

**Helliers, Hoopes and Barbary Pirates:
exploring the Bere Ferrers parish Churchwardens' accounts**

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This article explores payments recorded in the churchwardens' accounts for the parish of Bere Ferrers in the 17th and 18th centuries. The original documents are archived in the Devon Heritage Centre in Exeter. However, the evidence used here draws on material produced by the late Robin Gallup from transcripts made by the Rev. F. Wintle in the early 20th century.

Aside from names in the parish registers, we have few details of rural people and their lives before the emergence of censuses, local newspapers or other documents, so the churchwardens' accounts are especially valuable. The records used here offer fascinating glimpses of the matters that concerned the local church administrators and their Bere Ferrers parishioners during two periods, 1601-1654 and 1728-1794.

The central role of churchwardens was (and still is) to act as guardians of the Church building, its contents and the churchyard, as well as other Church property. They were primarily responsible for collecting and disbursing funds for the protection, maintenance and enhancement of the Church fabric (Borthwick Institute for Archives, 2006). However, in the past, the churchwardens' remit was much wider; they were effectively the 'local government', so the parochial budget was remarkably diverse. While many entries in the accounts are short and mundane ('washing the surplices' appears regularly), others are singular and surprising in their focus and scope, sometimes reaching far beyond the confines of the Tamar and Tavy to reflect national or even international affairs.

There is enough detail in the records to hint at the concerns, priorities and perhaps even the emotions of the parochial managers and their parishioners in the 17th and 18th centuries. But of course, there are also many gaps and silences, which makes the accounts all the more intriguing. It is left to us to imagine and ponder what Bere Ferrers and its church looked like then and, especially, the faces, characters, conversations and concerns of those vanished generations. What debates, arguments and agreements lay behind such humble items as "repairs to the sidesmen's pews in the church, being ready to fall"?

Maintenance and Improvement of St. Andrew's Church

Throughout both periods considered here, expenditure on the church and its fittings was the dominant focus for payments. There were constant demands for repairs inside and out, only a few of which can be included here. In 1602, funds were allocated for "Leading for glass and mending faults in the church windows". Had there been particular urgency in the work in 1633 that led to payment for "candles for the joiners to work by night"? In 1634 and 1635, repairs to the tower of St. Andrew's church incurred a bill for £63. The relatively slender tower was constructed of local slate stone, which is less resilient than the granite in many West Devon churches, so periodic re-rendering has been essential to resist deterioration. Hence in 1741, a bargeman was paid "...for casting sand for rough cast". It is unclear what led to the purchase in 1733 of "reed and labour in stopping of breach on ye Church". In 1753, Nicholas Knight had presented his bill for "nails and brads for repairing the singing seats & other smithy work", while in 1767 further roof repairs must have been needed, as payment for "hellier's work" appears ('helliers' were slaters or tilers). Between 1774 and 1776, there was a major

project to renew the bells, with a replacement set cast by Penningtons of Stoke Climsland, which required “ringing out of new bells agreeable to the custom of other parishes”. Basic ‘groundwork’ was also necessary, such as “putting brimble on the churchyard wall to keep out the sheep” in 1607. The scenes of emergency shepherding that preceded this task can only be imagined. However, by 1642, “cutting of the brambles in the churchyard “was listed - so the planting 35 years earlier had clearly been effective!

There were frequent small payments for keeping the church fittings in good condition, for example (and note the evident gender division of labour): “Pd Ruth Palmer for materials for mending the pulpit cushion and surplice” (1751), “Pd Kate Palmer for mending the black cloth & simple crepe for the bier” (1756) and “Pd Ruth Salmon for the stuff & mending the cushions of the Communion Table as per bill” (1769). But there were also many improvements to the church interior, for example: “Pd to the painter for making the Commandments and the rest of the sentences in the church” (1635), “Pd Mr Sion for a superfine folio Common Prayer Book & carriage from Exon” (1756), and in 1771 “velvet for the pew“(1771).

Music

The later Georgian era was the golden age of church musicians, as personified by Thomas Hardy’s ‘Mellstock Quire’ in ‘Under the Greenwood Tree’. The Bere Ferrers accounts for the later 18th century frequently refer to payments for the maintenance of the instruments played by the church band. They would have performed on the gallery that was erected at the back of St. Andrew’s in 1783 at the expense of John, Earl of Buckinghamshire, of Blickling Hall in Norfolk, who owned most of the Bere Peninsula at that date. Musical investments at this time included a “bridge for the bass”, “new strings for the bass viol and violincello” and in 1787, payment to John Williams for reeds for the ‘hautboy’ (forerunner of the oboe). There was further outlay to “Miss Jane Stephens for candles for the singers” and to Mr Bennett “for instructing the singers”. Such musical education had precedent in Bere Ferrers, for in 1728 John Smith was rewarded “for perfecting ye parishioners in singing as per consent of ye major part of ye parish”. Was this John Smith some 18th century Gareth Malone, inspiring the locals to choral magnificence, or had the congregation’s performances got so dire that drastic measures were needed?

Military Matters

In the earlier 17th century, parishes faced more militaristic demands on their funds; churchwardens were responsible for organising local defence forces – the ‘militias’. Their duties included arranging for those serving in the parish militia to assemble occasionally for ‘musters’ and training, and also to acquire and maintain suitable weapons. In 1612, 11 shillings and 4 pence were paid to the ‘muster master’ who trained 22 men from Bere Ferrers in Tavistock. A similar amount was paid the following year for a “new pike that the parish wanted to furnish the trained soldiers when they were to appear before the Captain and Muster Master”. The parish also had armour; in 1603 John Wroe was paid two shillings for “standing the parish armour the last year in his house”. However, there is scant reference to the *real* fighting that afflicted the area during the long siege of Parliament-supporting Plymouth by the Royalists in the Civil War. In 1642 and 1643, payments (bribes?) were made for “keeping of sick soldiers out of the parish”. Then in 1650, there is a terse: “Pd for putting down the Kings Arms in the church” - perhaps a rather delayed acceptance of the Cromwellian interlude. Yet the often vicious

fighting and raiding between 1642 and 1645 must surely have brought much fear, suspicion and deprivation, even to the relatively isolated Bere Peninsula.

Charity

Among the most intriguing and surprising entries in the accounts are the charitable payments, directed not only to local needs but also to affairs that were far beyond the banks of the Tavy. Although sometimes frustratingly cryptic, we are offered hints that local residents had values, perceptions and emotions that are not simply those of an imagined 'barbaric past' but were sometimes not so very distant from our own. While parishes had legal responsibility for catering for the poor, surely humanity, sympathy and initiative also lay behind the responses to the less fortunate. As early as 1602, two shillings were "given to a poor man being hurted and licensed to beg....to travel to the Bath for a remedy". Then in 1607, there is an unusually detailed record of the transfer from Bere Ferrers of a "sick woman into the Maudlyn house" at Plympton that almost parallels a modern social work case. Money was found for the expenses of the two 'sidemen' that rode to Plympton to organise the woman's 'placement', "the hire of a horse to carry her things and herself to Plympton with one body's labour that travelled thither there withal", plus a bed, blankets, coverlet, bolster, a 'new crock', 'porringer' (bowl) and saucer for her to use.

However, events in the wider world also attracted donations. Long before modern 'disaster appeals', England had a highly organised system of 'briefs' that publicised cases of distress. These were printed documents that were widely distributed in the hope of attracting alms from around the country (Pounds, 2000). The churchwardens' accounts for 1729 record modest payments from Bere Ferrers "to them that suffered in ye overflowing of water in Kent" and "to them that suffered by fire in Somerset". There were also contributions to ransoms for individuals who had been taken into slavery in North Africa, victims of the notorious 'Barbary Pirates' (often described as 'Turks'). Thus also in 1729, the parish "gave to five poor sailors taken in Turkey". Earlier, in the reign of Charles I, there were payments in support of "two Irishmen that had been taken with the Turks and were going from Ireland to London, having a pass" and for "the redeeming of one John Skinnerd of Maker being taken by the Turks". But occasionally, there are glimpses of less benevolent actions, such as "Pd for tithing men for sending away of Irish people" in 1631 or "food for prisoners and taking them to Exeter gaol" in 1611.

Celebrations

That Bere Ferrers residents were aware of distant affairs is also evident from the payments for celebrations, notably special performances by the church bell ringers. In 1609, the churchwardens "bestowed upon them Ringers to drink the Corination Day" (sic) (i.e. that of James I). Over 150 years later, ringers' were paid to mark the coronation of George III and the birth of the Prince of Wales. In 1786, payment was made for a "form of prayer for the providential preservation of His Majesty" when George III escaped an assassination attempt by Margaret Nicholson (she spent the rest of her life locked up in the Bethlem Hospital in London). Military victories also warranted extra bell ringing, including "when ye rebels were defeated" in 1745 – the 'rebels' being Bonnie Prince Charlie's Jacobites. On this occasion "more was expended at Phillipa Williams" - but who was she and how did she earn such 'expenditure'? Ringers' celebratory thirsts were also quenched following Admiral Rodney's naval victory over the French at the 'Battle of the Saintes' (in the Caribbean) in 1782, and

that of Admiral Howe at the ‘Battle of the Glorious First of June’ in 1794. But what did parishioners at large know of such stirring events and how did they understand and perceive them?

Vermin and other animals

Warfare of a more mundane and local nature also attracted regular payments – for the killing of ‘vermin’ in the parish. Bounties were paid for the destruction of an alarmingly wide range of animals and birds that were considered, rightly or wrongly, to be harmful, especially by farmers and gardeners (Brushfield (1897). Thus “two parishioners that have killed and destroyed some 2 or 3 dozen of those noisome birds called hoopoes this year” were rewarded for their efforts in 1607. ‘Hoopoes’ were bullfinches, targeted for their attacks on flower buds on fruit bushes and trees. In 1641, there were rewards for the killing of ‘greys’ (i.e. badgers) and as late as 1787, a ‘martin’. Non-lethal animal control also featured. Stray dogs in the church were an enduring problem: “Pd for whipping the dogs out of the church“ (1652) and in 1728, “Pd to the sexton for keeping ye dogs out of the church”. Such mundane little phrases conjure the detail of long-vanished everyday lives and preoccupations. Were attitudes to dogs in public places as contested as they are today?

And finally...

But to conclude, some items that show the breadth of affairs that feature in the accounts. What scenario could we conjure from, in 1607, “paid two men to help row with the accountants down with the lead from Stonehouse to Plymouth the wind being very high and rough seas”? Then there were the outlays on ‘hospitality’: “for the minister’s dinner at archdeacon’s visitation” in 1608, “13/6d paid for dinners for wardens and sidesmen” when the Archbishop visited Plymouth in 1634 and the regular “bottle of wine for ye Dean rural” in the 18th century. Finally, this entry appears in 1771, “Pd the mason for his journey expenses abt coming to view the intended bridge at Chucks Ford”. But this consultancy job was in vain. Although proposals for such a road crossing reappeared in the 20th century, that stretch of the Tavy below Maristow remains remote and tranquil – and commuters from the Bere Peninsula to Plymouth still endure (or enjoy) the late medieval route via Denham Bridge!

There is insufficient space here to do proper justice to the wealth of items in the Bere Ferrers churchwardens’ accounts. For those parochial officials, armed with quill and ink and candle, record-keeping was probably just a bureaucratic chore. Or did they also sense they were writing for posterity – creating little lights on the past to some unimaginable future, and to pose so many tantalising questions for the curious searcher after local history?

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