

THE VICARS OF STEYNING: A HISTORICAL INTRODUCTION

We know nothing of the vicars of Steyning in the period before the Conquest.

1066-c.1250

The church and manor of Steyning was a royal possession from at least the time of King Alfred. The income and all rights of lordship were confirmed to the Abbot and Abbey of Fécamp after the Conquest, though the ultimate ownership remained in the King's hands. Until about the year 1250 their Steyning possessions were administered by three or four canons. Although, at the end of that period, **Nicholas de Plumpton** is described as having the 'cure of souls' it is not known whether he or the other canons performed the role of parish priest.

This is the period in which Fécamp's money supported the building of the church. The nave from that time largely survives but the original chancel, the transepts and the central tower have gone.

c.1250-1337

In the years between 1250 and 1337 the Abbot of Fécamp will have appointed the vicars for Steyning. The abbot's records for these appointments do not survive but mention is made of at least some of the men who became vicars. We have discovered their names from other documents, such as court records:

William—Roger de Wole—Ralph—Robert Beneit—Ranulph Lessorle

1337-1402

In 1337 England went to war with France – the start of the 100 Years' War – and the Crown reclaimed the proceeds and rights of manors which were in the hands of French monasteries and abbeys such as Fécamp. One of those rights was to select the men deemed to be suitable to become vicars of Steyning. All of the names which were submitted (or 'presented') were recorded in the Patent Rolls. Although, for one reason or another, not all the men presented to the vicarage of Steyning actually took up the position being offered to them, we believe that, with the exception of one eight-year gap between 1401 and 1409, our list for this period of those who did become our vicars is more-or-less complete:

**William de Thame—John Erel—William de Whattele—
William Eliot—John Abbe—William Pinner**

1402-1444

In 1402 Henry IV gave all the possessions and rights of manors previously held by the Abbey of Fécamp to his brother-in-law, John Cornwall. In 1414 a proviso was added that, on his death (in December 1443), they would all pass to his newly founded Abbey of Syon. During this period the presentations to the vicarage of Steyning continued to be recorded in the Patent Rolls. In these 42 years Steyning enjoyed the services of twelve different vicars:

**Thomas Barker—William Tanfeld—Nicholas Clerk—Henry Tournour—
William Nutfeld—John Cook—William Ragdale—Richard Papy—
Henry More—William Potter—William Yerdeley—William Pynder**

It was during this century that the South Porch was built. It provided protection for the 12th century South door, which is still in use.

1444-1539

Following the death of John Cornwall, the Abbey of Syon – in 1444 – had its rights to the possessions and privileges of the lands which once belonged to the Abbey of Fécamp, confirmed. Amongst those rights the advowson (the right to select the vicar) for the vicarage of Steyning was specifically mentioned. For the next 95 years, until the dissolution of the monasteries – which, for Syon, was completed in 1539 – they retained those rights and, presumably, exercised them. We say ‘presumably’ because we have been unable to track down any Syon archives recording appointments to the vicarage of Steyning. For vicars during these years we have been able to identify only two, through their being named as overseers to wills:

Robert Marchall—John Hobson

1539-1605

Following Henry VIII’s manoeuvring to divorce Catherine of Aragon the reformed Church of England was established, separated from the Church of Rome and with Henry himself as its head. Thereafter, with the Abbey of Syon having lost all its rights and property by 1539, the vicars of Steyning were appointed by laymen who acquired or inherited the advowson to the vicarage of Steyning.

Those appointed during the reigns of the Tudor monarchs would have had to contend with the vicissitudes of the official line on Christian worship. **Richard Calver** was appointed during the last days of the reign of Henry VIII, and continued throughout the reign of Edward VI, so he must have been content with the more extreme Protestantism of the young King. To what extent the people of Steyning moved with the official line we do not know.

Within a year of Catholic Queen Mary’s accession Steyning had a new vicar, **William Stoderd**, who was, presumably, an adherent of the ‘Roman’ faith. No doubt he would have reverted to conducting the services in Latin – as would his two successors. Maybe it was Stoderd who preached hell and damnation at John Launder’s burning on Chantry Green in 1555.

John Banckes provided stability as vicar of Steyning for all but four years of Elizabeth’s reign. He oversaw the introduction of new parish registers and possibly a new English Bible – although how he viewed the competing theologies is not known.

We do know, however, that **Stephen Vinall**, who succeeded him, was a card-carrying Puritan who was one of four Sussex vicars to be deprived of their benefices because of their views, in 1605.

The six Tudor vicars were:

**Richard Calver—William Stoderd—John Brykenden—
Stephen Grene—John Banckes—Stephen Vinall**

It is in this period that, without financial support from the Abbey of Syon, without the fundraising associated with a variety of saints’ days and with a reduction in legacies targeted on the maintenance of the fabric, the tower and the chancel fell into ‘decay and ruin’. During the incumbency of John Banckes money was raised for the rebuilding of the tower. It, together with a steeple to top it off, was rebuilt at the west end of the church during the early years of the 17th century.

1605-1656

The distinctions between competing interpretations of the Christian faith continued to be a matter of often fierce debate and action during much of the Stuart century though, as always, it is difficult to distinguish between the national arguments and what was happening in people's lives.

Jonas Michael, who succeeded Vinall, was a lawfully authorised public preacher and must have been more moderate in his views than the deprived Puritan, Vinall. His entries in the church book suggest that he was a gentle soul and it was in his time that the grand King James Bible was published, but we have no exact understanding of his theology. He did, though, present to the church courts for judgement those Catholics, such as Sir John Leedes of Wappingthorne, who failed to attend communion.

His successor, **Leonard Stalman**, was vicar for 13 turbulent years as Charles I and Archbishop Laud attempted to turn the clock back in the face of a rising tide of Puritanism, whilst England descended into civil war. At the end of his time all parishes were required to get their parishioners to sign up to a Protestation in which they pledged their support for the 'true Reformed Protestant Religion' and railed against 'Popery'. We are told that 205 Steyning men over the age of 18 did so and that 'none have refused'.

Some of these men must have held extreme views because, on Stalman's death in 1643, they did not wait for the usual procedure for the selection of a new vicar; instead, an anabaptist hatter of Steyning appointed **Robert Child**, a coachman, as their unofficial 'vicar'. The flavour of the man can be judged from the fact that he immediately promoted the 'Solemn League and Covenant' which had the intention of abolishing all bishops. Although it got fewer signatures than the 'Protestation' two years before, he continued as Steyning's 'vicar' for 13 years so must have had considerable support from the community. He discarded the Prayer Book for the 'Directory of Public Worship' and destroyed the communion rails. In 1656, four years before the Restoration of Charles II to the throne, he and his family left for Ireland. Why, is not known. Maybe he had outlived his welcome in Steyning. On the other hand, he may have felt that Oliver Cromwell's conquest of Ireland, with draconian laws having been introduced to suppress the Catholics, provided him with new opportunities.

Jonas Michael—Leonard Stalman—Robert Child

1656-1702

Within ten years of Robert Child's departure dissenting nonconformity had become the subject of tight restriction. The vicars who followed were conventionally presented by their patrons and inducted by the bishop of Chichester. It was a period which saw the resurgence of the Church of England, but our vicars still had to live through tense times. The 'threat' of popery was real in people's minds, particularly after the revocation of religious tolerance for French Huguenots in 1685, even though the number of Catholics was small and indeed, in a census of 1676, none were found in Steyning. With the Glorious Revolution and the Act of Tolerance of 1689 worship became easier. It probably suited the vicar at the time, **Joseph Proude**, who would appear to have been a man of unenthusiastic piety who rarely wrote in the Church Book, and was even suspended for a year in 1691.

Charles Blackwell—Richard Vaughan—Joseph Proude

The churchwardens' accounts, which survive from a scatter of years in the 17th century, show what was being spent on the repair of the church – new bell ropes, replacement window glass, shingles for the steeple and timber for seating.

1702-1790

The first half of the 18th century was a period of contentious patronage for Steyning's vicars. **John Mathewes**, a Steyning schoolmaster, was only chosen after disagreements as to who had the right of advowson for Steyning. His patron, James St Amand, won the day on that occasion and St Amand's great nephew, Robert Hesketh, who inherited the patronage, played an interesting part in the choice of the next two vicars. In 1745, when Mathewes died, Hesketh was not yet 21, so his guardians lined up **John Gray**, the curate in Hesketh's home town, to be vicar here on the understanding that he should only serve for six years and should then vacate his incumbency. If he failed in this bargain, he was to pay Hesketh £5,000 (something like £1 million today). Gray stayed on and Hesketh went to court to claim the money. As he was already offering the position in exchange for money, a thing which the court did not approve of, he did not get his £5,000 though he did get rid of Gray. What **John Hoper**, the next vicar, paid Hesketh, if anything, is not known.

John Mathewes—John Gray—John Hoper

It was during the incumbency of John Mathewes that the steeple was removed from the tower.

1790-1840

By 1790 the advowson for Steyning was in the hands of Sir John Honeywood who owned substantial properties in Steyning through which he could also significantly influence the choice of its parliamentary candidates. He and the Duke of Norfolk vied for control. His first choice of vicar, **Thomas Winstanley**, was very much an interim appointment. He was a scholarly man whose interests and time were principally directed to a position he held at the University of Oxford. After two years he was succeeded by **John Penfold** – previously an apothecary and man midwife – who had social aspirations. He became Chaplain to the Duke of Sussex, sometimes entertaining him and other members of the nobility to games of cards at the vicarage. In 1808, he added the Rectorship of Pyecombe to his sphere of influence and, soon after, became a prominent member of the '*Steyning Society for the Protection of Property and the Prosecution of Thieves*'. Throughout the 18th and 19th centuries, there is a sense that the vicars felt that they had an entitlement to their positions. By 1797 the advowson had been sold to the 11th Duke of Norfolk but, as Mr Penfold was already in post and the Duke died in 1815, he did not present any parsons.

Thomas Winstanley—John Penfold

During John Penfold's time as incumbent the chancel, with its new east window, was remodelled. He was also the man responsible for adding the galleries above both the south and north aisles, additions which were soon being roundly condemned and which were subsequently removed in 1906.

1840-1918

This period was occupied by only two vicars and it was the Marquess of Bristol who had acquired the right to present from a later Duke in 1840 he presented **Thomas Medland**, who remained Vicar for 42 years. One of Mr Medland's first actions was to rescue the twelfth century font from a corner of the churchyard and get a base made for it in the Wiston Estate workshop – both font and base are still in use today. Mr Medland was one of a new breed of keen parson antiquaries. He wrote an article 'Notices of the Early History of Steyning Church' published in 1852 by the newly founded Sussex Archaeological Society. He was also responsible for the provision of the lychgate in 1856. We owe him our gratitude for preserving the church when it became apparent that the chancel arch and other areas were in danger of collapse. An architect, Gordon Hills, was recruited and he carried out a comprehensive restoration including reconstructing the crossing arches and providing

buttresses to support the crossing. By 1878 Mr Medland was celebrating the Holy Communion three times a month which, it could be argued, was quite advanced in churchmanship terms at that time. In 1870 the Benefice income was estimated at £450-£500 pa (around £60,000 in today's money).

In 1881, just before Mr Medland died, Mr CT Congreve bought the advowson and his son in law, **Arthur Congreve-Pridgeon**, became our vicar. We must be grateful to Mr Congreve-Pridgeon because it was on his watch that the galleries, which disfigured the Church from 1832-1907, were demolished and there is a memorial on the south aisle wall of the Church recording his achievement.

When Mr Congreve died the advowson passed to his daughter, Mrs Congreve-Pridgeon who acquired the right to present her husband's successor. When he died in 1918 the advowson was given to an evangelical trust set up to hold advowsons, the Martyrs Memorial Trust. The Church of England made it illegal to sell advowsons in 1933.

Thomas Medland—Arthur Congreve-Pridgeon.

1919-1945

Our next vicar, **Ernest Cox**, has left a remarkable contribution to the history of the Church and the town of Steyning. From 1921 to 1939 he published a carefully researched article in the parish magazine almost every month, several of them about our Vicars, and we have benefited from this in the compilation of the List. With the arrival of the Revd Mr Cox, Mr Medland's frequent services of Holy Communion was somewhat watered down with sung matins becoming the main Sunday service.

1946 TO DATE

We'll leave this background history at this point, only recording an interesting incident in 1984. When Roy Boff resigned the benefice in 1984, the four churchwardens of Steyning and Ashurst crossed swords with Martyrs Memorial Trust (MMT) about the next appointment. They wrote to the Diocesan Bishop complaining that MMT 'had chosen to ignore most of our needs and traditions' and that 'the churchmanship of their [MMT] men did not coincide with what we needed ... at St Andrew's.' The stand-off resulted in **Peter Burch**, who was acceptable to both parties, being appointed. The same problem occurred with MMT when Peter Burch resigned in 1994. The churchwardens refused to endorse every MMT candidate sent for interview until, after nine months, the appointment by law lapsed to the Archbishop of Canterbury. After a vacancy of eighteen months the Archbishop appointed **Dr Paul Rampton** who came on the understanding that the Eucharist would become the main Sunday morning service and, from his first Sunday, he wore Eucharistic vestments.

To prevent the same problems happening at the next vacancy, the Parochial Church Councils of Steyning and Ashurst (the neighbouring parish to the north, who had shared an incumbent since the end of the Second World War) decided to petition the Diocesan Bishop for an exchange of advowsons with a benefice under the patronage of the Bishop of Chichester which was of evangelical churchmanship and would welcome MMT as patron. In 2011 this was achieved when the benefice of St John, Southbourne, west of Chichester, agreed to an exchange, and both Steyning and Ashurst now have the diocesan bishop as patron.

October 2022

[Diocese of Chichester]

VICARS OF THE PARISH OF ST ANDREW & ST CUTHMAN IN STEYNING

1278	William	1433	Henry More	1749-56	John Gray
1293	Roger de Wole	1438	William Potter	1757-90	John Hoper
1325	Ralph	1439	William Yerdeley	1790-92	Thomas Winstanley
1336	Robert Beneit	1441	William Pynder	1792-1840	John Penfold
1337	Ranulf Lessorle	1477-85	Robert Marchall	1840-82	Thomas Medland
1349	William de Thame	1535	John Hobson	1882-1918	Arthur Congreve-Pridgeon
1350	John Erel de Stenyng	1543-53	Richard Calver	1919-45	Ernest Cox
1355	Simon de Whattele	1554-57	William Stoderd	1945-61	Ceredig Egerton-Williams
1360	William Eliot	1557	John Brykenden	1962-70	Richard Hare
1372	John Abbe	1557-9	Stephen Grene	1971-8	Maurice Garner
1385-1401	William Pymour	1559-99	John Banckes	1979-84	Roy Boff
1409	Thomas Barker	1599-1605	Stephen Vinall	1985-94	Peter Burch
1415	William Tanfeld	1605-30	Jonas Michael	1995-2012	Paul Rampton
1416	Nicholas Clerk	1630-43	Leonard Stalman	2014-16	Neil Roberts
1419	Henry Turnour	1644-56	Robert Child	2017-	Mark Heather
1420	William Nutfeld	1657-77	Charles Blackwell		
1422	John Cook	1677-83	Richard Vaughan		
1426	William Ragdale	1683-1701	Joseph Proude		
1426	Richard Papy	1702-45	John Mathewes		

*Remember your leaders, those who spoke to you the word of God.
Consider the outcome of their way of life, and imitate their faith. ♦ Hebrews 13:7*

[Note: Scripture verse is provisional. Title to include a reference to the diocese if space allows.]