

Rev. Robert Townson MA : First Incumbent of Allithwaite Parish

Whilst researching Robert, the first incumbent of St Mary's Church Allithwaite, I discovered a well-researched and detailed family history of the Townson family written by John (1) which traced his family back to the 17th century. In this biography of Robert, some of the information from the Townson family history has been used and will usually be quoted without a further reference, whilst the many other primary sources will be referenced. The search for information on Robert Townson has been limited to digital searches, and to date, the local Westmorland Gazette and Kendal Mercury papers have only been digitised up 1870/1.

The Early Years

Robert was born in 1832 (Census records) in Kendal to Robert and Mary who lived at Low Farm in Crosthwaite-cum-Lyth in the district of Heversham. In 1841 he was living there with his two brothers Thomas and William and sister Elizabeth. In 1901 he was living with another older brother John, who was also a clergyman. Robert went to school at Heversham and Sedbergh and studied humanities (2) at Queens College, Oxford, from 1851-1855, and he was awarded a BA at a ceremony in May 1866 (3). He was ordained as a Deacon in June 1855 (4) and taught at Rossall School from 1856-1857 (5) and during that time he was conferred an MA (class 3) in a ceremony in April 1857 (6).

Robert's ordination to the priesthood by the Bishop of Carlisle in June 1858 (7) was accompanied by an assignment to the Parish of Thrimby (8) (a small medieval church at Little Strickland in the Eden valley). However, his tenure was rather brief as four months later he was offered an appointment as the Headmaster at the Grammar School, Lowther (9). He moved over to the neighbouring village of Askham

and was replaced at Thrimby by the Rev S Whiteside from Lindale (10).

Whilst living in Askham, Robert married Margaret Cowper in January 1859 (11). Margaret was from a wealthy local land-owning family, who inherited from her father in 1878. The family's main fortune originated from a relation on his mother's side of the family, Isaac Swainson, who had bought the rights to a patent medicine called 'Velnos Vegetable Syrup' in about 1775. This was immensely popular and made Isaac and Margaret, who carried on the business after his death, a great deal of money. Incidentally, Thomas Cowper, Margaret's grandfather, had been the 'guide over the sands' in the Leven estuary between Cartmel and Ulverston. In 1860 Robert and Margaret moved to Chapel House Parsonage in the Parish of Grayrigg (12) where he resided for 5 years. The living provided a salary of £100 and a residence (13), and whilst there they had 4 children. In the 1861 census they had a servant and housemaid to help the household.

The Allithwaite Years



St Mary's Church Allithwaite. Pat Rowland 2005

St Mary's Church Allithwaite was consecrated on 29th June 1865, and it was not until March 1866 that his appointment was announced and he was instituted to the perpetual curacy in April 1866 (14) (15) as the first incumbent. As a perpetual

curate, Robert Townson will have been supported by the cash stipend, maintained from Mary Lambert's endowment, as she set aside £5000 for the Bishop of Chester to invest for such purposes, said to be worth £215 net (16). In the first year Robert was reported to have officiated at 2 weddings (17) (18), attended the opening of the new church at Arnside (19) and met the 'chancellor' with the other clergy at Ulverston (20). Later, he presented 22 candidates for confirmation, and in January 1879 he conducted the funeral of James Simpson Young at Cartmel.

The family clearly had other income as Robert and Margaret together with their 8 children had 4 servants (1871 census). In 1866 he generously donated two guineas towards the Archdeacon's memorial. Between his arrival in 1866 and the 1871 census Margaret produced 4 children, and sadly Sarah May died in November 1874 aged 6 months giving them 10 children in total. Robert officiated at the wedding of his brother-in-law, James Cowper at Hawkshead in 1867 (21) and later was reported as being involved with the Kents Bank House preparatory school for sons of Gentleman as a referee (22).

In Victorian times major festivals were an opportunity for large gatherings and celebrations in the district. On one such occasion, Robert and the Parishioners attended an annual Harvest Thanksgiving Service and party in Lindale, together with the vicars of Cartmel, Grange-over-Sands and Lindale (23). The festivities on Thursday 5th October 1871 commenced at 2:30pm with the choir which was greatly strengthened by amateur singers from neighbouring parishes. A greater part of the congregation together with 140 school children adjourned to one of the parsonage fields for merry sports, followed by an afternoon tea party at 5:30pm in the School Room for upwards of 300, with entertainment at 7:30 for 600 people.

In the time of Robert's incumbency in Allithwaite the liturgy will have been High Church. In the announcement of his death he was said to belong to the Oxford Movement (24), who were Anglo-Catholic High Church members of the Church of England. The leaders of the movement argued for the inclusion of traditional aspects of liturgy from medieval religious practice, as they believed the church had emphasis on the rituals and ceremony of the church, in particular the use incense and the placing of candles on the altar, and of vestments and wafer bread in the Holy Communion (Wikipedia). In 1877 he was listed as one of 22 members of The Society of the Holy Cross in north-west England



Roll of Honour Plaque in St Mary's Church, Allithwaite. Pat Rowland Dec 1999

(25). This was an international society of Anglo-Catholic priests that developed when the Oxford Movement had played its course (Wikipedia). Interestingly one of the main contributions that resulted out of the Oxford Movement is the hymnbook entitled Hymns Ancient and Modern which first appeared in 1861, and used in St Mary's Church Allithwaite until the mid-1990s. The illegal practices of the Ritualists resulted in imprisonment for some priests

and the prosecution of the Bishop of Lincoln in 1890.

Robert appears to have been absent between 1875 and 1876 when the Rev. Marten Igglesden was recorded in Crockford's Clerical Directory as curate-in-charge at Allithwaite.

Life after Allithwaite

After 15 years in Allithwaite, the Townson's were 'called' to pastures new and a quiet life in rural Suffolk. Robert (or his agent) attended an auction in Stowmarket and purchased the perpetual right for the cure of souls in the Parish of Gedding for £250 (26). Here are extracts from the report of the auction. 'Country residence with stables recently built at the cost of £1200, with fruit and kitchen gardens, and 6 acres 26 poles of glebe land (annual rent charge of £150). The church consists of a nave, chancel and low towers, capable of seating about 100 persons (annual income estimated at £200).



Gedding Medieval Church, Suffolk
www.suffolkchurches.co.uk/gedding.htm

The present incumbent would be 42 years of age in September 1881 (NB Robert was 49 at that time). The auctioneer said the Reverend gentleman would be willing to change with a clergyman older than himself as he was anxious for more active employment. On vacation, the purchaser will have the right of presentation.' Robert presided at this medieval church for 2 years (5). From 1884 there is no record of him being an incumbent until in 1892 it was

announced he would become the vicar of Moulsoford near Wallingford in south Oxfordshire (27), where he remained for approximately 2 years (5). The 1891 census describes him as a Clerk in Holy Orders living in Warwick New Road, Milverton (just outside Leamington Spa) with his wife, 3 children, a cook and housemaid.

Robert's wife Margaret died in March 1909. There is a detailed report of her funeral at Bexhill followed by interment in Hasting (28). She was survived by Robert and 6 of her children. On this occasion, the continuing family connection in the church is apparent with 3 sons and one son-in law as priests. At that time, Robert Walter was vicar of Headington, Frederick Rector of Boxwell, John Rector of Carlton, and Charlotte's husband was Rev. W. Clissold-Curtis. John Townson (1) states that his son Robert Walter was also an extreme Anglo-Catholic. Robert died in February 1914 (24) and was buried in Hastings Cemetery.



St John's flint-faced Medieval Church at Moulsoford near Wallingford
www.moulsofordparishchurch.blogspot.co.uk

Career Timeline

1851-55: Oxford
1855 : Ordination as Deacon
1856-57: Teaching at Rossall School
1857 : Award of MA
1858 : Ordination to the Priesthood
1858-60: Thrimby & Askham
1860-66: Grayrigg
1866-82: Allithwaite
1882-84: Gedding
1892-94: Moulsoford

Comment

Looking back, Robert Townson's incumbency at St Mary's Church Allithwaite was clearly his most important contribution to the Church during his career. He moved to the newly built Church in the prime of his life at the age of 34. Allithwaite was still a small rural community. For example, in 1841 there were 40 dwellings with approximately 50 adults and 50 under 18's (1841 census - Pers. Comm., Barbara Copeland). In addition the Parish included the few residences in Kents Bank, Cart Lane and surrounding farms. During his tenure the Parish expanded gradually especially in Kents Bank from 8 dwellings in 1861 to 20 dwellings in 1881.

Initially he would have to develop further the Services established by the clergy from Cartmel in the months prior to his appointment, and previously at the Chapel-School down the road. Although there are no reports of worship at Allithwaite during his incumbency, services will have been grand occasions, especially on festivals, with a surpliced choir led by the choirmaster Mr Winson, who was also the schoolmaster during this time. Miss Mary Anne Dunkley, the head teacher at the Moorhurst School in Kents Bank, was the organist from 1873-1882. She is commemorated by the brass plaque affixed to the organ and with another plaque on the south wall of the church. Limited information from a scrapbook of Mrs Lamb, covering the period 1870-1876 suggests that Allithwaite Parish was remote from the other local Parishes, as there was no mention of participation in the Rural Deanery meetings, or of the choir attending major festivals.

On completion of the searches for Robert, I wondered how well the 'poor and working class' congregation of the Allithwaite accepted Robert, the affluent priest and intellectual scholar from Oxford and his High Church liturgy. After all he was the

perpetual curate for almost 17 years suggesting a successful tenure. It was only when I subsequently started to research his successor, John Hammersley, that the picture became clearer. Robert moved to Gedding in 1882, exchanging places with John Hammersley. The evidence for the exchange is that John was recorded as the Rector of Gedding just a few months before the auction of the 'living' in September 1881 (29). John himself had taken a strong stance against the ritualistic practises (30) favoured by Robert, and perhaps John would prove to be more suited as the incumbent of Allithwaite. John's incumbency lasted 25 years! On the other-hand Robert Townson's liturgy of High Church appears not to have matched the expectations of the parishioners of Gedding, as his tenure only lasted for 2 years.

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