

THE REVD WILLIAM WILSON, VICAR OF HOLY ROOD, SOUTHAMPTON, 1828–70 AND THE REVIVAL OF THE OFFICE OF RURAL DEAN IN THE CHURCH OF ENGLAND

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ABSTRACT

The Church of England between 1780 and 1830 began the process of internal reform. One example of this reform was the assertion of more effective control over the clergy and dioceses by the bishops. The principal agency through which this was achieved was the rural deanery. Whilst rural deans had been in existence in the eighteenth century it was from the 1820s that they played a strong part in the process of reform of the Church. This article examines the work of William Wilson, vicar of Holy Rood, Southampton from 1828 as rural dean of Southampton. It seeks to clarify the work of Wilson as rural dean and to contribute to the debate on Church reform.

The office of rural dean was, in origin, a Saxon one established in succession to the sixth century office of archipresbyter. Almost certainly the title 'rural dean' came into use during the primacy of Lanfranc. However, during the later medieval and Tudor period the office nationally fell into disuse and, in spite of attempts to revive it in 1604, remained so until the nineteenth century. During the eighteenth century Bishops Ward of Salisbury and Benson of Gloucester re-introduced the title as did bishops in the dioceses of St David's and Chester. As early as 1720 Bishop Wynne of St Asaph asked his rural deans to report to him on the condition of rural deaneries, (Gibson, 1984, 38) but the office was often without clear or defined responsibilities. In 1825 Joseph Hume referred to 'the enormous sinecures called rural deaneries' (Carpenter, 55). For the most part historians have credited the revival of the office in its fullest form to Bishops Kaye of Lincoln (1827–53), Marsh of Peterborough (1819–39) and Blomfield of London (1828–56). The rural deans appointed by Kaye, Marsh and Blomfield exercised a developed range of functions including the maintenance of discipline in the

clergy, acting as the bishop's agent in the deanery and inspecting schools and charities (O'Day, 42–44 & Dansey, vii). However, Bishop Charles Sumner of Winchester was also one of the first bishops to appoint rural deans. Much of Bishop Sumner's correspondence with William Wilson, vicar of Holy Rood and the first Rural Dean of Southampton from 1828 to 1872, has survived. It is the aim of this article to draw together the details of Wilson's career and to indicate the way in which Wilson executed his office as rural dean of Southampton and vicar of Holy Rood.

William Wilson, if his private papers had not survived, would have been assumed to have been a good example of a clergyman of the corrupt, unreformed era. Born in 1783, the son of a Kendal gentleman, he was educated at Queen's College, Oxford. Wilson was ordained deacon in September 1807 and priest in March 1808, and subsequently appointed assistant curate of Colne Engayne, Essex. Nevertheless, it was to be a long time before Wilson entered a living of his own, and in this respect he was like many Georgian clergy who suffered from an overcrowded profession. In 1811 he was appointed curate of St Bees by the Bishop of Chester at the meagre salary of £35 a year. It was only in 1817 that Wilson was appointed to a domestic chaplaincy by Viscount Galway. Five years later Wilson returned to Oxford to take up a fellowship at Queen's College and to act as curate of St Ebbe's with a salary of £70 a year. It was this move that brought Wilson close to an important centre of patronage. It also gave him time to obtain a BD and a DD and to act as dean and bursar of his college (Foster). In 1824 the Revd Hugh Hill died, leaving vacant the living of Holy Rood, Southampton. This living was

part of the large Southampton estates of Queen's College and Wilson was able to use his college connections to be appointed to it.

The origin of the links between William Wilson and the Sumner family is obscure, but they developed very quickly. In 1828, on his translation to the see of Winchester, Charles Sumner made one of his first acts the appointment of Wilson to the newly revived rural deanery of Southampton. Thereafter, in 1829 Wilson was appointed vicar-general of the diocese and surrogate to the Bishop, and in 1832 he was collated to a canonry of Winchester. There can be little doubt that some of this patronage reflected the fact that William Wilson had first become engaged to, and finally married, Maria Sumner, the Bishop's sister, in 1830 (SRO WP ff 1-28).

Ecclesiastical historians are increasingly debating the question of when the reform of the Church began, of which the revival of rural deaneries is a part. Traditionally, historians have tended to regard the Church in the early nineteenth century as either 'reformed' or 'unreformed'. Before the Church reforms of the 1830s and '40s the Church and its clergy have been regarded as corrupt. Recent research has suggested that this is not the case, and that during the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries there were aspects of both corruption and reform (Gibson, 1988 & Gibson, 1990). One view asserts that there was a patchwork of reform between 1780 and 1830 (Virgin, 1989, 264-6). The appointment of Wilson is perhaps an example of the artificial division between the reformed and unreformed. Wilson embodies the synthesis of the two views: a man in receipt of church patronage because of his connection with his College and relationship to the Bishop, who was nevertheless a model cleric discharging his responsibilities with great energy and effectiveness.

The deed of appointment of Wilson to the rural deanery of Southampton in 1828 defined the range of duties expected of him by Bishop Sumner. It indicated that he was to inspect annually the condition of all churches, churchyards, registers, glebe houses and lands within his deanery. Moreover, as rural dean he

would exercise oversight of all charitable foundations and schools in the deanery and notify the bishop of all parish vacancies. (SRO WP ff 20). Bishop Sumner had regular meetings with his rural deans, who attended assemblies of senior diocesan clergy at Farnham Castle. One of the rare benefits of the ownership of Farnham Castle by the See was that large numbers of clergy could be accommodated for some days and rural deans were often invited to stay for a few days (Sumner, 322). In practice the role of rural dean was far more extensive than the list in Wilson's deed of appointment and in the case of Southampton seems to have been closer to that of an archdeacon.

The first issue that Wilson had to deal with as rural dean was that of Church accommodation in Marchwood. The Bishop wanted to arrange for the chapel in the parish to be used permanently for Sunday services, but he was unsure of the reaction of Mr Phillips, the vicar of Eling, in whose parish Marchwood fell. In fact, Phillips initially refused to countenance the idea of a chapel in his parish and Wilson investigated the possibility of the Ordnance Office at Marchwood receiving local people at its regular services. These services were held in a licenced room at the Ordnance depot. Probably the threat of this rival provision was sufficient for Phillips to agree to the use of the chapel, and in December 1829 Wilson was asked to select and recommend a suitable minister for it (SRO WP ff 1-5).

Much of Wilson's responsibility as rural dean involved supervision of the clergymen of the deanery. In August 1829, for example, he was required by the Bishop to prevent local clergy from preaching in schools which were not licenced for such purposes (SRO WP, f 3). A year later, Wilson was asked to enquire whether the rector of Nursling was resident or not, and to pass information to the diocesan chancellor in case a legal suit might follow to enforce residence (SRO WP, f 10). In February 1835 Wilson was required to deal with the troublesome Mr Urquhart, whose temper had caused considerable problems in Southampton. The Bishop emphatically told Wilson

'his (Urquhart's) ministry is at an end'. Wilson was required to break the news to the unfortunate clergyman. In the same letter Wilson was consulted by the Bishop about what to do with the Revd Mr Herbert Smith who was pious but mentally disturbed (SRO WP, f 31 & Venn). On a regular basis Wilson was invited by the Bishop to recommend clergy of quality for livings and offices in the bishop's gift. In all, ten clergy were discussed at various times by the Bishop and rural dean (SRO WP, f 31).

Undoubtedly, one of the most difficult problems that the Bishop and his Rural Dean had to deal with was that of Mr Bisse. Bisse was the chaplain of the Southampton Penitentiary, and in 1833 was accused of a serious crime. The Bishop's letters to Wilson are oblique and guarded on the matter of the nature of Bisse's offence. But in May 1833 Bisse fled to Primrose Hill in London and the Bishop's letter to Wilson mentions this as being where 'the assault' took place. Dr Wilson hoped that Bisse would stay in London, but he soon returned to Southampton where he proved to be an embarrassment. The Bishop urged Wilson to persuade Bisse to get a lawyer, but Bisse seemed determined to ignore the matter and ride out the storm. Wilson monitored public opinion in Southampton regarding Bisse's decision to remain in office at the Bishop's request. The result was sufficiently worrying for the Bishop to suggest that an inquiry should take place into the affair. However, it proved difficult to arrange, and as time went on a serious problem arose. In July 1833 the Bishop was due to visit Southampton when he would be attended at public events by all the local clergy. If Mr Bisse was received by the Bishop it might compromise the Church, but if the Bishop refused to receive Bisse it might further prejudice his case. The Bishop bluntly told Wilson to present Bisse with an ultimatum: submit to an inquiry or risk not being received during the visit. Bisse attempted to solve the problem by resigning from the chaplaincy, but the Bishop refused to accept his resignation and reluctantly agreed to meet Bisse. After the meeting Bisse agreed to submit to the board of inquiry of which he was

able to name three out of five members. The results of the enquiry were not recorded but were almost certainly unfavourable to Bisse, since in March 1834 the Penitentiary in Southampton applied to the Bishop for compensation for the 'lapses arising from Mr Bisse's ministry' (SRO WP, ff 20-27 & 30).

An important contribution of Wilson to Southampton during his time as rural dean was the planning and development of the corporation cemetery in the city. The issue arose in 1837, when it became clear that the various ancient city parishes in Southampton could not provide sufficient space for further burials. Dr Wilson was particularly anxious about burial grounds since his own parish, Holy Rood, had no churchyard or cemetery of its own. Moreover, the rector of St Mary's refused to allow any of his glebe land to be alienated for use as a burial ground. As a result, the corporation investigated the possibility of creating a cemetery to the north of the town (Patterson, 1965, 86). The city had expanded significantly and Bishop Sumner readily agreed that it was necessary to establish a cemetery. In May 1841 Sumner asked Wilson to arrange a meeting of the city incumbents to discuss the creation of a cemetery, and to report back to him. Wilson also acted as the main link between the diocese and the corporation (Patterson, 1965, 109). The Bishop was not happy with the site chosen by the corporation. It would, he wrote, be 'most inconveniently distant which will be bad for the poor and the clergy'. But it was clear that there was little other choice since the area between the medieval city and the Avenue (the proposed site) was already developed into suburban housing. The Bishop acquiesced over the site but felt that the cemetery could not dispense with the services of a permanent priest. He quoted the development, a short time earlier, of the Winchester Cemetery, which had a chaplain, and made it a condition of supporting the act of parliament required for the new Southampton cemetery that it, too, should have its own chaplain. Significantly, Wilson accepted that there should be a section of the cemetery allocated for Dissenters and

agreed with the Bishop that this should not concern the Church. As a result, the cemetery was also able to include a Jewish quarter, though it is not clear whether Jews and Dissenters were on the same footing in rights of burial. It also possessed Anglican and Dissenting chapels (Patterson, 1965, 154 & Brannon, 73). The passage of the act of parliament required for the cemetery was a lengthy and protracted affair. In April 1843 Wilson consulted the clergy of Southampton again about any final amendments they wanted before the final reading. However, it was not until May 1846 that Bishop Sumner came to Southampton to consecrate the new cemetery. The ceremony and service was, at the Bishop's direction, devised by Wilson (SRO WP, ff 38-44).

The cemetery was not the only issue regarding temporalities which absorbed Wilson's time. Wilson was assiduous in maintaining the fabric of his own church, Holy Rood. During his tenure of the living, Wilson employed Messrs Mee & Webb as architects to reveal the hitherto covered sedilia and to rebuild the church. In 1849 Wilson directed that the wooden colonnade known as the 'Proclamations' be pulled down. They were the site of government declarations and had been the place at which the hustings was erected at elections. Visiting the church in 1850, Phillip Brannon said that the rebuilding 'reflects the highest credit on the vicar . . .' Wilson was also intimately involved in the construction of a new chapel in the parish of All Saints, Southampton, which was consecrated by the Bishop on the same day as the cemetery. All Saints Church had been able to accommodate only a third of the inhabitants of the parish and the new chapel was desperately needed (Brannon, 42 & SRO WP, ff 29 & 44). Bishop Sumner showed himself to be a progressive diocesan, concerned for sections of the community frequently neglected. In September 1846, for example, Wilson was directed to enquire whether local churches provided space near the pulpit for the elderly and poor with hearing difficulties. Tranquility between parson and parishioners was also important. In December 1848 Wilson undertook an enquiry

into the vicar of Bursledon's plans to rebuild his church. The vicar's proposals had attracted considerable opposition from his parishioners and Wilson's role was that of arbitrator between vicar, churchwardens and parishioners (SRO WP, ff 46-47). In September 1840 Wilson was even invited to investigate and report on the condition of education in another rural deanery, that of Godstone, for the Bishop (SRO WP, f 37).

Probably the most time-consuming function of the rural dean, as exemplified by Wilson's work for Bishop Sumner, was to act as the Bishop's messenger in the deanery. The Bishop seems to have spoken to his lesser clergy via his dean. In 1833 he asked Wilson to arrange for the Southampton clergy to observe the national day of thanksgiving for the abatement of the Cholera epidemic (SRO WP, f 18). On occasion this could be an unpopular role for the rural dean: in February 1835 Wilson was asked to inform the Southampton clergy that the ecclesiastical reforms would mean that the Bishop would no longer be prepared to provide augmentations to clergy stipends from his own funds (SRO WP, f 31). In January 1829 Wilson brought the news to Mr Butteridge, minister of St Paul's chapel in All Saint's parish, that he had 'acted very inadvisedly' in requiring collections of money during minor services when only a few people were in the congregation (SRO WP, f 2). Much of this work required a degree of trust between the Bishop and his rural dean. Bishop Sumner seems to have had great confidence in Wilson and consulted him on very sensitive matters. In April 1830 when Beaulieu, a donative and thus outside the bishop's jurisdiction, was discussed the Bishop revealed to Wilson his desire to end Beaulieu's donative status (SRO WP, f 7). A number of the Bishop's letters to Wilson demonstrate his willingness to confide in him (SRO WP ff 10 & 19 eg).

Occasionally, Dr Wilson entered the realm of politics in his capacity as rural dean. In 1828 he led the city clergy in a petition against Catholic Emancipation. Twenty years later he preached against the Pope, Pius IX, for his cynical rejection of support for the rebels in

Italy in the revolutions of 1848. Crowds flocked to Holy Rood to hear these popular sermons (Patterson, 1966, i, 151 & ii, 70). The issues on which the Bishop consulted Wilson included the disturbances attendant upon the agricultural unrest in the early 1830s in Hampshire. In June 1833, when Mr Fleming, the owner of Stoneham Park and Chilworth Manor, and of an estate at Binstead on the Isle of Wight, evicted all his Binstead tenants along with threats and menaces, the Bishop consulted Wilson on whether he felt the accusation of Fleming's threats to be likely. (SRO WP, f 22). But Fleming was a JP and deputy lieutenant of the county and able to ride out the protests at his behaviour.

One duty which William Wilson took very seriously was his responsibility for God's House and the French Church in Southampton. On the nomination of Queen's College, Oxford, Wilson was Steward of God's House, as vicar of Holy Rood the Church fell in his parish, but as rural dean he had oversight of charitable foundations within the deanery. Indeed, Bishop Sumner was the first bishop to include oversight of charitable foundations in his deed of appointment of rural deans. In this he was subsequently copied by the bishops of Worcester, Gloucester, Chester and Ely (Dansey, 362). Wilson was elected a trustee of the French Church (the church of the Huguenot refugee community and chapel of God's House) in 1856 (Welch, 100-101). However, it was as early as 1829 that the new rural dean first enquired into the state of this remarkable foundation. Wilson reported that he actually lived in God's House (presumably he occupied the Steward's lodgings), and performed English services every Wednesday in the French Church. The remaining services were held in French, but in accordance with the rite of the Church of England (Welch, 183). Thereafter, Wilson's commitment to the French Church was remarkable. He has been credited with saving the institution in the middle years of the nineteenth century, the historian of the French Church writing that 'the congregation might well have quietly disappeared but for the

efforts of the Revd Dr Wilson' (Welch, 9). In addition to routine administration of the foundation, Wilson seems to have supervised the accounts of the Church. He also used his position as Steward to persuade Queen's College to provide new pews and fittings for the Church in 1864 (Welch, 114). It also seems clear that Wilson was responsible for demolishing the decrepit buildings of the foundation and replacing them with the nineteenth century buildings.

William Wilson died in August 1874 at Winchester and was buried in the churchyard of his son's church at Preston Candover. There is little doubt that Bishop Sumner held William Wilson in high regard. In 1833 Wilson was invited to preach the diocese's ordination sermon at Winchester (SRO WP, f 22) and the Bishop was so impressed that he encouraged Wilson to arrange to have it published (SRO WP, f 28). Wilson was a noted evangelical preacher and so popular that Holy Rood was the centre of evangelism in Southampton (Patterson, 1966, ii, 69). In 1835 the Bishop wrote praising Wilson for his parish work and he repeated the praise in another letter in 1836 (SRO WP, ff 34 & 36). Indeed, the Bishop's esteem for Wilson was so great that when in May 1853 he received a complaint from a member of Wilson's vestry, he waited some time and then informed the complainant that the matter had lapsed (SRO WP, f 48). Much of this is, no doubt, part of the Bishop's family relationship with Wilson. Indeed, Bishop Sumner watched the education of his nephew, Wilson's son, who was rather flatteringly named Sumner Wilson, with pride. Sumner Wilson was invited to join his uncle in Geneva for a few days in 1853 after he had graduated from Oxford (SRO WP ff 48-49). Sumner Wilson was subsequently ordained and presented to the vicarage of Preston Candover. However, it would be unfair to suggest that the favour was merely flagrant nepotism. William Wilson was a noted Hebrew scholar and had published a number of works, including *The Bible Student's Guide* in 1863, and was invited in 1832 to contribute to the fifty volume *Christian Family Library* (SRO WP, ff 50 & 52). Moreover,

the collection of Wilson's letters confirms that Wilson was a conscientious clergyman, committed to the work of the Church and modest in his own virtues. Indeed, it seems likely that only Wilson's self-effacement prevented his elevation within the ranks of the Church. Wilson was tireless in his work for the poor, organising lectures and evening classes and a clothing club and a prototype of a YMCA (Patterson, 1966, ii, 60). Over a century before

William Wilson was appointed rural dean of Southampton, Bishop Francis Atterbury of Rochester commented that the only way to establish strength and discipline in the Church was to revive the office of rural dean (Dansey, viii). In the case of William Wilson it is clear that Atterbury's hopes were fulfilled. The Church in Southampton was appreciably stronger and more effective after Wilson than before.

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