

Discord in the Chancel

Vicar assaulted in church: fighting over harmonium and organ

When Kilsby church was forced recently to find a new home for its old harmonium (which was eventually relocated to a chapel in Long Lawford), it is just as well that we did not follow the example set in 1895 ...

Leamington Spa Courier - Saturday 20 July 1895

"An extraordinary scene took place in the Parish Church at Kilsby, Northamptonshire, on Sunday, between the Vicar (the Rev. F. Bell) and some of his parishioners, who claim certain rights therein. It seems that a family of Kilsby have held a part of the chancel, and have sat there when so minded. Preferring, however, to sit in the body of the church they assented to allow the harmonium and other church furniture to be placed in their old seat. A member of the family died a short time ago, and the Vicar was asked to allow a certain hymn to be sung at the funeral, but he refused. The Vicar was thereupon requested to remove the harmonium from the pew, and that he also refused to do. On Sunday morning, the organist was playing the voluntary, when the aggrieved parishioner and his assistants made their way to the pew and began to remove the instrument. The Vicar went from the reading desk to stop them, and a sturdy struggle ensued, in the course of which the harmonium was pulled into several pieces, the congregation standing up meanwhile to watch the unseemly proceedings. The portions of the harmonium were placed outside the church by the victorious party, and the Vicar, who had been somewhat roughly handled, proceeded with the service."

Unhappily, the struggle over private property rights in the church did not end there; it seems that strong feelings were still simmering, for two years later the following report appeared:

Northampton Mercury - Friday 29 October 1897

"KILSBY.—The Organ.—Some time since, the Rev. T. S. Hichens, Rector of Guilsborough, offered to present an organ to the church of Kilsby, and the offer was gladly accepted. Consideration naturally turned upon the most suitable spot in the church in which to erect the organ, and the choice ultimately fell upon continuation of the North aisle opening into the chancel, this having the advantage being near the choir, and also it was thought being the most convenient. The necessary faculty was accordingly applied for, and on the usual notices being posted Mr. George Charles Cowley gave notice of opposition on the ground that the place selected called by him chapel is his private property. On Monday the Chancellor of the Diocese, Mr. G.H. Blakesley attended, when evidence for and against the faculty was tendered. The Chancellor was attended by Mr. H. W. Gates, as Registrar of the Diocese; Mr. Kemps, Q.C. (London), instructed by Mr. F. W. Atter, Peterborough, represented the petitioners, the Rev. F. Bell, of Kilsby, Mr. Postle, churchwarden, etc.; and Mr. Granger Prior, Rugby, appeared for the objector, Mr. George Charles Cowley. Little interest was manifested in the proceedings, there not being half a dozen present besides officials and those immediately concerned. After a long argument, the faculty was granted, but was ordered to be held over to give Mr. Cowley chance to take other action."

To trace the roots of this power struggle in Kilsby church, we must dig deep ... for it all started back in 1535AD.

The will of Robert Cowley of Kilsby, in 1535, includes a bequest of

"... a close and one quartern of land [about 7 acres] ... of which close and land I will that yerely one abbott be kept and donate of 2s for my soul, my wiff's and all chrystyn souls for ever. And for want of performance of the same, I will my overseers with the churchwardens of Kylesby enter into the said close and land and preserve the said abbot for ever."

This gift provided an income for a chantry priest to pray in the chantry chapel that Robert Cowley erected (the chapel at the top of the north aisle). The chantry chapel was still in use in the 1540s – and we even know the name of the chantry priest – because Hugh Nicols of Kilsby left 3s-4d in his will in 1545 for "... Brother Father Oswald to pray for me". The priest of Kilsby in 1545 was not named Oswald; so we can infer that this "Brother Oswald" was a former monk, thrown out of work at the Dissolution of the Monasteries in 1539.

Which all goes to show that tradition runs very deep in country churches. However, the organ saga in 1897 ended happily – the organ was installed in the Cowley chapel, where it continues to give pleasure today (despite the occasional croaky note due to its venerable age).

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March 2014
(792 words)