

'My Time in Weston'



An extract from 'Memories of a Mediocrity' by
Archdeacon Hardcastle

When my appointment to Weston was announced a paragraph appeared in *Truth* to the following effect: "We understand that a young man, a very young man, the Rev. E. H. Hardcastle, Curate of Ramsgate, has been appointed by the Lord Chancellor to the very desirable benefice of Weston, Bath. Apparently the only qualification of this young clergyman is that his father was a member for S.E. Lancashire. We have no doubt that many clergy and laity in Bath and neighbourhood will have something to say about this." This was not very kind but it had its modicum of truth.

Mrs. Fraser, widow of the late Bishop of Manchester, was an old friend of my family and also of my wife's. She had a deep interest in Weston, where she had lived for many years and, being a friend of the Lord Chancellor (Lord Halsbury), himself a Lancashire M.P. and had no hesitation in offering me the living, but not, we knew, without careful enquiry into my personal suitability. If there was, as *Truth* suggested, any element of a job in the appointment of my unworthy self, it was, though I say it as shouldn't, a very good job for poor old Weston to have at last a young Vicar with a charming young wife and no longer an incumbent with one foot in the grave. Far from Bath and Weston making any objection, there was a chorus of satisfaction. This requires a little explanation. For over fifty years the living of Weston was held by a fine old English gentleman named John Bond, a member of an old Dorsetshire family whose home was at Tyneham on the coast. He went to Weston as a very young man, actually nominated while in deacon's orders, about the year 1827 and retired to Tyneham about 1800, justly loved and honoured by the parish to which he had devoted his life. He was followed by an extreme Calvinist who spent every winter in the Riviera, and after seven years of that sort of thing, during which the parish fell lower and lower in spiritual health and moral character, he exchanged with a High Churchman, a good man in poor health who died a year or two, before he could do much good. After that the parish was in the hands of a curate-in-charge, who also died soon afterwards. This was the condition of things when I was appointed. The parish had fallen into such depression of spirit that it had come to regard itself as under a curse for its sins, and I was considered a courageous man to undertake the incumbency under the circumstances. What exactly *Truth* meant by "desirable" is therefore not quite clear. If it referred to the income, that was never more than £350 gross. I should like before passing on to say that I visited the old Vicar, John Bond, aged 92, several times at Tyneham, where he lived with his younger brother, Thomas Bond, aged 88. They were a fine pair of old gentlemen and I loved to go there and hear the reminiscences of the parish, which were surprisingly bright in a nonagenarian memory. After a few more years he passed away and the handsome Churchyard Cross, designed by Mr. Buckle, is his memorial at Weston. It is made of Ham stone and has not worn too well, so looks almost like an ancient cross. I had some little difficulty in persuading the parish to agree to this form of memorial; it was even suggested by some that a public convenience would be of more practical utility! However, I got them keen about the cross when I told them it was a memorial to the unrecorded dead, and a beautiful monument for all

parishioners who could not afford gravestones, etc. Somerset, by the way, has still several hundred remains of ancient Churchyard Crosses – more than any other county – and a number of beautiful ones are still undamaged. I must now briefly describe this interesting old parish.

Bath Weston corresponds to Batheaston on the other side of the city. The Weston boundary was not half-a-mile from the Circus and the village itself less than a mile. In the intervening space were many large houses and villas, some of them occupied by affluent people, including a number of old ladies whose chief remaining pleasure in life was the daily visit of their medical adviser. Some such were in my parish, but on the whole my villas produced a number of helpful people and some very good friends. Then suddenly villadom ends and you come to the village down a short hill, the old Church, with its pretty little fifteenth century tower, perched up to the right. Thus there was a well defined boundary between villa and village. But there was another interesting element in the parish. Weston stretched far into the heights of Lansdown. From Kelston Round Hill, which rises steeply from the Avon Valley, you could walk along the heights over Lansdown Race Course to Beckford's monument on the edge of Bath and be all the time in the parish. Enclosed in that large hill curve were many small pastoral farms and some groups of cottages. One of these milk farms, a prosperous one too, was unique in my experience from the fact that the husband and wife, after quarrelling in early married life, worked and lived together without exchanging one word for twenty years! At any rate one solution of domestic problems! This rural Weston was always a delight to me, the people were real Somerset, and it gave me the feeling of being a country parson. And there was yet another element in the parish and one continually increasing, namely, Coombe Park, with its ever lengthening procession of small villas which also produced some valuable friends and helpers in the parish. The population was over 2,000, and the village itself, numbering about 1,500, has remained little changed to this day. In my time it was poor, shabby and backward. It was known as the wash-pot of Bath, as in fact it was. Most of the women earned their living by laundry work and thereby kept their husbands, who were hewers of wood and drawer of water for their wives. This produced a rather considerable element of an unpleasantly coarse type of woman.

There were Church Schools with poor buildings and good teachers, of whom Mr. W. Dawe, the Headmaster, was a personality in the village. Anyone with parochial understanding will, I think, be able to form a general impression of the character and setting of the parish from the foregoing description.

No sooner had I become Incumbent than I was urged by the Diocesan Missioner to take part in the Bath General Mission. It was put to me that Weston needed some spiritual tonic – as it certainly did- but whether a Mission without adequate preparation was the right medicine, is another question. It was not suggested to me that the very fact of my coming with fresh influence and ideas should itself be the proper tonic for the moment and that a Mission could follow very profitably a year or two later; but, anyhow, the Mission was held three months after I went there, and on the whole I believe it helped me to get down to the real work which badly needed doing. I will not enlarge upon the Mission, which was ably

conducted by A. B. Sole, a Winchester Incumbent, but I cannot omit to place on record one rather interesting outcome which concerned me personally. Weston was much addicted to drink, and the Missioner was an ardent total abstainer and temperance speaker. It was therefore arranged to have a great temperance meeting in the schoolroom. Many came and listened with rapt attention to the speaker till he invited all present to take the pledge. Not a soul responded; so I, feeling something had to be done, stood up and said I would take the pledge myself to be T.A, as long as I was Vicar of Weston. Great enthusiasm! What a blessing for a parish to have a Vicar who will give such a lead! They all held up their hands – over a hundred of them- and took the pledge. In a few months they had almost all broken it, and I only was left, to be a total abstainer for ten years!

So that was how I happily began my ministry in Weston. But, alas! tragedy was soon to befall me and hide for a time all the bright sunshine of joy and hopefulness behind a dark cloud of deep sorrow. My beloved young wife was taken ill before the end of the year and on February 5th 1892, passed away after 6 months of married life. Her lovely old mother, Mrs. Compton, was with her and me to the end and in all my life I have known nothing more bracing and wonderful than her faith and courage after the loss of her only child. She sent the remaining years of her long life with her brother and niece till she passed away at Pembury, Kent, well over 90 years of age. I leave to the understanding of my readers what this disaster meant to me. But I must say this, under the good Hand of God the deep sympathy of the parish people knit me to the heart of Weston, as nothing else could have done, with an affection which still remains after all the many years which have passed since that dark day. This year (1941) I hope to preach my jubilee sermon in Weston Parish Church.

My sister Kate came to live with me at the Vicarage and thus a new chapter was opened which was to last over eight years, during which we worked together with much happiness, giving ourselves to Weston and Weston giving itself with responsive and affectionate friendship to us.

One result of the Mission was, as usual, a large number of Confirmation candidates, including over 20 boys. I prepared them as I had learned to do and saw them all separately, etc., and the Easter Communion came at the convenient time after Confirmation. Imagine my horror when not one of my village boys made their Communion! I had received no hint of refusal, but not one came. That opened my eyes to my own ignorance and inexperience, and also to what the deep seated opposition of village custom may mean. It was not till Michael Kinloch came a year later that we could begin to break the serried phalanx of such opposition.

One of the first things to be done was to enlarge or rebuild the Church. All that was left of the ancient Church was the little 15th century tower originally built for the small village. John Bond had pulled down the body of the little Church and built a substantial new Victorian nave and apse of poor architectural quality. We decided, on the advice of Mr. E. H. Harbottle, architect, that we could not demolish this nave but would build new transepts and chancel at a cost of about £5,000. The money took some getting and it all came out of the parish except £1,000 from Mrs. Fraser. The result is not a harmonious whole, but the old tower stands and the Church inside is not unworthy, except that the old East window, which ought to have been removed long ago, is an eyesore. The font, a perfect gem, designed by Bodley, is a memorial of my wife. The chancel screen is actually *my* memorial! given by a dear old retired clerical parishioner, Mr. Whale, when I left. The Churchyard must have a word of mention. At one time it was a forest of iron cages, a few of which still remain, but I got most of them removed, levelled the turf and planted some cedars of uncommon kind – one, I remember, was named *Pino Pinsappo*. They were a few feet high when I planted them in 1892, and now after 50 years they are beautiful trees, high above the Church, still growing and giving a distinguished character to the Churchyard.



Speaking generally, my ten years at Weston was a time of marked progress. The truth is, it is easy enough for an average and sufficiently keen young man, with the affections of a friendly people to help him, to bring up a decent parish to a fair standard of Church life and social decency. There comes the time of opportunity to every parish to pull itself out of the muddy ruts caused by years of neglect and conservative disposition to remain as it always has been. That was the case of Weston. The time of opportunity had come and only a fool would have failed. With all the resources of good will and financial sufficiency which were

available, Weston and I got on very well together and I also had my sister as an admirable and acceptable helpmeet.

Politically Weston was a Conservative strong hold; ecclesiastically it was more or less infected by the Evangelical predominance of Bath, without ever having been touched by any of its spiritual elan; socially, as I have said, there were the diverse elements of villadom and village, but it was, all the same, a united parish in sentiment. I had not been trained to Catholic ideals and my moderate Churchmanship suited the people and enabled me to win the confidence of a mixed congregation. I took my time in making changes. For instance, I found evening Communion had been established for ten years. I did not like it, but there was nothing in my knowledge to assure me it was wrong. I doused it steadily and gently with cold water and in eighteen months it peacefully died. That was typical of other things. Win the people's confidence, let them know what you are and with a little patience you will get all you want. That had always been my method of working. It may not be the method of some, nor always the best, but it was mine.

Three elderly ladies, sisters of Father Lowder of East London fame, came to live in Weston not long after I went there. They were dear old things, always sympathetic and helpful; what a blessing of love and good Churchmanship they brought! But first I must mention the Misses Pinder of Weston Park. They were like a pair of little twittering birds bursting with love of Weston and the Vicar and his sister and of everything that was good in the parish. Next door to them was dear old Goodenough, very deaf, an entirely whole-hearted Wykehamist – a fact which blinded him to any defects of mine. He was Churchwarden until he died. Next to him was an old cleric, Mr. Arthur Thompson, with his admirable daughter, Miss A.T., who had the curious habit of interjecting her conversation with “Yes, no, yes, no, altogether”. A little way up the hill were the old Fletchers from Lancashire. They were staunch Protestants, but as I was Lancashire born they were kindly affectioned towards me and I knew how to handle them. Being Lancashire people they were good givers on a generous scale and with Lancashire outspokenness they let their neighbours know they thought them a stingy lot. This was apt to be resented. The most imposing mansion looking over the valley was Cranwells, just outside the parish, where lived Mrs. Campbell Cory, a great friend to whom I owed many kindnesses.

But I must not dally in Weston Park; we must pass down the hill into the village, past the forge where Holcombe plays the hearty English role, to the schools, where Mr. William Dawe with fiery eye is making the boys' hands smart. A formidable character was W. Dawe. He was the life and soul of the local Conservative party. Everybody feared him, but he was a good fellow and we worked together comfortably in parish business and were good friends. But no one in the village counted so much as Edward Russell – Postmaster, Carpenter, Parish Clerk, Undertaker and everything else. What he did not do was done by one or other of his good-looking and gifted daughters. Dear things, they have nearly all passed away, but their good work will not be forgotten. But I must not overlook Henry Trickey, the most respected and trusted man in the parish – farmer, Churchwarden, Chairman of the first Parish Council,

District Councillor, etc., a sound and simple Englishman, a humble, consistent Christian, and the best of friends to a young Vicar.

In the autumn of 1892 I had a stroke of luck and Michael Kinloch came to be my colleague and close friend for three years. I happened to meet the Bishop of London's Chaplain in Winchester Meads on the occasion of the Quincentenary of the College in 1892. "Do you happen to know of a good curate?" I asked him. "No, and I would not tell you if I did. We want them all in London", was the reply. Going off, he turned and said "By the way, I have just heard of a man who is ordered to come into the south country for his health, but I know nothing about him". Out of that chance meeting Michael Kinloch materialized and I have often thought of that incident as illustrating on what little accidental pegs our destinies seem to hang. I took a shot at Michael and got him. That chance meeting in Winchester Meads got me my best curate, gave him the best of wives, Miss Adria Heath, and from that happy union there are two sons, a daughter and five grandchildren.

We worked and played together as brothers to the breaking down of bad old traditions and the building up of new and better ones. One of his first tasks was to struggle with a boy named Jack Podger to get him to come out against the anti-Communion opposition. He succeeded and thus broke it down for good. How we used to enjoy driving off in old Sadd's little pony carriage every Monday morning to the foot of Sham Castle for a day on the golf links!

There is no need to enlarge upon the progress of the work at Weston, which was easy going because there was so much leeway to make up. For one thing we had to bring people together into some sort of family feeling and for this purpose we made good use of the Vicarage garden on summer evenings. I somehow learned and introduced what came to be known as the Vicar's dance, a folk dance in which everybody could take part, each gentleman having two ladies. To see the whole village dancing on the lawn together, with old Trickey the farmer Churchwarden to the fore, was something to delight the gods of good human nature.

Another thing we instituted was the ANNUAL MISSIONARY SALE. Missionary sales have now rather gone out of fashion, being replaced by Free-will Offerings. There is something to be said for Free-will Offerings for Choir, Church expenses, etc. But I believe in the Missionary Sale and have had one in my parish for 30 years out of 33 as an incumbent. It brings people together for the greatest of causes, sets all the good women to work and is, in fact, a delightful parish party. In addition to this we had many boxes distributed in the parish. One old laundry woman always put a threepenny bit every Sunday into her box and another on many occasions; when we opened the box we would find as many as 70 threepenny bits – a fine instance, I thought, of the widow's mite. As a result of these efforts we brought up our missionary contribution to well over £200, pretty equally divided between S.P.G. and C.M.S.

I had another first-rate colleague at Weston, Roger Hayes Robinson, who came towards the latter part of my time. He was a great man with the Church Lad's Brigade, which afterwards was rather outshone by the Scouts. I remember a delightful bicycle ride with him from

Shrewsbury to Monmouth, about 100 miles, mostly down the Wye Valley. After I left Weston he stayed on for a little time and became Rector of Yatton and died there soon after.

He figured prominently in an unusual incident which occurred at Weston during his time. One evening, all unknown to me, the village suddenly broke into a frenzy of excitement, in fact exhibited itself as a thro-back to rougher days. It was an old Somerset custom to give "rough music" to anyone who had fallen below the moral standard tolerated in the village. On this occasion a woman had misbehaved herself with a man while her husband was in prison. The village sense of decency was outraged and they not only gave her "rough music" but dragged her from her house, after trying to set it on fire, and were proceeding to duck her in the stream, with cries of "burn her!", "drown her!", when Roger, who had heard the noise, hurriedly came to her rescue, cut the cords which bound her and took her under his protection. In the next issue of the Bath newspaper there was a lovely picture of the rescue and of the gallant curate defying the infuriated villagers, etc. "Rough music", which is probably now long out of date, happened on several occasions in my time and it is rather an ugly custom. But I always felt there was something to be said in its favour as being a rough and ready way of expressing moral indignation, which, even in an elementary form, is a valuable commodity in old village life.

I have never taken an active part in political controversy, but on one occasion, about the middle of my time at Weston, I suddenly, to the surprise of myself and everybody else, sprang into the limelight in connection with a burning question of that time, *e.g.* the Disestablishment of the Church. Political party feeling ran high in those days and Bath was a borough which changed its representation with small majorities. So the atmosphere was particularly sensitive to any breeze.

The Liberal candidate publicly stated in a speech that in Queen Elizabeth's reign the property of the Church of Rome was transferred by Parliament to the Church of England. I knew this statement was historically false and I decided it must not be merely refuted but refuted in the most effective way to the advantage of the Church. It was useless entering upon an historical argument which few would trouble to follow, so I wrote the following letter to the local newspapers: "I am ready to send £50 to the Bath Hospital if Mr. ----- will name any Act of Parliament in Queen Elizabeth's reign by which the property of the Church of Rome was transferred to the Church of England". The effect of this letter was immediate and electric and I found myself prominent in the headlines. To the public mind there was something sporting about the challenge. Practically the Vicar of Weston had made a bet with the Liberal candidate that he was completely wrong. But was the Vicar right? The popular notion had always been that something of that sort had occurred at the Reformation. Did the Vicar know what he was doing? The Conservative Agent hurried to call and offered his help, *as it was most important*. Working men stopped me in the street to say: "We expect you know all about it, Sir". "You've got him all right?" I had got him all right, but I must have a spectacular victory which all could understand. Some sort of answer was sure to be made, and I knew the knockout blow must come from higher authority than

mine. So I wrote to the biggest authorities of the day – the Earl of Selbourne, the Lord Chancellor, and Sir Richard Webster, the Attorney General. They both rose to the occasion most generously and I published their letters. The incident has a peculiar interest in the fact that Lord Selbourne's letter must have been the last or nearly the last that great champion of the Church ever wrote, for he died a few days afterwards. I need not say the Bath Hospital did not receive anything, but my victory was complete. All the other side could say was that of course I was *technically* correct, but the practical effect of Elizabethan legislation, etc.

One of my closest friends in Bath was Lancelot Fish (afterwards Archdeacon of Bath), who had been with me at Trinity. He came to my study one day in the spring of 1899 and said: "I have been thinking, Hardcastle, that you and I, old cricketers, ought to do something big before we go on the shelf; what do you say to a tour in Holland?" I readily agreed on the understanding that he could arrange the matches and manage the business. So we pulled it off and a great time we had, though we were on the eve of the Boer War and there was some anti-British feeling.

While I am talking of cricket, I must mention the famous old Lansdown cricket ground which was in the parish (originally high up on the hill) and where I had many a good game. On one occasion the Minister of the Congregational Church, Mr. Simon, father of Sir John Simon, came to me and asked me to get up a clerical eleven and challenge the Lansdown Club. This was rather a formidable proposal, but I got the team together and we called it "A Pastoral XI". It included two or three Free Church Ministers, a Roman Priest who was a good wicket-keeper, and the rest C. of E. We had a great match and I led my Pastoral XI to victory, being in my best form with bat and ball. It was a happy *entente cordiale*. Would that the Holy Catholic Church could present such a good cricket front of fellowship in the bigger business of the world.

On my return to Hawkhurst from the Holland tour in August, 1899, I became engaged to Alice Goschen, daughter of Viscount Goschen of Seacox Heath, Sussex, and we were married in Flimwell Church in the following June. Weston gave me a handsome silver salver for a wedding present. I was asked to choose it myself, which I did, and, as there was some difficulty about composing the inscription, I also had to do that myself!

With the turn of the new century everything seemed to come to a time of change. A new century, a new Sovereign, a new wife, and nearly ten completed years of fairly successful work in my first parish, through most of that time lovingly and most capably assisted by my sister Kate, who devoted herself to the parish, winning universal friendship and affection.

The time had come for a move. We had enlarged the Church, added to the school buildings, built a parish hall and, though I never saw it quite finished, I expended the parting gift of £200 which I received from the parish on a much-needed enlargement of the Vicarage.

Several things were offered to me about the same time, one of which was S. Martin's w S. Paul's, Canterbury, from Archbishop Temple. How could we help accepting it and returning to our own Country of Kent!

We had a great farewell; and with mingled feelings of gratitude and sorrow, I took leave of the parish which had taught me so many lessons, which had generously put up with my shortcomings and mistakes and given me, without fail, its loyalty, sympathy and affection.