

Faringdon in 1903 by Geoffrey Williams

In 1903, Faringdon was living in the height of the Imperialist Age with Edward VII at last on the throne, and society reflecting the new image. In rural areas, though, attitudes remained predominantly Victorian, and our parish magazine reflected this feeling of permanence and continuity. The Tory party was in power; the Hendersons were living at Buscot and the Cunards at Faringdon House. Reverend Weldon was well ensconced in the Vicarage, suffering little doubt and remaining firm in his views. Mr. Habgood had been elected churchwarden fifty-three years previously and was still going strong. God was indeed in his heaven and all seemed very well with the world. If there were rumblings of Socialism and reform, then locally they were muted topics, but reading between the lines of the monthly Vicar's Notes, slow but inevitable change could be detected, with hindsight, despite dogmatic opposition to it.

Following the cheap importation of corn and meat from the Empire and South America, agriculture was in decline. The picture of rural life seen in Helen Allingham's watercolours was in reality very much harsher. The poverty line of Booth and Rowntree stood at a mere penny or two above £1 a week. Unsurprisingly, the Workhouse in Union Street in Faringdon, would cast its shadow over the lives of the poor, and though All Saints' would regularly contribute to the Zenana Mission, there was a very real need much closer to home. Agricultural wages remained low, 14/- a week. There was a tied cottage with a vegetable garden for a rent of about 1/-, but if the job was lost then so was the home. By 1903, the incentive to move to the town was not so much for better wages but for the very job itself. Swindon and employment with the GWR was not really within walking distance. Here lay the first hints of change to come.

The Parish Magazine was published with a secure and moral paper, Home Words for Hearth and Home, an improving piece of reading for those who knew their place. Generally, though, national affairs were of less importance than their immediate local impact, and this applied particularly to education. The Vicar wrote strongly about the implications of the new Education Act and that Voluntary School Supporters would be called upon to make greater sacrifices if "the splendid work of equipping the children in knowledge, discipline and manners is to be maintained". Faringdon had three schools and was rightly proud of them. Any interference with these was seen to be evil. By April of that year, the full implications of the Act were to be realised. The County Council was taking over the schools and the Parish would be responsible for repairs or improvements. This was fine for Anglicans but less acceptable to non-conformists who had to contribute to schools they would probably not use. This would be a bone of contention nation-wide for years, with ministers preferring to go to prison rather than pay what they considered an unjust tax.

Parish life in Faringdon moved slowly through the year. Mr and Mrs Cunard held the School Treat in the grounds of Faringdon House yet again. The Parish Notes abound with such entries over the years. "Noblesse Oblige" prevailed in those days. Nowadays, even the little hole in the door in the wall is blocked to prevent even a glimpse of the great house. Buscot Park was not to be outdone; Lady Henderson entertained the Girls' Friendly Society with "kindness and hospitality" and that too was a regular annual event. There were the inevitable rummage sales to equip the Mission Hall and though the Vicar deemed these a success, he did think that the Hall could be better equipped with an umbrella-stand and a kettle. "I hope that someone who did not help with the sale will do the graceful act of supplying us with these last requisites". If you did not realise your deficiencies then the Reverend Weldon told you, no error! He also welcomed the coming of Advent with the news that the course of sermons in preparation for a "happy and joyful Xmas" was to be on Death, Judgement, Heaven and Hell, which should have rounded the year off in a suitable manner.

The Annals for 1904 have unfortunately been lost, but a small jump to 1905 reveals the Vicar's concern that although the Christmas Day attendance was up by 57%, the

offertory was down by 8.3%. Perhaps the recession of the previous year was beginning to bite. Unremarked in the magazine was the scandal of the harsh treatment of the Chinese labour in the gold mines of South Africa or the precarious existence of the British working man, but by the end of the year, the Liberals had won the election, the way was paved for long needed social and political reform, and Welldon could turn his attentions to the problems of alcohol. He was glad that "Temperance Meetings are so popular". There was a real need in Faringdon. There were more pubs in town in those days, selling strong beer at about a penny a pint, but it is probable that drink offences were dealt with swiftly in the local Magistrates' Court. The young were encouraged to see the temperance light in the Band of Hope and police on the street could easily deal with backsliders in those days.

By May, the Vicar was expressing his delight for the Easter decorations, and for the offertory, which by tradition in those days, came his way. In fact, 257 communicants produced £8-16-6, an average of 8 pence each, which was the price of a gallon of beer or a large loaf of bread. Well, he was happy with it. His main problem was securing the services of a curate. "There is a devastating dearth of curates" he wrote, "which augers badly for the future of our Church". He pointed out that stipends offered were totally inadequate and parents refused to let their sons enter a ministry with an income of between £70 and £150. A labourer would expect to earn £55 per annum. Nonetheless, a Reverend Williams was noted as "coming with a view to taking up the curacy", so all was well.

The Summer drifted blissfully on with the girls going to Buscot again and the Choir to Portsmouth. General Booth came to speak in the Market Place and the Vicar hoped that people would attend in large numbers. The choir acquitted themselves very creditably at Harvest Festival, and Miss Shilleto was appointed Headmistress of the Girls' School. She came "with a good reputation" which can only be good news. But Welldon saw little good in the poor attendance at the Church Missionary Meeting. He could not understand people "making no effort to attend a meeting of thrilling interest held almost at their doors". Ah well, Faringdon is still like that! So with a mild rocket for those parents who brought their children late to the monthly Public Baptismal Service, the year ends with the Advent hope of something better in the future.

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June 2009