

The Extraordinary Case of Rev. William Day

It's June 1837 and a new rector arrives at St Mary's, Hawridge. His appointment will turn out to be a mixed blessing for both vicar and parishioners.

The Rev. William Day was born in 1813, the second son of George Day, a clergyman of Earsham, Norfolk. Hawridge was his first appointment after being awarded a B.A from Merton College, Oxford in 1835.

In the first half of the 19th century a clergyman without independent means or family connections enjoyed a meagre living. Worse still, there was insecurity of tenure and an incumbent usually had to meet all or most of the costs of running the parish from their own resources. Unsurprisingly, debt was a frequent occurrence. Within two years of arriving William Day, whose living was valued at £156, found himself in Hertford gaol for unpaid debts. It was only the beginning of his troubles.

In 1842 'The Times' - under the banner 'Extraordinary Case' - reported a lawsuit bought by a Mr Smith, "a gentleman of independent property", who lived in Chesham. The report relates how, on a July evening, a small child made a remark whilst the Rev. Day was passing the Smith's property on horseback. Day became upset, dismounted and followed the child onto the Smith's property "for the purpose of beating it." A servant tried to intervene but "with an oath is struck very severely."

Mrs Smith hearing the commotion emerged and asked Day to explain his conduct and for her trouble received "several blows with the butt-end of his riding whip upon her neck and shoulders" until he was restrained by a servant. Mr Smith remonstrated with Day who, before riding off, responded by saying, "D—n your eyes, you are only an old pauper." Whilst Mr Smith went for the local constable, Day returned and broke down the gates of Smith's house.

Despite the assault on his wife and the damage to his property, Mr Smith sought only an apology, a 20 shilling donation to charity and for Day to keep the peace towards his family. Day treated the proposal with contempt and refused to offer any explanation for his behaviour. The jury found Day guilty and fined him 200 shillings.

In May 1843, Day went to the 'Rose and Crown', drank brandy and water excessively and left with Benjamin Batchelor. A dog belonging to Mr Weedon, a local farmer, followed them along the road. For some reason Day is annoyed by the dog and he cried out "I will do the rascal" before cutting the dog on the throat.

Between 17th July 1843 and the 16th March 1844 Day was in Aylesbury gaol although we do not know why he was there. On the 5th June, Day was seen in a state of intoxication in the 'Rose and Crown' following a vestry meeting at the church. Earlier reports speak of him as being "rather fresh" and "in liquor".

Now well into his stride, on 17th September, Day left the 'Rose and Crown' in a drunken state. He was accompanied by Thomas Batchelor (possibly the same Thomas Bachelor who was the Hawridge Parish Guardian between 1823 and 1824) until Day said to him "Go to Hell, I don't want you!"

A scuffle with Nathan Tomlin occurred on 18th November. Both of the men were drunk and had to be separated by the landlord of the 'Rose and Crown', Joseph Pitkin. Day was, according to reports, "pretty well tipsy" before he entered the pub.

Matters reached a head, however, on 7th February 1845 when Day drew a knife on Thomas Batchelor and cut him. Day was tried by the Aylesbury assizes on 14th March on a charge of "feloniously cutting and maiming." He was found guilty of common assault and imprisoned, most likely in Aylesbury gaol, for six weeks. This caused a great scandal in the village, where he was already known as "the drunken parson", and caused his congregation, which had been around a hundred, to dwindle even further.

Whether it was his indebtedness, the experience of being sent to prison or just the daily grind of a clergyman's life that led to his addiction to drink we cannot know. What is clear is that it was his drunken behaviour and prison sentences between 1837 and 1845 that led to his trial in December 1845 under the Church Discipline Act.

Having heard the evidence, the ecclesiastical court decided to suspend Day for three years for his "habitual intoxication." Under the terms of his suspension he must present to the court a certificate, endorsed by three clergymen, stating that he has been of good behaviour during this time.

Day's suspension was met with great scepticism. 'The Times' of 5th December asked its readers, "Is it possible to pen this judgement without astonishment?" In its view, "a plain, right-thinking man" would consider Day should be "instantly punished by deprivation." Sir H. Jenner Fust is singled out for criticism because, as the paper sees it, he "could not bring himself to discharge an unpleasant duty."

'The Times'' doubts appear to be well founded. On 14th December, 1848, Day's suspension ended and he resumed his clerical duties - without the certificate of good behaviour the court had asked for. On 19th February, 1849 he is served notice. Characteristically, Day ignores not just this notice but four others and is finally pronounced in contempt.

What happened to William Day next? I've yet to find out but the 1851 Census offers a hint. It shows a thirty-eight year old Rev. William Day in Aylesbury gaol!

Barry Warr