

BENSON VICARAGE by Janet Burt

Prior to the 16th century the words describing church matters differed from our use today. The priest in charge of a parish would be known as a Rector or Parson. Where the incumbent was an absentee a substitute would be in place, and he was known as a vicar. The income, or living, derived from lesser tithes was therefore known as the Parsonage, Rectory or Vicarage, and this did not originally mean the priest's dwelling house.

In Benson the most recent dwelling house for the Vicar is in Church Road next to the Churchyard. The Vicarage which has survived the longest is at the corner of Church Rd and Oxford Road, by the War Memorial – nowadays known as The Old Vicarage. It was in use as the Vicar's residence until 1970, having been built 100 years before.

References to a parsonage in Benson start in 1540, and continue through 1680, to 1840 and 1869. Also mentioned are "a curate House" in 1630 and "the vicarage" in 1861. It may be that these earlier dwellings were not on the same site, but by 1638 a map shows a building established there. In 1862 the then vicarage was described as "very old", and it may have been one of these earlier buildings.

In the 12th Century the church and its living was given to Dorchester Abbey, but, after the dissolution of the monasteries it was transferred to Christ Church College, Oxford.

In 1616 the incumbent, Will Cox, signed a "Terrier of the Vicaridge of Bensington" This was a document which described a land holding and often included descriptions of buildings on the site. In this case it states, "there was glebe land of 2 acres and 1 rood" between the churchyard and the river. Mention of a parson house was not made, but that does not preclude the existence of one.

The absentee priest was not unusual . In 1667 John Cross, an apothecary, was the tenant of the parsonage with all its benefits. His lease was for 21 years. In return he was to pay the minister the sum of £13.6s 8d "at the usual feast".

Later the lease was granted to William Mearsom, blacksmith, for 21 years and included "the Church house being a smyth's forge" – probably not the

parsonage house. Other tenants followed, and in another terrier it detailed “One messuage or tenement with the forge in the Occupation of George Messom, one other messuage or tenement called the Church House in the Occupation of Henry Meades, one acre and a half of land in the close with the Barn and Garden belonging to the same”. In 1862 the incumbent, John Collyns noted in a letter to Christ Church that “the parsonage very old and needs rebuilding”

In 1866 it was stated that, as the incumbent of Benson was entitled to tithes, it was henceforward declared to be a Vicarage.

The Old Vicarage. This was the house rebuilt for Rev. G C Robinson in 1869-70 , occupying the same site as its predecessor, and probably includes some of the old building materials. The architect, Charles Buckeridge specified the reuse of any sound bricks and stone in the foundations and internal walls, and the use of old tiles as far as they would go. Also recycled were the old copper, stone sink, the kitchen range and two of the best fire grates in bedrooms. The walls are faced in flint and bonded with brick dressings, and the mullion windows were of Box Stone. With its gables it owed nothing to the earlier Georgian Villa style.

The interior was to be styled appropriately to the status of the Vicar. The study, drawing and dining rooms had moulded wooden cornices, while the staircase hall, hall and porch were plainer. There was also a bedroom floor with dressing rooms. The services comprised kitchen, scullery, pantry, cellar, coal cellar and wine cellar. In 1891 the Vicarage was fully used by the Vicar, his wife, their seven children and two servants.

This house has been a private residence since the last incumbent to live there, Rev George Palmer, left in 1970.

References: Barrie Charles “The story of the old vicarage, Benson”

Catherine Murray “Benson. A village through its History”

The Shorter Oxford English Dictionary