

The Advowson and Rectory Manor of Compton Dando

The advowson or right to appoint the incumbent to the benefice of Compton Dando was originally vested in the landowners who had founded the parish church and endowed it with the lands which made up the rectory manor. After the Norman Conquest the advowson passed to the D'Alno family and in 1304 was acquired by Bath abbey. Successive bishops of Bath & Wells were the titular abbots of Bath abbey which was presided over by priors. They gave their name to Priory Farm in Compton Dando, Stanton Prior and Priston, and the abbey acquired many other manors and advowsons in the district. Records of presentations of incumbents of Compton Dando by the abbey begin with William de Compton in 1318. Thereafter regular presentations were made by the Prior and Convent of Bath to the bishops who duly instituted the incumbents. The bishops' Registers show the succession of vicars instituted to the benefice. Few remained there long; for example, between 1465 and 1490 Bishop Robert Stillington instituted six vicars, each staying on average less than five years. The last presentation made by Bath abbey was of Edward Brooke, who was instituted by Master John Penande, vicar-general of the bishop, on 25 February 1528. In 1539 the abbey was suppressed by Henry VIII's commissioners and all its property, the annual income of some £700 which had supported the prayers of the prior and 15 monks, together with numerous advowsons, was confiscated by the Crown. A remarkable exception in Compton Dando was the property which was acquired by the church estate trust for the maintenance of the parish church. No doubt this was accomplished through the influence of Edward Brooke with his relative Sir David Brooke, Lord Chief Justice of the Exchequer, who was one of the royal commissioners for the suppression of Bath abbey. Edward Brooke accepted all the religious changes of Henry VIII's last years, but having married during the permissive regime under Edward VI, he was obliged to resign when Mary restored Catholicism in 1553. His successor was Roger Nicholles, who was instituted by the bishop of Bath & Wells on 12 November 1554. The advowson now belonged to the Crown, and Nicholles was presented to the bishop by King Philip and Queen Mary. The Crown retained the patronage of Compton Dando throughout the reigns of Queen Elizabeth and James I, but as part of Charles I's religious policy it was given to the bishops of Bath & Wells in 1638. On 23 March 1638 Francis Standish was both presented and instituted by Bishop William Piers, and successive bishops have retained the advowson ever since.

Compton Dando was a well-endowed rectory manor and was frequently held by non-resident and pluralist rectors who appointed curates to perform the duties within the parish for a modest stipend. The Glebe Terrier of 1623 lists the property which consisted of the parsonage house, outhouses and barns, the churchyard and 1 1/2 acres adjoining, a meadow by the river close to the mill, 35 acres of land in the North and South fields and at Tucking Mill, together with all the tithes in the parish. It is clear from the probate inventory of the vicar, John Newman, who died in 1664 aged 40, that much of his time was devoted to farming. As well as his glebe farm, he leased by copyhold from Sir Hugh Smyth an additional seven acres of meadow, 10 acres of arable and pasture, together with access to common grazing on Compton Common for 6s 5d per annum plus two capons or 3s 4d. Of his modest wealth of £155 2s 6d, half was accounted for by his livestock and farming equipment. The bishops of

Bath & Wells regularly leased the tithes of Compton Dando worth about £100 a year by copyhold tenure for a large fine and small annual rent. In 1627 they were leased to Thomas Milner who was the incumbent of Corston. He sub-let the lease to Jerome Harvey of Hunstrete in 1635 for £250 and an annual rent of 40s. This lease was witnessed by John Locke of Belluton, whose son was the famous philosopher, and by John Flower, John Davies, Richard Court and Nicholas Court. Immediately after the signing of the lease, Thomas Milner, 'in his owne person did enter into the Chancell of the Parish Church of Compton Dando and then and there did deliver the full and peaceable possession and seizin of all and singular the premises to Jerome Harvey'. Later the lease was acquired by Hugh Smyth of Ashton Court and then by successive members of the Popham family who also held the main manor of Compton Dando. The lease gave the right to collect the tithes of corn and hay, whereas the vicar had the more difficult task of collecting the tithe on livestock, milk, eggs and garden produce.

Many incumbents continued to be non-resident throughout the 18th century, although agricultural improvements and the steep rise in the price of farm produce meant that the income from tithes increased greatly. Accordingly the benefice became much more valuable, and the benefits of Queen Anne's Bounty and the easy mortgage terms available made it possible to rebuild the parsonage house on a much grander scale during the years 1848-50. In 1664 John Newman's small thatched-roof parsonage house consisted of 4 ground floor rooms and three bedrooms, while by 1851 the Revd Wilson Pedder could find in his new house accommodation for himself, his wife, four daughters, a nursemaid and three servants. John Newman had been involved in the daily management of his glebe farm and dairy, but Wilson Pedder had leased the land and was only concerned with the church services and the spiritual welfare of the 384 inhabitants of the parish. He was also involved in the long negotiation with the *National Society for Promoting the Education of the Poor in the Principles of the Established Church* which led foundation of the school in 1857. The Ecclesiastical Census of 1851 showed that the church had 40 free seats or benches, while 75 pews were rented and were therefore private. Wilson Pedder refused to reveal how many of his parishioners attended church on the Census Sunday. Until the late 20th century, the presentation and institution of each new incumbent was entirely a matter for the patron and the bishop. Any thought of consulting the parishioners would never have been considered and would have been thought quite unnecessary. For the parishioners therefore, the suitability of each new incumbent was a lottery. This was well summed up by Reuben Dewey, the leader of the village band and choir at Mellstock, in Thomas Hardy's novel *Under the Greenwood Tree*, published in 1872:

‘Your parson comes by fate: ‘tis heads or tails,
Like pitch-penny, and no choosing’.

Joseph Bettey