

THE REVEREND OLIVER WILLMOTT

Born 1910

The Reverend Oliver Willmott took up his post as Vicar of Loders and Dottery at the age of 37 and retired when he was 72, at which time he was the longest serving incumbent in the whole diocese of Salisbury. He attached great importance to visiting his parishioners, whatever their religious views or denomination and, in the early years, he did this by bicycle. When, latterly, he was also vicar of Askerswell, he succumbed to the necessity of using a car.

Before coming to Loders he was an Army Chaplain during the second World War. Sir Edward le Breton, a military man, who lived at Loders Court was the then Patron of the the Living, which alternated with the Lord Chancellor. In 1947, it was his turn to appoint the new vicar, he wanted a former Army Chaplain, so Oliver was the obvious choice. This was the start of a close friendship between the two families.

Oliver, Teresa and their large family lived in the old Vicarage, now Loders Hall, which is partly Tudor, with a Victorian addition. Oliver was attracted to the Vicarage by the fireplace in the Tudor room, which he enjoyed keeping supplied with logs, chopped by himself. Three of their seven children were born in Loders, their family consisting of five girls, one a twin, and then two boys. They kept a cow to provide milk for the family, a pig, chickens and turkeys. The girls all went to Loders School and the boys to Salisbury Cathedral School, where they were in the choir.

Teresa took the younger children for Sunday School in the Vicarage, which they used to say jokingly was the public house of the village. Parochial Church Council meetings, Ringers meetings and Mothers' Union were all held there. It was a very happy time and whenever Oliver was offered another living, the children would say, "you can go, but we are staying!"

The family have long since flown the nest and Oliver and Teresa now live on the outskirts of the village, in Bell Cottage, which has quite a history of its own as an inn, being reputedly the oldest pub in Loders. It is on the Dorset List of Licensed Premises, that was first drawn up in 1760, but it is said to have been built about the time when the first bell was put in Loders Church, the tenor bell now, about 1626. It lost its licence, once for smuggling in the early C19 and then again for rowdiness, at the time the Bridport to Maiden Newton railway was being built in 1855.

INTERVIEW 5

INTERVIEWER: Pat Hughes
Yondover Farmhouse
Loders

DATE: 1989

THE REVEREND OLIVER WILLMOTT
BELL COTTAGE
LODERS

(3.1910)

VICAR OF LODERS FROM 1947 to 1982

Reminiscences of the Reverend Oliver Willmott, Vicar of Loders from 1947 to 1982.

1. When I sent in my resignation to the then Bishop of Salisbury, his Secretary replied and said that she had been looking at the records and I was at that time the longest serving incumbent in the whole diocese of Salisbury.

You lived in the Old Vicarage didn't you?

Yes. That was the attraction in my taking Loders - the fireplace in the Tudor dining room. I am mad on fires and the prospect of a big open fire in a setting like that appealed to me tremendously. I don't think it was a sort of Act of God, or answering any call from heaven that brought me here - it was that fireplace!

Had you lived in Dorset at all; did you know Dorset before coming here as Vicar?

No: I am from Somerset and I had no connection with Dorset at all. I happened to come here because Sir Edward le Breton at Loders Court was the then Patron of the Living. He alternated with the Lord Chancellor and it was his turn to Present, and he wanted a former Army Chaplain to be the new Vicar and I filled the bill because I had been an Army Chaplain during the war.

2. So you enjoyed living in the Vicarage, and I imagine your children particularly enjoyed it very much?

Oh they did. As time went on we had a house cow and we had a pig down in the sty and we had chickens and turkeys for Christmas, and the children just loved it. Whenever I was offered any other Living the children would say 'You can go but we are staying'.

And you had quite a lot of children?

Yes: when we came here we had four girls, including a twin, and three more children were born here. We had five girls in all then two boys.

And did any of them go to school locally in the Village?

Yes, all the girls went to the local school. The two boys didn't; they went to ^{Salisbury Cathedral} Salisbury Cathedral School. They had good voices and were in the (School) Choir.

/

I should think the children were very well known throughout the Village.

Oh they were, yes, and they were very helpful in the Church work, fetes and things, collecting and helping, and so on.

I imagine that the Vicarage itself was very much a focus for a lot of activity?

Oh yes. We used to say, jokingly, that the Vicarage was the public house of the village. You see, we had no Church hall and Church (Parish) Council meetings, Ringers meetings and Mothers' Union were held there, and also my wife had a kindergarden school there on Sundays, and so it was very much used as a focus.

Of course it was a lovely big house and so you had lots of space to spread out; and the gardens went down to the river - and one of your sons particularly was a very keen fisherman wasn't he - Chuck?

Yes and he was very very good at it. He still is.

What was the role of the Church in the village at that time?
Do you think it has changed at all?

Well I don't know how much it is changed now. The world altogether has changed so much; the population here has changed so much. It's a different world and I don't think it has changed for the worse in many ways. We have had very nice new people come in who have taken their part in Church life, but we were so well, we were so turned in on ourselves when I came here. Near you we had Maurice Crabb who eventually had four girls; and Raymond Crabb who had four girls, and the Schoolmaster had four girls, and the Drakes in the house on the corner had, I think, about three girls, and the (farmer) vicarage had five girls. But we were one sort of big family, and virtually everybody regarded themselves as staunch Church, even whether they came or not.

So it was really a cross-section of the village who came to Church?

Yes they were very good. I would think we used to average at Matins somewhere around 60/70 on an ordinary Sunday, and of course at the festivals the crowds turned out, and especially harvest.

Did you have a lot of children coming to Church?

Yes: it all depended on parents - if they were brought up to Church themselves they sent their children. And of course there were no counter attractions for children then: very few people had cars, no television, and, well, Church was an entertainment in a way.

And really almost a social meeting place?

Very much so, yes.

And your wife took the Sunday School?

Yes: she took the juniors and I took the seniors in Church at the same time - Sunday afternoons.

And this was a very thriving school at the time. Of course, Loders School is a Church School too, so you must have had very close contact with the school itself.

Yes, that was one of the joys of being Vicar here - the close relationship with the school. We had a wonderful Headmaster in Ronald Price, and his family were very very co-operative. I used to go in every Thursday morning and take the senior class, and even after my retirement he asked me still to go in, which I did.

And this was in Religious Studies?

Yes.

And you were a Governor as well?

Oh yes, I was Chairman of the Governors.

3. And the Church Wardens in those days - what sort of section of village society would they be from, traditionally?

Well they were very representative. Eli Lentall was Church Warden when I came and the butler at Loders Court, Mr Gillard, he was Church Warden as well. There is something memorable about Mr Gillard: he used to come to the 8 o'clock Communion and take the collection, and the collection was on a plate and he led off with a half-crown, and then he departed as soon as he had handed the collection to me at the altar, and he took the half-crown with him - that was acknowledged

/

that he should - he only put it there to encourage the others. When he gave up he was succeeded by Harry Sanders, who was a carpenter I think, so we had a farmer and a carpenter - quite representative.

And what about the choir at that time? Did you have children in the choir?

Oh yes, we were a cock and hen choir, and there were several children. They did not sit in the chancel, they sat in the pew in front of the organ and a few pews at that end, the west end, instead of the east end, as they do now - as they did in Hardy's thing, the Greenwood Tree.

I wondered how that tradition had started - with the choir at the back?

The village band in Hardy were up in the gallery, and of course there used to be a gallery where our organ was, not in my time but that is where it was, and the advantage was that they were behind the congregation and put vim into their singing.

Yes I think it is an advantage actually. And apart from the choir it was very traditional, in country Churches particularly, that people had their own pews: was this kept to?

Yes it was, in a very sort of unofficial way. You wouldn't dream of sitting in Mrs So and So's pew, and Mrs So and So, if she found you sitting in her pew, would be quite likely to stand beside you until you got out of it! But people knew their pews.

And who used to read the lessons in those days?

X Well always the Lord of the Manor - Sir Edward read the lesson invariably. There was one funny lesson once: he went down to the lectern and started off "Here beginneth the 5th Chapter of St Paul's Epistle to the Corinthians ..." - something like that - "to whit...." and then he stopped and came back up to me and said 'I think I've got the wrong lesson padre: what is it?' Well at that time they were doing a new lectionary and there were all sorts of provisional lectionaries possible and about a dozen possible ones, and I just

/

didn't know, couldn't tell him. And so he went back to his seat and all the lesson that the congregation had was "To whit"! Somebody said afterwards the congregation should have shouted out "To who"!

Christmas must have been rather a special time in the village generally?

Yes: a great event in the village at Christmas was what was called the Court Party at Loders Court. Sir Edward and Lady le Breton had all the children of the village to their big dining room and they had a conjuror as a rule, and a terrific ^{tea}(day). And as they departed each child was given a half-crown, which in those days meant quite a lot.

X And I believe Sir Edward also used to donate a Christmas tree to the school?

That's right, yes, and there was a school Christmas concert, carols and all the usual things: carol singing round the village in aid of the Church of England Children's Fund, and so on.

The same is happening now because that still goes on. When did it start - did it start before your time or was it something you initiated?

Well Sir Edward's party was going on and I think we started the carol singing round the village for the C of E Children's Fund, and various other things.

And then we come on, I suppose, to Mothering Sunday.

Oh yes, that was a great do: mothers used to come in force. The children filled the lectern side of the Church and the mothers filled the pulpit side, and very often the Lady Chapel was full of friends as well. It was quite a big do, and the children had brought flowers for their mothers which I used to give out from the chancel step, and then the children took flowers round the village to old and sick people: quite a business.

And then of course there was in the autumn the Harvest Festival, which must have been a great event.

Yes that really was. We didn't grow corn much in the parish at