

THE ENLARGEMENT OF WEST COKER CHURCH,
1833/34
(PLATE III)

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Until close on Victorian times, the church of West Coker was a small and simple building. In the medieval period there had never been a resident lord of the manor, who might have paid for one of the fine naves or towers so characteristic of Somerset. The tower, a modest 40 feet in height, was rebuilt (and by tradition substantially raised) in 1764/5, mainly by the levy of rates. The rest of the church consisted of chancel and nave, the latter 45 feet long, with a narrow north aisle, only 5 feet wide, at the east end of which was a proprietary chapel. Collinson, in his *History of Somerset*, mentions a south aisle, but this was an error. There was a gallery at the west end, holding the singers and the band of bass viol, flute and serpent, and probably part of the congregation. The bass viol and flute appear in the churchwardens' accounts, and the serpent still exists. In all, the church seated 260 persons, 110 of the sittings being free. Besides pews in the body of the church and the gallery, there were family pews in the north aisle. The Warry family had two pews in the chapel, which they had acquired recently when they bought the manor-house in 1829, and in the aisle were Moores, Wadmans and Rendells. The Moores and the Warrys were substantial landowners, now turning to the professions; the Wadmans had been carpenters and flax and hemp dealers, but had now acquired a substantial farm. The Rendells were essentially manufacturers, though they owned a little land; they owned a rope works and were prosperous, the family fortunes having been founded on the flax and hemp trade and later sailcloth manufacture.

In the eighteenth century, the size of the church had been adequate for the needs of the parish. Indeed, one may surmise that, except on the occasion of the three principal communion services, it was poorly attended; for the period was an easy-going one. The main landowners did not live in the parish and it is very doubtful if most of the rectors did either. At any rate, most of the eighteenth century signatures in the parish registers are those of curates. The living was not a wealthy one, with only some 20 acres of glebe, while tithes, at the values of the time, probably brought in no more than £150, and it is hard to believe that both resident rector and resident curate could have been supported. It is also known that the rectory was in decay and had to be rebuilt early in the nineteenth century.¹ Occasional signatures show that the rector was not always absent, and much later village memory still recalled rector and a local farmer combining to pelt a Methodist out of West Coker with rotten eggs.²

¹ *Elizabeth Ham by Herself* (1942) 183.

² R. de Z. Hall, "A West Coker Antiquary of 1848", *Proc. S.A.S.*, 106, 96-7.

In 1802, the Reverend George Jekyll was inducted, and lived in West Coker throughout his long incumbency of 41 years. There is some biographical detail about him which suggests that he was not a paragon of the virtues,¹ but that he was devoted to his parish is without doubt. The rebuilding of the parsonage has been referred to; this was in 1812, the house being that next door to the present rectory. Sixteen years later, in 1828, Jekyll applied himself to the need to enlarge the church. West Coker was a partly industrial village, and its population was expanding at a rate which requires immigration as well as natural increase to explain it. In the twenty years from 1801 to 1821, numbers had risen by 200, to 958, and the increase continued in the following decade, though at a slower rate. In April 1828, Jekyll applied for a grant to the Society for Promoting the Enlargement of Churches and Chapels, which had been founded in 1818. His proposal was to add 255 sittings, nearly doubling the accommodation. To comply with the Society's rules, half the new sittings were to be free. The vestry minutes are silent on the subject, and the inference is that the rector intended to finance the scheme by private subscription. A few months later, the Society made a grant of £100, but this was never taken up. This abortive application and the reply form the beginning of a record kept by Mr. Jekyll which is sufficiently full for it to be possible to reconstruct the course of events until the enlargement was completed six years later.³

In the late summer of 1833, a fresh application was sent to the Society. Jekyll kept a copy of his answers to its questionnaire, and one of these makes it clear that the enterprise was his alone. 'The parish strenuously opposing a rate', the scheme was to be financed by subscription. The rector over-optimistically claimed to have promises of £300 towards the estimated cost of £600 and would seek further subscriptions to cover the balance beyond what the Society should give. There was full legal power to raise rates, recently fortified by legislation of 1818 and 1819 (58 Geo. III, c. 45 and 59 Geo. III, c. 134) which, taken together, allowed rates to be raised for church building and enlargement up to 5/- in the £ and for money to be raised on the security of the rates. There was, however, a proviso that the levying of such a rate could be vetoed by the proprietors of one-third or over in value of the property in a parish. That such a veto would be exercised in West Coker was obvious in advance. The parish meant the vestry and the vestry meant, principally, the farmers. Most of West Coker by this time was in large farms. There had been a recent revaluation, and on the basis of this a rate of about 3/6d. in the £ would have been needed, compared with a regular 2½d. for church purposes. Two farmers would have had to meet more than half the cost, and another sixth would have fallen on another two. The rector clearly saw that it was

³ The record is preserved in the rectory at West Coker. It was carefully sorted and filed by Sir Matthew Nathan about 1930.

futile to bring the scheme to the vestry, which took no notice of it till the work was complete. Examination of the later subscription lists shows that the farmers not only opposed a rate but boycotted the project altogether. The only subscriber was Henry Moore, who was then the rector's churchwarden, and his contribution of £30, though the largest, was about a third of what he would have borne as a ratepayer.

From the landowners invited to subscribe, Jekyll got a mixed response. W. Berkeley Portman, whose family had been important landowners for over two centuries, and later lords of the manor, had recently sold most of his West Coker land. He declined on the practical ground that his interest in the parish was now small and on the specious one that the law respecting faculties was about to be amended. G. Warry grudgingly agreed to contribute his fair quota if the work was absolutely necessary, provided neither of his pews was altered; but he thought the work premature 'because the Irish Church Temporalities Bill having passed a second reading of the Lords, I am not without the strongest hope (tho' not a Radical) that Reform will also be introduced into our Church'. With Dr. John Moore, who was the leading surgeon of Yeovil as well as a principal landowner, the correspondence was longer, and shows that there was strong feeling in the village on what actually should be done, not merely how it should be paid for. Writing on September 8th 1833, when the work was under way, Dr. Moore referred to a forthcoming parish meeting, fearing that 'through misconception, misrepresentation, and a false view of things, party spirit has been excited to the prejudice of the undertaking.' Nothing but the most friendly spirit would be extended to the rector, who was adjured 'use your authority, step forward and close the breach.' He himself has been calumniated as lukewarm over the scheme, and he suggests that the rector has let enthusiasm outweigh diplomacy, hurrying on 'so as to alienate you from the affections of your parishioners. How eager will all the ill-disposed be to foment and cherish this discord, using it as a handle for the most determined and unanswerable insults.' There is also the question of the rector suffering in a pecuniary way. Within the week, Dr. Moore wrote again to say that the rector was attempting too much. The extension should stop before coming to the chancel.⁴ He would, however, subscribe, without demanding a pew in the new structure, if the work were completed with a lead roof. A postscript refers to another tribulation of the rector's: 'The eyes of the world are upon us, and God's. Surely you can regulate the actions of your son.' There must now be inferred an exchange of letters or an interview where the rector said that a lead roof would be far too expensive and Dr. Moore swore that in that case he would not pay a penny, for in early November the latter wrote 'I am sorry for the past and shall feel pleasure in dis-

⁴ See following paragraph.

covering any loop-hole by which I may be extricated from my vow.' He had been told that £30 was asked for and that the rector would like to exchange the picture in the church for Moses and Aaron. So he agreed to this, provided that the rector allotted him two pews and handed over the old picture at his mother's house in West Coker. 'By thus mixing up the matter I persuade myself that I am clear in my conscience and I hope that I have proved to you that on Christian principles I am ready to live on the most friendly footing with you.'

Meanwhile, the plan had been approved by the bishop, on September 9th. It doubled the size of the church, apart from the north aisle, and the extra seats were brought up to 316. Part of the extra seating, 44 seats, was to be gained by an extension of the western gallery, to which access was to be gained by a narrow door and staircase, with apparently no connection with the body of the church, at the south-west corner. The rest were crowded in by a most unusual arrangement whereby a new nave extended the whole length of the church, parallel with the whole length of the chancel at the eastern end, and the most easterly rows of seats were to face west. The main entrance for the extension was in its east end, the whole arrangement being so peculiar that it is not surprising that there was controversy. The other necessary work was to replace the old south wall by an arcade. The plan commended itself to the Society as well as to the bishop and a grant of £160 was made. The final number of sittings was to be 576, of which 334 were to be free.

Money was collected and the work started actually before the bishop had given his formal approval. Thomas Baker, one of the village hemp buyers and spinners, made the main collection and paid for the preliminary work. He had been churchwarden in 1828/29 and was so again in 1834/35. His account shows that by the end of August he had £126 in hand from 10 persons including himself. Most were landowners, but one or two were craftsmen and traders. The rector raised another £74, part of which was by way of additional contributions from some of those on Baker's list. Dr. Moore's £30, and another £20 originally earmarked for a lead roof, brought up the total to £250 and after Messrs. Batten had taken their legal fees from the Society's grant, the grand total was £406, nearly £200 short of the estimate of cost.

The progress of the work can be traced from Baker's account and the various bills, most of which have survived; a few other expenditure items are to be found in a distinctly muddled account kept by the rector. Payments to masons in late August, 1833, followed by wages to a couple of labourers and £1 for cider, suggest the preliminary demolition, clearance and digging of foundations. The masonry was mostly finished by the end of October, the frame of the roof was up before the end of November, and the slater immediately afterwards received an advance and was paid finally in early February, 1834. One of the carpenter's accounts shows that the flooring was

going on concurrently, and there remained the work on the pews and the gallery. Before the work was finished, however, there was a calamity, described by the rector in an unsuccessful appeal to the Society for further help. 'An additional evil was that in effecting the enlargement the workmen threw down the chancel roof, in consequence of which a heavy expense has fallen to me beyond what I had subscribed. Indeed should the Society favour us with the grant of another £100, we shall still have a considerable surplus unprovided for.' And in July, 1834, a carpenter has an entry of 5/- for 'prompting up chancell' and £20 for working on it, and 200 dozen double slates were needed.

In early 1835, the value of masons' and carpenters' work was assessed by John Patch, 'Builder, Surveyor, Auctioneer, Appraiser, etc.' of Crewkerne, and the total cost came to just under the rector's original estimate of £600. He was short of some £190 and the painful process of diminishing the debt can be traced up to 1839. All the outside suppliers and craftsmen were satisfied at an early stage, except a Yeovil ironmonger, Josiah Hannam, who was still sending in 1839 an account rendered for over £8 due since 1835. The masons, James and William Randall,⁵ both of West Coker, had been satisfied by the end of 1835. By this time most of the outstanding debt was due to the two carpenters, George and Charles Lane, again West Coker men, who were owed £82 and £43 respectively. They accepted pews, one worth £20, the other £15, in part payment, and George Lane credited 4½ years' tithes, prudently unpaid. Varying small sums were paid to them at intervals from 1836 to 1838 and late receipts of nearly £40 helped to reduce the debts to £8 and £3 respectively, after which no more was recorded. It is evident that the rector had to raise money by selling property or by borrowing, in order to reach this result, since a running note of payments to one carpenter mentions £15 received in 1838 from Mr. Newman of Yeovil, while the other in 1839 had £20 from the same source, and there is a note from Mr. Edwin Newman of Yeovil, undated, saying that he will send the residue of the £100 to the rector.

The receipts referred to were the refund, through the Church Commissioners, of customs and excise duties. The customs duties, over £28, were on the red and Memel deal which was used, and the excise, nearly £11, on glass.

The accounts tell much of how the work was organized. The two local carpenters, with their materials, were responsible for well over half the cost. Their principal wood was the deal referred to above, which was supplied by Stuckey and Bagehot of Langport; but they used oak joists, and two-thirds of the flooring, as well as part of the pews, was of elm. The ordinary stone for walling came from the quarry at Chiselborough, three miles away, by small contracts with

⁵ William Randall or Rendell was also parish clerk and constable, while Charles Lane, the carpenter, was tything-man.

carters. The local masons did the plain walling, but a separate contract was made with a freemason, John Staple of Stoke-under-Ham, for the work requiring Ham stone, *i.e.*, arches and door and window frames. A local purchase of Ham stone was made for the quoins of the walls. Lime and hemp were provided by West Coker men, and also smith's work. Slates were bought from John Lovibond of Load Bridge and the plumber and glazier, Philip Watson Watt, was a Martock man. The only Yeovil supplier was the hapless Josiah Hannam. Most of the work was on the basis of contract or surveyed value, the employer being the Rev. George Jekyll, with the curious exception that the contract for the main roof — not that which fell — was signed between the carpenters and the rector's son Joseph.

The work having been completed, the vestry took a hand. On the 7th May, 1835, it decided that 'the seats on the right hand of the door should be appropriated to the School Girls and the opposite Seats to the Boys . . . Further, that the New Gallery and the Seats under are to be appropriated to the Women'.⁶ This arrangement did not last many years for, by authority of a faculty of 1862, the church was virtually rebuilt, and in the course of the work the seating was materially reduced. The gallery came down, the east door was closed and the portion of the new nave abreast the sanctuary shut off to form a vestry, while other pews had to be removed in consequence of the construction of a south door with porch. There was some compensation by the widening of the north aisle; otherwise, the size of the church remained as it had been established by the 1833 extensions. By good fortune, an unknown artist painted the church from the north-east some time after the extension and before the rebuilding, and the picture still hangs in the church, and indeed the building looks not very dissimilar to that of the present day, because of the characteristic, if unaesthetic, construction of three small roofs, one over each part of the church.

⁶ Vestry Minute Book, 1826-84, in Somerset Record Office, at which is also deposited the faculty of 1862.