THE MEDIEVAL PARSONAGE AND ITS OCCUPANTS.¹

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The pilgrim who sets out in this country in search of the old and the beautiful will find himself richly rewarded. Few of the thousands of villages and small towns scattered over the face of England are unable to boast of a parish church whose history can be traced back into the Middle Ages, while the student of architectural types and styles will almost certainly be able to find examples of all that he needs within a few miles of his home. The cathedrals and parish churches are one of the glories of England, a joy both to the tourist and to the professional historian.

My purpose this afternoon, however, is to speak not about the churches but about the men who served them some six or seven hundred years ago. I want you, as it were, in imagination, to step across with me from the parish church to the parsonage house where we will call upon the incumbent and his staff and try to find out how they live and what sort of men they are.

The modern country vicarage or rectory generally gives the appearance of a substantial detached villa or small country-house with a pleasant garden of flowers and a drive up to the front door. The medieval parsonage was a very different place. There were a few, certainly—mainly in the richer parishes and in the Border Country where there was danger of raids—which were substantial stone-built houses; but the majority were just wooden cottages of the type in which the peasant and small holder of those days lived. Even the stone houses were a good deal less commodious than the Georgian and Victorian rectories which stand in many of our villages to-day. The little village of Hale, near Sleaford in Lincolnshire, had a typical parsonage of the better type. But it contained only six rooms—a hall (which served as the living-room), two small rooms adjoining it (no

¹ A lecture delivered in the John Rylands Library on the 10th of November, 1943,
doubt used as bedrooms), a kitchen, a bakehouse and a brewery. According to our standards this would seem modest enough; but, compared with the accommodation with which most of the clergy had to be content, it must have appeared luxurious in the extreme and have been looked upon with envy by the incumbents of the district. For there is no doubt that the average house of the medieval parson was nothing more than a two-roomed wooden cabin with a thatched roof. Against very wild and stormy weather such a building would afford little protection, while the danger of fire was one which must have brought considerable anxiety to the occupants. Such a house, moreover, would easily fall into decay, and the poverty of the clergy must often have made it impossible for them to keep their homes in repair.

As we approach our parsonage we must not, therefore, be surprised if we find it in a sad state of delapidation. When, for example, the Dean and Chapter of Exeter visited a number of parishes in Devon in 1301 they found many of the parsonages in disrepair. Winkleigh Vicarage was in a very bad way; at Harberton the house had entirely collapsed except for the priest's chamber, while at Shute the chaplain's house was in such a ruinous condition that the poor man had to sleep in the church.

In addition to a dwelling-house the average medieval parsonage included a range of farm buildings, for most of the country clergy were at that time agriculturists on quite a considerable scale. It was no unusual thing for a priest to keep cows, sheep and pigs, besides the horse which he would require for visiting the outlying parts of his parish. The Vicar of Chieveley had, at one time, as many as twelve cows, a hundred sheep and twelve pigs; while a flock of fifty to sixty sheep with half a dozen milking-cows was quite common. Such stock would need looking after, and many parsonage houses had to be provided with stables, cow-houses and pigsties. Moreover, the storage of produce handed over as tithe made it necessary for the rector to have good barns and granaries, safe against marauding neighbours and dissatisfied tithe-payers. The medieval manse, therefore, presented the appearance not of a small country house but of a regular farm-
yard with all the customary sights, sounds and smells of such places. Here the parson lived and worked, dividing his time between the calls of his spiritual and natural sheep; walking from the stable to the altar and from the sanctuary to the sheepfolds, sharing all the time with his people in the task which occupied so much of their waking hours and of their thoughts, that of making the earth bring forth her increase.

We are so much accustomed nowadays to regard all parishes as being organised on the same system, with the parson, be he rector or vicar, residing in the parish and personally ministering to his flock, that it is easy to forget what great diversity there was among the parishes of England in the Middle Ages.

The first great division was between those parishes which were in the hands of rectors and those which were served by vicars. Now that the distinction between a rector and a vicar has ceased to have much meaning, I am often asked where the difference lies. In point of fact there is nowadays practically no difference, but in the Middle Ages there was a good deal.

In order to explain this difference I must take you back for a moment to the very beginnings of the parochial system in England. In the very earliest times the country was organised on diocesan rather than on parochial lines; but with the emergence of the manorial system we find also the building, by the local landlords, of what were little more than private churches for the use of those living on the estate. It is from these local churches that our parochial system took its origin. But since the parish had been at first the creation of the local lord who had built and endowed the church and who, under the system of tithes, continued to be its chief supporter, it was not to be wondered at if he claimed certain rights over it. In the first place he reserved to himself the right to appoint the parish priest, a privilege which might be distinctly advantageous if he had a son or a relative whom he wished to set up in life. So down to quite recent times it was customary in some villages for the eldest son of the squire to inherit the hall and estate while the second son took Holy Orders and inherited the living. Secondly, the Anglo-Saxon lord claimed the right to transfer,
if he so desired, the income of the benefice to some other ecclesiastical body so long as the parish church was adequately served. Since a living was often worth twenty or thirty pounds a year and a priest could always be found to do the work for an annual income of about £3, there was generally a considerable balance which the lord considered himself free to "appropriate" to some other aspect of the life and work of the Church. In the religious revivals of the eleventh and twelfth centuries many laymen were moved to make some substantial contribution to the monasteries, with the result that the income of a large number of parish churches was given away. Out of the gross income of the benefice a small sum was set aside for the payment of a priest to serve the church, while the greater part of the living was paid each year into the hands of the monks.

So long as adequate men could be found to minister in these appropriated parishes the system may have worked well enough, but when some of the religious houses contented themselves with searching for the cheapest men whom they could find in the overcrowded labour-market, it was clear that some safeguards were necessary. The solution was found in the establishment of the system of vicarages, a practice which began in this country in the twelfth century and continued for many years. The purpose of this reform was to bring to an end the bad habit of letting parishes out to the man who was willing to take the lowest stipend, and the method was to grant to the vicar of an appropriated parish security of tenure and a minimum wage. The casual priest who was engaged by a religious house to serve the church in any particular parish was at the mercy of his employers who were under no obligation to pay him any specified amount and who could dismiss him at will. The vicar, on the other hand, had his freehold from which he could not be dislodged, while he received a stipend which, if not princely, was at least secure.

By the end of the thirteenth century a large number of English parish churches had been appropriated to the religious houses and a fifth or perhaps a quarter of all the parishes in the country were officially vicarages. The remainder were still in the hands of rectors, but not all of these men approached their
work from the same standpoint. We shall understand the parochial life of the Middle Ages only if we constantly bear in mind the fact that, whereas some rectors regarded their livings as spiritual responsibilities others were content to think of them as little more than financial assets. The distinction between the two was largely, though not wholly, one of class.

If we study the records of ordinations and institutions from the bishops’ registers of the time we shall discover that probably most of those who sought ordination and who eventually succeeded to livings were local men, sons of the smaller landowners and of the yeoman class. Many of them were ordained on the title of their own property, showing that they were men who had some private means and were therefore in no danger of becoming a burden to the Church or to the community. Others were sons of craftsmen or tradesmen, boys who had somehow managed to get enough education to pass whatever intellectual tests the bishops demanded. Some, like the “pore persoun” of Chaucer’s band of pilgrims who set out “the holy blisful martir for to seek” sprang from the peasant class.

Most of those who came of yeoman or peasant stock were men who were willing to take their spiritual duties seriously by living in their parishes and ministering to their congregations. This is not to say that they were all good priests, or even good men; but at least they made some show of spiritual activity in the parishes to which they were instituted. It was far otherwise with many of those who belonged to the great land-owning families, the Clares, Nevilles, Folliots, Bohuns and others. However anxious the bishops might be to pay no attention to rank and breeding when it came to the selection of ordination candidates, they would find it very difficult to resist the demands of those who belonged to the most powerful families in the land. Much of the patronage of the Church was in lay hands, and it was only natural that fathers should wish to see their sons well provided for. The consequence was that there was in England a group of men, mostly members of the more powerful landed class, who first provided themselves with papal dispensation to hold a number of livings in plurality, and then devoted their energies to the collection of enough benefices to enable them to
live handsomely, and in some cases luxuriously, while taking only a trifling interest in the parishes from which their income was derived.

Typical of this class was Bogo de Clare, a son of the Earl of Gloucester and Hereford. He obtained a dispensation from the Pope to hold benefices up to a total of 400 marks (which would represent some £5,000 in modern currency); but before he had finished he had far exceeded this limit. He began by being presented by his mother to the rich living of Adlingfleet in Yorkshire, and by the year 1280 he held benefices in four other counties and in Ireland, and shortly afterwards acquired fourteen more. By the time of his death in 1291 he held two canonries, three dignities in Cathedral and collegiate churches and twenty-four parishes. His total annual income from these benefices must have been in the region of at least £50,000 in modern currency.

This gigantic income enabled him to live a life of luxury and indulgence while he took only the smallest interest in the parishes from which he drew his money, leaving them to be served by stipendiary priests to whom he paid some trifling sum. Some idea of Bogo's manner of living is to be derived from the extracts from his household accounts which have been preserved. These furnish us with a picture of a very rich man, living in great comfort surrounded by his servants and squires, entertaining groups of actors and bands of musicians, dressing himself in the most costly garments and loading his table with the richest of foods. When I tell you that in one year he spent more on preserved ginger than in the payment of a chaplain to serve one of his livings, it will give you some idea of the manner in which he lived.

Undoubtedly a good many parishes in the Middle Ages were in the hands of such men. Being pluralists they were of necessity also absentees from their livings, in most of which they were probably never seen. Moreover, since they made no pretence to minister in their churches they saw no reason why they should ever proceed to Holy Orders. That a man should be instituted as rector of a parish without the necessary qualifications to conduct the services in the church would seem very strange to us.
But it appears to have caused little surprise to our ancestors seven hundred years ago. Hugh of Welles, as Bishop of Lincoln in the thirteenth century, was a highly conscientious diocesan who worked hard to raise the standards of the parochial clergy; yet of the 248 men whom he instituted to benefices in the arch-deaconries of Oxford, Buckingham and Stow, only 62 were in priest’s orders, eleven were deacons, while the remaining 175 were only sub-deacons or acolytes. Even Welles’ successor, the noble Grosseteste, one of the greatest English churchmen of all times, was content to institute large numbers of men in minor orders, less than one-fifth of those whom he sent to the parishes being priests. Many of those who became rectors during these years were also under age, some being small boys of ten or twelve years of age who made the income of the living a convenient method of paying their school-fees.

The number of men who behaved in this way was comparatively small, though, since they were mostly pluralists on a large scale, the number of parishes affected was considerably greater. But, of course, the majority of rectories were in the hands of resident men who occupied the parsonage-houses, farmed the land attached to the benefice, and ministered in the parish church.

We must go on now to the second type of parish, that in which a vicarage had been ordained. Although after the appropriation of a church to a religious house the governing body of that house became titular rector, the actual conduct of parochial affairs was entirely in the hands of the vicar, who, as I have already said, enjoyed that privilege known as the “parson’s freehold” which has so profoundly influenced the parochial life of this country all through its history. The vicar, having been appointed to the benefice by the Chapter of the monastic house, drew his income partly from what were called the lesser tithes—that is to say, tithes on all produce except corn—and partly from the freewill offerings of the people. In very few instances could his income be valued at more than about £5 a year; but such a sum in those days would enable him to live in a modest way, though it would allow very little for the ever-pressing calls of hospitality and charity in a society which knew nothing of Poor Laws or of the organised relief of poverty and sickness.
Since the appropriation of churches to religious houses meant that the monks became responsible for providing someone to serve in these parishes, it might be thought that the easiest thing would be to allow some of their own members to do this, and it is sometimes rather loosely stated that certain parishes were served by monks. The evidence, however, until towards the end of the Middle Ages, is against this. Monks lived under a system which was devised to separate men from the world, and it would therefore be quite alien to the spirit of monasticism to take men out of the cloister and put them into vicarage houses where they would be cut off from the daily society of their fellow-monks and from the whole discipline of corporate life.

On the other hand, canons of the Augustinian and Premonstratensian Orders were quite commonly instituted to the care of parish churches. Some, indeed, of the early Augustinian houses were founded with the express purpose of serving one or more parish churches. This seems to have been the case at Barnwell, near Cambridge; though in this instance the idea did not survive for very long since the canons found it more convenient to delegate the parochial work to vicars and chaplains and to devote themselves to the life of the cloister and to the management of their large and growing estates. Nevertheless, it was not uncommon, all through the Middle Ages, to find canons-regular in charge of parishes. In these cases the parsonage became a kind of cell to the mother house, for it was a recognised thing that no canon-vicar should live alone, but that he should always have with him one or two of his fellows from the abbey or priory.

Thus there were always some parishes in England which were served by regulars, but their number was always small. The great majority of vicars were secular clergy, appointed by the religious houses. Most, but by no means all, of them were in priest’s orders; and most were resident, living in the kind of house which I have already described, and sharing it with their colleagues, the chaplains and clerks who assisted the incumbent in the performance of his ministerial duties.

The vast number of these lesser clergy is one of the surprises of medieval history. Jessopp once wrote of England in the
thirteenth century as "swarming with clerics," and there is no doubt that he was justified in the use of this verb, for the most careful calculations, based upon every available scrap of evidence, point to there being something like 40,000 secular clergy in England in the year 1300, as well as about 16,500 monks and friars. If, as is generally supposed, the population of England at that time was little more than three million, this would mean that the proportion of clergy to laity was about one in seventy, whereas nowadays it is one in a thousand. In other words, there were, in proportion to the laity, fourteen times as many clergy as there are to-day.

This "swarm" of 40,000 clerics was spread over about nine thousand parishes, giving to each an average of four or five men. How the income of the normal parish in the Middle Ages ever sufficed to support so large a staff is one of the mysteries which we shall always find it difficult to understand. Yet somehow or other these men managed to keep themselves alive, though their standard of living must have been very low.

The most important of the assistant clergy were the chaplains in charge of outlying chapels, some of whom had their own endowments and lived in comparative independence. Next to them were the annual chaplains who assisted the incumbent at the parish church. These "curates," as we should call them nowadays, were obliged to live on very slender incomes. According to the statutes of William of Blois at Winchester in 1229, annual chaplains were to receive three marks or forty shillings a year. Even if we put it in terms of modern currency it amounts to little more than £1 a week. Yet when the Dean of Salisbury visited the parish of Sonning about this time he found that the chapel of Arborfield was being served by a man who received only half this amount. In the congested condition of the clerical labour-market during these years men were often obliged to offer themselves for hire to anyone who would employ them. A man was not supposed to be ordained without some title, that is, without a guarantee that he would have some means of subsistence; but in many cases the only guarantee which he could offer was very precarious, while some bishops were rash enough to ordain men with no title at all.
In addition to the various chaplains, most of whom were in priest’s orders and were therefore able to say Mass and to hear confessions while their own rectors were disqualified by being insufficiently ordained, came the deacons and clerks. In his synodal statutes of 1238 Robert Grosseteste declared that “in every church where funds permit there shall be a deacon and subdeacon to minister therein as is fitting: in other churches there must be at least one adequate and suitable clerk, who, properly attired, shall assist in the divine office.” Apart from the assistance which the deacon could render at Mass we know very little of his activities. In the present Anglican service for the ordering of deacons it is stated that “it appertaineth to the office of a deacon to assist the priest in divine service, to read the Scriptures and Homilies in the church, to instruct the youth in the catechism, and to search for the sick, poor and impotent people of the parish that they may be relieved with the alms of the parishioners.” Similar tasks may well have been assigned to the medieval deacons, since these words, which made their first appearance in 1549, are probably based upon customs with which the Church had long been familiar.

The humblest, but by no means the least important, member of the staff in each parish was the clerk. The office of parish clerk is one which, having held an honourable place in the annals of the Church in this country, has only latterly been allowed to disappear. Throughout the Middle Ages the parish clerk held a position which, though of little substance, was of some security, for he was licensed by the Bishop and held his office as a freehold. In some parishes he was supported by the people, and, in addition to his regular stipend, might collect odd tips and fees, as did the “joly Absolon,” clerk of a parish in Oxford, who, in Chaucer’s words, could

“lete blood, and clippe and schave
And make a chartre of lond and aquittance”

besides his proficiency in dancing and acting and as a performer on the “rubible,” an early type of stringed instrument. As a result of his versatility he made quite a considerable income, and was able to dress as a dandy and to woo the carpenter’s wife with gifts of “pyment, mead, and spiced ale, and wafres piping
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hot.” On the other hand, many a parish clerk must have had a perpetual struggle against poverty and the terrors of old age and unemployment. Dr. Hartridge has pointed out how vicars, living on miserably small stipends, were yet expected to support their own clerks; and one can only wonder how anyone managed to live on the few shillings a year which such an arrangement would allow. Matthew Paris’ pathetic little story of the parish clerk whose modest income of twenty shillings a year was reduced, by the rapacity of a papal collector, to eighteen, with the result that he had to sell his books in the Cathedral close in order to keep body and soul together, is probably a fair commentary on the status of the parish clerk in most English parishes.

Such was the staff of the typical English country parish during the Middle Ages, and it is reasonable to suppose that they all lived together in the parsonage. However small and however dilapidated the house might be, it would be the only lodging which these men could either find or afford. Nowadays a clergyman expects to have a room to himself in which to write his sermons and interview his parishioners, but in medieval times there was no such demand for solitude. So long as a man had a roof over his head he cared very little about privacy. The average parish priest of those days had no desire to read or write, and if he interviewed his parishioners it would be in church in the seclusion of the confessional. The parsonage was therefore not, like its modern equivalent, a place for work, but merely a shelter, a convenient lodging for men who spent most of their time away from home.

The house-work, such as it was, was done by a boy. The richer clergy employed a number of such attendants, but even the humblest vicar was expected to have his page. The wages of this scullion were probably extremely small, for he became proverbially one of the poorest members of the community, so that Chaucer’s mercenary Pardoner can declare:

“ I wol have money, wolle, chese and whete
Al wer it yeven of the prestes page
Or of the porest wydow in a village.”

But in addition to those whom I have mentioned as occupants of the medieval parsonage there is no doubt that, in a number of
these houses, there was also to be found the priest's consort whether officially his wife or not. Although the teaching of the Apostles seems to allow of clerical marriage, celibacy had from the fourth century been the rule of the Western Church. It had, however, never been very rigidly enforced until Gregory VII in 1074 adopted it as a part of his programme for Church reform. But while it was easy to say that clergy must be single men, it was very much more difficult to see that the regulation was enforced. In this country, clerical marriages had been quite common in the days before the Norman Conquest, and there is abundant evidence that attempts to abolish them were only very partially successful during the next hundred years. Especially was this so in the North of England where old habits died slowly. The famous Ailred of Rievaulx, for instance, was son, grandson and great-grandson of priests, and several of the Bishops of Durham, and at least one Archbishop of York, were married men and fathers of families.

It was clear, then, that so far as this country was concerned the Hildebrandine reforms were not meeting with the success which was intended; and at the beginning of the thirteenth century another great reforming Pope, Innocent III, made a new effort to put an end to the irregularity of clerical marriages. His attempts seem to have caused some dismay which is reflected in a number of poems written about the year 1216, in which the clergy are made to declare both their determination to keep their wives and also their inability to live without them.

There is sufficient evidence to show that throughout the Middle Ages there was always a number of married clergy in this country though never enough to justify the sweeping statement of Giraldus Cambrensis that “nearly all” the parish priests of England had wives. The Church, moreover, was bound to take notice of these breaches of her own law. Officially, clergy who married were liable to suspension, and vigorous efforts were made from time to time to see that this was carried out, though not always with the success which their promoters might have desired. Even if the authorities achieved some success in the prevention of actual marriages, they were helpless against what Alexander IV called “the notorious cohabitation of clerks with their concubines”.

There was certainly, then, in many a parsonage house a woman living with the incumbent on terms practically the equivalent of wedlock. Sometimes, as at Broadwas in Worcestershire, the priest attempted to introduce his sweetheart in the disguise of a dairy-maid, but in most instances the woman was recognised as the priest’s wife and was accepted as such by the community. Clerical moralists like Robert Manning of Brunne in the fourteenth century might cry shame upon those women who consorted with the clergy, and tell gruesome tales of fiends carrying off the corpse of one who had lived for many years with a priest and borne him four sons; but on the other hand the daughter of the Rector of Trumpington in the Reeve’s Tale was considered so well-born and bred that, as Chaucer tells us, “ther durste no wight clepe hir but madame”.

Such was the medieval parsonage and such its occupants. It remains only for me to say a few words about the men themselves and the life they lived. But here the difficulties begin. Anyone who sets out to give any kind of picture of medieval social life is faced with the problem of the inadequacy of his material. Evidence exists, but not in sufficient abundance to enable the historian to make the sort of generalisations which the public demands. So far as the parochial clergy are concerned, what evidence have we?

First we have the testimony of official documents—Bishops’ letters and registers, accounts of visitations, and so on. These are immensely valuable in all kinds of ways; but they need to be treated with caution. Many of them are concerned mainly with the enforcement of discipline, and can therefore easily give us an unbalanced view of the state of the parochial clergy. Then there is the witness of contemporary literature. This also can tell us a good deal, but we have always to remember that fiction is not the best type of evidence. There is no more famous piece of writing about the medieval parochial clergy than Chaucer’s description of the “pore persoun” in the Prologue to the Canterbury Tales. But this is fiction, not evidence. Moreover, Chaucer was anxious to counteract the popular belief, often fostered by the religious themselves, that the members of the
religious orders held a monopoly of holiness. He did it by turning his regulars, monks and friars, into rogues while he makes his parish priest a paragon of virtue and devotion to duty. We must, therefore, be very guarded in using contemporary fiction as evidence of actual conditions in the Middle Ages.

Occasionally the historian stumbles upon some piece of irrefutable evidence—such, for instance, as the Household Accounts of Bogo de Clare to which I have already referred—but for the most part he must gather what scraps of evidence he can and try to fit them together, as a worker in mosaic fits together little coloured stones, to form a picture. But even so he must remember that among his coloured stones many are missing, and that there is nothing more misleading than a generalisation based upon insufficient evidence. Moreover, if he is wise, he will not put all the light-coloured stones into one half of his design and all the dark-coloured ones into the other half. Life is not like that. There are black spots and there are spots of dazzling light, but they appear against a background which is uniformly grey. So in the Middle Ages there were some thoroughly bad parish priests and there were some exceptionally good ones; there were men who were idle and selfish and there were men who attained to great holiness and righteousness of life; but the majority were simple men, not demanding much for themselves and not expecting that others should demand much of them.

Compared with their successors in later generations, the medieval parish clergy were undoubtedly seriously under-educated. When Archbishop Pecham wrote that “the ignorance of priests casteth people into the ditch of error,” since the clergy are like blind guides who will not seek for light where alone it may be found, he was only expressing what was in the minds of many of his contemporaries. Nearly a century earlier Giraldus Cambrensis had enjoyed himself in collecting examples of clerical ignorance, and Roger Bacon and Grosseteste had both complained bitterly of the very low standard of education among so many of the clergy. But I do not think that the clergy were altogether to blame, for educational facilities were in those days far more meagre than they are to-day. It is true that the Univer-
Universities of Oxford and Cambridge were beginning to make their influence felt from the thirteenth century onwards, but the proportion of parochial clergy who possessed a university degree remained small. Many towns could also boast of a grammar school or of some kind of academy for the instruction of the young, but even these attracted only a few of those destined for ordination. Try to imagine the sort of homes from which these lads came. If a boy lived in a town of any considerable size or where there was a large church or a Cathedral he would at least have a chance of going to school. But if he lived in the country—and the names of the clergy show that many of them came from tiny villages—opportunities for education were very small. Younger sons of the manorial family might be sent to the nearest grammar school, or they might receive some instruction through living as pages in the household of some nobleman or bishop; but the struggle for existence in which most of the village community was engaged occupied every member of the poorer families from earliest years. Nowadays a village boy who shows signs of awakening intelligence is taken at the public expense to a central school, where he will be both fed and educated free of charge. But in the Middle Ages any village which was more than a mile or two from a town was almost completely isolated, and no child from such a place could hope to reach any school, apart from the difficulty of any pair of hands, however small, being spared from the labour of the fields and of the home.

We must assume, therefore, that many of those who came up to the bishops for ordination, and who subsequently found their way into the parishes, were men who had had no opportunity of being educated beyond what they could pick up from some sympathetic priest. The clergy of England have always been associated with the instruction of children; and many a parish priest, then as now, would be willing to help any boy who felt that he had a call to the ministry and lacked only the necessary qualifications of learning to enable him to achieve his ambition. Such a system would not make for a high standard of education among the clergy, for many of those who attempted to give the instruction may have been themselves but poor scholars; but at least it would help to fill the gaps in the educational system.
And, when all is said and done, although it is right and proper that the clergy should be educated men, the scholar does not always make the best parish priest.

Besides being only a little above the standard of the laity in education, the average parochial clergyman of the Middle Ages lived in every way very much on the same level as the members of his congregation. The habits of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries have left us a tradition that the clergy should live very much apart from their people. Readers of Trollope will not need to be reminded of the vast gulf which yawned between the clergy and the country people of the villages of Barsetshire. Even poor Mr. Crawley, who was so much looked down on by the gentry of the county, was intensely conscious of the social distinctions between himself and the brickmakers of Hoggle End. But in the Middle Ages such “class distinctions” (for what else can we call them?) would exist only where the members of the more powerful families were concerned. The average parish priest of those days not only shared in the same standard of living as his poorer parishioners, but he was also thrown constantly into contact with them through being engaged upon the same tasks as those which occupied their days. I have already mentioned the fact that many of the country clergy in those days were farmers, and, as those of us who work on the land know, you cannot work a smallholding without constantly rubbing shoulders with your neighbours. If that is true to-day how much more must it have been true in the days when a man’s land was scattered about the parish, a strip here and a sellion there, and when every journey to any part of his holding necessitated his crossing the land of his neighbours.

If the country parson was thus accustomed to mingle with his parishioners in their work, it is little wonder if he also joined them in their hours of recreation. While the richer clergy took their delight in field sports—to the great indignation of William Langland, who thought that the sporting parson should be unfrocked even if allowed to go unhung:

“Haukyng other hontyng, yf eny of hem hit usie
Shal lese ther-fore hus lyue-lode—and hus life parauenture”—
while the rich were thus employed, the poorer clergy found their solace in the rough sports of the villagers and in the uncertain pleasures of the bottle. Episcopal decrees are full of denunciations of those among the clergy who were accustomed to drink too much, Bishop Quivil of Exeter, for example, urging his clergy to give up spending nights in drinking and foolish talk, but rather to go home and sleep soberly so that they may be in a fit state to say their offices when morning comes. Drunkenness is, in our own days, a thing so degrading and unnecessary that we should be rightly shocked to hear of any clergy who were guilty of it. But censures which would be justified to-day can hardly be applied to those who lacked so many of the things which we enjoy. Many of the medieval clergy lived in isolated villages and hamlets, cut off from all chance of sober relaxation and with none of the solaces of home-life or of books. We must not, therefore, be too hard upon them if they sought companionship and recreation in the tavern.

Poor, badly-housed, cut off from all legitimate pleasures of family life, ill-educated, terribly isolated and with little chance of preferment, the average parish priest of medieval England lived a hard life. But it was not without its compensations. However humble his position in the hierarchy he knew himself to be a member of a great spiritual fellowship, a corporation which had behind it illimitable reserves of power and of prestige. Nor were the compensations confined to this world. Beyond “our bourne of Time and Place” lay another and a better world to which all those who had served their Master faithfully were hastening. Every child was familiar, in those days, with the great “doom” painted upon the wall of the church, with its grotesque portrayal of heaven and hell. Almost everyone was haunted all through life by the thought of possible damnation and endless torment. To be a priest did not necessarily ensure salvation, but it put a man on the side of the angels and gave him something to offer at the Judgement-seat of Christ.