

Church Life in an Early-19th-Century Market Town: A Letter from Faringdon, Oxfordshire

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SUMMARY

A letter from the curate of Faringdon with Little Coxwell to Reverend Charles Simeon, patron of the parish, survives in the archives of All Saints church, Faringdon, and is reproduced here in full. It gives an interesting glimpse into the religious life of an early-19th-century market town; and Faringdon does not appear to have been untypical of market towns in Berkshire and Oxfordshire. In doing so, it casts a sidelight on the operation of the patronage system in the Church of England at that time and on the desperate position of many of the unbeneficed clergy.

CHARLES SIMEON AND PATRONAGE

Charles Simeon (1759–1836) went up to King's College, Cambridge, with a scholarship and in 1782 was elected to a fellowship prior to graduation. He was ordained deacon in 1782 and priest in 1783. In 1782 he was appointed minister of Holy Trinity church, Cambridge, due to his father's friendship with Bishop Yorke of Ely, and he combined that post with his fellowship until his death.¹ The event which changed Simeon's life, and was to leave a lasting impression on the Church of England, was his conversion at Easter 1779 to a personal, Evangelical faith.² Despite being a fervent Evangelical, he remained a convinced Anglican throughout his life and looked for ways he might help to strengthen his beloved Church of England. His influence was felt in two ways: by the spread of 'Simeonites' into livings all over England, and through the establishment of patronage interests. That Evangelicals became an accepted and influential party within the Church of England as the 19th century progressed was due in no small measure to Simeon.

At the start of the 19th century the Church of England effectively offered no training to young men wishing to enter the ministry. Simeon identified this as an area in which he could make a contribution. He gave informal 'sermon parties' and private lectures on religion to undergraduates who were considering offering themselves for ordination. He also held regular 'conversation parties' in his rooms – a form of seminar. In this way he supplied the Church of England with generation after generation of young Evangelical clergy instructed in their faith and trained to express it clearly.³

Although Evangelical clergy had great difficulty getting livings, 'the real and urgent problem facing Evangelicals in Simeon's day was neither the recruitment of men for the ministry nor the securing of their ordination, but that of securing continuity of teaching in any given parish'.⁴ The work of one Evangelical clergyman could be undone very quickly by an unsympathetic successor. This was due in large measure to the patronage system which operated in the Church of England (and in modified form still does today).

¹ H.C.G. Moule, *Charles Simeon* (1892, repr. 1948), 37.

² *Ibid.* 24–31.

³ H.E. Hopkins, *Charles Simeon of Cambridge* (1977), 86.

⁴ M. Warren, *An Essay on the Rev Charles Simeon MA, 1759–1836* (1979), 12.

The advowson, or the right to present a clergyman to a benefice, was frequently owned by a lay patron. Like any other piece of property, it could be inherited and was a solid investment which could always be sold to release the capital. Patronage could be a valuable right, allowing a patron to provide a living for a relative or friend, though the value varied considerably from parish to parish depending upon historical factors and endowment income. Indeed, Simeon's own appointment to Holy Trinity was an example of this method of preferment, although the patronage was in this case held by the diocesan bishop.

John Thornton (1720–90), a wealthy merchant and an Evangelical, had bought nine patronages and one presentation of another. In his will he vested them in three trustees, of which Simeon became one in 1813. Simeon quickly saw the potential of using patronage as a means of ensuring the continuity of a faithful Evangelical ministry in key parishes. Balda⁵ dates Simeon's first recorded interest in acquiring patronages to a letter to Henry Thornton (son and heir of John Thornton) probably written in August/September 1814: 'I think the purchase of Livings is one of the most useful modes of serving our blessed Lord ... So that ... I might be able to insure (humanly speaking) a continuance of the gospel there'.⁶ He was soon involved in negotiations to purchase livings on his own account, acquiring Cheltenham, his first, in 1817.

It is unclear precisely how Simeon financed his vision. In 1814 he received a legacy of £15,000 from his brother, though it appears that this did not provide the capital for this project. Moule quotes a memorandum of 1816 which implies that Simeon intended to devote the interest from this legacy to charitable works for the relief of the poor, and Balda has argued that while the legacy may have provided the security and stimulus to begin the purchase of advowsons, the funds came from other sources such as the royalties from his publications and specific gifts from well-wishers.⁷

The idea of patronage as a spiritual responsibility was new in Simeon's day.⁸ Simeon regarded the responsible exercise of patronage as a sacred trust and devoted a considerable amount of both capital and energy to it. Towards the end of his life he wrote, 'There is this difference between myself and others: they purchase *income* – I purchase *spheres*, wherein the prosperity of the Established Church, and the kingdom of our blessed Lord, may be advanced; and not for a season only, but if it please God, in perpetuity also', and 'The object is of incalculable importance. The securing of a faithful Ministry in influential places would justify any outlay of money that could be expended on it'.⁹ And again, 'Why have I bought these Livings? Not to present a good man to each, but to fill them with men who shall prove great and leading characters of commanding influence in the Church of God'.¹⁰ The idea of 'spheres of influence' or 'influential places' was important. Provincial and market towns, especially in areas of industrial growth, were favoured.

In 1833 Simeon established a trust to administer the patronage of his livings in perpetuity. In order to safeguard his principles regarding the exercise of patronage, he drew

⁵ W.D. Balda, 'Spheres of Influence: Simeon's Trust and its Implications for Evangelical Patronage', 73–4 (Cambridge Univ. unpubl. PhD. thesis, 1981).

⁶ Cambridge Univ. Library Add. 7674/1/1/39.

⁷ Moule, op. cit. (note 1), 128–30; Balda, op. cit. (note 5), 70–2; *contra* Hopkins, op. cit. (note 3), 218.

⁸ A. Pollard, 'The Influence and Significance of Simeon's Work' in A. Pollard and N. Hennell, *Charles Simeon (1759–1836): Essays Written in Commemoration of his Bi-Centenary by Members of the Evangelical Fellowship for Theological Literature* (1959), 159–84. See pp. 170–1.

⁹ From a letter to the Rev. Mr. I., 8 August 1836, quoted in W. Carus, *Memoirs of the Life of the Rev Charles Simeon, MA, with a Selection from his Writings and Correspondence* (1847), 780.

¹⁰ From a letter dated 29 April 1833, quoted by Pollard, op. cit. (note 8), 173.

up a charge to his trustees which emphasised their responsibility to appoint the best person for the job without fear or favour.¹¹ At his death, twenty-one livings were vested in his trustees.

Others were slow to follow Simeon's lead in using patronage trusts to ensure the continuity of their particular churchmanship in perpetuity, though small local and personal trusts continued to be established to manage patronage, in much the same way as John Thornton had done in the previous century. The first to imitate Simeon were other Evangelicals. Perhaps surprisingly, the Anglo-Catholic party did not begin to establish patronage trusts until the 1870s, preferring to rely on the good offices of existing patrons and to build new churches in the rapidly expanding urban areas. A. D. Wagner set up a trust to control appointments to the churches in Brighton established by his father, though it did not become operative until his death in 1902. Although this was a local trust, its motivation was to secure Anglo-Catholic practice in the town. The first High Church patronage trust of national scope was the Society for the Maintenance of the Faith, established in 1874 explicitly to acquire livings. In addition, Keble College, Oxford (founded in 1868), a Tractarian foundation, effectively served as a patronage trust by accepting livings from private donors. However, Anglo-Catholic trusts were never as large or active as their Evangelical counterparts.¹²

THE CASE OF FARINGDON

Faringdon took its place among the larger market towns of Berkshire and Oxfordshire which continued to be important as commercial and service centres throughout the 19th century. The area of north and west Berkshire in particular was slow to develop an industrial manufacturing base, and in consequence its industries reflect its largely agricultural aspect.¹³ Piggot's *Directory* of 1830 records that Faringdon maintained a wide range of rural crafts: carpenters and joiners, blacksmiths and farriers, saddlers, harness-makers and other leather trades, wheelwrights, and whitesmiths; in this it compares well with the other main towns in the area. In common with other market towns in the county it supported branches of two banks, showing that its commercial base was sound.¹⁴

Simeon purchased the advowson of Faringdon with Little Coxwell from Mr and Mrs James Hawkins of Weybridge in 1823. A financial account survives which details the activities of Simeon's solicitor, George Booth Tyndale, in negotiating for the advowson.¹⁵ An entry dated 3 October 1823 records Simeon's first instruction in the matter. On 14 November Tyndale made Hawkins an offer of £1,300 which was rejected after some thought, and a revised offer of £1,400 was accepted on 2/3 December. The change of ownership was enrolled in Chancery in March of the following year. It appears that Hawkins tried to buy back the advowson in November 1829, but Simeon always refused to sell or even exchange

¹¹ Charge to his Trustees, 18 March 1833, Cambridge Univ. Library Add. 8293 C/2/2.

¹² W.A. Evershed, 'Party and Patronage in the Church of England 1800-1945: A Study of Patronage Trusts and Patronage Reform' (Oxf. Univ. unpubl. D.Phil. dissertation, 1985); N. Yates, *Anglican Ritualism in Victorian Britain 1830-1910* (1999), 199-201.

¹³ C.J. Bond, 'The Small Towns of Oxfordshire in the Nineteenth Century', in T. Rowley (ed.), *The Oxford Region* (1980), 55-79; N. Hammond, *Rural Life in the Vale of the White Horse 1780-1914* (1974, repr. 1993), 5.

¹⁴ J.S. Creasey, 'Rural Servicing Trades 1830-1939', in J. Dils (ed.), *An Historical Atlas of Berkshire* (Berks. Record Soc. 1998), 104-5; T.A.B. Corley, 'Banks', in J. Dils (ed.), *ibid.* 100-1.

¹⁵ Cambridge Univ. Library Add. 8293 B/1/13.

a living once he had acquired it: on one occasion he firmly resisted an approach from such an influential person as the Duke of Northumberland, who wanted the advowson of Beverley (East Riding), the historic resting place of the duke's ancestors.

The market price of a patronage was linked to the income of the living. £1,400 for Faringdon compares favourably with eight livings put on the market by corporations and which Simeon considered buying. A printed circular issued in Simeon's name but without his knowledge to raise money for the purchase of these livings suggested that £10,000 would be sufficient, giving an average price of £1,250.¹⁶ All eight were comparatively poor livings, with an average income of only £85 10s. per annum, though they were mostly in large and growing towns. Faringdon's income was three times this figure. In 1817 Simeon had paid £3,000 for the financially attractive patronage of Cheltenham.

It is not clear why Simeon was attracted to Faringdon, especially as the patronage appears not to have been advertised for sale. Unfortunately his initial letter instructing Tyndale does not survive, though it may not have explained his reasons. With a population of about 2,500 Faringdon was not a large town, but it was a market town and Simeon must have regarded it as a place of influence in its region. Possibly its proximity to Oxford, the 'other' university, was a factor.

Faringdon posed an ongoing difficulty for Simeon. When he purchased the patronage, an incumbent was already in post. This was William Hawkins, brother of the former patron. Hawkins was certainly not an Evangelical. He was an absentee who lived in Cheltenham and appointed a succession of low-paid curates to carry out his duties in the parish while retaining the bulk of the parish income for his own use. This was not an unusual situation at the time: in 1799, 7,358 out of 11,194 parishes in England and Wales had no resident parson¹⁷ and as late as 1834 the incumbent was not resident in over 46 per cent of parishes in the neighbouring Oxford diocese.¹⁸ William Hawkins had become vicar in 1800 but remained until 1849. Simeon was unable to exercise his right to present a new vicar until Hawkins either chose to vacate by resignation or died (as in fact happened). Hawkins outlived Simeon by over a decade, so it was Simeon's trustees who eventually presented their candidate.

THE LETTER

A letter addressed to 'The Rev. C. Simeon, King's College, Cambridge' is preserved in the archives of All Saints Church. It is endorsed, possibly in Simeon's hand, 'Faringdon. Mr. Pridham's account of the state of things there. important. July 1829'. The full text is as follows:

Faringdon, July 22nd 1829

My dear Sir,

It will give Mrs. Pridham and myself great pleasure to see you at the Vicarage whenever you can make it convenient to come. We shall probably go into Lincolnshire about the first week in September, and return after an absence of 12 days and shall be glad to receive you either before or after that time.

¹⁶ Cambridge Univ. Library Add. 8293 C/3/8.

¹⁷ Hopkins, op. cit. (note 3), 214.

¹⁸ D. McClatchey, *Oxfordshire Clergy 1777-1869: A Study of the Established Church and the Role of its Clergy in Local Society* (1960), 31.

There is no conveyance from Reading but by post. Burford is but 11 miles distant, and coaches are running through from Oxford & Cheltenham several times in the course of a day.

I thank you for your kind inquiries respecting my situation. I wish I could in truth send you a gratifying account of the faith and obedience of my people generally; but I regret to say their history does not present such features as will warrant us to indulge in joy before God on their behalf. Less I cannot say respecting them, and more I need not say, than that with very slight exceptions, they are almost if not altogether the worst specimen of human nature I have seen. The few who constitute the higher class have entered into a conspiracy against the gospel, which they have uniformly, ever since my residence amongst them, for upwards of 8½ years, treated with scorn and contempt: 'hating to be reformed', candour and inquiry are virtues they will not exercise.

The parish made it a sine qua non of my acceptance of the cure that I should preach an Evening Lecture, for which they pledged themselves in a written agreement (uncalled for by me) to raise £20 annually. Several of them violated this written agreement the first year and the rest have discontinued the payment of their subscriptions, and have ceased to attend it, so that it is now frequented by the poor, to whom the Gospel is more acceptable.

I am sorry to say that the example of the more wealthy among us (education is out of the question) has a very bad effect in prejudicing several of the poor employed by them.

- The population of the town is about 1800; that of the hamlets 600, at one of which there is a chapel of ease.
- The number of communicants is about 30 on average.
- The Vicar is about 54. He resides at Cheltenham. He dined with us yesterday; and though a Gallio as to the things of God, he has always acted with kindness and consideration towards me. I should think him more opposed – than friendly towards the gospel.
- Our late Sunday School is now merged in the National School, established Jany. 1826; and consists of about 150 Boys, most of whom attend the school and the Church on the Sabbath. There is a Girls' Charity School containing about 80 scholars.
- There is a Church Missionary Society which was formed in 1823. All the leading people (one excepted) have warmly opposed it from its institution. Still we have raised in 5½ years from the town & neighbourhood upwards of £700.
- There are a few subscribers to the Bible Society among the Quakers & Dissenters; but not one except myself among Churchmen.
- Occasional sermons have been preached for the Moravians, the Jews etc. But only a few pounds were collected after each.
- The Church will accommodate about 900 or 1000 people.
- The average number of hearers in the morning may be about 600. In the evening about 400.
- Service at Faringdon in the morning, at the chapel of ease at Coxwell at ½ past 2 in the afternoon, and an Evening Lecture at 6 o'clock at Faringdon.
- Three full services every Sunday, except sacrament days (which are monthly) when the service at Coxwell is omitted.
- A Lecture every Wednesday at the Poor House which is attended by some of the senior people of the congregation.
- The Living without the surplice fees, and with the House included, may be estimated at £270 or £280. Curate's salary £80 per annum.

I believe the above remarks are full answers to all your questions.

I have for some time been desirous of being released from this arduous sphere of duty, the trials and burthens of which would probably prove too much for me in the decline of life. Should you know or hear of an eligible curacy, I shall be most obliged to you to mention it to me.

As you will not, in all probability, come to reside here should the present Incumbent die before you, I would beg to suggest from my own experience of the peculiar character and temper of the people, that you should choose a man of a strong elastic constitution; one, who, after every attempt to conciliate his parishioners by kindness, courtesy, and christian love, must submit to constant insult, and persecution, in their coarsest forms.

The Parsonage House adjoins a Public House which proves a perpetual nuisance.

P.S. I am the sixth clergyman connected with this situation as vicar and curate in 13 years and 10 months. I have resided here 8 years and 8 months. The people at Little Coxwell are very attentive at Church and behave civilly.

I remain, My Dr. Sir, your obliged Friend,
J Pridham

COMMENTARY¹⁹

This letter comes five and a half years after Simeon acquired the advowson and was written by Hawkins's curate at that time, the Rev. John Pridham M.A.²⁰ It is evidently a reply to a letter from Simeon (which does not survive) enquiring into the state of church life in this town in which he had made a significant investment but where he was not yet able to exert his influence. Not surprisingly, Simeon seems to have bypassed the non-resident incumbent and written directly to the 'man on the ground'. He appears to have asked a number of specific questions, which the curate did his best to answer one by one, all too aware that his correspondent offered his best chance of preferment.

The registers for All Saints show that John Pridham had taken up his duties as curate by 1 December 1820 and did not give them up until the start of November 1829.²¹ During that period the baptism, marriage and burial registers record a small number of officiating ministers in addition to Pridham, presumably standing in during occasional absences or illness. The incumbent, Hawkins, is not recorded as having taken any services during Pridham's curacy.

The tone of the letter suggests that Pridham was of an Evangelical persuasion. He seems proud to report that his insistence on personal faith provoked a negative response from his more influential parishioners, who were content to conform to the outward routines of established religion but did not wish to be disturbed by their curate. The higher classes of society were also suspicious of 'enthusiasm' in religion as being dangerously close to political agitation. The American and French Revolutions were ever-present reminders of the need to enforce conformity in all areas of life. Pridham clearly did not regard the problems he experienced with his 'higher class' of parishioners as in any way of his own making; he expected persecution. His disappointments had clearly taken their toll and left him disillusioned; though the poor and the residents of Little Coxwell received a more favourable commendation.

Pridham's estimate of the size of the parish is a little low. The 1821 census gives the population of Faringdon as 2,513, making it the ninth largest town in the county, and of Little Coxwell as 271.²² The village of Littleworth and the settlement of Thrupp were also

¹⁹ Faringdon was a peculiar of Salisbury Cathedral and was in Salisbury diocese until 1836, when Berkshire was transferred to Oxford diocese. It has not been possible to examine the visitation returns for the period 1800–36, which might have provided an interesting alternative viewpoint on the life of the parish.

²⁰ This was possibly the John Pridham who matriculated at St Edmund Hall, Oxford, in 1806 aged 25, proceeding to B.A. in 1811 and M.A. in 1815, making him 48 in 1829. J. Foster, *Alumni Oxonienses: The Members of the University of Oxford, 1715–1886* (1888).

²¹ The relevant registers are in the Berks. Record Office: 'Marriage Registers 1813–37' D/P53/1/14, 'Baptism Registers 1813–34' D/P53/1/8, 'Burial Registers 1813–42' D/P53/1/24. The first and last services at which Pridham officiated were: marriages on 24 December 1820 and 26 October 1829; baptisms on 13 December 1820 and 1 November 1829; burials on 1 December 1820 and 30 October 1829.

²² *V.C.H. Berks.* ii, 237.



Fig. 1. The interior of All Saints church as John Pridham would have known it, filled with pews and galleries and with the organ suspended in the crossing. This drawing, signed by J. Stone and dated 1806, is bound into a copy of Stone's *The History of Faringdon and the Neighbouring Towns and Seats in Berkshire* (1798), in the possession of All Saints P.C.C.

part of the parish at this date; they only became a separate ecclesiastical parish in 1843. Until a chapel was built at Littleworth in 1839, an aisle on the south side of All Saints church was reserved for the villagers. Little Coxwell is served by the 12th-century church of St Mary, which at this date was designated a chapel of ease.

In 1829 the capacity of All Saints was considerably greater than the 300 it holds today.²³ This predates the major restoration of 1853–4, funded largely through the generosity of Daniel Bennett Esq. of Faringdon House with J. W. Hugall as architect. That restoration included the removal of the pews and galleries seen in the late 18th-century drawing by J. Stone (Fig. 1) and the provision of new pews throughout.

On Pridham's estimate, 25 per cent of the population of the parish attended Morning Prayer. This figure may combine the attendance at All Saints with the early afternoon service at Little Coxwell. Though the evening congregation of about 400 would include some overlap with the morning congregation, 'double duty' did not become the norm until mid-century; among others, domestic servants who were unable to attend in the morning because they were preparing lunch for their employers would be present. The proportion of the population of the parish attending Anglican services each week may therefore have exceeded 35 per cent. This was within the range for the neighbouring Oxford diocese: of ninety-four parish returns to the 1831 Articles of Enquiry, sixty-six reported average Sunday attendances of between 25 per cent and 50 per cent of the population.²⁴ When one considers

²³ As late as 1939, *Kelly's Directory of Berkshire* (p. 88) still gave All Saints as having 900 sittings (all free).

²⁴ C.D. Field, 'A Godly People? Aspects of Religious Practice in the Diocese of Oxford, 1738–1936', in *Southern History: A Review of the History of Southern England*, 14 (1992), 47–73. Reported on p. 54.

that Congregational and Baptist congregations also met and that the Society of Friends was active in the town, the combined total of regular attenders at Christian worship in Faringdon and its parish may have exceeded 45 per cent.²⁵

Pridham took three services a Sunday, but only two when the monthly communion was celebrated at All Saints, which the congregation from Little Coxwell was expected to attend. This pattern of two Sunday services of Morning and Evening Prayer was becoming more common in towns and large villages than in rural areas,²⁶ though Parochial Returns for 1818–25 show that 40 per cent of parishes in the Oxford diocese still had only one service a Sunday.²⁷ A monthly communion was unusually frequent at this date; the habit of weekly communion did not develop until the 1840s and 1850s, while for some time after this many rural parishes continued to celebrate the sacrament only four times a year.²⁸ The 8 a.m. Sunday communion service did not become a feature of parish worship until the early years of the 20th century. The number of communicants is low when compared with the numbers attending Morning and Evening Prayer, reflecting the normal pattern in the Church of England at this time. In the early 19th century it was still comparatively rare for two sermons to be preached on a Sunday even when two services were held.²⁹ A contractual agreement with the incoming curate would ensure there was a sermon at Evening Prayer, and the reference to an evening lecture probably relates to this. Pridham appears to have continued to preach morning and evening despite the promised fee not being paid, reflecting his own priorities as an Evangelical.

A meeting of ratepayers was called on 15 September 1800 to discuss the implementation of the *Act for the Better Relief and Employment of the Poor* (1782).³⁰ It was agreed to build a new workhouse on land owned by Mr Hallett in Back Street. Work seems to have begun promptly, and the title deed is dated December 1804. This was the 'Poor House' referred to by Pridham.³¹ Following the 1834 *Act for the Amendment and Better Administration of the Laws Relating to the Poor in England and Wales*, Faringdon became the centre of one of the twelve Poor Law Unions in the county.

Sunday Schools are today associated with religious instruction, but when the movement began in the late 18th century they were an act of practical social welfare by the churches, teaching both reading and the catechism to children who otherwise received no education. The National Society for the Education of the Poor in the Principles of the Established Church, a voluntary organisation with the objective of promoting popular education which was formed in 1811, before any state provision existed, set up the National or Church Schools.³² It was therefore natural that the All Saints Sunday School should be amalgamated

²⁵ The Friends' Meeting House on Lechlade Road is notably early, dating from 1672. The Congregational chapel (now Catholic church) of 1840 on Marlborough Street replaced one of 1799–1800. The Wesleyans opened their first chapel (now the Masonic Hall) in Gloucester Street c. 1837. Detailed in C. Stell, *An Inventory of Nonconformist Chapels and Meeting-Houses in South-West England* (1991), 7–8.

²⁶ Yates, *op. cit.* (note 12), 28.

²⁷ McClatchey, *op. cit.* (note 18), 82.

²⁸ O. Chadwick, *The Victorian Church: Part I, 1829–1859* (3rd ed., 1971), 514–15.

²⁹ McClatchey, *op. cit.* (note 18), 82.

³⁰ Berks. Record Office D/P53/18/1, 'Poor House Committee Minutes 1800–1'.

³¹ The earlier building was adapted as the Union workhouse until a new workhouse was built in 1846; see N. Pevsner, *Buildings of England: Berkshire* (1966), 142. Both workhouse buildings have since been demolished.

³² Popular education was a major denominational battleground. The rival British and Foreign Schools Society, a largely Nonconformist body, had been founded in 1807.

with the National School on Stanford Road when that was established in 1825³³ (Pridham may have misremembered the date). A Female School of Industry to teach domestic service was opened on London Street in 1833; it may have replaced the earlier Girls' Charity School.

The missionary societies which Pridham supported were those which were popular among Evangelicals: Nonconformists could support the non-denominational British & Foreign Bible Society, hence his comment about Quakers and Dissenters. He may have known that Simeon was himself a founder member of the Church Missionary Society and a strong supporter of both the Society for Promoting Christianity Among the Jews and the Bible Society.³⁴

The living derived most of its income from tithes and the rent from glebe lands. As was usual with non-resident incumbents, Hawkins paid his curate only a small stipend for carrying out his duties and retained the remainder of the income for his own use: the parish was not getting good value for money. Although £80 was the minimum stipend set for curates, some in poorer livings were paid less than this.³⁵ In addition, the Parsonage House, the use of which was an in-kind contribution to the curate's stipend, was unsatisfactory.³⁶

A huge gulf was fixed between curates and incumbents, and Pridham expected to remain someone's drudge; a person with connections would not remain a curate. An anonymous pamphlet of 1843 drew attention to the lot of curates with 'no prospect of preferment from wealthy relatives or patrons or from any of those various influences which need not be mentioned'.³⁷ Neither did he for a moment expect to be promoted into the vacancy on Hawkins's death, sourly offering his opinion of the characteristics required for that appointment based on his own unhappy experience. Retirement was an impossibility for men like Pridham, who clearly expected to work well into old age. After explaining that the duties at Faringdon were likely to become too much for him – which could hardly have recommended him to his prospective patron – he asked Simeon to look out for an easier position for him. When he wrote this letter, Pridham presumably did not anticipate that he would be leaving Faringdon before the end of the year.

CONCLUSION

The letter paints a picture of a functioning market town in the early decades of the 19th century, with its social distinctions, its poor house and National School. In common, no doubt, with those in many towns, the public house could get lively.

In economic terms, Faringdon took its place among the larger market towns. In its religious life, too, Faringdon was similar to many other towns. The Nonconformist denominations were present, existing in tension with the Anglicans. The usual mission societies were supported. The pattern of worship at the parish church was unremarkable, and the high (to modern eyes) attendance was well within the range for the region. The only comparatively unusual note was that Pridham was an Evangelical.

³³ *V.C.H. Berks.* ii, 490.

³⁴ Moule, *op. cit.* (note 1), 91–5.

³⁵ McClatchey, *op. cit.* (note 18), 75.

³⁶ Pridham may have lived in the 18th-century house in Church Street, known as The Old Vicarage, which adjoins the Salutation Inn. Another 18th-century house near the churchyard gate subsequently served as the vicarage.

³⁷ Anonymous, *The Whole Case of the Unbeneficed Clergy by a Presbyterian in the Church* (1843), quoted in McClatchey, *op. cit.* (note 18), 75.

In general terms, the letter well illustrates the exploitation a curate without social connections could expect; in this respect the Church was little different from the wider society of which it was a part. The opposition Pridham experienced from the 'higher class' was that which a sincerely spiritual and pious man without social connections might expect to face in his ministry. Pridham reveals a casual acceptance of the corrupt practices of pluralism, absenteeism and place-seeking which marred the Church of England at this date. Even Simeon unquestioningly used the flawed patronage system in order to promote spiritual ends.

During the second half of the 19th century the Church of England saw rapid change in many of the areas touched on in Simeon's enquiry. Changes in both canon law and popular opinion put an end to the abuses of pluralism and non-residency, while clergy developed a much more demanding spiritual and pastoral role. Many incumbents employed assistant curates (rather than surrogates) to help in this work, while new opportunities, often in the rapidly growing urban areas, reduced the likelihood of a man remaining a curate throughout his career. However, for Pridham this was still beyond the horizon.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The author would like to thank All Saints P.C.C. for permission to publish Pridham's letter and to reproduce Fig. 1.