

## **Compton Dando Easter Vestry Book 1831-1973**

The parish vestry was the principal instrument for the government of each parish. Originally it had been concerned mainly with ecclesiastical matters, but from the Tudor period more and more secular duties were heaped on the parish officials. The parish officers, including the churchwardens, constables, overseers of the poor and surveyors of the highways (waywardens) were all elected or appointed at the Easter vestry. Their operations were financed through rates imposed on householders, and it was generally the substantial landowners and major rate-payers who attended the vestry meetings. The minutes therefore provide complete lists of the principal residents as well as of successive churchwardens and other parish officers. Parishes continued to be governed by these officials until the transformation of the system by the Parish Councils Act of 1894 which created a secular system of local government. Earlier a major part of the responsibility of each parish for the care of the poor had been removed by the Poor Law Amendment Act of 1834 which introduced a system of workhouses based on the union of several parishes.

The Compton Dando Vestry Minute Book provides good evidence of the changes in parochial government during the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. The early part of the book is taken up by the careful record of payments to the poor, sick and destitute in the parish. This provides dramatic evidence of the scale of poverty and unemployment in the parish in the two decades after the end of the Napoleonic War. In 1832 the Overseers paid regular relief ranging from 1s 6d to 3s 0d per week to twelve families in the parish and gave occasional sums to some 18 others, so that of a total population of about 300, a total of 30+ were in receipt of poor relief. Details are included of payments for all sorts of purposes and problems. Many of those named would have had dependants, so that the total number living in poverty within the parish would have been even greater. Money was provided for the care of children, house rent, clothing, footwear, nursing care, midwifery and the costs of paupers' funerals. There are references to the Poor House in Cocker's Hill which could provide temporary accommodation for families in occasional cases of complete homelessness. The Overseers who administered the system were paid £10 per annum for their work, and the Churchwardens received £8 8s 0d which included payments they made to men who caught vermin in the parish. The rates levied in the parish in 1832 produced £182 12s 9d and the Overseers distributed £166 10s 8d. In 1834 the Poor Law Union Workhouse was established in Keynsham and the poor had to submit to the harsh discipline there if they were to obtain relief.

After 1834 the Minutes of the Vestry Meetings are almost entirely concerned with the church and provide a more formal account of the appointment of churchwardens and other parish officials, although with few details. During the 1850s the energetic vicar, the Revd Wilson Pedder, evidently took a major part in parish affairs and was chairman of the Vestry. In 1856 there are references to the costs of building the new parochial school. During the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century the accounts of the Feoffees of the Church Estate were laid before the Vestry and there are regular requests for the Feoffees to provide money for the church fabric, the maintenance of the school, care of the churchyard and the relief of exceptional poverty. In 1870 it is noted that there was an outbreak of 'scarletina' in the parish and that five children had died. There was also a collection for the French who had been invaded by the Prussian army and for the relief of the grievous suffering caused by the siege of Paris.

In 1871 Hymns Ancient & Modern which had been published in 1861 was introduced in the church. Sadly, this meant the end of Tate & Brady's metrical version of the Psalms and the splendid tunes which accompanied them. The new hymns were soon followed by a choir in the chancel and by the introduction of an organ. In 1873 the Feoffees paid £73 for the construction of arches from the north aisle into the vestry and from the chancel into the vestry 'for placing better the organ'.

A new stained glass window was installed by the Feoffees in the south wall in 1871. It was made by Powell and Sons of Whitefriars Glass Works and cost £25. Overseers of the Poor continued to be appointed and in 1873 the salary was increased to £12 because rates had to be collected quarterly for Keynsham Union. Rates were also levied in support of the school. Most of the Vestry business during the later 19<sup>th</sup> century was purely formal. In 1906 major alterations were made to the chancel costing £447 10s 0d. It was also agreed to extend the churchyard, although this was not done until 1924. There was concern over the conduct of young men in the church and the ringers were threatened with legal action if their behaviour did not improve. During the Great War it was difficult to find men to act as bearers at funerals and in 1916 the provision of a wheeled bier was proposed. The proposal was still being discussed in 1937. The bells were re-hung with a new treble bell in 1930. Electric lighting was installed in 1945 and the new east window in 1963. Changes in church life are reflected in references to sidesmen, harvest festivals, a girls' choir, regular collections at services and annual outings for the choir and ringers.

Later meetings were largely confined to the appointment of officers, but they continued to provide an invaluable record of local people and families who were active in the life of the church.

J. Betty