

This is the Thirty-sixth of an occasional series of articles by David Stone about incidents in the history of Swanton Morley and its church

The Collett Family Part 3: William Collett Junior

We have already seen how William Collett Jnr was the youngest child (and only son) of William Collett Snr. He was baptised in Swanton Morley, on 17 August 1796, by his father, who had been appointed curate here in July 1784. The Collett Family website says that his early education was at the following schools: North Walsham, Hingham and Fransham. This is a little odd, because his father was an active curate of Swanton Morley during this period, so he would not have wanted to live elsewhere. So, I think that some of these must have been boarding schools. He entered Trinity College Cambridge on 18 Nov 1814, but after just over a year he 'migrated' to Sidney Sussex College, being awarded a BA in 1819. He did not achieve his MA until 1825, by which time he was married.

His clerical career

Like his father he was an active pluralist, and his list of appointments is too lengthy and complicated to describe here. Suffice it to say that he was ordained priest on 15 October 1820, and that, almost immediately, his father, William Snr, who held the patronage of the two churches in Surlingham (St Saviour's and St Mary's) appointed him vicar there. So he continued the family tradition of receiving a nice income from a derelict church (St Saviour's). He was appointed as stipendiary curate to Wickham Market in Suffolk for a couple of years (1820-22) and this brought in a useful extra £100 p.a. He was appointed curate of St Mary's, Thetford (not to be confused with St Mary's, Surlingham), in 1828 and, after 1829, St Mary's, Surlingham, would appear to have been looked after by various stipendiary curates. He was rector of Thetford from 1841 to 1861. In retirement, he spent the period from 1862 to 1865 as the chaplain of Morden College at Blackheath in south-east London, an appointment which he obtained through a family connection. This college was founded in 1685 as a home for "poor merchants and such as have lost their estates by accidents, dangers and perils of the seas ..."

Problems with his parishioners

It would seem that William Jnr was a difficult man to deal with, even when judged by the standards of his time. A book by Robert Lee describes an incident which makes this clear.

"One parish which clearly had profound difficulties in its relationship with an absentee rector was the parish of Surlingham. In the *Norwich Mercury* of 8 December 1830, the Rev William Collett, incumbent of St Mary's Thetford and of the ruined church of St Saviour's in Surlingham, published an address in response to the unrest that had disrupted his attempts to gather the St Saviour's tithes."

Part of this address said:

"I was sorry for the sake of the poor, that some of you met at the Ferry House in an unlawful manner But I have no doubt that you were misled and made tools of by others I have received from some of the farmers a notice to gather my tithes in kind, or else to take in future just what they please to offer. I cannot submit to such an unjust demand." (Note that the Ferry House Inn still survives.)

On 28 December the farmers named by Collett, struck back. In their letter to the *Norfolk Chronicle* they described the impossibility of dealing with a rector who insisted upon communicating exclusively through his agent. Furthermore, they said that Collett had stubbornly refused to abate tithes that were much higher than in neighbouring parishes, thereby limiting their scope for increasing wages to labourers:

"When we paid our tithes to his agent, we enquired what terms we might expect for the next year, and received for answer that he would not alter one farthing from what he had previously fixed."

The Tithe Commutation Act of 1836

This changed the whole system of tithes. By this act the government decided to commute all tithes and to replace them by a rent-charge. Tithe Commissioners were appointed and the process of commutation began. In 1843, William Jnr was forced to accept an award, but it was a very generous one. As Lee says:

“He was awarded a rent-charge of £309 for the defunct parish of St Saviour’s, whose boundaries could no longer be traced on maps or on the ground, while the Rev. John Scott, resident clergyman and vicar of the existing church of St Mary’s, was awarded £101 for his parish even though he was effectively the minister of the whole of Surlingham. As rector of a church which was an ivy-clad ruin, and of a parish that had disappeared from the landscape, Collett presided over the ecclesiastical equivalent of a rotten borough. His refusal to contribute to a Surlingham ‘Hail Storm’ fund was a further indication of the myriad small ways in which many clergymen managed to alienate themselves from their communities.”

His family

His first wife was Phyllis Preston Reynolds, whom he married in the church of St Nicholas, Great Yarmouth, in Oct 1820, and their first five children were born in Bramerton, which is very near Surlingham. However, he was appointed curate at St Mary’s Thetford in Nov. 1828 and their sixth child was born in Thetford in 1830. Unfortunately, Phyllis died on 4th June 1831, at the age of 29.

On 2 June 1835 he married Ellen Clarke Bidwell in Thetford. She was 13 years younger than him, and they had a further seven children, all of whom were born in Thetford. Mary who was born in 1840, died when she was less than a year old, and the youngest child, Alfred died in infancy.

There is only room here to mention the careers of two of his children:

- **William Reynolds Collett**, the eldest son of William Collett Jnr by his first marriage, was a Fellow of Caius College from 1845 to 1857, and librarian to the college. He was ordained deacon at Ely in 1846, and became priest in 1849. However, what is mainly of interest to us is the family into which he married. In July, 1858, he married Mary Hoste, the daughter of Colonel Sir George Charles Hoste who had fought at the Battle of Waterloo. Incidentally, Sir George Hoste was the brother of Captain Sir William Hoste, one of Nelson’s frigate captains. (You might like to note that the *Pitt Arms* at Burnham Market changed its name to the *Hoste Arms* in 1811.) From 1856 until 1902 William Reynolds Collett was the Rector of Hethersett with Canteloff in Norfolk, and from 1879 to 1897 he was the Rural Dean of Humbleyard.
- **Henry Collett** was the eldest son by his second marriage. He attended the Addiscombe Military Academy College in Croydon and, following his graduation in 1855, he sailed to India, where he joined the Bengal Indian Army, rising to the rank of Lieutenant Colonel in 1879. In the Second Anglo-Afghan War (1878-1880) he acted as quartermaster-general on the staff of Sir Frederick Roberts (later Field Marshal Lord Roberts). However, because of increasing deafness he decided to retire from the army in 1893. He was honoured by Queen Victoria when he became General Sir Henry Collett, KBE. He was also a keen and knowledgeable student of botany and was made a member of the Linnean Society in 1879. In retirement he worked assiduously at the Royal Botanic Gardens at Kew.

The death of William Jnr

When William Jnr retired as rector of Thetford, he and Ellen moved to Kingston-upon-Thames, and they can be found there in the 1861 census. However, they were on holiday at Whitby in Yorkshire when William died suddenly on 11 Sept 1866, when he was in his 70th year. He was buried in Charlton Cemetery in Kent, but, as we have seen, his name is inscribed on his parents’ tomb in Swanton Morley churchyard. Ellen was still living at Kingston-upon-Thames at the time of the 1881 census.