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A FRESH LOOK AT THE RECVLVER PARISH CLERK'S STORY

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A little more than a century ago, George Dowker carried out some exploratory digging at Reculver, in the area of the ruined church, and against the wall of the Roman fort; his reports form two papers in *Arch. Cant.*, xii (1878) – 'The Roman Castrum at Reculver', 1–13, and 'Reculver Church', 248–68.¹

In his account of the demolition of the Church, Dowker printed (pp. 255–6) some notes in the hand of the parish clerk, found among the parish papers. 'The following description' he wrote, 'is unsurpassed; I give it in its own language and spelling.' The paper was then in the keeping of the 'Vicar of Hoathe' according to Dowker: in fact, no such incumbent existed, since Hoath was in the care of the Vicar of Reculver, who at that time actually resided at Hoath.

Dowker's publication of the clerk's story attracted the attention of later writers, and several printed versions have appeared in books on the locality, although the vagaries of spelling recorded in *Arch. Cant.*, xii (1878) were not always accurately reproduced.

Apart from the odd spellings, a feature of special local history importance is the list of those residents who voted for or against the vicar's proposal to demolish the church. It has sometimes been stated that it was the vicar's casting vote which determined the fate of the church, but in Dowker's text three parishioners voted on each side, and the vicar's single vote made the result 4–3, so his second, or casting, vote was not needed to break a tie.

Successive recent Vicars of Reculver have been unable to produce the original document so that the old references to a casting vote could be clarified, or the accuracy of Dowker's transcript tested. The possibility remained, too, that some of the variations in the later

¹ See also, *The Gentleman's Magazine*, February 1808, 125.

printed texts might be due to access to the original by one of the editors concerned.

In 1974, the writer was shown a miscellaneous packet of papers in a deed-box held by the Revd. D. J. Bretherton, D.D., at that time Vicar of Herne and Rural Dean of Reculver. There was a number of papers obviously collected by an earlier vicar, J. R. Buchanan, about 1887 when preparing his book *Memorials of Herne, Kent*, and there was also an old envelope which contained two small pieces of paper held together with a rusty pin, and covered with somewhat uneducated handwriting. Unfolded, and unpinned, these papers proved to be the original manuscript of the parish clerk's story of the events leading to the demolition of his beloved church.

How the papers came to Herne is unknown. Buchanan certainly printed the text in his *Memorials*, with slight variations on Dowker's version, but examination shows that he copied Dowker, and the differences are his own work – in fact due to inaccurate transcribing or proof-reading.

It became clear, too, that Dowker himself had been careless in producing his transcript; much of the trouble is due to the parish clerk's uncertain spelling and his unpractised hand. He was, after all, the village smith, with just enough learning to justify his parish office. Punctuation and capitalisation are irregular and inconsistent, and spelling becomes phonetic at times; the ink varies in colour, and the paper was probably nearly as stained and grubby when Dowker found it as it is now. The main difference however, between Dowker's text and the original holograph version is the omission of the name of one of the parishioners who voted against the resolution, Solomon Henman; so that there were in fact four votes on each side, and the vicar's second vote was indeed necessary to carry the decision.

Dowker's text as printed in *Arch. Cant.*, xii (1878), is reprinted here, followed by the hitherto unpublished original version.

George Dowker's version:

'1805 Reculver Church and Village stood in saftety; 1806 the sea begun to make a little ineroach on the willage; 1807 the farmers begun take up the seaside stone work and sold it to the Margate Pier Compney for a foundation for the new peir, and the timber by action, as it was good oak fit for their hoame use, and than the willage became a total rack to the mercy of the sea.' Oct. 13th, 1802. 'The Chapel house fell down.' (*Here some connecting remarks are wanting*). 'This been all dun and spread abroad, the people come from all parts to see the ruines of village and the church. Mr C. C. nailor been Vicar of the parish, his mother fancied that the church was keep for a poppet show, and she persuaded her son to take it down, so he took it in consideration and named it to the farmers in the parish about taking it down; sum was for it and sum against it, than Mr nailor wrote to the Bishop to know if he might have the church took down, and is answer was it must be dun by a majority of the

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people in the parish, so hafter a long time he got the majority of one, so down come the Church.

'for it, Mr Nailor, vicker, Mr Tom denne, Reculver, Mr W. Staines, Brooke, Mr Tom Fix, hiltrow. – Against it, Mr Wm Brown, Reculver, Mr Step. Sayer, Bishopstone, Mr Brett Clark to the old church 40 years.

'The last tax that Mr nailor took was these words, Let your ways be the ways of rightness, and your path the peace, and down come the church, and whot was is thoats about is flock that day no one knows.'

John Brett's original version:

(1)

1805 Reculver Church and willage stood in saftey 1806 the sea begun to Make a Little incroach on the willage 1807 the farmors be gun take the sea side stone work and sold it to the Margate pieor Compney for a foundation for the new pier and the timber by action as It was good oak fit for their hoane use and than the village became a total Rack to the Mercy of the sea.

Oct 13 1802 the chappel house fell down

(2)

this been all dun and spred a broad the peopel Come from all parts to see the ruines of village and the Church Mr C b nailor been vicar of the parish his Mother fancd that the Church wos keep for a poppet show and she persuade har son to take it down so he took it in consideration and named it to the farmers in the parash a bout taking it down sum wos for it and sum against it than Mr nailor wrote to the Bishop to know If he Might have the Church took down and is answer wos

(third page not numbered)

it Must be dun by a MaJority of the peopel in the parish so hafter a Long time he got the MaJority of one so down Come the Church

for it Mr Nailor vicker

Mr Tom denne Recvlvr

Mr Wilm Stains Brook

Mr Tom fox hiltrow

agains it Mr Wm Brown Reculver

Mr Solmon henman Reculver

Mr Step Sayer Bisopston

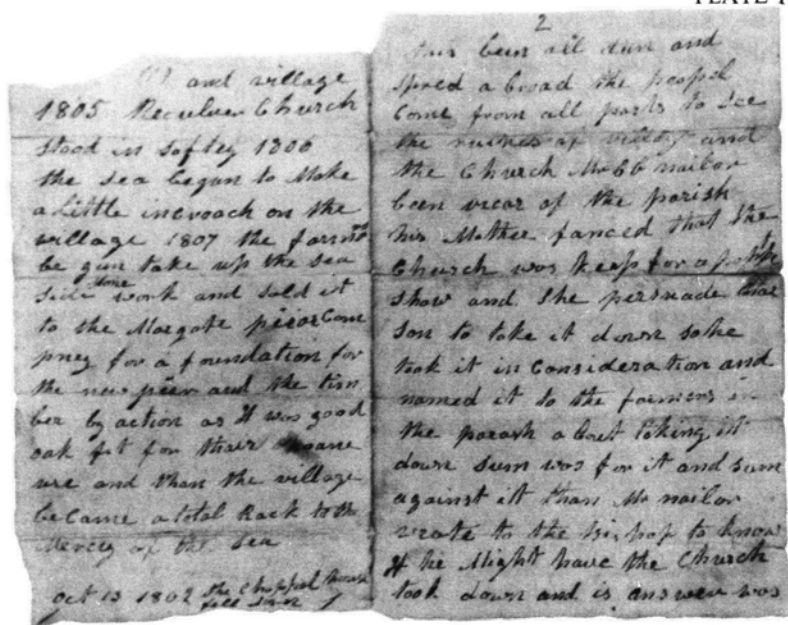
Mr Brett Clark to the old Church 40 years

the Last tax that Mr nailor took wos these words

Let your ways be the ways of rightness and your path be peace and down Come the Church and whot wos is thoats about is flock that day no one knows.

Among the minor variations between the two texts, there are some more significant. Referring to the timber sold by 'a(u)ction' the Dowker text reads 'it was good oak fit for their hoame use' – their *home* use; the clerk's note is certainly mis-spelt, but quite clearly reads 'hoane', that is, 'fit for their own use' with an intrusive initial 'h'. This is a rather more acceptable rendering, when it is realised that the timber in question was apparently the substantial piles driven into the beach to try to form a breakwater to protect the cliff on which the church stood, with the help of the 'sea side stone work'.

The curious dated sentence about the Chapel House is seen to lie at the foot of page 1, and there is no room for what Dowker called the

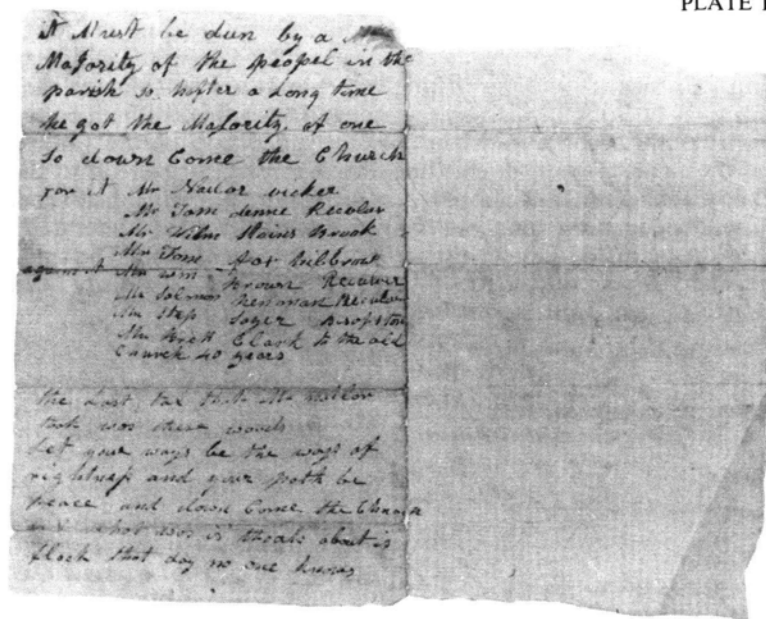


Front of Paper, showing pages 1 and 2. Actual size 205 × 163 mm.

'connecting remarks'. While the apparent incoherence is thus not clarified, it is clear from the discussion of the paper, below, that the text has survived in its entirety, the short sentence being perhaps simply a memorandum on the part of the clerk.

Dowker's version refers to the vicar as 'Mr C. C. Nailor' and all the later editions repeat this. The vicar was Christopher Bramble Naylor, and it is interesting to find that Brett had named him correctly as 'Mr C B' but by writing a lower-case 'b', had led Dowker to copy it as a second 'C'.

Among the numerous reprintings of the parish clerk's rather pathetic record may be cited: a direct and accurate reprint of Dowker's two papers by F. G. Holman, who was custodian of the ruins until the early 1920s; this was authorised by George Dowker's widow in 1911 and sold as a booklet on the site for many years; Jessie Mothersole, in her book *The Saxon Shore* (1924) records a visit to the ruins of the church and fort the day after Holman's death, and prints the text fairly well – 'spreed' for Dowker's 'spread', 'Company' for 'Compney', 'pier' for 'peir' are among her variations, and she



Back of Paper, showing page 3.

improves the punctuation and capitalisation a little. The locally produced Millgate's *Guide to Reculver* appeared in various editions from before 1900 to the present, and quoted the final sentence from Dowker with the addition of a comma; and probably most widely seen of all the references, Arthur Mee in his *Kent* (1936) produced a hybrid version, partly in the original spelling and partly modernised, of the text beginning at 'His mother fancied . . .'

It is now clear that none of these writers or editors had seen anything other than the *Archaeologia Cantiana* version, and thus Solomon Henman has never before been given credit for his part in trying to prevent the demolition of the historic Church of St. Mary the Virgin, Reculver.

A NOTE ON THE PAPER

The pieces of paper on which John Brett's notes appear were originally joined side by side (see Plates I and II) as one half of a foolscap page, probably torn out of one of the church-books of the

period. Only a small part of the crowned arc of the familiar watermark containing Britannia remains at what became the lower edge of the paper. The half-sheet had been folded down the middle to form four 'pages', and the writing was set out as two columns each occupying one of the pages on one side, and as a third column on the reverse of the second. In this last column the final 'e' of 'the' (line 2) and the final 'h' of 'Church' (line 18) were carried over on to the otherwise blank half of that side, proving that the original half-sheet was undivided at the time, but has split along the fold at a later date, when the pieces were pinned together as they were found. The small irregular strip cut off the top of column 1 had perhaps already been removed when Brett started writing his story.