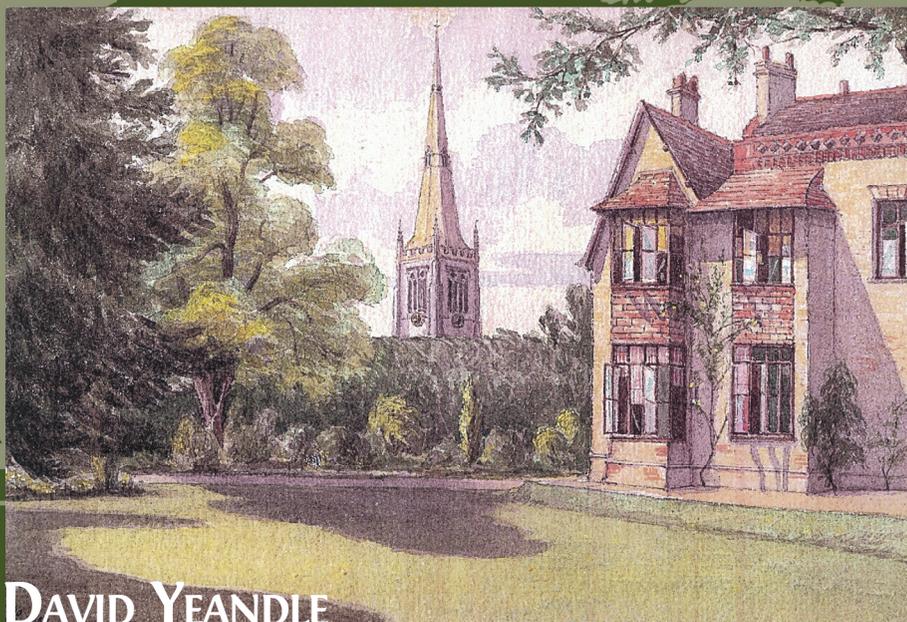


A VICTORIAN CURATE



DAVID YEANDLE

A Study of the Life and Career of
the Rev. Dr John Hunt



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8. Country Life

The second part of our investigation deals with the 'postscript' to Hunt's booklet. While the themes remain roughly the same, the scene changes to the country, to different mentalities and a different type of churchmanship. A not altogether convincing justification is given at the beginning for this part of Hunt's 'letter' being addressed to the Bishop of London:

There is no special reason why this Postscript should be addressed to the Bishop of London. The events it records took place in another diocese.¹ The facts, however, concern the whole Church and therefore every Bishop in the Church. What concerns all Bishops must be of special interest to the Bishop of the Metropolis.²

Hunt begins the introduction to the Postscript by offering some reflections on the state of his career and fortunes after leaving St Botolph's, Aldgate, following the anatomy scandal. He includes some perceptive observations in expressive language:

Notwithstanding the apparent egotism of this letter, nothing but a deep sense of duty would ever have allowed the writer to publish it, and nothing but the same sense impels him to write again. We do not make all the circumstances of our lives; most of them are made for us. It is our business to use them as best we can, so to serve our day and generation, that when the night cometh, wherein no man can work, we may lay our heads down to sleep with the peaceful assurance that we have not lived in vain.

It is difficult, indeed, to determine how far we are the children of destiny, and how far our own character and acts create the circumstances of our lives. We seem carried on to do certain things by an impulse

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- 1 Huntingdon Archdeaconry was transferred to Ely in 1837, before which it had been in Lincoln Diocese.
 - 2 *Clergymen Made Scarce*, p. 26.

apparently irresistible, and when they are done we wonder what end they can serve. And yet how often after years have passed away do we see the necessity that these things should have been done, yea that they *should have been done by us*, and that they were worth our doing even if we had spent ourselves in the performance of them. There is a Wisdom teaching and guiding us all, shaping our ends, and making us the servants of a Divine Will in adversity as well as in prosperity.³

Whether we choose to interpret the sentiments in the same way as the author, they are certainly worthy of scrutiny. Hunt's reference to his 'apparent egotism'⁴ is a clue to understanding his psychology, which may have been instrumental in some of his misfortunes. The observation that 'There is a Wisdom teaching and guiding us all, shaping our ends, and making us the servants of a Divine Will in adversity as well as in prosperity'⁵ is a touching response of faith in the light of his difficulties. Particularly interesting are Hunt's ironically critical observations on the role of the curate: 'It is necessary always that a Curate be a man *of whom not much can be said*. It is with Curates as it is with young ladies, the more unknowing they are the more likely it is that some Rector will give them employment.'⁶

8.1 Swallow, Lincolnshire

In response to his advertisement in the *Record*, Hunt received two positive replies. He chose the one with which he had first corresponded, viz. Swallow⁷ 'in the wolds of Lincolnshire', commenting: 'How different the course of events had I decided on the other.'⁸ The date is December 1864, the time when the two *Punch* articles about the anatomy scandal appeared (November and December), both of which mentioned Hunt by name. He clearly did not wish to be identified with the scandal in the eyes of the new parishioners, so his solution was to borrow 'all the papers with the intention of never returning them'.⁹ This strategy was evidently successful, as we hear no more about his temporary stay here,

3 *Clergymen Made Scarce*, pp. 26f.

4 *Ibid.*, p. 26.

5 *Ibid.*, p. 27.

6 *Ibid.*, p. 26.

7 Mrs Eliza Hunt's annotation: 'Swallow near Caster' [viz. Caistor].

8 We do not learn which was the other parish or why things might have been different.

9 *Clergymen Made Scarce*, p. 27.

save for the deficiencies of the church, congregation, and sacred vessels. Swallow was his seventh curacy, which proved to be something of a rural haven, affording him time to pen the first edition of *Clergymen Made Scarce*: 'Here I meditated on the past, and formed plans for the future.'¹⁰

Owing to the temporary nature of the engagement in Lincolnshire, Hunt finds himself having to advertise again. He explains how he 'again came in contact with two Incumbents, not knowing which of the two to choose.' The 'Evangelical' incumbent wished to meet him in London, but Hunt was well aware that the journey from Lincolnshire would cost him time and 'about £2 10s. in money'. He compares this sum with his curate's salary of £100 per annum,¹¹ commenting, somewhat tongue-in-cheek, that 'the most "Evangelical" being in [the] world must know that £2 10s. is a very large sum for a man who lives on £100 a year' and asks the incumbent 'who was to bear the expense of [his] coming to London'. Hunt relates with cynicism: 'The Incumbent had recourse to the usual excuse—the very night he arrived in London, he had met an old friend who was willing to take his curacy.'¹² Another clerical foible is thus laid bare.

10 *Ibid.*

11 £2 10s. was worth approx. £325 in 2020, £100 approx. £12,993.

12 *Ibid.*

