

Robert	7 October 1632	
Christopher	14 September 1634	31 March 1635
Zachary	23 April 1637	
Thomas	4 November 1638	
Xtopher	29 June 1641	1 July 1641

Dowe was a confirmed Arminian (see Introduction) and on 4th July 1635 was licensed by the Vicar-General to preach "the word of God throughout the diocese of Chichester". By the late 1630s he was one of "the leading clerics in Sussex" and "a vigorous controversialist who defended confession as 'agreeable to the constant and resolved doctrine of this Church'". The rise and establishment of such clerics, and the favour of the Bishop of Chichester, encouraged Dowe's career in the area. On 4th January 1640 he was recommended by Dr Edward Burton to be Justice of the Peace, a position he held until 1642. With the authority of both magistracy and diocesan preacher he traversed the countryside. Incidents such as that at Heathfield on 8th September 1640 would not have endeared him to all his flock. He instructed the churchwardens of the Church to remove an offending private pew, "which encroaches on the middle part of the Church and is an annoyance to those that sit neare". He strenuously upheld the presentment of recusants; while on the other hand, the protestant puritans described Arminian clergy as "lordly prelates raised from the dunghill, equally common in birth to the meanest peasants".

In 1636 Dowe obtained dispensation to hold in plurality with Battle the Hastings Church of All Saints, one of the two medieval Churches in the now "old town". He was presented by Charles I and Archbishop Laud as successor to Alexander Chaderton. But the Civil War had taken hold. The Long Parliament held from 1640 to 1653. Laud was executed in 1645, the King in 1649. The Committee of Plundered Ministers was appointed in 1642 to remove the episcopacy "as a great impediment to the reformation" and to appoint "godly and well affected ministers", expelling those of a different theology.

Dowe was sequestered from Battle and Hastings in 1643 and virtually disappears. He is known to have witnessed the Will of Henry Vertue, vicar of All Hallows, Honey Lane, London on 10th January 1655; and his estate papers proved in 1657 attest as his being of Kennington, Lambeth, in the County of Surrey. His wife, Mary, who was granted the administration, had already, on 23rd January 1646/7 been granted by the Committee that one-fifth of the revenue of the living from which a minister had been removed. It would seem that Dowe might well have been one of those ministers either incarcerated or kept under surveillance around Lambeth Palace by Parliamentary order; and that he ended there in 1656 or 1657 in reduced circumstances and obscurity. All Hallows was destroyed in the Great Fire of 1666 and subsequently united with St Mary-le-Bow in 1670.

NOTES

1. Other forms of name are Dow and Dawe.
2. Dr Edward Burton was instituted to the rectory of neighbouring Sedlescombe on

11th December 1628.

3. A Laurence Chaderton was a Fellow of Christ's College 1568-77 and then Master of Emmanuel College, Cambridge.

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JOHN ROWLANDSON : Incumbent 1643-1644

Following the sequestration and disappearance of Christopher Dowe, the "vicarage" was sequestered to the use of John Rowlandson, "a Godly and learned divinne". Rowlandson had been ejected by royalist forces from his living of Bakewell, Derbyshire. Dowe signed the churchwardens' account book finally in 1642. In April 1643 it was signed by "William Browne", in April 1644 by John Rowlandson and in April 1645 by Henry Fisher; though it is difficult to ascertain which of these might be actual signatures and which the names of incumbents entered by the clerk. Rowlandson's stay, if ever he took up residence, was short. He was clearly in favour with the parliamentary authorities and incumbent at Bakewell from 1615, returned there in 1644, to die in 1661. Like his successor Henry Fisher, we find, understandably, no record of his appointment in the diocesan records. Nonetheless, he is a link in the chain.

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Records and Manuscripts

Battle Churchwardens' Accounts, ESRO A2776

HENRY FISHER : Dean 1645-1664

A Henry Fisher appears in Peile's "Christ's College" recorded texts as son of Richard, born in Ireland, at school in Cork under Mr Godinch (sic), for three years at Trinity College, Dublin under Mr Rob Coke, admitted Christ's between 21 January and 20 February 1642/3 (sizar to Mr H. More), matriculated July 1643. A Henry Fisher appears in the records as appointed in 1663/4 to the parishes of Wartling, Sussex, and Hooe (mistakenly given as Worthing and Hove), the patron in both cases being the Viscount Montague. Peile seems inclined to associate this Henry Fisher with the "Irish" graduate of Christ's and therefore with Battle where he was before moving to Wartling; and indeed there was a college link with Ireland. Milton's tutor in 1624/5 was William Chappell who became Bishop of Cork and Provost of Trinity College, Dublin. Nonetheless, the matriculation date appeared suspiciously too close to the information supplied by the Proceedings of the Committee of Plundered Ministers that on 15th February 1644/5 after Rowlandson's departure from Battle they had appointed "Henry Fisher Mr of Artes Minister of the Word a Godly and orthodox divine to forthwith officiate as vicar" and granted the tithes to him. An alternative was therefore sought. In 1613 a Henry Fisher was baptised on 1st April at St Clement Danes, Westminster. His grandfather, Christopher, was a grocer of London, his father, Henry, a barrister of the Middle Temple in 1608, having graduated at Broadgate Hall, Oxford; both were armigers. The younger Henry himself graduated BA in 1634 and MA at St Alban's Hall, Oxford 1638. It will be clear as the narrative proceeds that this was the Henry Fisher of the 1645 appointment.

Once at Battle, Fisher settled at the deanery and with his wife, Winnifred, raised a family of children:-

Name	Baptised	Buried
Winnifred	18 July 1647	29 August 1647
William		13 July 1648
William	18 June 1650	
Samuell	21 February 1651/2	21 February 1652
Christopher	7 January 1657	

Two points arise from the parish registers. Against a number of the above entries is inserted "minister of the parish" and it would seem that as time went on Fisher became more and more accepted (actually confirmed as "vicar" in 1657 by William Yalden) appreciating this fact by his own inserted entries as such against his family in the parish records. Secondly, a marginal note beside the birth and burial of Winnifred in 1647 says "Oliver Cromwell's Chaplain" in an early hand but not that of Fisher himself. Further on is a second semi-smudged out entry and it has been surmised that this title threw light on Fisher's unknown whereabouts between 1638 and 1645. No such evidence has come to light and the entry is now dismissed as a piece of hostile scurrility. It is perhaps more likely that he held a curacy or living elsewhere and as a "Godly and orthodox divine" was of a Puritan religious conviction acceptable to the Committee for the Approval of Public Preachers.

Dowe's removal followed by Rowlandson's drawing of parish revenues, not to say parliamentary supremacy against a submerged ancient regime, must have drawn some resentment against Fisher. On 17th January 1645/6 upon Fisher's petition, "some articles exhibited against him were referred to the Committee of Parlt Sittings in ye said Towne of Battell" to hear his exceptions to the witnesses. On 6th June 1646 is an order for the Committee at Battle to hear witnesses for the defence of Mr Fisher. Nothing further seems to have occurred. In 1665 and 1668 there was further court action between Henry Fisher, Clerk, plaintiff, and Wm Bigg and Joseph Bishop, defendants on the subject of Battle tithes - but this was not an uncommon source of dispute between clergy and parishioners.

Nine years after his arrival in Battle, the following entry occurs in the parish register:- "Henry Fisher of Battell, Clarke, chosen Register accordinge to the late Acte, for entry of Registringe of Birthes, Marriages and Burialls by ye consent of ye parishioners and sworne before mee, and to testify my approbation of him I have entered it in this Booke the day he took his oath." So - approbation by the authorities and by local congregation. Fisher was formally appointed "vicar" on 27th November 1657. William Yalden, gent, an ironmaster of Blackdown, West Sussex, had purchased two thirds of the living sequestered from the Montagues by Parliament in 1650 with parts also of Cowdray, though he returned them in 1660. Between 1652 and 1660 he was a Justice of the Peace. In 1654 Fisher leased land from the Battle Abbey estate.

A telling anecdote is recounted by Vere Hodge. The sole communion cup in the Chichester diocese of Edward VI's reign, hallmarked 1552, was described in the 1651 inventory of Church goods as a "silver bowl". In this way, the Cromwellian incumbent averted its confiscation.

On 9th February 1663/4, Henry Fisher resigned as Dean of Battle in favour of William Watson and took Watson's former living of Hooe, a parish five miles to the south west. Francis, 3rd Viscount Montague, was once more patron of Hooe, Wartling and Battle - and Fisher became incumbent of Wartling also. Watson had come to Wartling in 1662,

taking over from John Moore who also held Hooe. Lower writes of John Moore, "he was the son of William Moore, Vicar of Wartling he afterwards became Vicar of his father's parishand was ejected from it in 1662. Moore was buried at Wartling on 13th February 1669.

The Subsidiaries Book gives Fisher's induction at Wartling as 2nd February 1665, a year after his arrival in Hooe; probably on account of diocesan delays and Moore's resettlement. Fisher was buried at Wartling on 8th September 1680. The register records "buried Mr Henry Fisher, Vicar of this parish of Wartling and also of the parish of Hooe for 17 years last past. He was buried according to ye law (of the) Woolen Act as approved by a certificate from Sir N. Pelham."

Thus Henry Fisher, moved to and died in office in adjoining rural parishes in his mid-sixties. In his Will, written in 1654 and proved on 30th September 1680, he left his wife, Winnifred, the yearly rent from his house in Speine Lane near Boswell Court, London (interestingly, Cromwell and Milton property was nearby), and his executors were his surviving sons, William and Samuell. Samuell (whose birth/baptism of around 1659 has not been traced) followed his father, first by matriculating at Christ Church, Oxford, aged 18, BA 1674, MA 1677 and entered the Church, Woodnorton in 1684 and Swanton Novers in 1692, both Norfolk parishes. He died an early death in February 1692 and was buried at Woodnorton.

The breakthrough has been reserved till the last. The Will of Henry Fisher of London, gent, dated 24th June 1651 was proved on 14th October 1651. Administration was granted to Henry Fisher, eldest son of the deceased testator. In the Will Henry Fisher "desires that there may be peace between his son and his son-in-law Mr Christopher Bodly." An entry in the Battle Marriage Register reads that on 27th September 1649, Christopher Bodly was married to Magdalen Fisher. Thus the Dean of Battle 1645 to 1664 was the Henry Fisher of London and of Oxford University.

NOTES

1. Fisher was Personal Chaplain to William, Earl of Salisbury; and to the second Earl of Winchilsea, Heneage Finch, in March 1663/4.
2. Patronage of the living has included the three adjacent parishes of Ninfield, Hooe and Wartling combined for many centuries and certainly relates to the three parishes being a combined prebend of St Mary in the Castle, Hastings. All prebends of this former Royal Free Chapel were granted to Sir Anthony Browne in 1547/8.

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THE FOUR DEANS - CONCLUSION

It should not perhaps be surprising, though it is faintly, that 17th century Battle should so reflect national history. Wythines, for example, a traditional priest, whose philosophy reached back to the Church as Henry VIII left it; and that not lessened by his incumbency in a Parish Church where lay the effigy of Henry's Master of Horse who had presided over the closure of the Abbey and its conversion to great house and landed estate. Admittedly, Sir Anthony's successors' main centre became Cowdray; but in Elizabethan times the Montagues' Catholicism and friendship were not unacceptable at court and the records speak of 'martyrs' and Wythines's association in Battle with Lady Magdalen at the Abbey, Gray, a priest, and Terry, a schoolmaster. On the other hand, a close watch was kept on such contacts by Burghley's operations. Despite such, and the Armada and the Gunpowder Plot, Wythines survived to die at a ripe old age in 1615 as Parish Priest of Battle Church.

Bainbridge drew the revenues of Battle from 1615 to at least 1629; and at Icklesham, to judge by the complaints of 1644, for a great deal longer. Years, so it would seem, of absentee incumbent, and although "scandalous curates" may be an overstatement of the

times, neither parish benefitted from the scholar of some eminence appointed to them but were shruven by ordained local residents whom it is difficult to trace and administered, as the accounts show, by local laity. Bainbridge, with a lifetime career as scholar, Cambridge college master, university vice-chancellor, was eventually challenged by the new masters of the realm, Parliament. His defence lay in the importance of national higher education where his work lay; and with minor admonition he was permitted to retain his mastership and died in 1646, not unlike his predecessor Wythines, in relatively old age.

Bainbridge's successor, Dowe, from the same Cambridge college, Christ's, was a very different man. At a time when Laud's influence was paramount, he was much in favour with that Archbishop "whose creature and champion he was". He was fully resident in Battle, where he raised a family, received permission to preach widely and was, in 1640, appointed justice of the peace. In 1636 he was allowed to take All Saints Church in Hastings (later the scene of Titus Oates) in plurality; and if the episode of the pews in Heathfield is taken into account, was a forceful prelate who made enemies. In 1644/5 he was understandably assailed by the parliamentary committee and disappears from the scene, to appear eventually and finally in a Kennington, Lambeth civil law reference. The supposition is that he retired there. But with his royalist reputation, there is some likelihood that he may have been one of those clergy, at least for a time, who were incarcerated there.

Finally the parliamentary-appointed Henry Fisher, after two years in which it would appear the parish lay authorities (with a local curate?) administered the Church accounts for the benefit of a "plundered" clergyman. There was some thought that Fisher was yet one more graduate of Christ's, with a background of Cork and Trinity College, Dublin, education. This the research group rejected in favour of descent from a London merchant and a London lawyer. Fisher's appointment appears never to have been episcopally endorsed; though he survived through fifteen years of presbyterianism, was confirmed as Dean in 1657, conformed in 1662, and was given Wartling and Hooe until his death. The entry in the parish register, "Cromwell's chaplain", is perhaps more slighting than descriptive. On the other hand, the story of his saving the chalice from confiscation by identifying it as a vase, and raising a clerical family traceable in the next century, would appear to designate a moderate in tune with an England not unwilling, in 1660, to shake off the religious excesses of the past hundred years.

Appendix 1

One result of the present research was the correction of an early record concerning St Mary's Church (a chart on the vestry wall which formed the basis of a board in the St Catherine Chapel listing the Deans of the past). On this list a Dean, Robert Acre, is interposed after Dowe.

This arose from an original error traced to Gell's "Monumental Inscription in the Churches and Churchyards of Sussex", 1820 (British Library Add Ms 30, 081 f 36). The obverse of folio 36 relates to the brass in memory of John Wythines, the reverse to the fifteenth

century brass to Dean Robert Clere, both of which brasses still lie in the chancel. The upper halves of the folios bear faint pencilled descriptions of the figures but with no actual drawings. Below these, Gell transcribes the epitaphs, that on the reverse beginning "Decamus gratia Robertus Acre vocatus prudens". It is for consideration whether the original fifteenth century inscriber did not intend "decanus", that is, "dean". But it is evident that Gell misread the fifteenth century Robert Clere for Robert Acre; so that with the positioning in his manuscript, Robert Acre was subsequently entered as a seventeenth century successor to Christopher Dowe, again incorrectly described as buried in 1633. The burial, recorded in the parish register, was that of Dowe's infant son, Christopher. A Dean Acre there never was.

Appendix 2

One further small piece of information came to light. More than one individual under examination was recorded as having resided at Oxford colleges not recognisable today. On investigation, "St Alban's Hall" proved to be a medieval hall eventually incorporated with Merton College in 1881. Further, at one time in the Middle Ages there were eight "Broadgate Halls". One survived, to be transformed into Pembroke College in 1624.

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