); T H Archer-Houblon (Curate 1873-?) (ppl 058)

This article was reproduced from "The Blowing Stone" Winter 1993 and Spring 1994.

The Vale and Downland Museum is a registered charity (No. 270466) which aims to preserve and provide information and objects relating to the Vale and Downland area, Wantage, Oxfordshire.

The Museum encourages access to historical records for non-profit making purposes. This article may be used for such purposes, however the information must not be edited or reproduced for commercial purposes without prior written permission.

Vale and Downland Museum Trust, 19 Church Street, Wantage, Oxfordshire, OX12 8BL
Telephone: 01235 771447 e-mail: museum@wantage.com