

'A small civil war' - the Thurnby Bell-ringing Dispute 1862-63

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On 17th February 1862 the bells of St Luke's church in Thurnby rang out to greet the visit of the Earl of Stamford and Warrington's hounds to the village, as had been the custom for the past three years. (1) On this occasion, however, they were rung contrary to the orders of the incumbent, Rev John Roberts Redhead, who also 'took the precaution to secure, with strong nails, all entrances into the sacred edifice'. (2) The consequences of this act of defiance were played out far beyond the boundaries of the parish itself - as far as the Court of Arches, the highest ecclesiastical court of the Archdiocese of Canterbury. In the process, Rev Redhead himself became the subject of 'considerable ill-feeling', both within his parish and in the columns of various newspapers, for his actions against those involved. (3)

I heard the story of the 'Battle of the Bells' during my childhood in Thurnby and Bushby in the 1950s, from people who were clearly on the side of those against whom the vicar had acted. I felt a little pride in it myself - but I was not at all curious about the details at the time. Thus this article aims to answer the questions that only occurred to me many years along the line. Why did Rev Redhead go to such lengths to prevent the ringing of the bells on this occasion? Why did he take legal proceedings against members of his own congregation? How was the matter eventually resolved? And - the question at the heart of the dispute, and the easiest to answer - who *did* actually have a legal right to ring the bells, or prevent them from being rung?



Stoughton Grange 1789, the residence of Major Powys-Keck in the early 1860s, from J. D. Bennett, Vanished Houses of Leicestershire, Leicester Museums, 1971. Although described by Throsby as Stoughton Hall, all other sources refer to the house as Stoughton Grange, which took its name from the original medieval estate (Reproduced by permission of Leicester Museums and Galleries.)

Prior to this, Thurnby and the adjacent hamlet of Bushby were unremarkable agricultural settlements. Thurnby's population in 1861 was 196; that of Bushby only 60. In addition to nine farmers, their families and labourers, their residents included a carpenter and wheelwright, a surgeon, a tailor, and the solicitor

Thomas Miles who lived at Thurnby Grange and was 'in the habit of entertaining Lord Stamford when the hounds meet at Thurnby'. (4) There was one public house - the 'Rose and Crown' - a post office, and a small school. (5) The parish of Thurnby also included the curacy of Stoughton, a village around a mile to its south, where Major the Hon Henry Littleton Powys-Keck, lord of the manor and patron of the living of Thurnby, lived at Stoughton Grange. (6)



Detail from the Ordnance Survey maps 1:10,560, Leicestershire, XXXI.SE 1886 and XXXII.SW 1885, showing Thurnby Village and Thurnby Lodge. (Source: Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 CC International CC by 4.0 licence. Reproduced with the permission of the National Library of Scotland, <https://maps.nls.uk/view/101592690>, <https://maps.nls.uk/view/101592720>.)

Accounts of what exactly happened on 17th February 1862 vary, but one thing is clear: Rev Redhead's objections to the bells being rung on that day were not related in any way to the hunt itself or fox-hunting more generally. They rested instead on his claim that he had been 'subjected to a great deal of annoyance in consequence of the bells being rung upon improper occasions',

and that as vicar he had a right 'to put a stop to it'. (7) Quoting canon law in a letter of 10th February to David Wait, one of the churchwardens, he wrote that:

the churchwardens cannot procure the ringing of the bells, except on the occasion of divine service, if the minister forbid it. Neither can the minister without the consent of one of the churchwardens. I beg, therefore, to apprise you that I do not give my consent to the ringing of the church bells of this parish, at any time, on the occasion of the meeting of the hounds here; and that if this notice is disregarded I shall feel myself under the painful necessity of vindicating my own right in the matter by legal process. (8)

The notice was disregarded; and around 7.00 am on 17th February 1862, discovering the door of the belfry locked from the inside and the latch 'pegged down with wood, and the wood nailed to the door' on the outside, Mr Wait sent for the village carpenter and wheelwright Samuel Pawley. Acting under Mr Wait's instructions, he lifted the door off its hooks with an iron bar to admit the bell-ringers. He then 'hung the door on again, and went about his business ... Neither the door nor anything belonging to it was damaged by him removing it from off the hooks'. (9) On hearing that the ringers were entering the belfry, Rev Redhead went to the church, only to find the inner door to the tower barred against him. 'I am sorry you men act thus', he said: 'I shall be obliged to proceed against you and you must take the consequences'. 'We take the consequences', was the reply from one of the bell-ringers: 'we are all here and will abide by the law'. By the time the vicar returned with Thomas Miles and the local Superintendent of Police, the bells had been ringing 'a joyous peal' for around two hours as the hunt gathered. (10)

The good character of all those involved was emphasised at various points during the dispute. David Wait, who farmed



This small door at the base of the stair turret may have been the bell tower door at the centre of the 1862-63 dispute - but it may be of a later date when part of the church was rebuilt in the 1870s.

150 acres at Thurnby Lodge, had served in the Leicestershire Yeoman Cavalry in the 1850s, and acted as the county agent for the Gainsborough Bone and Tillage Mills. (11) He was the church organist at the nearby village of Evington, and was later elected as a Way Warden for Thurnby, with responsibility for taking care of the roads within the parish. (12) The bell-ringers, Edward Draper, Robert Jarvis and Edward and William Seale were all agricultural labourers. The Seales had been employed for around 16 years on Mr John Bramley's farm at Bushby, while Edward Draper, a widower with three young children, was also the parish clerk. (13) All five, however, found themselves before the County magistrates sitting at Leicester Castle in March 1862. David Wait was charged under the Ecclesiastical Courts Jurisdiction Act 1860 – commonly known as the 'St George's in the East Act' for its close association with disorder at that particular church in the east end of London (14) - with being 'unlawfully guilty of violent, riotous, and indecent behaviour, by entering the parish churchyard, and forcibly breaking open the belfry door of the church'. (15) Similar charges were laid against Edward Draper, Robert Jarvis and Edward and William Seale, and initially against Samuel Pawley – who was also the parish constable. In his case they were withdrawn 'in order to make him a witness'; but Thomas Miles, who had organised the meet of the hunt, was charged with aiding and abetting the offence. (16)

The case created 'very great interest, many of the principal farmers and gentry of the neighbourhood where the scene occurred being present, and the Court was crowded with intent listeners. Outside the Court crowds were waiting to hear the result of the proceedings'. (17) However, the allegations against Mr Wait were vigorously challenged by his legal representative, Mr J. B. Haxby, on two grounds. Firstly he questioned the validity of a charge under the St. George's in the East Act, which:

was passed for preventing diabolical nuisances at the church bearing that name, and at other places of worship. It applied itself to nuisances inside and outside the church during divine service, and to remedy a certain evil existing at that time ... Had it been proved anything of a riotous nature had occurred? There was no violence used or any noise made to attract the attention of the parishioner [sic]; nothing was done but merely placing gently a crow-bar under a door, and quietly and peaceably lifting it off the hinges, and replacing it. Where could be found the indecency in the proceedings? they were all respectable men, and not an indecent word was spoken He (Mr. Haxby) considered he could not go too far in speaking of the absurdity in bringing his client there on such a charge ... (18)

Those found guilty under the Act could be fined or imprisoned - but the jurisdiction of the County magistrates themselves was also called into question by the vicar's declaration that: 'I have come here today, not to seek punishment to the defendant, or

anyone else; I want to know whether I have the right of control over the bells or not'. Mr Haxby contended that 'as the question of right had been brought in by the complainant their jurisdiction ceased... this was not the proper tribunal at all to try a case of right'. The magistrates could not reach an agreement on these matters, and the case against David Wait was dismissed. The charges against Edward Draper, Robert Jarvis, Edward and William Seale and Thomas Miles were also withdrawn. (19)

However, Rev Redhead was not done with 'vindicating his right' to prohibit the ringing of the bells, and issued a suit against the five men in the Court of Arches on the grounds that they had 'broken into the belfry or tower of the parish church and rung the bells, contrary to the order and against the remonstrances of the promoter [of the suit]'. He asked that they should be 'admonished to refrain from the like behaviour for the future'. The Court assented, confirming that 'the clergyman of the parish, although he has no authority to order the bells to be rung (excepting one: for service) without the consent of one churchwarden, has the legal right to prevent them being rung'. (20) The defendants did not oppose the verdict, and no penalties were imposed. They were however made liable for the costs of the case, amounting to £44 3s 10d. (21)



Early twentieth century postcard view of St Luke's Church Thurnby (from *The Wrench series*).

Some accounts of this dispute state that the four bell-ringers were consigned to the County Gaol in Leicester for non-payment of these costs. (22) This was not so. As David Wait made clear at the time, that sum was paid, and 'that case was settled'. (23) They did indeed spend time in prison, but in relation to an entirely different case brought against them for holding a bell-ringing practice without the vicar's consent on a Monday evening in April 1862. Such practices were normally held on Tuesdays, but:

The day on which they rang the bells was a rainy one, and unfit for out-door occupation; and they wished to make the most of their time by practising upon it, instead of the next, when it might be fine. When spoken to by Mr. Redhead, they expressed themselves

sorry that they did not know that they had done any harm, and apologised humbly in order to appease his wrath. (24)

Although they were 'the regular ringers, and had been for many years, and had always been allowed to ring in ordinary practice whenever they thought proper', Rev Redhead brought a second case against them in the Court of Arches. (25) This went undefended because the men could not afford to employ a lawyer, but they were again ordered to pay the costs, amounting this time to £37 10s:

which, being an amount wholly beyond their means, they are now sent to prison, to be disgraced for the rest of their lives; leaving their wives and families in misery, and a burden on the parish to which they belong; but the man whose mission it is to preach "peace on earth, goodwill towards men," chose rather to imitate the example of the servant of the King, who, after being himself pardoned, went out and met a fellow servant, laid hands upon him, and cast him into prison until he should pay him (Matt, xviii, 28 v) (26)

'Mr Redhead seems to have peculiar notions about some things, and bell-ringing in particular', wrote the same correspondent to a local newspaper:

I do contend that a clergyman ought not to visit his ill-humour on these harmless men, and burden our rates for the sake of carrying out his hobby. I also consider that a clergyman ought to conduct himself so as to be beloved by his parishioners, instead of being (as in this case) almost universally disliked ...

'I hear the parishioners and churchwardens have come to the conclusion of selling the church bells, organ and other moveables, which they consider they have a claim upon,' he continued, to support the men in prison and their families. This did not happen, but an appeal for donations attracted 'several handsome subscriptions', and it was also said that members of the hunt sent the men 'game, and so many other delicacies, that ... never had they lived so well'. (27)

CHURCHES AND CHURCHMEN. TO THE EDITOR OF THE LEICESTER CHRONICLE.

Sir, - There is something wrong in the state of Denmark, or "any other state," when we find four hard-working, industrious men, thrown into our county gaol at the instance of a certain clergyman, for ringing the church bells at what he considered an improper time. The men I allude to are residents of Thurnby or Bushby.

These individuals (who are now in prison, and costing the county something considerable), I learn, chose on a certain Monday to practice ringing the bells of Thurnby, instead of the Tuesday, on which day they are generally rung ... Yours respectfully
CENSOR (*Leicester Chronicle*, 14th Feb. 1863.)

The parishioners expressed their own views when Lord Stamford's hounds met again at Thurnby in February 1863, having resolved:

(although deprived of the right to ring the church bells) to let the proceedings pass off with *eclat*, and accordingly they engaged a circus band, and for a considerable time paraded the village, halting occasionally in front of the Vicar's residence, playing quite a medley of lively tunes, to the utter annoyance of that gentleman. The day was most propitious for the meet, which was attended by very large number persons, who found their way to Thurnby, not so much for the sake of seeing the throw off as for the mirthful scene of villagers who seemed as if they could not adequately make too public a display of the opinion they entertained of the Vicar. (28)

Questions were also asked about Major Powys-Keck as patron of the living. The church was said to be 'almost deserted for some time past; and yet the patron... still retains this gentleman there, and forces the inhabitants either to sit under his ministration or abstain entirely from attending the House of God' – allegedly driving people into Dissent 'who would otherwise be good Church people'. (29) On 10th March 1863, however, when the men had been in prison for several weeks, Major Powys-Keck paid the whole of the costs of the case himself, enabling them to be released in time to share the festivities marking the marriage of the Prince of Wales and Princess Alexandra on that day; and 'by the kindness of other friends, funds were supplied to enable the men to enjoy themselves at home with their families'. (30)

The question remains of why Rev Redhead pursued one of his churchwardens and the four bell-ringers to such



Portrait of Major Powys-Keck, the Hon. Henry Littleton Powys-Keck (né Powys) by Camille Silvy, albumen print, 29 April 1861, NPG Ax52720. (© National Portrait Gallery, London, reproduced under a Creative Commons licence Attribution-Non Commercial-NoDerivs 3.0 Unported (CC BY-NC-ND 3.0). npg.org.uk/collections/search/use-this-image/?mkey=mw243026)

lengths. Part of the answer appears to lie in his view of the meet of the hunt as a secular event and thus not a 'just cause' for ringing the bells. 'Last season', he said during the proceedings in the County Court: 'I made objection to their being rung; the first time I felt inclined to put a stop the ringing on such occasions was at the commencement of the present hunting season. Previous to this time I have never interfered with the churchwardens as to the ringing...'. However, as a letter to the *Leicester Journal* pointed out in February 1862, church bells were frequently rung for secular purposes:

who has not heard of the Church Bells having been rung on the occasion of the Squire's marriage, the birth of his heir, and when that heir attained his majority, and when the Squire or Lord of the place has returned to his ancestral home after a prolonged absence. Who has not heard of Church Bells having been rung at the village wake or festival, and what inhabitant of this town [Leicester] does not know that the Church Bells have always been rung on the occasion of the Election of the Members for the Southern Division of the County... (31)

Was there 'more desecration', he asked, in ringing the bells to greet the hunt than for any of these other purposes? On the contrary, he argued, having rung them for the past three years, 'the non-ringing of the bells could not have been construed otherwise than an omission of the usual compliment to his Lordship' – and moreover, given that they were all labourers, 'few persons would try to deprive the poor Ringers of the gratuity which Lord Stamford on these occasions liberally bestows upon them, and which carries gladness to many a cottage hearth'. (32)

His views were echoed by the *Leicester Chronicle*, which described the dispute as:

like a paltry quarrel about a trifle... The Earl of Stamford's hounds meet at Thurnby. The occasion is joyous, and in a country village the time for a little rural hilarity. One way of showing pleasure in such places is to ring the church-bells. In doing so, people don't think about canon law and ecclesiastical censures: they cannot discharge ordnance, for they have none — bonfires are not at hand, and, besides, it is day-time when the Earl and his friends are at the "meet"— no other way is left open in which the prevalent feeling can manifest itself except by putting the bell-ropes in motion. (33)

Such precedents may go some way to explain why five of Rev Redhead's parishioners chose to defy him, despite evidence that he did have the right to prohibit the ringing of the bells; but 'If this be the greatest enormity perpetrated in Thurnby parish', the newspaper continued: 'the Rev. Mr. Redhead may well consent to overlook it occasionally, and not create a small civil war in his domain by trying his strength against his parishioners on such a very insignificant issue'. (34)

There was more to it than this, however. There was clearly some personal animosity between the vicar and Mr Wait - ‘some private and personal feeling’ – to which Rev Redhead himself freely admitted during the case in the County Court. ‘Up to the present hunting season the churchwardens and myself have been on good terms’, he said, but: ‘Mr. Wait and myself have had a misunderstanding; and it was during the existence of it that I interfered with his right of ringing the church bells’. (35) The nature of this ‘misunderstanding’ is never revealed, but the vicar was said to have viewed the Monday bell-ringing practice in April 1862 as a deliberate challenge to his authority: ‘a conquering peal, and fancied the men were encouraged by myself [Mr Wait] and others; now, I defy that gentleman to bring forward the least proof that such was the case’. (36)

None was forthcoming. Nor were there any further reports of the dispute once Major Powys-Keck had secured the release of Edward Draper, Robert Jarvis and Edward and William Seale. Relations between the vicar and his parishioners may have continued to be strained, but Rev Redhead remained as incumbent until his death in 1872, when he was succeeded by his son Theodore. Robert Jarvis died in 1864, and David Wait in December 1867 of a ‘lingering illness’. (37) His widow Ann continued to run the farm at Thurnby Lodge, and William Seale was working there as a labourer in 1871. Edward Draper appears to have moved away, but Edward Seale was still living in the parish in that year, and still working as an agricultural labourer. (38)



The adjacent gravestones of Rev J. R. Redhead (stepped cross) and David Wait in Thurnby St Luke’s churchyard.

Thurnby’s ‘Battle of the Bells’ was denounced at the time as ‘unworthy of the great attention bestowed upon it’, but for those who were incarcerated as a result it was far from a ‘paltry quarrel about a trifle’. It surely justifies a closer look some 160 years after the event as an example of the sort of conflict that could arise within the supposedly tranquil and harmonious villages of Victorian Britain’s green and pleasant land.

References:

1. *Leicester Journal* (subsequently *LJ*), 28th February 1862.
2. *Grantham Journal* (subsequently *GJ*), 28th February 1863. This was in fact the Quorn Hunt, which was commonly known by the name of its master - at this time George Harry Booth-Grey, 7th Earl of Stamford and 3rd Earl of Warrington.
3. *Leicester Guardian* (subsequently *LG*), 21st February 1863.
4. *LJ*, 21st March 1862.
5. *Wright’s Historical Gazetteer and Directory of the Counties of Leicestershire and Rutland* (1863), pp588-89. This was presumably the day school opened in 1833 by ‘a lady’, and free to the children of cottagers in both settlements. The National School in Thurnby was not established until 1865 (Thurnby | British History Online (british-history.ac.uk) – accessed 26th April 2023).
6. Henry Littleton Powys-Keck was born at Lilford, Northamptonshire in 1812, and served for 26 years in the 60th Royal Rifles, retiring with the rank of major. Towards the end of the Crimean War he also founded the Royal Soldiers’ Daughters’ Home in Hampstead, London to ‘nurture, clothe, board and educate the destitute female children, orphans or not, of soldiers, born during the service, or after the honourable discharge of their father’. He was elected an MP for Leicestershire in 1861 and appointed Deputy Lieutenant of the County in the same year (www.childrenshomes.org.uk/HampsteadSoldiers) - accessed 24th April 2023; *London Gazette*, 15th Nov. 1861; 17th Jan. 1862).
7. *LJ*, 21st March 1862.
8. *ibid.*
9. *ibid.*
10. *LJ*, 21st March 1862; *GJ*, 28th February 1863.
11. *LJ*, 31st October 1856. Thurnby Lodge, the farm from which the 20th century municipal housing estate took its name, was within the Thurnby parish boundary at this time.
12. *Historical Gazetteer and Directory of the Counties of Leicestershire and Rutland* (1863); *LG*, 7th November 1863.
13. Letter to *Leicestershire Mercury* (subsequently *LM*), 28th February 1863.
14. See below for the main points of the Act.
15. *LJ*, 21st March 1862
16. E. Ruddock, ‘Thurnby’s battle of the bells’, *Leicestershire Historian*, Vol 1, Part 7, Autumn 1970 (Old Series), pp.238-241.
17. *LJ*, 21st March 1862.
18. *ibid.*
19. *ibid.*
20. Report of the proceedings of the Court of Arches, *Royal Cornwall Gazette*, 4th July 1862
21. Ruddock, p.240, *op. cit.*
22. *GJ*, 28th February 1863; Ruddock, *op. cit.*
23. Letter to *LM*, 28th February 1863. It is not clear who paid them, but possibly by him.
24. *LC*, 14th February 1863.
25. Letter to *LC*, 28th February 1863.
26. *ibid.* The four men had 10 children between them.
27. *LM*, 28th February 1863; Ruddock, *op. cit.* I have not been able to find any other source to confirm the latter.
28. *GJ*, 28th February 1863.
29. *LM*, 28th February 1863.
30. *LC*, 28th March 1863.
31. *LJ*, 28th February 1862.
32. *ibid.*
33. *LC*, 22nd March 1862.
34. *ibid.*
35. *LJ*, 21st March 1862.
36. *LC*, 14th Feb. 1863; *Leicestershire Mercury*, 28th Feb. 1863.
37. *LC*, 21st December 1867; England & Wales, National Probate Calendar (Index of Wills and Administrations), 1858-1995. David Wait left effects of under £800; Rev Redhead of under £300. Both were buried in St Luke’s churchyard (www.findagrave.com – accessed 20th April 2023).
38. 1871 *Census*. Edward Draper could not be found in this Census, but appears in 1881 in Thurmaston, working as a brickyard labourer.