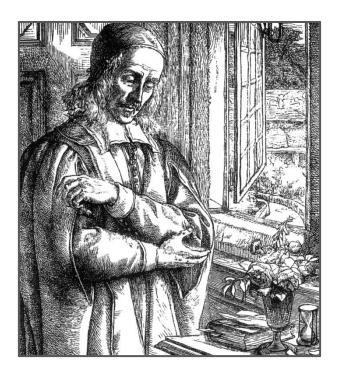


THE PARSON'S LIFE

How George Herbert might have recorded events during the years 1629—1633



Script of the Group's presentation in St. Andrew's Church Bemerton 26 June 2012

Author: Peter Webster

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THE PARSON'S LIFE

Introduction

It was Siegfried Sassoon who said "leading a good life is better than keeping a good diary" – no doubt a sentiment with which George Herbert would have agreed, had it ever occurred to him to do such a thing as keeping a diary. But in the first half of the 17th century, it was not the custom for even well educated people to keep a journal recording personal events and feelings, and certainly not for publication. A far cry from today, when it seems that just about everyone is either blogging, tweeting, or 'letting it all hang out' on Facebook.

In those days, journals were kept mainly for accounting purposes. Magdalen Herbert's Kitchen Book is a good example of how such records can provide us with some valuable insights into daily life at the time. But personal journals are rather different. In general, it isn't until later in the century that we start to see these emerge – the most notable diarist of this period is of course Samuel Pepys.

So Herbert never kept a diary – at least, not as far as we know, and there is no evidence to the contrary. What you will hear from us this evening is a work of pure fiction. We have selected some important events in his life between 1629 and 1633, which are of course the years that matter most to us here in Bemerton, and we've tried to imagine how he himself would have recorded these events for posterity. But although the diary entries are fictional, the events they cover most definitely aren't.

When studying the life of George Herbert, our group has always tried not to depend too heavily on Izaak Walton's very detailed but not entirely reliable biography of 1670. Certainly it's worth reading, if only because it's the nearest thing we have to a full contemporaneous account, written less than 40 years after his death. But Walton puts his own words into Herbert's mouth, and often assigns to him motives and attitudes for which there is no firm evidence.

So in selecting the events for our journal, we have been careful to use whenever possible what has to be the most reliable source material, Herbert's own letters and other writings. Other supporting material is based on independent sources such as the Public Record Office and Salisbury Cathedral archives. There is some reliance on Herbert's prose work 'The Country Parson' but, as he himself pointed out, he wrote this as 'a mark to aim at' and it doesn't necessarily reflect his own practice. But it is a good guide.

We have also avoided using any of Herbert's poems in 'The Temple' as a source. While it is generally accepted that many these are autobiographical, without knowing at what stage of his life each poem was written it would be unwise to start

drawing any conclusions from any of them about his daily life as a priest here in Bemerton.

As you will hear, our imaginary journal entries attempt to use the sort of words and expressions that Herbert would have used, based on early 17th century literature generally, but more specifically on his own letters and other writings. The results are unlikely to fool anyone with expertise in the language of the period, but hopefully they will sound sufficiently authentic to give you a good sense of how he might have recorded all these events at the time.

We've had to assume, I hope correctly, that our audience this evening has some prior knowledge of George Herbert's life before he came to Bemerton, and knows something of his family circumstances, his generally poor health, his achievements as an academic at Cambridge University, and his brief but significant involvement in the world of politics and business.

Finally, a word about dates. At the time we are considering, each New Year began not on 1st January but on 25th March. That's why, for example, the date of Herbert's death is usually quoted as 1633 but his memorial plate is marked 1632 – he died on 1st March. This often gives rise to confusion so, to keep things simple, this evening we have adopted the modern calendar throughout.

Incidentally, the dates in our imaginary diary all fall on a Monday. This is quite deliberate – we felt that Herbert was the sort of man who might well set aside a fixed time each week to write up his diary. In his poem 'Sunday', Herbert writes about:

The Sundays of a man's life Threaded together on time's string,

This evening we have threaded together for you the Mondays of a man's life – "The Parson's Life"

Dauntsey House, 9th March 1629

I have taken a wife. Though it be the dolorous time of Lent, my marriage to Jane Danvers at the priory church of Edington on Wednesday last was a pleasing occasion, in the presence of my stepfather Sir John and his new bride Elizabeth, and members of our families and friends dwelling in the surrounds.

It joys me exceedingly to have discovered so gentle and kind a woman as Jane among the family of my stepfather. My sojourn with his elder brother my Lord Danby at Dauntsey House has been both congenial and healthful: my body and spirit are much refreshed by the good Wiltshire air. I have met with nothing but the most careful consideration from my Lord and his kinfolk. Our only sorrow is that God in his mercy chose to call to heavenly rest my Lord's other brother Charles, Jane's father, before he could see his most beloved daughter married.

In the coming days we shall take up residence with my dear wife's mother at Baynton House, and thereafter shall I make true endeavour to find a way to serve God by attending to the cure of souls: I am resolved to seek a living. I have spoken with Jane about the many changes such an undertaking would bring to our lives. Our families and friends be never forgot, but our first and humble duty should be owed to the good shepherd, and our devotion to his sheep. My loving wife is ever obliging and I doubt not that she will prove a charitable friend and counsellor to persons of every station whose souls become my special concern.

Baynton House, 16th November 1629

My search for suitable employment may be ended. This day has come a messenger from Wilton; my cousin William, Earl of Pembroke, hath the presentation of a living hard nearby, lately vacated, and would install me as Rector there, and as his Chaplain. The parish is Foulston-cum-Bemerton, and the cure was last entrusted to My Lord Bishop of Rochester, Walter Curle, who is now translated by His Majesty to Bath and Wells. So the path to advancement is already well established, and my kinsman is sure that the King will assent to the presentation.

And yet I hesitate. My body, while much recovered of late, is still weak. The parish is mean, not above 200 souls, and I doubt not that their devotion to working the land much exceeds their zeal for worship. And even the cure of so few is a heavy burden; how can I be certain that I am truly worthy to serve Jesus, my Master, at his altar as a Priest? I mind too the austere Calvinist inclinations of my Lord Bishop of Salisbury, Doctor John Davenant, whose strictures could perchance bring difficulties in these troubled times. And the city, still recovering from the late plague, is presently in some strife and I fear that even this mean parish may be disturbed thereby. But t'would be a great joy and spiritual comfort to secure a living so near to the great cathedral church. My Lord's is a good and kind offer, and I must pray for divine guidance.

Wilton House, 26th April 1630

The die is cast. On Friday last arrived here from Westminster the deed of presentation bearing His Majesty's privy seal, by which I am named incumbent of the living of Foulston Saint Peter and Bemerton. Today I went with my good friend Mr. Arthur Woodnoth to Salisbury, there to be received by Dr. Davenant and subscribe to the deed of institution. We straightway came to Bemerton where I was honoured to receive the key of the chapel from the churchwarden, and entered to toll the bell according to our custom.

Once inside the little church, quite alone, I was overcome with a great passion and, having sounded the bell, could not but prostrate myself before the altar to pray and reflect on the new life I had come at last to accept. So many thoughts went through my mind; my unworthiness for the great work to come, the necessity of being admitted to the priesthood at the soonest opportunity (for I am yet Deacon and not priested), but above all my resolution to adopt from this day forward the holy rules by which I intend to conduct my life in the service of Jesus, my Master. So long was I at this that Mr. Woodnoth and the others eventually came in to see to my welfare.

In the coming days we shall take a closer measure of my parish, meet some of the people and see what work is needed to restore the fabric of the buildings, which are yet in great disrepair and much neglected. Then we return to Edington to tell Jane about it all, but particularly this day, one of the most memorable of my life.

Baynton House, 14th June 1630

Newly returned from Wilton, whence I have been attending to the making good of the two churches and the rectory. The neglect has been great, and though much work has been done in Foulston, yet there remains an abundance of employment for the stonemasons and carpenters in Bemerton. I fear that the charges withal will amount to not less than two hundred pounds, and my purse is at full stretch.

But it is a good work that sets in proper order the house of God. At Foulston there are two new bells, and the pulpit and desk which showed great dilapidation are replaced and much improved. The church is now clean, dry and wholesome, and since I have Mr Nathanael Bostocke for curate there can be services therein much oftener than of late. The Bemerton church is in poor condition and in part must be rebuilt; new walls and roof timbers are sorely needed; the door is rotten and must needs be replaced; and the inside wants plaster and new furnishings.

The parsonage-house too is not yet habitable; during his incumbency Dr. Curle dwelt a good twenty miles distant and so it has stood empty these past ten years and more. Walls are crumbling, windows are broken, the thatch is almost entirely gone away and nature in all its wildness has encroached upon the defenceless building. But I doubt not that it can be recovered and indeed made dry and proof against the weather when the fabric is restored. I am much enamoured of the glebe with its river banks and fine view of the cathedral church, and with God's grace Jane and I will make a happy home there.

Bemerton, 9th August 1630

Though it be not spacious, yet the rector's house affords great contentment to our household. Jane has begun to tend the garden and has planted such fruits and herbs as may be utilised for home-bred medicines. I have laid out some fine walks in our grounds and along the river and am much inspired by the tranquillity of this place.

And what great joy it is to have living here with us my two orphaned nieces, Dorothy and Magdalen Vaughan. When my elder brother Lord Edward, to whose charge they are committed, urged me to take but one of the girls here I wrote him that I would have both or neither, for else

they would be without like company in our household, and so it was arranged. It is meet for them to be brought to womanhood in the love and worship of Jesus, my Master.

I have this day written to my very dear brother Sir Henry about the third sister Catherine, who is still of tender years; she is all but destitute and now sorely wants education. I have sought to persuade him in all charity to take her into his household. But I know he is loath to do so, being mindful of the ungratefulness of kindred bred up (which generally is very true), therefore I have told him that if he take her not I will have her here, though it be yet another burden upon my weak health and meagre purse. But difficulties are so far from cooling Christians, that they provoke them.

Bemerton, 19th September 1630

The longed-for day has come at last, and I am priested. To be not able to administer the sacraments to my flock came hard; but Mr Bostocke being ordained at the last Ember-days, since our coming here in April there has been no infant in the parish unbaptized and we have twice celebrated the holy communion. Though Christmastide be the next great feast, I shall call the people to God's holy table on Sunday next to mark my anointing.

Since coming to Bemerton I have taken up my pen again and returned to versing. My spirit is moved by the great work on which I am embarked, and my countenance is much uplifted by dwelling in such peaceful and verdant countryside. I have retrieved from my cabinet the little book in which I caused to be set down some years before a collection of my poesy written since the early days at Cambridge. My fancy then was to build from the verses an edifice representing God's church and its many splendours; and now that I am daily immersed in devotions and the service of Jesus, my Master, it is my intention to look again at this work and compose anew.

My dear Jane is an ever present support and comfort. With my nieces and the servants, she cheerfully joins me in our twice daily prayers in the church, Without hindrance to my public duties, we have begun to entertain our neighbours from time to time on Sundays; such occasions provide the opportunity to discourse of such things as are both profitable and pleasant, and to raise up their minds to apprehend God's manifold blessings.

Bemerton, 21st March 1631

Five years have passed since My Lord Bishop of Lincoln presented me with the Prebend of Leighton Ecclesia, and yet I still want sufficient money to finish rebuilding the lovely church there. It has lain unused for near thirty years, and the parish has perforce to gather and worship in the hall of Leighton House, home of My Lord the Duke of Lennox.

It is my earnest wish that this house of God should once again ring with the voices of the local people. I have given much thought to the work; the pulpit and reading desk are to be of identical stature, that preaching and prayer may be equally regarded, and the seats and stalls shall be soundly build of fine oak to magnify the glory of Jesus, my Master. The outer fabric is much distressed: the North wall was wholly fallen down and must needs be rebuilt from the ground: and as for the roof there is none; a new covering of lead and tiles is wanted, with proper drainage and fitments. The tower also is ruined and the bells lost.

Against he wishes of my dear departed mother, I vowed to God that I would find the funds for the rebuilding of this church. I have tried to involve my exceeding dear brother Nicholas Ferrar in the work at Leighton, and indeed have urged the Prebend upon him; but for the present he is entirely taken up with his community at Little Gidding. Mr Woodnoth holds in the account some several hundreds of pounds given already, but in truth the business goes so slowly that I fear it may never be accomplished.

Bemerton, 18th July 1631

I have joyed in music from my earliest days. It is the finest balm for troubled times and uplifts the soul; truly one of God's bountiest gifts. To our Charing Cross home when I was but a small child came great men of music; Dr William Byrd and Dr John Bull were guests at our table; and the singing of psalms with my family on Sunday evenings recalls the happiest of times. In the house of those that are skilled in music, all are musicians.

And of all music, church-music is the best; it is my heaven upon earth. As is now my custom twice every week, on the morrow I shall walk into Salisbury to attend evensong in the great cathedral church, and listen to the singing men of Sarum raising their voices to Almighty God; though there be now only six vicars choral and seven lay vicars, I am sure there will again be choristers when the present petty disputation in chapter over the Dean's choice of Mr Giles Tomkins to be the boys' tutor is resolved.

After the service there is always music making in the South Canontry, home of my good friend Dr. Henchman, the precentor. There I am able to sing, and to play my lute and viol, together with others of like mind, including some of the cathedral singers and musicians. For me, it is a special joy when we are able to perform some of the verses from my little book that I have set to music.

Bemerton, 10th October 1631

Some days ago came Mr Woodnoth, bringing with him a gift for me from Little Gidding; I have long desired to see one of the concordances of the gospels worked by Mr Ferrar's nieces, and now I have a copy of my own. It is a beautiful work of art, with many outlandish illustrations gathered by my brother Ferrar during his travels in earlier days, and all splendidly bound in a velvet covering. I shall treasure it always.

Mr Woodnoth is in some turmoil. Lately entered into the service of my father Sir John, he is much troubled about his want of success in the course on which he is now embarked, and sought my counsel about the wisdom of putting behind him his trade as a goldsmith in the city. And he is yet anguished over his leaning towards divinity; his heart aches because he feels that he should be doing good in other ways. My dear brother Ferrar and I have assured him that in his many endeavours for us in past years, and in his business with the Virginia Company, he has done much to further the glory of God and the spreading abroad of His word.

I have set out for him in writing seven reasons why he should persevere; he is a man of great business accomplishment and financial skill, which is much needed by Sir John, and it would not look well if he were now to lack constancy.

Bemerton, 19th December 1631

Christmastide is hard upon us, and as we prepare again to celebrate the birth of the holy infant, it is a good occasion to visit my flock and carry to them the good tidings of the season. At this time of the year when days are short and home fires are sore needed, a neighbourly call by the parson can be a source of much cheer and comfort.

Throughout the year, it is my custom upon the afternoon of in the weekdays to visit in person now one quarter of my parish, now another. By such visits I find persons most naturally as they are, wallowing in the midst of their affairs; whereas on Sundays they put on their holy-day clothes, and come to Church in frame, commonly the next day they put off both. Often they are busy in the works of their calling, and justly earn my commendation for their industry. But I counsel them always to remember that it is through God's providence, and not their labour, that they thrive. And I admonish them that they should not dive so deep into worldly affairs that they neglect the care of their families and the proper attention to religion.

Nothing is too little in God's service, and I do not disdain to enter into the poorest cottage, though I even creep into it, and though it smell never so loathsomely. For God is there also, and those for whom God died. And truly such dwellings remind us of the lowly stable that was the humble birthplace of Jesus, my Master.

Bemerton, 19th March 1632

This day has arrived a most welcome letter from my brother Sir Henry about the church at Leighton. He writes of the blessed success that God has given us by moving the heart of the Duchess of Lennox, to an exceeding cheerfulness, in signing one hundred pounds with her own hands (and promising to get her son to do as much).

The prospect of restoring of the church is much improved, and with this money now found through Sir Henry's striving I believe there is good hope that it can be accomplished by the end of this year. My exceeding dear brother Ferrar hath done much to bring about this happy circumstance, through his care and counsel, and his brother John Ferrar has directed and overlooked the work. With 18 masons and labourers now engaged on the construction, the external fabric and roof are all but complete, though Mr Woodnoth hath calculated that there will be not money enough to rebuild the tower and put in the bells. But I am told that in the coming days 10 carpenters will be set to work on the internal appointments.

On the morrow I shall write to Brother Ferrar to thank him for his support and his counselling upon the matter. It was at his urging that I took upon myself the business at Leighton Ecclesia, and it is through his constant care to secure and maintain its prosecution that there will soon stand there again a fine building to the glory of Almighty God.

Bemerton, 13th August 1632

A sorrowful day, for we laid to rest my dear niece Dorothy. Some weeks past she caught a fever from which she was never to recover, and on Thursday last God called her to his bosom. There has been so much sadness in the lives of there dear children, losing both their parents when tender in years, and Magdalen and Kate are much distressed. I have consoled them with

reminders of the many happy days Dorothy spent here with us, and an assurance that the griefs of this world are as nothing compared with the joys hereafter.

In her final days, Jane and I assisted her in the setting down of her will, which was inscribed by Mr. Bostocke. The main legacies are to her sisters and to me, one hundred pounds each, but she was so thoughtful and mindful of the love and support given by my dear wife's family at Edington and Dauntsey that there are small bequests for many of them; to our servants Elizabeth, Mary, Anne and William are left small monies in token of their solicitude; and there is twenty pounds for the poor of the parish.. Dorothy was devout, kind and generous, and did much good in the parish while she lived. There were many tears this day as she was laid to rest within our church.

Though of late my body has become exceedingly weak, yet I still write much, both verse and music; and for some time now I have been engaged upon setting down what I perceive to be the form and character of a country parson, drawing upon the many experiences of pastoral life I have gained here in Bemerton.

Bemerton, 24th September 1632

I am in frequent correspondence with my dear deserving Brother Ferrar, and he has lately sent me his translation from Italian into English of a small book intituled 'The Hundred and One Considerations of Signor John Valdesso', soliciting my censure or approval.

This Valdesso was by birth a Spaniard, and was known to Erasmus. Though a Papist, his Considerations accord with much that devout Christians will find agreeable as a guide to their belief and conduct, and he is a true servant of God.. Therefore I have read the work most diligently, even in the time of my present griefs, and have set down some notes in much detail; especially on those points where he hath tended to obscure or disparage the Holy Scripture: for it is true, there are some things I like not in him. Yet I would have the work published as Brother Ferrar intends. Valdesso bears great honour and reverence towards our dear Master and Lord, for which I do so love him, that were there nothing else, I would print it. In the coming days I shall return the book to Little Gidding with my notes.

I am still able to walk in the rectory garden and take the air, but my frailties are such that I can no longer visit my flock nor entertain them here; neither can I make the journey to Salisbury: I miss exceedingly the beauty of the cathedral services and my regular music meetings. But I am much consoled by the loving care and consideration of those around me, and I can yet write or play my lute; God is merciful.

Bemerton, 8th October 1632

I grow daily weaker, and it becomes ever more apparent that the time approaches when my dear Lord and Master will call me unto him. Though I can no longer conduct divine services, yet I have until late been able to cross the lane to the church with my family twice each day to pray and reflect on God's blessings.

But now I suffer fevers, and there are times when I want breath so extremely that I am overcome with faintness. My dear Jane has long entreated that I entrust Mr. Bostocke with the daily prayers, and so I have agreed at last that he shall be appointed to do so from tomorrow, and I will only be a hearer of them. The work of the parish demands two persons; therefore I

have engaged another curate, Mr John Hayes, to assist with the services at Foulston. I must needs look to him and Mr. Bostocke to convey to London the proof of Dorothy's will.

My book of rules for the life and work of a country parson progresses well, though now I write each day only for a short time. It was begun as a mark for me to aim at; now it will be for others to add to these points, which I have observed, until the book grow to a complete pastoral. I confess that I have set the mark as high as I can, since he shoots higher that threatens the moon, than he that aims at a tree. Not that I think, if a man do not observe all that I have written, he presently sins and displeases God, but that it is a good strife to go as far as we can in the pleasing of Him , who has done so much for us.

Bemerton, 4th February 1633

Some days ago came to visit one Edmund Duncon, who holds the living at Friern Barnet. He was lately visiting Little Gidding and has been sent by Brother Ferrar to find out how I do, and to assure me of the prayers of that blessed community. In my weakness, it pleased me greatly to receive his news and learn of their constant devotion in their divine offices.

Mr Duncon is presently gone to Bath but will come here again on the morrow. I shall entreat him to convey to Brother Ferrar that my life is drawing to its close, and beg him to continue his daily prayers for me, though my heart is now fixed on that place where true joy is only to be found; and tell him that I long to be there, and do wait for my appointed change with hope and patience.

And I shall charge this Mr Duncon to put in Brother Ferrar's hands the little book in which is written my collection of verses, with the earnest request that he consider whether they should be made public and printed; it shall be for him to decide.

Bemerton, 11th February 1633

We daily expect Mr Woodnoth, who has promised to help me make provision for those I shall leave behind. There remain some legacies willed by Dorothy to be accounted for and settled, and I have begun to reflect on mine own dispositions. Other than my dear Jane, who hath a competent maintenance secured her, my greatest concern is for my nieces. They shall have not only their portions from Dorothy but also mine together with five hundred pounds to be divided equally between them. My two curates shall their half years wages aforehand, and something chosen from my bookshelf.

I shall beseech Sir John Danvers to be the overseer of my will, and Mr Woodnoth will be nominated executor thereof; I shall bequeath unto him twenty pounds, of which fifteen is to be bestowed upon Leighton church, now much restored. Though I leave this fine work behind me as a memorial of my devotion to Jesus, my Master, in whose blessed presence I shall be presently, yet it and I are less than the least of all God's mercies. Amen.

Conclusion

George Herbert died a short time later, probably on 1st March 1633. He lies buried somewhere under the floor of this very church. It says much about the greatness of the man and what he achieved during his short time here in Bemerton that, almost four hundred years later, we are still studying his works and doing our best to understand this life and times of this truly remarkable country parson.

Only a sweet and virtuous soul, Like season'd timber, never gives; But though the whole world turn to coal, Then chiefly lives.



The George Herbert in Bemerton Group

The Group is drawn mainly from residents of Lower Bemerton, near Salisbury in the county of Wiltshire. It was set up in 2002, and its current ten members cover a wide spectrum of interests, both religious and secular.

The Group's aims are to:

- o study and celebrate the life and work of George Herbert as priest, writer and distinguished inhabitant of Bemerton;
- o mount events relating to the works of George Herbert and the context in which he lived; and
- o liaise and co-ordinate with other bodies with like interests.

We strive to share our enthusiasm for George Herbert and his works with others, usually through events held in or around the village where he spent the last three years of his life. In this way we support the Friends of St. Andrew's Bemerton in their work of promoting the memory and works of George Herbert.