

The Country Parson's Flock: George Herbert's Wiltshire Parish

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Thank you very much. It is a great pleasure, a humbling experience in fact, to be standing here speaking to you in George Herbert's church. And I suppose that it is a little unusual to be asked to give the same lecture 18 years after I first delivered it. I shall not quite be doing that, as I had better explain. After I spoke to you in 2005 a version of my talk was published in *Sarum Chronicle*, (in 2006), then the following year a conference was held at Sarum College entitled 'George Herbert's Pastoral', attended by many Herbert scholars from the United States and elsewhere. I was asked to give the lecture again, and after that I revised it for a book of essays resulting from the conference, which was published in 2010.¹ So my talk existed in various versions and I have stitched them together for this evening. Over the last decade or more I have not worked very much on Herbert, though I was involved in an event here in 2014. But my interest in Wiltshire in the early 17th century has continued, and been concentrated on one of Herbert's clerical neighbours, Thomas Crockford; I will mention him at the end. For this evening I have also looked at one or two additional sources now more easily available as a result of the internet revolution. So you can see that my 2005 talk has taken on a life of its own, and this evening you are just getting the latest iteration.

Few Herbert scholars would deny that the poet's ministry to his parishioners at Bemerton during the last three years of his life 1630-1633, was for him the culmination of his spiritual and pastoral journey; nor that his practical experience as rector of this Wiltshire parish to a great extent forms the backdrop to his prose manual, *The Country Parson*. It is somewhat surprising, therefore, that more interest has not been shown in the historical and topographical context in which Herbert was working and writing, and in the surviving local historical sources relevant to Bemerton around the period of his ministry.² This paper attempts to draw together some information, from

¹ Hodgkins, C (ed.), *George Herbert's Pastoral: new essays on the poet and priest of Bemerton*, Univ. Delaware Press, 2010, 158-72.

² Modern exceptions are Charles, A M, *A life of George Herbert*, Cornell UP, 1977; and Cooley, R W, 'Full of all knowledg': *George Herbert's Country Parson and early modern social discourse*, Univ Toronto Press, 2004, especially ch.4. Charles's Appendix E (228-33) includes

a local historian's standpoint, about Herbert's parish – and the people who lived there.³

For local historians and enthusiasts of location in literature it is rather disappointing when one turns to the introductions to the standard editions of Herbert's works,⁴ and find that they talk largely about metre and form, literary antecedents and the like, and say little or nothing about Bemerton. That is not to say that the mysteries of literary criticism are unimportant, but it is like reading the programme note to a symphony, full of musical technicalities and instrumental nuts and bolts – and then being told nothing about the places and the passions that swept its composer on.

So, if we do form our own mental picture of George Herbert's Bemerton, it is largely the one that he chooses to give us, in his poetry and prose, and which his biographers, notably his near contemporary Izaak Walton, reinforce.⁵ For years my own mental picture of him, thus formed, was of the saintly priest, stricken by illness, quietly and earnestly ministering in a sequestered country parish (in stark contrast to his pluralist or fanatical fellow-clergy), whose chief relaxation was to stroll through the meadows to the ancient peace of the nearby cathedral city, and to join in the music and worship.

It is, you will admit, a comfortable and uplifting portrayal, and we have sufficient testimony from people who knew him to be sure that in broad terms our impression of his saintliness is perfectly correct. I have no intention of denigrating him or of challenging our appreciation of him. On the contrary we owe it to his memory to use whatever sources are available to us to reconstruct as full and rounded a portrait of his life as possible. A biography which makes out that someone is perfect, and living in an unreal world, is not only rather boring, but it is also unconvincing, less than human. Somebody used the

a transcript of 1646 sequestration records relating to Herbert's successor, which are of considerable interest but, since they are readily available in print, are not discussed here.

³ This paper is based originally on a lecture originally given to Bemerton Local History Society and the Summer Evenings with George Herbert Group, 19 Oct 2005, a version of which was published, as 'The country parson's flock: George Herbert's Bemerton in 1632', in *Sarum Chronicle* 6, 2006, 29-40. I am grateful to Anne Trevett and Judy Rees of Bemerton for encouraging me to undertake this research, and to the staff of the Wiltshire & Swindon History Centre, Chippenham for making source material available.

⁴ Unless otherwise stated citations are from Slater, Ann Pasternak (ed), *George Herbert: the complete English works*, David Campbell, 1995 (Everyman edition); see also Patrides, C A (ed), *The English poems of George Herbert*, David Campbell, 1974.

⁵ Walton, I, *The life of Mr George Herbert*, 1670; reprinted in Slater 338-85.

expression, 'pilloried in stained glass' in such a context, and there is that danger with Herbert.⁶

The Wiltshire parish to which Herbert was instituted rector on 26 April 1630, and where he died on 1 March 1633, was known as Fugglestone with Bemerton. In fact it included three communities (the third was Quidhampton), each with its own agricultural territory, and each with its linear village strung out along the ancient valley route between Salisbury and Wilton.⁷ In theory at least (though some may have managed to evade the list) a roll call survives of all adult males who were living in the parish in 1641/2, less than a decade after Herbert's death – 43 in Fugglestone and Quidhampton together, and 26 in Bemerton. This is because all men were required to profess their support for the principles of the Church of England, and this 'Protestation Return' survives and has been published – many years ago – for the parish.⁸ Multiplying this total, 69, by about three, to include women and children, gives a total population of about 200, perhaps split fairly evenly between the three villages. That round number, 200, was given again in the Compton Census, a return of religious allegiance about a generation later, in 1676, and it has been suggested that it referred to the total population of the parish.⁹

Almost the whole parish belonged to, and was controlled through manorial courts by, one of two large landowners, and so most of these inhabitants were tenants of one or the other. In broad terms the western half, Fugglestone and part of Quidhampton, belonged to the earls of Pembroke, of Wilton House, as successors to Wilton abbey, the medieval owner. The eastern half, Bemerton and the rest of Quidhampton, had had many owners, but by about 1615 it had come entirely into the ownership of a family called Grobham, whose principal estate was at Great Wishford, further up the Wylye valley in south Wiltshire. This manor was to stay with the Grobham (later Grobham Howe) for about two centuries, until about 1800 or a little later. When Herbert arrived in April 1630 both manors had new lords. Sir Richard Grobham had died in the previous July, and his whole estate, which included a portfolio of land all over Wiltshire, was inherited by his brother John

⁶ Least guilty of this are Charles, A M, *A life of George Herbert*, Cornell UP, 1977; and Daniell, J J, *The life of George Herbert, of Bemerton*, SPCK, 1893.

⁷ The standard history of the parish, by Margaret Morris, is in *Victoria History of Wiltshire* 6, 1962, 37-50.

⁸ *Wiltshire Notes & Queries* 7, 1911, 163-4.

⁹ Whiteman, A (ed.), *The Compton Census of 1676: a critical edition*, British Academy, 1986, 126.

Grobham.¹⁰ Herbert's kinsman, William Herbert, 3rd earl of Pembroke, had died even more recently, on 10 April, two weeks before the poet's institution – he too was succeeded by a brother, Philip Herbert, who became the 4th earl. At about 40 years of age he was only a little older than the poet.¹¹

So it was all change in 1630 – two new landlords and a new rector. For any parish at around this time one might hope to find at least some documentary evidence. And, for Herbert's there is the parish register, which would have been his responsibility.¹² During his incumbency it records 14 baptisms, 6 marriages and 13 burials, though some parishioners who we know died in this period seem to have been omitted, or were buried elsewhere. There are two lists of taxpayers – seven names in 1626, five in 1628 – who would probably have been the wealthiest men in the parish.¹³ There are also some 25 wills, between 1631 and 1647, nearly all of them, one assumes, of people the poet would have known personally.¹⁴ Then there are court records, the minutes of business meetings held to run affairs in each manor; and, most importantly, there is a survey – a detailed written description – of all the tenancies held under the Wilton House manor (the western half of the parish), made in February 1632.¹⁵ Another, briefer, survey (or extent), undated but a little earlier than Herbert's time, gives valuable information about farming in the Bemerton portion of the parish.¹⁶ In addition it is quite reasonable to extrapolate from records of rather earlier and later periods to draw conclusions about such things as topography, population, agriculture and industry. An exhaustive study of a neighbouring parish, Netherhampton, using Wilton estate records, has shown that there was a very considerable level of continuity there from one generation to the next.¹⁷

A few lines above George Herbert's own burial, the parish register records that two tenant farmers, John Young and Richard Thring, were buried

¹⁰ Fry, G S and E A (eds.) *Abstracts of Wiltshire Inquisitiones Post Mortem: Charles I, 1901*, 103-7. W(iltshire &) S(windon) A(rchives) 753/1 is a detailed cartulary of the Grobham estate, including copies of deeds relating to Bemerton and Quidhampton.

¹¹ *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, 26, 677-85.

¹² WSA 930/1.

¹³ TNA, E 179/199/431; E 179/199/398.

¹⁴ In WSA P1/ and P2/; and in TNA, PROB 11.

¹⁵ Kerridge, E (ed.), *Survey of the manors of Philip, 1st earl of Pembroke and Montgomery, 1631-2*, 1953 (Wiltshire Record Society 9), 49-55.

¹⁶ B(ritish) L(ibrary) Add Ch. 15156. Although undated some details are similar to a rental made in September 1620, which is recorded at the back of WSA 2057/M3.

¹⁷ Shute, H, *My Lord Pembroke's manor of Netherhampton*, 1986.

within little more than a week of each other, on 8 and 17 April 1631. Both left wills,¹⁸ with inventories taken after their death of their possessions for probate purposes, and both described themselves as yeomen (small farmers) of Quidhampton.

Richard Thring, the later to die, was a widower, with two surviving sons, Richard and John (who took over the farm), and a daughter, Susan. Richard may have had a somewhat inflated view of his wealth, since in his will he left Susan £100, though as it turned out the total inheritance was assessed at £240. Susan, armed with this dowry, one assumes, went off and was married shortly afterwards, and perhaps left the parish (since there do not seem to be any baptisms in the register attributable to her union). The sons Richard and John appear to have inherited an amalgamation of three virgates (or farming units of about 20 acres), since their father when he died was growing 20 acres of wheat, 18 of barley and 3 of oats and vetch (presumably another 20 acres or so was lying fallow, making about 60 acres in all). Some of their inheritance was out in the fields shooting up now that Spring had arrived, but there were also still stocks of barley and wheat in the barns and in a granary on staddle stones; 86 sheep, with 16 lambs, 4 carthorses, 4 cows with 2 calves and 2 yearling bullocks, and 4 pigs. The younger Richard surrendered at least part of his interest in the farm a few years later, in 1638, but John persevered, and began a new copyhold, on three lives, in 1651.¹⁹

The farmhouse, a modest affair, was on two floors, with three rooms – the hall, the kitchen and a bedroom downstairs, two more bedrooms and a wool loft upstairs. Altogether there were 4 beds – so one assumes that both sons and the daughter lived at home with their father. There were only two chairs, so at mealtimes the sons perhaps sat on the form, which is also listed. Other furnishings included two tables and a cupboard with two shelves.

John Young, the other casualty that April, was a married man, whose wife, and now widow, had the unusual name of Elflet, and there were two servants (by which they presumably meant farmworkers) living with them – these two had their own bedroom, but only one bed between them! After John died Elflet lived on for another nine years, and she too left a will with probate inventory.²⁰ She had run the farm down a bit, it seems, as her estate was worth £127, down from £231 when husband John had died. But then there were no surviving children, and her bequests were to various individuals. There is a

¹⁸ Thring: WSA P1/T/77; Young: WSA P1/Y/12.

¹⁹ WSA 2057/S12, Fugglestone court roll 18 Sept 1651.

²⁰ WSA P2/Y/29.

whiff of George Herbert's caring country parson in her will. She asks that one of her appraisors (the valuers of her estate) be my friend Hugh Chibnall, curate of Fugglestone. When John had died, he too had called on friends, 'beloved friends' he called them, to witness his will and to act as appraisors. They were John Bacon and John Hillman, who both had interesting stories of their own.

John Hillman was the miller at Quidhampton, but it was not a corn mill.²¹ His was a fulling mill, for the cleansing, felting and finishing of cloth. The Salisbury area was still an important clothmaking centre, though by now in decline, and the fulling mills dotted up and down the south Wiltshire rivers had been crucial to its prosperity. At Quidhampton the fulling mill was operating from about 1577 or earlier until it was finally destroyed during the agricultural labourers revolt in 1830.²² It stood on the river close to the present turning into the village from the Harnham main road. Hillman presumably employed staff, as in 1632 the will of John West, fuller of Quidhampton, was proved.²³ In 1616 Hillman had been one of the 'questmen', as they were known (churchwarden's assistants or sidesmen), who had helped to draw up a terrier of the land and tithes that belonged to what would become Herbert's living.²⁴ Competent as a businessman and administrator he may have been, but when he witnessed a will in 1636 it transpired that he could not sign his own name.²⁵

John Bacon, the other 'beloved friend' who was to be an appraisor, was another small farmer in the parish, and by now something of a village patriarch. He would live on until 1635, when he made his will, requesting that he be buried near the porch of Fugglestone church, and leaving ten shillings to 'our minister whome I would should preach my funerall'.²⁶ In his late 70s by 1631, his copyhold tenure dated back to 1575, 56 years before, when he was quite young.²⁷ Another named 'life' on this copyhold was Margaret Elliott, a year older than John, and still alive in 1632, though widowed and known by her married surname of Foreman. The parish registers are lost for the relevant years, but she surely must have married into the yeoman family of Forman, that in 1552 had produced Quidhampton's most famous son, the notorious

²¹ Kerridge, 1953, 49, 53.

²² Rogers, K H, *Wiltshire and Somerset woollen mills*, Pasold, 1976, 252-3.

²³ WSA P2/W/354.

²⁴ Hobbs, S (ed.), *Wiltshire glebe terriers, 1588-1827*, 2003, (Wiltshire Record Society 56), 185 (no 363).

²⁵ WSA, P2/S/543, will of William Sharpe

²⁶ TNA PROB 11/168/497.

²⁷ Kerridge, 1953, 51, 53.

astrologer, magician and medical quack, Dr Simon Forman.²⁸ He had moved to Salisbury, then to London, fell in with Shakespeare and his circle and became embroiled in scandals and lawsuits of various kinds. Margaret, 79 in 1632, would have been Simon's exact contemporary, and it is likely, therefore, that her late husband had been one of his five brothers, and so she had been the colourful doctor's sister-in-law. Herbert would have heard of Forman's exploits and adventures (who hadn't?) and would doubtless have encountered many older parishioners, like Margaret, who remembered him from forty or more years before.

In 'The Parson in Circuit' Herbert advises clergy to visit his parishioners on weekday afternoons, when they are 'wallowing in the midst of their affairs'. He goes on – 'wherefore neither disdaineth he to enter into the poorest cottage, though he even creep into it, and though it smell never so loathsomely; for both God is there also, and those for whom God died'. The probate inventories of people like John and Elflet Young, by no means the poorest cottagers, somehow enable us to creep in with Herbert's parson, find the sickly old man in his chamber within the hall, sitting up in his joined bedstead, wrapped in his feather bed, propped on a bolster, with coverlet green rug and mattress, his linen shirts over in a corner, a coffer, table and two stools against the wall and a fire burning. And when Elflet died, nine years after her husband, it was in the same room, now called the parlour, with much the same furniture around her. One recalls, in Walton's account, that Jane Herbert, the poet's wife, bought a pair of blankets to give to a poor widow in the parish – it would be pleasant to find the very blankets turning up in a probate inventory after the woman had died.

Of course, not all his parishioners lived in squalor, and Herbert, when talking of 'The Parson's Courtesy', distinguished between the poor to whom he gave alms, and those whom he would invite to his table – his dinner parties, which were presumably reciprocated. William Sharpe of Fuggleston, styled 'gentleman' would have been one such guest. The most highly-taxed inhabitant in 1626, when he died in 1636 he was worth almost £320, a considerable fortune.²⁹ His clothes were worth £40, his rings and jewels £30, and his silver and gold drinking vessels, spoons and similar £35. In the loft over his bedroom were books to the value of over £6. He seems to have

²⁸ Rowse, A H, *Simon Forman: sex and society in Shakespeare's age*, Weidenfeld, 1974; Cook, J, *Dr Simon Forman: a most notorious physician*, Chatto, 2001; Crooks, A, 'Simon Forman and Wilton Abbey', *Sarum Chronicle*, 22 (2022), 61-70.

²⁹ WSA, P2/S/543.

regarded himself as one of the Wilton elite, and although living in Fugglestone, wished to be buried in the chancel of Wilton parish church.

Just a month before Herbert took up his living, on 12 March 1630, a meeting was held of the manorial court in Bemerton.³⁰ This is interesting because it relates, not to the Wilton estate part of the parish, but to the Grobham manor embracing Bemerton and part of Quidhampton. The Latin minutes of this meeting begin by listing all the farmers on the manor, eight freeholders (who would have sublet to tenants), four leaseholders and ten copyholders (all of whom were probably hands-on farmers or, if not themselves, supervisors of employees or sub-tenants who were). There is a second list of the eight people who actually attended (the homage). The business dealt with several changes in tenancy, and then consideration was given to two requests from tenants. Robert Strugnell and widow Katherine Scamell both needed wood to repair their barns. And both were given permission to cut down trees – three and two respectively – on the land they tenanted, provided that they planted others in their place. Herbert was not the only person in Bemerton contemplating necessary repairs that spring, after the winter's ravages. Strugnell, in fact, was one of the wealthiest inhabitants in the parish – in 1628 his tax assessment was higher than that of anyone else. Perhaps significantly, too, his name heads the list of jurors, the homage, at the courts held in 1630 and again in 1635.

This 1630 meeting was recorded in a book which had seen service since 1595, and during the 1620s the minutes of one or two similar occasions were recorded each year. Little village tensions and gripes are played out in its pages, in curt Latin and eloquent English: Henry Bower the miller was presented in 1626, 'for suffering his hoggs to go about the high ways and into the corn fields'. Robert Smytten in 1623 took the law into his own hands by breaking down the pound to release his horses. He was made to pay one shilling to repair the damage but was pardoned the offence because the animals had been wrongfully impounded. James Jacobb, one of the principal farmers in Bemerton (occupying eight yardlands),³¹ seems to have ridden roughshod over the proceedings more than once. In 1626 he kept sheep in the marsh when he should not, put mares on the common among the tenants' horses, dug a boundary ditch two feet on to his neighbour's land, and made an encroachment by extending his ploughland on to the sheep down. It was time for the homage to beat the bounds, and settle such matters – which they

³⁰ WSA 2057/M3, covering 1595-1630, 1635-9.

³¹ His holding is given in the 1620 rental at the end of WSA 2057/M3.

did. But at the next court, in March 1627, we discover that they ran out of time and had not completed the job. So three days, Monday, Wednesday and Friday, were set aside in Rogation Week ‘to view and bound out all the residue’.

In his chapter ‘The Parson’s Eye’ Herbert imagines himself standing on a hill and considering his flock, and discerning two sorts of vices – the ones that are clear and evident, and those that are dark and obscure. Adam Nicolson, in his study of the Herbert family’s striving for perfection, *Earls of Paradise*, published in 2008, has a chapter about some of the vices which fractured the vision of a Pembroke-estate Arcadia.³² He describes a court case in Salisbury in 1631 (so during George Herbert’s incumbency) which resulted from a libellous song composed by a woman from Stoke Farthing near Broad Chalke. In 28 lines of rhyming couplets (perhaps written after a heavy evening in a local alehouse) she catalogued the charms of all the women of easy virtue in this tiny hamlet who might be amenable to male attention. Another case, at Broad Chalke a few years later, involved a late night ‘dancing match’ which continued until daybreak with suspicions of immorality. Even Bemerton rectory was not exempt from censure. Thomas Lawrence, Herbert’s successor, was accused of allowing skittling, bowling and dancing there on Sundays;³³ moreover Herbert’s wife, Jane, was regarded by John Aubrey as a *bona roba*, which might charitably be translated as a ‘showy dresser’ but implied something rather more dissolute.³⁴ The church court records of the period are a mine of information about the shortcomings of Wiltshire parishioners.³⁵ Anyway, to return to the manor courts.

After 1630 there were no more meetings of the court for a few years (or if there were the minutes were kept in a different book, which has been lost). Perhaps the new Grobham landlord decided that they were unnecessary. But the meetings resume in 1635, and standards seem to be slipping. The minutes begin in Latin, but soon the clerk lapses gratefully into English, ‘*in his verbis Anglorum sequuntur, videlicet*’ There are more changes in tenancies, fines for non-attendance, more trees cut down for repairs, and clearly one tenant is planning to build a new house altogether, which will require the timber and planking from four trees. Everyone has to make sure that the fence in the

³² Nicolson, A, *Earls of Paradise: England and the Dream of Perfection* (2008), 154-76 (on 160-4).

³³ Drury, J. *Music at Midnight: the life and poetry of George Herbert* (2014 edn.), 309-10.

³⁴ Bennett, K (ed.), *John Aubrey, Brief Lives*. . . . Oxford UP, 2015, vol. 2, 1655-6.

³⁵ see Ingram, M, *Church Courts, Sex and Marriage in England, 1570-1640*, Cambridge UP, 1987.

marsh (part of the common meadow) is put into repair; arrangements are made too for managing the common sheep flock, including fines set if sheep or cattle stray on to the highway (except at sheertyme). Next year there are other problems – the tracks to Kingsmead and Oats Close need repairing; tenants have taken to keeping pigs on the common illegally and are fined. Judging by the names the offenders are respectable members of society, so the fines are probably not punitive, but simply a way of collecting an unofficial rent for an activity not covered by commoners' rights. William Scammell is in trouble for not keeping his gate at the town's end in repair, and for neglecting a fence. These things mattered, of course, because everyone in the village would suffer if the stock got into their gardens through one person's negligence. The hayward, who is to be responsible for supervising taking the grass crop from the meadows, is appointed, and two other local worthies, Philip Stevens and John Best, are charged with organizing another beating of the bounds, for which they will be paid.

With a jolt we are back to George Herbert's concerns, though he was dead by the time that this particular perambulation was arranged. In his chapter, 'The Parson Condescending', he lists the four manifest advantages of processions: blessing the fruits of the field; justice in preserving the bounds; the neighbourliness of accompanying each other on the walk, and reconciling differences; and the opportunity to dole out poor relief. And who were Philip Stevens and John Best, the organisers of this event? As far back as 1616, twenty years before, they were the Bemerton churchwardens.³⁶ So these are the very men that Herbert was referring to when he wrote: 'the country parson doth often, both publicly and privately, instruct his churchwardens what a great charge lies upon them, and that indeed the whole order and discipline of the parish is put into their hands.' And he was quite right. When trees were to be cut down for repairing houses it was Philip Stevens who was to decide where their replacements were to be planted.

Such an office, Herbert decrees, was not to be vilified or debased by being cast on the lower rank of people – no indeed, both Stevens and Best were leaseholders, along with another man who attended the meetings, Edward Ward. He was a 'questman' or sidesman, the churchwarden's deputy, but 1635 was his last meeting. He died in 1636 and left a will,³⁷ in which he professed in simple piety the beliefs that Herbert had instilled or reinforced in him. His body was to be interred in Bemerton church, and he left £1 to buy a

³⁶ Hobbs 2003, 185 (no 363).

³⁷ WSA P2/W/373.

pulpit cloth for the better adorning of the same church. St Andrew's church today is quite a plain building, but it has a spectacular and glorious modern altar cloth. Clearly this faithful worshipper wanted to do something to make his church special, just as its modern congregation has done. Edward's considerable wealth enabled him to leave £100 each to his two daughters, to be paid them on their marriage (a dowry in other words) but with the stipulation that they were 'not to match or bestow themselves in marriage without the consent or good liking of their mother'.

All this came a little after Herbert had died, though during his lifetime Stevens, Best and Ward, along with the curates, must have been Herbert's right-hand men, his trusted neighbours in Bemerton. But another record of a court meeting has survived from the Fugglestone and Quidhampton end of the poet's parish.³⁸ It took place in August 1633, a few months after he died, but one of the problems it addressed must have been dragging on for some time. In among the changes in tenancy, broken fences, and trees for mending (all in Latin) is a complaint – levelled against some of the leading small farmers, including John Bacon who we met earlier – that they had extremely dangerous hearths so that the fires were built up against the walls – this was causing great fear and concern on the part of their neighbours, and they were ordered to put matters right. Again we are back to Herbert's country parson, whose consideration of providence used the motif of fire – fire which unexpectedly overturns things, just when the farmer has safely gathered in his harvest. It was one of the stories – clearly a great worry in the minds of some of his parishioners – that he used to explain spiritual truths.

Strange at first sight that it was the more affluent inhabitants who seemed to be taking risks, since they had the most to lose, but it was probably not their own homes that had the dangerous chimneys – it was those of the humble cottagers, their employees in what we would call tied cottages, about whose welfare Herbert is so concerned, but who at this date are largely absent from the records. Apart from their names – in the protestation rolls and the registers – we know almost nothing about them.

I want to introduce one more individual, like the churchwardens and the miller John Hillman a leaseholder (or tenant by indenture), in this case of the Wilton estate. His name was John Puxton, and he leased Fugglestone Farm (the complex that we know of as the Wilton House Garden Centre). In fact there were two John Puxtons, father and son, and they probably never resided in the parish, but installed tenants. John senior lived in Salisbury and was an

³⁸ WSA 2057/M5.

alderman, listed in a document of 1626 next to John Ivie, and alongside other city notables of the time, such as Henry Sherfield and Bartholomew Tookey.³⁹ A few months after this document (a list of ordinances) was signed John Ivie became mayor of Salisbury, and during his mayoralty disaster struck, in the form of plague.

This was in Spring 1627, just three years before Herbert came to Bemerton. Ivie, in recalling the terrible year, noted that:

And as many persons of the city that had any friends in the country that would receive them into part of their houses or barns did fly as if it were out of an house on fire; insomuch they did load forth of goods and wares above three score carts a day until all of any ability were gone, and this in four days.⁴⁰

Puxton was doubtless part of this exodus (perhaps one of many who had sought refuge here and had risked Herbert's parishioners with contracting the plague). Although he had connections with various places around Salisbury, Fugglestone and Wilton were where much of Puxton's property lay. Any attempt at flight from the epidemic did him no good, however, as he died on 10 April 1627 and was succeeded by his son, John Puxton junior.⁴¹ If we are to give credence to one of Walton's anecdotes, about the gentleman who used to walk into Salisbury with the poet, Puxton junior would fit the bill very well. Herbert is reported to have said to this man: 'I do this (that is, ask about your faith) the rather because though you are not of my parish, yet I receive tithe from you by the hand of your tenant. . .'

In the Wiltshire and Swindon Archives is a small undated survey of Mr Puxton's farm, as it was still described some years later.⁴² Puxton had sold his lease of the farm to a Mr Coker, and then it had been purchased by a Salisbury clothier, Thomas Cutler, probably in 1650, and he was responsible for making the survey. Cutler gave up the farm in 1677, passing the lease to his son, and died in 1684.⁴³ Cutler claims that, after letting the farm for an unspecified time

³⁹ Slack, P (ed.), *Poverty in early Stuart Salisbury*, 1975 (Wiltshire Record Society 31), 93.

⁴⁰ Slack 1975, 117.

⁴¹ Fry, 1901, 407-9.

⁴² WSA 413/74.

⁴³ WSA 2057/S5 (the survey published by Kerridge – see note 15) includes marginal notes which Kerridge ignored. There is a reference to Cutler taking on the lease in 1646 (perhaps a confusion with Mr Coker), but the date of the indenture is given as 20 May 1650. It was surrendered on 13 June 1677 in favour of his son, also Thomas, who finally surrendered the farm in 1696. Thomas Cutler junior had acquired other property in Fugglestone in 1673. Cutler senior's will was made in 1681 and proved in 1685 (WSA P4/1685/14).

he 'laid out £100 at least in setting up of hatches & in trenching [?] and drowninge the meadowes which are very much improved by it yeat not halfe soe much as they may bee'. So it seems fairly clear that the water meadows in at least part of Herbert's parish (that belonging to the earl of Pembroke's innovative Wilton estate) were not begun until some time after 1650 and before 1677, long after the poet's death. The court book for the other manor, described above, continues until 1639 without any mention of water meadows.

The history and operation of floated water meadows in south Wiltshire have received considerable scholarly attention in recent years,⁴⁴ and there can be little doubt that Herbert was aware of, and intrigued by, this technological innovation. His kinsman Rowland Vaughan had written a manual on the subject, dedicated to the earl of Pembroke and published in 1610; water meadows had begun to be constructed along the south Wiltshire rivers Nadder and Wylye during the 1620s; and the poet himself seems to allude to the technique in poems such as '*The Water-course*'.⁴⁵ For this reason, and because of a romantic notion which associates Herbert with Bemerton's meadows,⁴⁶ it is perhaps worthwhile to emphasise that in Herbert's parish itself no evidence has so far come to light for the construction of water meadows during his lifetime. I should perhaps level a mild criticism here at John Drury's acclaimed recent (2013) biography of Herbert, *Music at Midnight*. Drury has a chapter, 'Bemerton: being a country parson', which I'm sure many of you have read.⁴⁷ He begins it by imagining the poet looking out over the meadows and drawing inspiration from them. Pat Magee and Ronald Blythe had both inadvertently committed this anachronism before him, but Drury should really have known and used the volume I mentioned at the beginning which resulted from the Sarum College conference in 2007, and taken note.

Another common misapprehension concerns the nature of Bemerton as a 'country' parish. Ronald Cooley has provided a valuable service in relating Herbert's experience of the countryside to the enclosure movement and the

⁴⁴ Bettey, J H, *Wiltshire farming in the 17th century*, 2005, (Wiltshire Record Society 57), xxx-xxxiv, 236-75; Cowan, M, *Wiltshire water meadows*, Hobnob Press, 2005; Cook, H and Williamson, T (eds.), *Water meadows: history, ecology and conservation*, Windgather Press, 2007.

⁴⁵ Cooley, 2004, 104-7, 139-46.

⁴⁶ e.g. Magee, P, *George Herbert, rector of Bemerton*, 1976: '... the meadows of Bemerton where he once lived and worked are hallowed ground'; Blythe, R (ed.), *The priest to the temple or the country parson*, by George Herbert, SCM Press, 2003, ix: 'On Thursdays he walked via the water meadows to Salisbury Cathedral'.

⁴⁷ Drury, 2014, 203, 206.

various agricultural regimes practised in Wiltshire during the poet's sojourn.⁴⁸ The contrast between clayland north Wiltshire, an enclosed landscape where dairying predominated, and chalkland south Wiltshire, a country of open arable fields and sheep downland, has often been discussed, since its significance extended into the realms of social, religious and cultural history.⁴⁹ Herbert, as Cooley notes, had experience of both south and north, 'chalk and cheese', through his acquaintance with Dauntsey, Edington and Bemerton. Dauntsey, in north Wiltshire, was certainly in the cheese country, but Edington (which Cooley brackets with Dauntsey) had far more of the character of the chalklands, with its extensive sheep runs on Salisbury Plain, and hillslope arable fields remaining open until 1842.⁵⁰ In many respects it was a more typical south Wiltshire parish than Bemerton.

Herbert's portrayal of the country parson, who preaches to country people, 'thick, and heavy, and hard to raise to a point of zeal' – so you have to tell them stories – inclines the reader to assume that he is describing some isolated, backward community lost in the Wiltshire countryside. The impression is reinforced by Izaak Walton's anecdotes of what appear to be poor, ignorant rustics, stopping their ploughing when they hear the church bell. This may be true of Dauntsey and Edington, but it does not fit 17th-century Bemerton.

Bemerton, or rather Fugglestone with Bemerton (the distinction is important), was a predominantly agricultural parish in Herbert's time, but it was not typical of south Wiltshire, for two reasons. First, because of its position close to the confluence of major rivers, with only a narrow spur of high ground between them, it possessed relatively little chalk downland; and the chalk spur which its territory straddled is here mantled by a loamy soil suitable for arable cultivation. The acreages devoted to arable and to rough sheep pasture were therefore quite disproportionate to those of the prevailing sheep-and-corn husbandry practised throughout the chalkland parishes. These (including Edington) relied on intensively cultivated open arable fields, generally running up the valley sides, and extensive rough pasture for sheep on the downs beyond, the sheep being kept principally for folding on the fields in order to manure and so enrich them. But on the Wilton estate's Fugglestone manor there was only 140 acres of downland, and at Quidhampton only 100 acres, far less than most of its neighbours further

⁴⁸ Cooley, 2004, 93-107.

⁴⁹ Explored by Underdown, D, *Revel, riot and rebellion*, Oxford UP, 1985, 73-105.

⁵⁰ Rogers, K H, 'Edington', *Victoria History of Wiltshire* 8, 1965, 239-50, especially 243-5.

upstream.⁵¹

The second atypical feature of Herbert's parish also relates to its position. Anyone who has been here will be aware that Bemerton today is suburban, rather than rural, its historic settlements and much of its farmland engulfed by modern Salisbury. So familiar to us is suburban expansion that we make allowance for it, and imagine that in Herbert's day it was out in the country, separated from Salisbury by Fisherton, which was itself semi-rural. But Herbert's parish was not Bemerton, it was Fugglestone with Bemerton, and Fugglestone was very much a suburb – not of Salisbury, but of another town, its neighbour and historic rival Wilton. Fugglestone extended right up to and embraced part of urban Wilton, several of its smaller suburbs, the site of its famous sheep fair, and the approach to Wilton House and some of what is now its park.⁵² Looking the other way the development of the parish was influenced by its proximity to Salisbury, still at this period one of the largest and most influential cities in southern England. The fulling mill has already been noted – a little further there were old and important paper mills (just over the parish boundary, but right next to Bemerton),⁵³ and there are references to tentering racks (used for drying cloth in the woollen industry) and gravel pits. Salisbury gentry such as Puxton, businessmen such as Cutler, and intellectuals such as Forman, had interests in or connections with the parish. Traffic was undoubtedly heavy (relatively speaking, in 17th-century terms) along the westward roads out of Salisbury through the parish, especially on market days. What is now, or should be, a country lane linking the three village streets was then a thoroughfare between major nearby towns. This was no sequestered downland parish.

And Salisbury itself, in Herbert's day, was not some genteel, Trollopian, ideal of civilized living, to which the poet repaired for music and culture. It was a city in turmoil, ravaged by plague, in a kind of civil war with itself, between the reactionary, wealthy, St Thomas's parish, and the radical puritan, deprived poor of St Edmund's. It was struggling to cope with an influx of vagrants, rough sleepers tramping through places like Bemerton to find that Salisbury's streets were not paved with gold, and being sent back again the

⁵¹ Morris, 1962, 38, 44.

⁵² See maps in Morris, 1962, 196-7; and in more detail WSA T/A Fugglestone.

⁵³ Rogers, K, 'Harnham's Mills', in Howells, J (ed.), *Harnham Historical Miscellany* (Sarum Studies 4, 2013), 87-98 (on 88-91).

way they had come.⁵⁴ Herbert would have seen the anarchic, infested Salisbury of John Ivie, not that of the restoration culture which a generation later, when Walton wrote his hagiography, was beginning to adorn the Close with its grand houses.

There are plenty of other themes that could be explored when considering Herbert's time at Bemerton, as portrayed in his own works and those of his biographers. Was he, for instance, exceptionally devout compared with his fellow clergy (as Walton maintains)? In recent years I have spent a great deal of time editing the annotated parish registers of one of his contemporaries and neighbours, Thomas Crockford, from further up the Wylde valley, and these suggest an equally conscientious man of God labouring in three adjacent parishes.⁵⁵ What is more, the evidence Crockford provides, about his parishioners in Wylde, Stockton and Fisherton Delamere, may be set alongside other sources, such as those I have used for Bemerton and Fugglestone, to build up a detailed picture of the world in which Herbert and Crockford were ministering. The thought I would end with is this.

Many scholars in recent years have delved into the significance and purpose of Herbert's *Country Parson*. They have seen in it theological messages reflecting the Laudian and Puritan debates of the time, or a political statement about the authority of church and state at parish level, or a literary conceit, a kind of utopia not grounded in any kind of reality. They have viewed it as a kind of theological football to be used by later churchmen to kick at their opponents. Local historians may not be qualified to enter this fray. But it is our duty to tug at some of these academic sleeves, and to point out that perhaps Herbert's parish as they imagine it was nothing like the place he actually lived and worked in – and surely some consideration should be given to the context in which his treatise was actually written, and to the ordinary folk among whom Herbert chose to spend his final years, and who filled this little church each Sunday?

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⁵⁴ Clark, P and Slack, P, *Crisis and order in English towns 1500-1700*, Routledge 1972, 164-203; Chandler, J, *Endless Street*, Hobnob Press 1983, 168-70.

⁵⁵ Chandler, J (ed.), *The Parish Registers of Thomas Crockford, 1561-1633* (Wilts Record Soc, vol. 73, 2020).