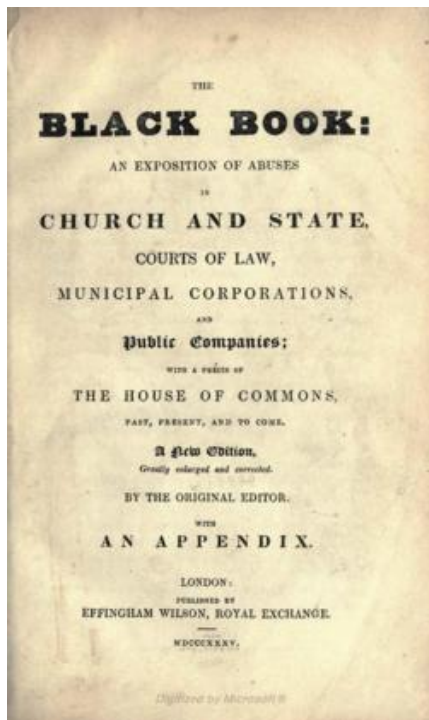


The Notorious Rector of Wheathampstead and his Unfortunate Curate

Corruption Unmasked

In the worldly Anglican church of the 19th century, pluralism, the practice of holding more than one ecclesiastical office at a time, was common. George Thomas Pretymen, the Rector of Wheathampstead-cum-Harpenden from 1814 until 1859, was a member of a family notorious for its pluralism. His father, George Pretymen Tomalin, Bishop of Lincoln and then Bishop of Winchester



and confidant of William Pitt the Younger, had few qualms about acquiring wealth out of the revenues of the church and using his influence to advance members of his family.¹ Only clergymen who gained influential patronage had any chance of advancement or affluence and he provided each of his three sons with posts carrying sizeable livings, as well as cathedral appointments.

In 1835 they all merited special entries in the Appendix of *The Black Book: or Corruption Unmasked, An Exposition of Abuses in Church and State*.² Even at a time when pluralism was rife, what marks out the Pretymen family was the

ruthlessness of their pursuit of personal gain.³

In addition to being Rector of Wheathampstead, George Thomas Pretymen was Vicar of Chalfont St Giles, Chancellor of Lincoln, Canon of Winchester and Prebendary of Westminster. His income amounted to £1,697 (equivalent to

¹ G M Ditchfield, 'Sir George Pretymen Tomline' *Oxford National Biography*, OUP 2004, online edition 2010.

² John Wade, *The Black Book: or Corruption Unmasked, An Appendix* (1835) p 27.

³ Dorothy Owen, *A History of Lincoln Minster* (1994) p 225.

about £80,000 per annum at today's values),⁴ excluding his lucrative cathedral appointments.



The Deanery, 11 Minster Yard, Lincoln

During his incumbency in Wheathampstead he built himself a comfortable new rectory, and employed twelve servants when he was in the village.⁵ As Chancellor of Lincoln he also took up residence at 11 Minster Yard, Lincoln, during the winter, where six servants, two footmen, a coachman and groom were in attendance.⁶

His personal ministrations at St Helen's were rare and over the years there were numerous outraged articles in the national press about him, such as this bitterly sarcastic comment under the heading 'Ecclesiastical Problems':

His direct revenues, his shares in the honey-falls of lease renewals, his numerous impropriations of great tithes, his mansions and other creature-comforts, with his exemption from all share of fatiguing labour as a clergyman, are, doubtless, most appropriate and just rewards for his singular piety.⁷

On a practical level, his annual visits to his parish in Chalfont St Giles were greeted with scorn:

The Rev George Thomas Pretyma, son of the Bishop, held the living in Chalfont from 1840 until 1859 without ever residing and when he came to visit once a year the people hissed him and the congregation got up and left the church.⁸

⁴ National Archives, Currency Converter.

⁵ Ancestry.com. *1841 England Census*.

⁶ Canon Owen W Davys, *A Long Life's Journey*, p 58; Ancestry.com *1851 England Census*.

⁷ *The Lincoln, Rutland & Stamford Mercury*, 6 April 1838, BL 19th Century British Newspapers.

⁸ Diaries of Rev Pownoll W Phipps, Vicar of Chalfont St Giles, Vol 3, p 79 (1886).

Pretyman's First Curate

George Pretyman's first curate in Wheathampstead was Rev Joseph Douton. The son of an auctioneer and gentleman, Douton matriculated from Hertford College, Oxford in 1810.⁹ His first appointment was at St Mary's Chapel in Luton and he was licensed in 1814, arriving in Wheathampstead at about the same time that George Pretyman took over the parish. They were of similar age and academic qualifications but their life-styles were very different. Joseph Douton's stipend was £100 a year (about £4,000 today), with 'surplice fees' for baptisms, weddings, and funerals.¹⁰ In 1818 he married Georgiana Wade in Harpenden¹¹ and their son, Charles Douton, was baptised at St Helen's in 1822.¹² They lived in rented accommodation in the village at £50 a year and, in common with many curates at that time, Joseph Douton supplemented his stipend by teaching.¹³ By 1826 he was the proprietor of a 'gentleman's boarding school' in the village on the site of Wheathampstead House.¹⁴ In 1836 *The County Press* reported a fire in a shed on the school premises:

Two pupils of Rev Mr Doulton (sic) had been playing with a small cannon near the shed, and upon one of them discharging it, the match was blown from his hand into the thatch, which immediately ignited.¹⁵

The duties of a curate on a meagre salary were often onerous, particularly if the incumbent was frequently absent. Curates hoping to acquire their own parish found it almost impossible without connections and Joseph Douton remained in Wheathampstead for 27 years.

Attempted Murder

Little is known about his long curacy but one dramatic incident caught the attention of the press and was reported in countless newspapers up and down the country. An error in the original report, repeated in all subsequent publications, gave his name as 'Rev Mr Dowton, the minister of

⁹ *Ancestry: Alumni Oxoniensis (1715 -1886)* vol 1.

¹⁰ Clergy of the Church of England Database, 1540 and 1835: CCEd, Clergydatabase.org.uk.persons.

¹¹ *Country Chronicle*, 18 April 1818, p 4; *Ancestry*, Selected Marriages, 1538 -1973.

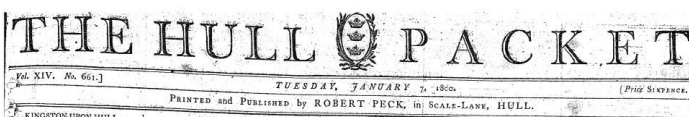
¹² *Ancestry*, England Births and Christenings, 1538-1975.

¹³ *Ancestry*, UK Poll Book & Electoral Registers, 1832.

¹⁴ County Directories of 1826 & 1839.

¹⁵ Quoted in *Wheathampstead and Harpenden*, VI The Schools (WEA 1976).

Withampstead', but the event took place in Gustard Wood and there is no doubt about his identity.¹⁶



A selection of the newspapers where the incident was reported

In 1838 James Wright, a retired butcher who lived there, made a desperate attempt to murder him and in 2002 James Wright's great, great, great grandson wrote this account of the incident and the final outcome of the trial at the County Assizes:

On 24th July 1838, James, extremely inebriated, sat in his cottage, armed with a pig knife, threatening to do dreadful things. His daughter, fearing the worst, ran out on to the Common and sought the assistance of the Rev Joseph Douton, who was passing by in his carriage. The Reverend, who was the curate of Wheathampstead, went to assist and was injured by the knife. Up before the magistrate, James was sentenced to 15 years' transportation. He spent some time in Hertford gaol but, following recommendations from the prison surgeon to the Chairman of the Board of Visiting Governors, was pardoned because of his age (72 years) and poor health. He died at Gustard Wood in 1846 at the age of 79 years. The case was fully reported in *The Hertford and Bedford Reformer* and the papers regarding his pardon are retained in the Public Record Office.¹⁷

Joseph Douton received a serious injury during the attack and Richard Webster, the surgeon from St Albans High Street who attended him, told the

¹⁶ *The Morning Chronicle*, 1 August 1838; *Freeman's Journal and Daily Commercial Advertiser*, 3 August 1838. and others in 19th Century British Newspapers.

¹⁷ Keith Wright, 'The Wright Family of Wheathampstead' (2002) Wheathampstead.net.

magistrate that if the stab wound had not struck a rib it would have proved fatal.¹⁸

Joseph Douton's long curacy in Wheathampstead came to an end in 1840, when he was presented with the living at Biggleswade in Bedfordshire, valued at £312 per annum, where he became the Rector of St Andrew's parish church. The following year his father, Jeremiah Douton, died and Joseph received a legacy from his will,¹⁹ giving him financial security for the future.

A Celebration Dinner

On New Year's Day in 1842 Joseph Douton was invited to return to Wheathampstead for a dinner held in his honour. Fifty church members assembled in the original National School building on The Hill and Charles H Lattimore spoke of the 'strong affection and unceasing regard' for him in the parish as 'husband, father, friend and pastor' during his 'arduous ministry' and emphasized his important work instructing the poor children in the village. Lattimore recalled some painful events, 'the dangers to your property by fire, to your valuable life from the attacks of illness and the murderous steel' but also many happier memories. The speech was greeted with cheers and Joseph Douton was presented with a massive silver centrepiece for his dining table. He responded that he was sad to leave but the parish at Biggleswade would enable him to spend his remaining days 'unfettered'.²⁰

In 1847 his son, Rev Charles Douton, joined him in Biggleswade as his Curate and Joseph Douton served there until his death in 1855.²¹

A Family Tragedy

In 1850, towards the end of George Pretyman's incumbency in Wheathampstead, a sad announcement appeared in the local press:

FATAL EVENT - It is our painful duty to record a most dreadful accident that befell the Rev George Pretyman, Vicar of Great Carlton, the eldest son of the Rev G T Pretyman, Chancellor of Lincoln and Rector of

¹⁸ *The Morning Chronicle*, 1 August 1838, British Newspaper Archive.

¹⁹ *Ancestry*, The National Archives, *Prerogative Court of Canterbury and Related Pr, and especially the family of the Rev W Smythobate Jurisdctions*: Will of Jeremiah Douton of Chipping Barnet, 5 Nov 1841, PROB 11/1953.

²⁰ *Herts Mercury and Reformer*, January 1842, British Newspaper Archive.

²¹ *Ancestry*, Oxford University Alumni, 1500- 1886.

Wheathampstead. On Saturday last, as he was passing through a hedge with a gun in his hand, its contents were unhappily lodged in his body and in a few seconds he was a corpse. The whole neighbourhood, by whom he was deservedly respected and beloved, are thrown into the utmost consternation and grief, and especially the family of Rev W Smyth of Elkington Hall, to whose daughter he was on the point of being united in matrimony; and it is awful to state that in the very week in which his marriage was to have taken place, will be the day of his funeral.²²

A Visitor's Impressions

In 1857, William George Thorpe, a barrister at the Middle Temple in London who was touring Hertfordshire, visited St Helen's Church in Wheathampstead, where he heard a sermon preached on 'the benefits, in a purely spiritual sense, of poverty.' He later wrote:

There were two liveried footmen in the Rectory servants' pews, looking in much better feather than the curate who had read the prayers: and the evident uneasiness of the very limited congregation induced me to ask particulars.²³

He discovered that the preacher was the notorious pluralist, Canon George Thomas Pretymen, whom he knew by reputation.

William George Thorpe added:

I don't think this gentleman rode to hounds like his brothers but he was a good shot and kept up a good head of pheasants. Meanwhile the curate of Wheathampstead did 11 months' duty, and received, so they told me on the spot, £80 a year (£3, 500 today). This was 1857.'

To George Pretymen's credit it should perhaps be said that in 1815, soon after his arrival in Wheathampstead, one of the first National Schools in the country was established on The Hill for the benefit of poor children in the village. But by the time he died in 1859 both the school and the church building of St Helen's were in a dilapidated condition and it was left to his successor, Rev

²² *Hertford Mercury and Reformer*, Saturday 13 April 1850, British Newspaper Archive.

²³ William George Thorpe, *Middle Temple Table Talk: with some talk about the Table itself* (1894), p 261.

Canon Owen Davys, to embark on a vast scheme of church restoration and to build a new school for the children of the village in Church Street.²⁴



The grave of Rev George Pretyman (died 23 June 1859)
and his wife Amelia (died 25 June 1867)
at St Helen's Church, Wheathampstead, Plot A
<http://www.hertsburialsandmemorials.org.uk/>

Dianne Payne 2016

²⁴ Ruth Jeavons, *St Helen's Church Wheathampstead: A brief history and guide* (2003).