

HASLEMERE UNCOVERED



Was the curate a ‘good egg’ - in parts?

In my article in February’s magazine, I suggested that Haslemere’s most infamous curate, the reverend James Fielding might be worthy of an article. So it appears. Sorry about the title; it appealed to my sense of humour. The answer to the question posed will become clear as the tale unfolds.

James Fielding was born in July 1740, the son of another James Fielding, ‘Gentleman’, of Silver Street, now known as Beak Street, in Soho. Fielding however, was not landed gentry, and a career was needed. Traditionally the eldest son inherited the family estates i.e. land, the second joined the army and the third went into the church. There was no estate to run and the military was distinctly unappealing as, at the time of leaving Harrow school (c 1757), we were again at war with the French. Many red-blooded Englishmen would have relished the chance to make their mark in battle, but apparently not so James. The navy was rejected too, as the hanging of Admiral Byng had just taken place and recruitment had taken a dive.

Instead James went up to Cambridge in February 1758, first to St John’s, then to Trinity College. He was awarded a BA in 1763 and was ordained deacon at Norwich on September 23rd 1764. It is probably fair to point out that his degree was attained without demonstrating any great intellectual endeavour. Trinity at the time, and in common with many other colleges at both Oxford and Cambridge, was noted for idleness, incompetence and corruption, and with only two tutors the college was not likely to make great demands on James’ capacity for work. The examination was oral and the standards were low. He was subsequently awarded an MA in 1766. This required only a small fee.

As a newly ordained deacon James Fielding was appointed curate of Barney, a remote hamlet in north Norfolk quite near to Holt. Holt was notable in that it had been razed by fire in 1708 and a substantial public fund had been raised for its restoration. The fund was administered by several local worthies including the vicar. This interesting feature was not lost on our hero.

James Fielding Senior, while not a man of great means, was able to purchase an advowson, 'the right of an appointment to an ecclesiastical benefice', the benefice in question being that of Cranleigh (then spelt Cranley) and James Junior was installed as rector on the same day that he was ordained priest at Winchester in May 1765. He was to retain the living of Cranley until 1806. His achievements there appear minimal: he let the churchyard to a local farmer to graze sheep and these had to be removed by parishioners from the church itself on those occasions when a church service had to be held.

Haslemere, more specifically Piperham, had always been a chapelry of the church at Chiddingfold, but in 1768 gained its independence and young Fielding's big break came in 1772 when the curacy of Haslemere came vacant. Why would a Rector wish to take on the work of a curate in sleepy Haslemere, a rural backwater with just a few fine houses owned by rich iron-founders and landowners?

James and his wife moved into The Town House in 1772. Much mystery surrounds this wife, and records show a terse statement that she died in 1773. Much later there was another very young Mrs Fielding, 18 years old Elizabeth Shephard whom he married at the age of 57.

James had arrived in more ways than one, for at the same time, he was appointed Justice of the Peace, a position which gave him huge power: control of both the church and the law. At that time there were more than 200 capital offences and it gave him much scope for taking bribes. Poor relief also provided opportunities for the unscrupulous. The Overseers of the Poor were appointed by the Justices and the records of the time reveal some interesting and unaccountably successful candidates for the job. The substantial budgets allocated for victuals - food and beer - sounded generous but frequently that generosity was not apparent to the poor for whom it was intended. So it would appear was the case in Haslemere, for the Reverend Fielding prospered as never before.

In 1792 Fielding bought a large estate which included Lythe Hill where he built an imposing Palladian pile, 'Denbigh House'. He also bought the more strategically significant Chase Farm. We need to remember that he had been appointed as a JP for the Haslemere area and Chase Farm on the West Sussex border marked the limit of his judicial authority.

The well-recorded sailor's murder at the Punchbowl in September 1786 highlights the part played by Fielding, for he was the JP who, after the capture of the three ruffians, committed them to trial at the Kingston

Assize. Their hanging was a commonplace sentence for highway robbery. Two brothers from Midhurst, the Drewett brothers, were well known highwaymen and they were also Fielding's employees. While they confined their activities to Surrey they were safe because the JP would be very lenient, but they became careless and held up the stage over the border in Sussex. They were hanged at Midhurst in 1799.



Chase Farm

Chase Farm yielded some interesting finds in the early 1900s in the shape of brass mail-bag tags, similar to ones found in the cellar of the Town House in Haslemere.

Fielding went on to add the delightful Church Hill House to his property portfolio and certainly he lived in great style as he also inherited the patronage of Cranleigh from his father which would have included the Manor House and the 70 acres of glebe land that went with it.

Following his marriage in 1796 he had four children, one surviving daughter married Alfred Trimmer and they lived at the Town House, another married a local surgeon and lived at Church Hill house. Fielding himself died in 1817 aged 77, his much younger wife died aged 58 in 1836. Though they lived then in Wonersh, both are buried in the family vault, now under the porch of St Bartholemew's church after it was enlarged in the 19th century.

With a landed estate of more than 5000 acres as well as several fine houses there is little doubt that the Reverend Fielding was indeed the villainous highwayman that legend suggests.

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I am indebted to Mr Tony Douglass for his painstaking research and to my old friend John Sugden who introduced him to me.