

Dr Barnes was Rector of Somerton from 1875 to 1923. This article by John Webb focuses on his work in the community. Under his stimulus the family were also most generous in their support for the church where he left good evidence of his support for the Arts and Crafts and Pre-Raphaelite movements. He commissioned the wonderful choir stalls in the chancel and, to commemorate William Barnes who appointed him, the window at the east end of the North aisle by Christopher Whall.

**THE BARNES FAMILY AND THEIR CONNECTION WITH THE VILLAGE OF
SOMERTON, OXFORD.
WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO THE VILLAGE HALL.**

To understand the connection between the Barnes Family, the village of Somerton, and the village hall the relationship between this particular family, the villagers, and the tenant farmers requires investigation and clarification. I am attempting in this article to shed some light on this relationship and the manner in which the Barnes family held the villagers in high esteem and wished to leave them a lasting legacy when the time came for them to sever their ties with the village. That legacy, in the form of a village meeting place, was to be a focal point of village life for ninety years and will now be remembered in the name of the new village hall as it is reconstructed in the first decade of the twenty first century.

The Barnes family began their connection with the village around 1875, the year in which William Barnes of Great Duryard in Devon acquired the advowson (the right to nominate the Rector) and nominated George Edward Barnes who was the Rector between 1875 and 1923. He was no absentee: the first entry in the marriage register of a marriage conducted by the Rev. Barnes whose signature was usually "Geo. E Barnes", was that of Dick Gibbard to Elizabeth Prior on 31st July of that year.

The Reverend Barnes and his family occupied the whole of what is now the Old Rectory at the bottom of Church Street. This large house was, I believe, the only one that was not in the ownership of the Earl of Jersey who, at this time owned the village and surrounding lands as "The Jersey Estate". It was owned by the Diocese of Oxford and was reserved for the Rector of St James Church and his family during their period of Christian service to the village. The Barnes family had quite a large household, and several members of the community served there, usually in the capacity of servants in the house or as coachmen, gardeners, and stable hands, with one or two itinerant workers taken on at harvest or during the year when required. Notable amongst these was Horace Baldwin who served the family all his life as a gardener from when he left school in 1915 at the age of fourteen right up to the mid sixties when, as well as being the village paper merchant, he also "kept an eye" on the property on behalf of the sons of Dr Barnes who were now the owners of the property. My own Aunt Hilda also began her working life in the kitchen at The Old Rectory, and many others were glad of the wages generated from this employment.

Upon becoming the Rector of the parish The Rev. Barnes set about making his mark on the lives of the villagers. He was quick to spot that there was a glaring difference between the lives of the labourers who tenanted the cottages and the high life enjoyed by the farmers, largely at the tenants' expense, and he set about doing his best, within the bounds of his duties, to improve the lot of his flock. He realised that there was no health care for many individuals save for the local "helper" or the visiting doctor whose services had to be paid for, so he enlisted the help of my Grandmother, Granny Baylis, and subsequently her daughter Auntie Jenny to become

midwives and train to help in the business of births and deaths. At his instigation Granny Baylis trained and practiced her duties efficiently in the service of the community and subsequently became one of the first registered midwives in the country. She gained her Central Midwives Board accreditation number 4861 on May 26th 1904, the training and examination fees being borne by the church with the good Dr Barnes smoothing the way for this to happen.

The other problem the Rector encountered that had a direct impact on the lives of the villagers was the "tied cottage" system that linked a home with the job. This was all very well whilst the worker enjoyed good health and good relationships with his employer, but this link was used by the farmers and other employers as a means to treat some of their workers as slave labour as the slightest dissent was used as an excuse to sack the worker which then resulted in the farmer, who was also on first name terms with the local magistrate, applying to the courts for a possession order, which meant the man had to find a new home for himself and his family in the period of grace granted to the tenant by the court for this purpose, which was usually 28 days.

If the worker had sustained an injury or became ill for a longer period than was deemed acceptable the farmer would still sack him at the slightest excuse, even though his absence from his employment was unavoidable. The reason given to the magistrate on these occasions was usually the non payment of rent which obviously could not be paid if there was no other income coming into the household and the worker was incapacitated. Dr Barnes was known to use his connections with the landlords or the Earl to stay the hand of those who sought possession of the cottage if the occasion had sufficient merit that could be upheld in law, or by the application of a little ecclesiastical pressure. In this, and many other small ways, the good Dr. Barnes gained the confidence of the villagers and used his influence as best he could to assist them.

The Rector also maintained a good working relationship with Jimmy Hants the school master. The school was held in the thatched house at the bottom of Church Street on the left. It still stands today, although the roof is now tiled, and some of the ground is now the site of Jack Nash's bungalow. The school house was right outside the rectory gates and on the way to the church. With children playing in the lane and teaching going on outside in good weather the children could have a pastoral eye cast over them when the rector passed or spoke to Jimmy, and from this observation and chat he could guess whether all was well at home, as if there was illness or other urgent matters to be attended to the child would be absent from classes, and this would indicate to the Rector that a home visit may be appropriate to ascertain the problem and assist if he could.

The sale of the village in 1919 would appear to be the catalyst for the Rector to set about leaving a lasting memorial to his work in the parish which, judging by the church records available spanned forty six years, with the last wedding officiated by the Rector being that of Owen Charles Hind to Nancy Brown in September 1922. During his incumbency of the living from the diocese it was obvious to the Rector that there was no dedicated meeting place available for the villagers and, short of using a spare barn on one of the farms, the Railway Tavern in Water Street, or the Reading Room that had been constructed down the lane by number three Church Street, no Village Hall or dedicated meeting place was available or envisaged for the community. The Reverend now employed his negotiating skills to the full as he needed a site for a hall that was central in the village and therefore useful to the majority of his flock. The land that was viewed as being suitable for his purpose was in the ownership of Mr Tommy Emberlin and abutted a pig orchard which had been purchased by Mr T. Moore at the "Somerton Estate" sale. The good vicar secured the land required from Mr Emberlin and raised funds for the

construction of a simple wooden building, raised on brick pillars with a shared outside chemical bucket toilet. Restrictions as to its use were placed on it by a governing body which was largely the Parochial Church Council, but no matter how this body was made up and viewed it could have been the Parish Council, the Village Club council, the Cricket Club council or any other parish body as they were largely all the same people only wearing a different "hat". The caretaker of the hall was to be the same lady who had performed the duty of church cleaner, namely Granny Baylis, followed by Aunt Jenny and, for almost forty years, by Aunt Vi, known to most villagers as Miss Plumb.

Shortly after the hall had been constructed Mr Moore was approached and subsequently gave a small parcel of ground to the village in the north corner of his pig orchard and the reading room was dismantled from its site in Church Street, moved, and reconstructed on this land adjacent to the village hall on the south side. It was a separate building, joined to the hall by a corrugated tin roof with a door at either end. This enclosed passageway was used as storage for many years for various bits and pieces of hall equipment such as the stage. It was subsequently removed and the land used to construct the kitchen area of the hall which was in place until demolition last year. Many photographs exist that show the varied functions that took place in the building over the years from celebrations of wars ending to weddings, birthdays, clubs and society's functions, and social events too numerous to mention.

By now the Old Rectory and smallholding had been purchased from the diocese by the Barnes family and it remained their residence until the children had grown up and moved on. The buildings had many other uses during the course of the intervening years before they were converted to the flats, and homes that now occupy the site, and this should be recorded elsewhere. It is safe to state that the good Doctor Barnes M.A., Rector of Somerton, endeared himself to the parishioners during his incumbency of the living, remained popular with the Earl of Jersey and his tenants who subsequently, after the sale, became the farm and cottage freeholders, and performed many good deeds to improve the lot of the labourers to whom he ministered. There were several vicars of the parish that followed him up to my teenage years in the village namely the Rev's. Merchant who was the first occupant of the new rectory that was built on land at the top of the hill on the Ardley Road sometime after the sale of the "Old Rectory" to the Barnes family around the period 1923/25, Ruddock, who baptised me, Hares, Moyle, and Rhodes, but the older villagers would always reminisce about the good that the Rev. Barnes had done for the village, the care that he showed for his flock, and the legacy he had left for them all to enjoy in the shape of a village meeting place.

JOHN WEBB.
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