

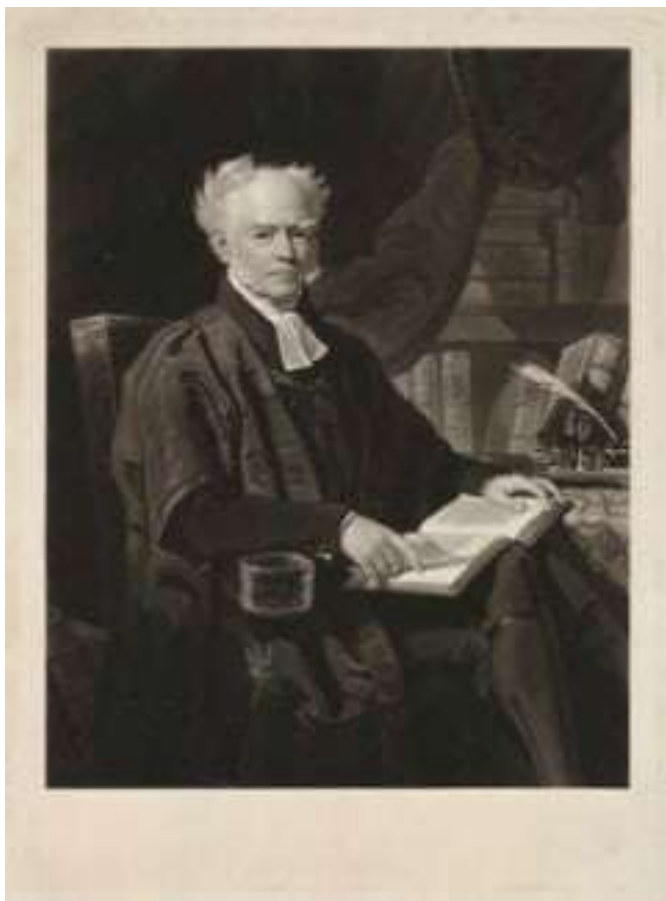
THEY MADE THEIR MARK**REV JOHN HEALEY BROMBY, VICAR OF HOLY TRINITY AND MASTER OF THE CHARTERHOUSE**

Image – National Portrait Gallery

The Reverend John Healey Bromby was probably the longest serving vicar ever in the Church of England, remaining in post for almost 70 years. Baptised on 15 November 1770 in Holy Trinity Church, he was the son of John Bromby, a Hull woollen merchant and was one of at least twelve of John's children to be baptised in Holy Trinity. Bromby attended Hull Grammar School where he was tutored by the headmaster and Holy Trinity lecturer, the Rev Joseph Milner. In 1788 he entered Sidney Sussex College, Cambridge, graduating with a BA in 1792 and a MA in 1795. He was ordained on 7th July 1793 in the chapel of Bishopthorpe Palace, the Archbishop of York's official residence, when he

was also appointed to the position of curate at Airmyn near Goole. A couple of years later he became curate at Walkington with a stipend of £30 and use of a house. In 1797 his old Headmaster, Milner, was appointed vicar of Holy Trinity but he seems to have been in poor health at the time and died in office after only a few months. His successor was John Healey Bromby who was 27 years of age when he was appointed. The next vicar after Bromby doesn't come along until 1867 - Bromby was in post for 70 years all but a few months. Just imagine doing the same job for 70 years!

Being vicar of Holy Trinity church though wasn't enough for Bromby. In 1821 he was also appointed vicar of St Swithun's at Cheswardine in Shropshire. Although there doesn't seem to be any evidence that he ever actually went there, this arrangement continued for around 45 years until 1867. Cheswardine provided him with an income of £295 plus a house, and in his absence he would have paid a curate to carry out his duties. After about 40 years in post he also became Chaplain to Hull Gaol.

Three times he was presented with testimonials of esteem by his parishioners.

On the third such occasion in 1849 they gave him a purse of 300 guineas as well as a silver inkstand inscribed with 'in love and veneration with which they regard him as a minister of religion and for their unfeigned esteem as a Christian, a scholar and a gentleman'. Bromby though, was also described as old-fashioned, a Tory and a high churchman. In responding to a questionnaire he once answered the question 'What Dissenting places of worship {in Hull} are there?' with 'Dissenting places of worship are numerous in the Town' and to 'Can you mention anything which specially impedes your own ministry or the welfare of the Church around you?' he wrote 'The long prevalence of dissent and the immensity of the work'. He also, he wrote, needed more 'labourers', both clerical and lay. He was a mere 94 years old at the time.

He didn't always see eye to eye with church officers, and there seems to have been particular tension with a churchwarden called Thomas Mitchell. The Hull Packet of 9th April 1847 carries a lengthy – and delightful! - article on a fractious parish meeting held to elect a churchwarden. Mitchell, who had held the post for 12 years, had declared his intention to resign, only to change his mind when he found he was likely to be replaced by one Thomas Feetam. According to the Packet this generated 'a good deal of excitement' with between 800 and 1000 people turning up to the meeting which 'had to be hurriedly transferred to the Town Hall.' (Imagine that number turning up to elect a churchwarden today!) Friction between Bromby and Mitchell is evident from the start, Bromby's opening remarks referring to 'painful misunderstandings' with Mitchell who, he felt, had 'interfered with matters properly in the vicar's province.' However he bore him no malice or ill will, and was 'quite ready to shake hands with him.' Mitchell was then duly proposed as parish churchwarden, to the accompaniment of 'cheers, hisses and groans.' Feetam was then proposed by a Mr A Bannister, who embarked on a lengthy character assassination of Mitchell. He had, he alleged, forbidden singers to attend services 'on pain of dismissal' with the result that the clergyman had had to lead the singing himself. He had refused to provide a carriage for the vicar, and when one was provided anyway ignored the bill. He had prevented the vicar attending a dinner at Beverley, whereupon Bromby returned to Hull to dine alone. ('Much disapprobation and loud cries of shame.') He must have needed some staying power to stick around for 70 years!

The famous lectern presented to the church by the copper merchants John and George Parker in 1847 marked Bromby's 50 years of service but if anyone saw that as a parting gift they were much mistaken. Bromby went on and on. At the age of 80 he was additionally elected to the Mastership of the Charterhouse in Hull (an alms house founded in the 14th Century which is still functioning today pretty much as it was well over 600 years ago.) He didn't retire into obscurity there either – the Charterhouse records show him as being a pretty active Master. Although he already held three livings, Bromby seems to have taken his role as Master seriously. When inmates were fined for damaging water closets he personally cancelled the order and produced a set of rules for the inmates, copies of which survive.

They seem rather tyrannical today, but were reasonable enough at the time. In May 1866 Bromby wrote to the Advisers pointing out that there were currently 70 rooms in the Charterhouse, with the inmates receiving six shillings a week, coal, turves, water and medical assistance, and there was not enough revenue to pay these allowances to an increased number of inmates. He proposed a development of additional rooms at Hessle, and to the annoyance of the Advisors had the plans drawn and lessees signed up without seeking their approval. One of the leases was to go to Mr. Francis Reckitt, “biscuit manufacturer”, another to Mr. James Reckitt, “starch and biscuit manufacturer”.

He finally resigned as vicar of Holy Trinity in 1867 at the age of 96 but carried on for a few months at the Charterhouse. He was 97 when he died – the oldest and longest serving clergyman in the Church of England.

Bromby also had wide interests outside the church – he lectured to the Mechanics’ Institute and published pamphlets on subjects such as ‘Time and its Uses’ and ‘The Terraqueous Globe’. He even translated some texts of Plutarch into English. He married Jane Amis of York in 1806 and had three sons, all of whom followed him into the church, one becoming Bishop of Tasmania.

He never advanced further than vicar in the Church. His career seems to have been limited by his politics, and one of his sermons provoked the displeasure of the Archbishop of York for its liberal views. According to his obituary ‘In politics he was an advanced Reformer, at a time when the Liberal cause was an unpopular one, and during the first thirty years of the present century he was rarely absent from any meeting held to discuss public affairs, and usually spoke with vigour on behalf of his cause.’

One thing is certain. There’ll never be another John Healey Bromby!

Don Knibb

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