

THE RECTOR OF BLETCHLEY, 1715-1727.

The Rev. Edward Wells, B.A., All Souls', Oxford, was Vicar of Corsham, co. Wilts, in 1665. He also became Vicar of Croscombe in the same county in succession to the Rev. Samuel Lanfire, who died in 1664. On 1st January, 1665, he married Elizabeth, daughter of the Rev. John Whiteborn, who had been Vicar of Croscombe, 1642-62, and been dispossessed by the Act of Uniformity, but continued to reside in his former parish.

On 27th December, 1667, was born Edward, the eldest, of the four sons of the Rev. Edward and Elizabeth Wells. He was educated at Westminster from 1680 to 1686, when he went to Christ Church, Oxford. He graduated B.A. 1690, M.A. 1693, and B.D. and D.D. by accumulation in 1704. He became Rector of Cotesbach, co. Leicester, in 1702.

In January, 1715, the universally esteemed Rector of Bletchley, the Rev. Matthew Disney, died suddenly in his study, being found dead on his knees in the attitude of prayer. He was one of the guardians of the young Browne Willis, lord of the manor and patron of the living.

Dr. Browne Willis now made the first of the many presentations, six in all, which he made to Bletchley Rectory. He is said to have been, at Oxford, a pupil of the Rev. Dr. Wells. The offer to the old tutor was made in a letter beginning-, " Your wearing your own hair is a circumstance so very agreeable to me, that it has determined me to offer you the living, etc." Dr. B. Willis wore a wig himself, but would not suffer anyone about him to do so, and subsequently Dr. Wells took to wearing one.

During the previous ten years Browne Willis had restored Bletchley Church, adorned it, provided a ring of bells, etc., at a cost of £1,300 or more, so doubtless out of compliment to his patron the recently-appointed rector wrote the book, "The Rich Man's great and indispensable duty to contribute liberally to the build-

ing, re-building, repairing, beautifying, and adorning of churches," published in 1717. This book had the rare distinction of being re-printed at Oxford in 1840, with an introduction by Cardinal Newman.

The affable stage of compliments was of very short duration; relations were soon strained; the masterful patron and perhaps difficult rector each lacked tact. Browne Willis's actions were ill-natured, or even spiteful. Having visited Wells at his Cotesbach Rectory and been entertained at dinner on bacon and beans, the patron resented the homely fare as a slight to his dignity. The morning after Wells returned to Bletchley a messenger called at the Rectory from the Squire of Whaddon Hall, enquired after the Rector's health, and left a present of beans. The next day the same enquiry and beans appeared, and on the third day, and so *ad nauseam*. Again, after dining at Whaddon Hall, on his way home the Rector found all the gates and stiles he had to negotiate fouled with fresh cow manure, done by order of his host. It is not very surprising that the persecuted Rector took advantage of the pulpit, and there let himself go in a manner which Nicholls, in "Literary Anecdotes," severely, and possibly unfairly, records thus: "To mark out by slander his benefactor, the very man who by mistake, in an uncommon manner, gave him the stand and opportunity of his behaviour."

Browne Willis replied in a tract called ".Reflecting sermons considered occasioned by several discourses delivered in the Parish Church, of Bletchley." This was publishing the local quarrel in a wider world; one can hardly suppose that in those days a mere squabble would be known very far away unless deliberately spread with malicious intent, as was designed by the tract. The rapidity of development of the quarrel and the intensity of its bitterness can be estimated from the "Humble Representation" made to the Bishop within two years of Dr. Wells's presentation to Bletchley. The document contains intrinsic evidence that it was drawn up and the ecclesiastical charges formulated by someone of more literary skill and knowledge than the churchwardens, or any

parishioner of a parish like Bletchley, would be likely to possess. It is evident that Dr. Browne Willis early repented judging the suitability of a rector by the fashion of his coiffure. Anyhow, Dr. Edward Wells continued in his incumbency.

The document is extracted from Tanner MS.

MS. TANNER 130, FOL. 73.

To the Rt. Revd. Father in God Edmund by Divine permission Lord Bishop of Lincoln

The Humble Representation of y^e Church Wardens and other Inhabitants of the Parish of Bleachley in. y^e County of Bucks and Diocess of Lincoln.

Most Humbly Sheweth

That Mr. Edw: Wells was constituted curate of the abovesaid parish of Bleachley at y^e Visitation held at Newport Pagnell in y^e s^d co : of Bucks in August 1717 at which time and place he gave (by his abusive Language to one of the Parishioners and Challenging to fight him) a certain omen of what we have to our no small concern felt.

Therefore we humbly hope that what is here alleged against him may be good Cause for your Lordships Removal of him from the said Curacy and your choosing and placing another therein worthy of this Important Charge who shall Discharge his Duty and Augment our diminished Congregation.

That he the said Edw: Wells as we humbly Conceive is unworthy of the Office of Curate of Bleachley aforesaid is Evident from what we shall here submit to y^f most consummate Wisdom viz.

That last Christmas Day on his return from y^e Church after Evening prayers without any regard to his function or y^e Sacred Office of administering the Sacrament which he had that Day performed wth out the least provocation he beat a Decrepid Beggar for asking of him Alms and to put a Gloss upon this his uncharitable Act Committed him to the charge of the Constable whom he Oblig'd the next Day to Convey the said Beggar before a Justice of the peace and neglected Divine Service attending in person the said Justice.

That he severall times has Omitted reading Divine Service on Days prescribed by y^e Rubrick such as Wednesdays and Frydays in Lent 5 Nov^r the two last Holy Days etc. that he Admitts persons of an Irregular Life and Conversation to stand Godfathers to Children such as have not receiv'd the Sacrament and particularly on(e) who has not been baptiz'd and who within less than these four years frequented Quakers Meetings and others who neglect coming to Church.

That he is very negligent in visiting y^e sick and not long since he Administer'd the Holy Eucharist in an ancient person of about 70 (who had never before received it) without any preinstruction and never Anttended her afterwards during her Illness That Malice is his inseparable Companion appears by his presenting at the last Visitation a Man for not taking the Sacrament on Easter Day last because he himself was presented for Misdemeanours.

That he is also guilty of many absurd and Un-generous Actions with an Account of which we shall not trouble your honour submitting what has been here represented to your great Judgement Witness our hands this Day of _____ in y^e Year of Our Lord God 1718.

In 1710 Dr. Wells had published a sermon preached by him in St. Martin's Church, Leicester: "The duty of being grieved for the sins of others." If we give credit to the charges made against him, it looks as if grief for his own lapses from grace left him but little time for spiritual altruism.

In 1724 Dr. Browne Willis started building a church at Fenny Stratford, and forming that "endship" into an ecclesiastical parish independent of Bletchley; for this purpose a monetary subscription and other forfeitures were extracted from the unwilling Wells. That Browne Willis wrote complaints of the Rector to his friends is shown by the following extracts from a letter written by Bishop Tanner, 16 Nov., 1724, "You declared your mind so fully to Dr. Wells about this affair when you gave him the living, he should now make no scruple of generously coming into all

measures unless his narrow soul be afraid of hurting his pocket." And again: "I can't tell what pretences of unavoidable necessity by reason of weakness of limbs, lowness of voice, or some other cause might be urged in excuse of Dr. W's. irregularity in sitting and preaching in a chair; but sure it could be no fault for youto present the dilapidations of the rectory house."

The vigilant patron evidently made residence at Bletchley so uncomfortable that Dr. Wells spent most of his time at his Cotesbach parish; here he died 11th July, 1727, and was buried. He was a man of the most varied learning and a voluminous writer. He was esteemed as the most accurate geographer of his time; he wrote many books on the subject and on Biblical geography, also works on mathematics and arithmetic. His works on Divinity included an answer to Dr. S. Clarke's Scripture doctrine of the Trinity in 1713. Other books are "Exposition of the Catechism," "Unworthiness no excuse for not coming to the Sacrament," "How to give religious instruction to children," "The duty of decent and reverent behaviour in Church," etc. On the armorial ceiling at Fenny Stratford he is represented by an open Bible on a shield; the design is not armorial, for apparently he was not heraldically "generosus." In Foster's "Alumni" his father is described as "pleb."

At his death he left his property to his nephews, the sons of his brother John. One of these, the Rev. Edward Wells, was curate at Bletchley, 1718-27, and had an only son, Edward, who kept a grocer's shop at Water Eaton; in the register he is described as farmer and gentleman, and sometimes as "Mr." He married Sarah, daughter of Thomas Cooke, a small farmer, and had a family. The Rev. Edward Wells laid aside his cassock and turned physician; his younger brother, John—who married Mary, daughter of the Rev. William Cawne, the Rector of Wavendon—then became curate of Bletchley. There are no descendants now in Bletchley of this family.

WILLIAM BRADBROOKE.