

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

Continuing the Story of the Rev. Edward Henry Evans-Lombe

By an odd chance I came across a first-hand account of the impression that the above rector made on a village boy. You may recall that I told you about James Lewton-Brain who was killed in WW1. He had a brother, Charles, who survived the war and eventually became a renowned local archaeologist. In his little book *Walking on Buried History* (Lark Press, June 2009) he includes a short chapter on what he calls *The Formidable Parson*. He actually calls him the Rev. X, but there is no doubt who it is! Here are some extracts:

“My parents taught at a Church school and we were therefore intimately connected with that Institution. Attendance at church was strictly enforced by this extraordinary man (Rev. .X). I can still see his white-bearded face and angry eyes. One dire result for us children was strict attendance at Sunday school, morning and afternoon, which came after church service. Himself sometimes gave lessons in the Sunday school, and if a child did not pay attention a calf-bound Bible would be thrown at his head. To me, attendance at church services was a torture with the sun shining invitingly on the meadows outside.

“This parson thought no small beer of himself and his family, and expected the women and girls to bob a curtsey, and the males to touch their forelocks to them. There was, however, at the far end of the village, a group of Radicals and Dissenters, led by a malefactor named Rix. One day the rector met the same Rix and accosted him; ‘Rix, I hear that your daughter Emma did not acknowledge my daughter when they met in the village.’ To which he received the unexpected and wrath-provoking reply: ‘If yar daughter slope (curtsey) to my daughter Emma, Emma’ll slope to her, but if she don’t, she ’ont’.

Evans-Lombe and Armstrong

Although Rev. Evans-Lombe and the Rev, Benjamin Armstrong, vicar of Dereham were both members of the Church of England, they were almost at opposite ends of the theological spectrum. Evans-Lombe was an Evangelical, whilst Armstrong was described as a ‘moderate Tractarian’. Now, the Tractarians were a High Church element very similar to the Oxford Movement. The result was that they did not get on. In fact, Evans-Lombe’s predecessor at Swanton Morley, Henry Tacy, was also an Evangelical and Armstrong does not appear to have got on with him either, although he did visit him when he was old and ill, and this seems to have brought about some sort of reconciliation.

However, Evans-Lombe and Armstrong were of much the same age (Armstrong was born in 1817 and Evans-Lombe in 1823) and Armstrong had to face very similar problems to those that Evans-Lombe had encountered with the Dissenters and the unions. Thanks to the fact that Armstrong wrote his famous diaries, we have a fairly detailed account of what occurred – even if events are only seen through Armstrong’s eyes.

Just as in Swanton Morley, there were various attempts to gain control of the Vestry. One such attempt came in 1865 when a coal merchant called Thomas Gidney stood for the post of People’s Churchwarden. He particularly attacked Armstrong on the issue of mismanagement of the administration of charities (just as Evans-Lombe had been attacked in Swanton Morley). However, being a committed Nonconformist he also attacked Armstrong’s ‘rampant ritualism’.

Gidney did not get in, but he continued to be a thorn in Armstrong's flesh.

Joseph Arch

Joseph Arch was an agricultural worker who was a well-respected Primitive Methodist preacher, and he founded the National Agricultural Workers Union in 1872. We have descriptions by Armstrong of two meetings that Arch held in the area.

The first was held in the Corn Hall in Dereham in April 1875 and, rather surprisingly, Armstrong called in to listen and he said that Arch's address was decidedly revolutionary. He also said that:

"The heat in the hall was intolerable and, "I felt quite green all evening from the steam arising from so many with whom cleanliness is not always accounted next to Godliness!"

The next meeting was held in Swanton Morley the following year, and this too was extremely well attended. As Armstrong said:

"At Hoe in the afternoon, found that the countryside had gone to Swanton Morley to hear Mr Arch, the Labourers' Union man. Even my school mistress had fled and only one man in church, to whom I gave a shilling for his steadfastness. Mr Lombe the rector of Swanton, voluble and bad tempered generally, very conservative and Low Church, is said to be almost beside himself at this aggression on the part of Mr Arch, but as he does not scruple to aggress into the parishes of his brother clergymen in the interests of the Church Association, I don't much pity him."

Now, the Church Association, which had been founded in 1865, was an Anglican organisation which was active in opposition to Anglo-Catholicism, Ritualism and the Oxford Movement – i.e. everything that Armstrong stood for. It would appear that Evans-Lombe had been doing a bit of evangelising in the Dereham area without asking Armstrong's permission. Certainly, there was no love lost between them.

Lewton-Brain's book adds an amusing postscript to this:

"The then vicar of Dereham was anathema to our Rev. X, being very High Church, fasting in Lent etc.; it was related that one Easter he had blessed and prepared a large cup of communion wine and, as the congregation was very small, he was left with three quarters of the sacred wine which he had to drink himself. To a man half-starved by Lenten fasting this was disastrous. Quite a scandal it caused."

The death of Evans-Lombe and the building of a church in his memory

He retired as rector in about the autumn of 1894, and by the time of the 1901 census he and his second wife Mary were living in Westhoe, Torquay. He died there on 12 August 1909, but his wife lived on for some years and next time I shall tell you how she came to fund the building of a little church in Canada in his memory. This church is situated in the town of 'Quick' in British Columbia and they celebrated the centenary of its foundation in October 2014. Mel Coulson, one of their churchwardens, kindly wrote to the Norwich Diocese to inform them of this event and since then I have enjoyed a lively correspondence with him.