A Victorian Curate

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

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Cover image: St Ives Vicarage, c. 1880. Courtesy of the Norris Museum, St Ives, Cambridgeshire, UK.

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11. Postscript: John Hunt in Otford

Although the purpose of the present work has been principally to highlight aspects of John Hunt’s career as a struggling curate, it would seem appropriate now to look briefly beyond this stage in his life in a postscript that examines the remainder of his life and career as Incumbent of St Bartholomew’s church in the village of Otford, Kent, a position that he achieved in 1878, at the age of fifty-one and in which he remained for twenty-nine years. Otford, near Sevenoaks, was a village of approximately 1,200 inhabitants. The living was in the gift of the Dean and Chapter of Westminster, and it was through Hunt’s friendly relations with Dean Stanley, who, as a fellow progressive theologian, recognized his prowess, that he was presented to the living. The position of Vicar of Otford could hardly be described as one of prestige; the living is reported in the press in 1878 as being worth £210,\(^1\) plus house.\(^2\) The vicarage was a substantial three-storey building, with ample grounds; both house and grounds would have necessitated the employment of

\(^1\) Approx. £25,560 in 2020.

\(^2\) There are several brief press reports, which contain mainly identical wording, e.g.: ‘None too soon Church preferment has come to the Rev. John Hunt, one of the most accomplished of clerical writers. Nearly a quarter of a century has passed since Mr Hunt took orders, and yet, while we have seen a perfectly unknown curate of two years standing presented to one of the best Crown livings in the east of England, Mr. Hunt has, until now, been allowed to go from curacy to curacy—Bishop Wearmouth, Deptford, Fulham, Hoxton, St Botolph’s (Aldgate), St Ives, Hunts, St Mary’s, Lambeth, and has never held benefice. He has now, thanks to Dean Stanley, been presented to Otford, near Sevenoaks, in the diocese of Canterbury. It is but a poor affair after all, for the tithes bringing in £666 a year [approx. £81,000 in 2020], are appropriated, and the vicar’s gross income is only £210 and a house. The population, however, is small—under 1,200, and the supervision of parish will not interfere with Mr. Hunt’s literary work. Otford is also sufficiently near to London for him often to run up and visit the British Museum Library. Mr. Hunt, who is a graduate of St. Andrews, first appeared as a writer in 1852 […]’, *Western Morning News*, Saturday, 26 January 1878, p. 2.
staff.\textsuperscript{3} It was a fitting residence for a gentleman parson, but the financial means to keep it running were scarcely extant on the Vicar’s meagre stipend, which by 1898 amounted to a net income of £243.\textsuperscript{4}

John Hunt found perhaps his ideal calling in the small rural community of Otford, where he was able to pursue his scholarly interests at a more leisurely pace. It is noteworthy that his major scholarship, with the exception of a second edition of his book on pantheism (1884), was completed before his arrival in Otford in 1878. Despite his waning scholarly activity towards the end of his life, he was awarded, in 1901, a Civil List pension of £100 per annum ‘In consideration of his theological writings and of his straitened circumstances’:\textsuperscript{5} The straitened circumstances are to be explained partly by the paucity of his stipend at Otford and partly by his remarriage in 1899.

Whether he cherished a desire to rise higher in the Church’s hierarchy cannot be known for certain. He rubbed shoulders with the ecclesiastical great and good, for example, while attending gatherings such as the Old Catholic Congress in Germany, but he appears to have been content, once settled in Otford, to live the life of a gentleman parson of the scholarly mould, with his books and his successive wives for comfort and companionship. He may well have perceived his career in similar terms to that of his mentor, F. D. Maurice, who, despite his outstanding scholarship and professorships, ‘was almost forty years in orders, and never held any higher preferment than a church, of which the income was derived from pew rents’:\textsuperscript{6} Hunt appears to have been content to feed his flock as the ‘poor man’s friend’, loved and respected by this small community.\textsuperscript{7}

Two works, both local to Otford, deal with John Hunt’s time as Vicar there and his involvement in local affairs. The earlier of the two is John

\textsuperscript{3} This Vicarage (built c. 1820), now called ‘The Grange’, still stands. Cf. ‘The Grange, Otford, Kent’, https://britishlistedbuildings.co.uk/101259017-the-grange-otford. A new, smaller, vicarage was built in 1924. Two servants are recorded as living at the Vicarage in the 1881 census.

\textsuperscript{4} Crockford’s 1898, p. 692. Approx. £29,580 in 2020.

\textsuperscript{5} The value in 2020 is approx. £12,570. See ‘Civil List pensions (London, 23 June 1902)’, House of Commons Parliamentary Papers Online, (ProQuest Information and Learning Company, 2005); for a near-contemporary assessment of these Civil List pensions, see http://archive.spectator.co.uk/article/13th-july-1907/8/civil-list-pensions.


\textsuperscript{7} Cf. p. 216, below.
11. Postscript: John Hunt in Otford

Hunt, the Poor Man’s Friend, by Harold Hart (an unpublished typescript of 1958 in the Otford and District Historical Society archive),\(^8\) which gives a brief overview of various aspects of Hunt’s activities, mainly relating to his time at Otford. There are errors and misquotations in the work, which was not intended for publication in that form. Otford in Kent, by Clarke and Stoyel, published by the Otford and District Historical Society in 1975,\(^9\) devotes much of Chapter 10 ‘Late Victorian’ (pp. 215–236) to Hunt’s actions in the parish and surrounding district, mainly from a secular point of view. The book, which is not without minor inaccuracies,\(^10\) asserts: ‘No one could have endeavoured to identify himself more thoroughly with his new home and its people than did this learned and dynamic Scotsman.’\(^11\) This reinforces the assumption that Hunt was indeed content with his life and status in Otford, where he appears to have found his bucolic idyll. Hart notes: ‘Hunt was a thinker and writer who loved a simple country life [...] [he] had a great zest for the style of life which he led.’\(^12\) He was a mostly benign influence in the small community, able to exhort and admonish his flock, becoming a father-figure and person of respect, to whom his flock looked up with affection. Those who were not of his flock held him in less high esteem, especially when, from a position of moral superiority, he criticized and berated those who were wrongdoers in his eyes. Having worked himself into a position of moral, spiritual, and also secular authority, he could be high-handed and supercilious when he met with opposition. As chairman of the Otford vestry, which at that time held powers as a parochial church council and also a secular parish council, Hunt fought several skirmishes with local personalities. This was particularly the case with the introduction of a new water supply

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\(^8\) For a transcription of the text and further details, see Appendix, p. 216. The work was begun by Hart’s son, Roland, who was unable to complete it, with the result that his father did so (from a handwritten memorandum in the Otford and District Historical Society archive, initialled ‘R.D.C.’, presumably Reginald Dennis Clarke, 5/9/61).

\(^9\) Reginald Dennis Clarke and Anthony Stoyel, Otford in Kent: A History (Otford: Otford and District Historical Society, 1975). Hart’s work was used in the production of this book.

\(^10\) E.g., ‘he [Hunt] came to Otford at the age of 51, after a wide experience as curate and incumbent in a number of English parishes, mostly in the south-east’ (p. 215).

\(^11\) Ibid. It is perhaps noteworthy that he identifies himself as English by the time he comes to Otford. Cf. p. 205, below.

\(^12\) Hart, Poor Man’s Friend, p. 1.
and mains drainage system to Otford in 1885.13 Hunt did not always emerge victorious but was usually outspoken, ‘humorous, untiring and fearless’, often displaying histrionics along the way.14 After so many years as a curate of submitting, however unwillingly, to his superiors, the tables had turned, and the parson could now lord it over those of whose souls he had the cure and others with whom he came into contact locally. A comparison with the ‘hierarchical autocrats’, to whom he had earlier meted out stern criticism,15 might easily come to mind, though this would perhaps be to do him an injustice.

Hunt’s strongly held, often strict, views were communicated in sermons and addresses as well as through the pages of the Otford parish magazine and the local newspaper, the Sevenoaks Chronicle and Kentish Advertiser, to which he contributed several letters, and which frequently reported on his activities. He still published in periodicals and journals with a national circulation, but as we have noted, he was no longer moved to write long works of theological scholarship, having become more of an observer and critic of society and religion.

As part of the argument over the water and sewerage system, Hunt crossed swords with a local overseer, Benjamin Parish, who had the task of levying a drainage rate. Parish accused Hunt of ‘wanting to underpay the rate-collector’,16 and a verbal skirmish occurred. Parish declared: ‘You are very well paid for all you do. I could preach better sermons than you for £100 a year’. Hunt, who was not well paid, even if the work was not unduly arduous, was ready with an astute, witty retort: ‘As I like to encourage lay preaching I will give you the pulpit next Sunday morning and see how you get on’.17 It is not recorded whether Parish took up this offer. Matters came to a head when Hunt refused to pay rates on tithes, and Parish took out a summons against him.18 Hunt’s willingness to be obstinate to an almost extreme degree in pursuit of a cause in which he believed strongly is amply illustrated by this incident. He won the argument by proving from his research into the Tithe Commutation Act

14 Clarke and Stoyel, Otford in Kent, pp. 218, 222.
15 Clergymen Made Scarce, p. 42.
16 Clarke and Stoyel, Otford in Kent, pp. 221f.
17 Clarke and Stoyel, Otford in Kent, p. 222, with reference to the Sevenoaks Chronicle and Kentish Advertiser of 3.11.1885.
18 Cf. ibid.
that the tithe payer and not the tithe owner was legally responsible for payment.\textsuperscript{19} The case had national repercussions.\textsuperscript{20}

In politics, as in theology, Hunt was a liberal, as noted publicly by Parish in the above dispute.\textsuperscript{21} He encouraged working men to have a voice and to become involved in decision-making. He would preside at meetings of the Otford Working Men’s Liberal Association.\textsuperscript{22} His political involvement was, however, not partisan; he chose neutrality in political matters and was not a member of a party.\textsuperscript{23} Hunt disapproved of the reforms of local government that were introduced in 1894, but he did stand for election as a parish councillor when the old system was no longer in force. The working men, whom he had encouraged and supported, disappointed him by not voting for him in large numbers, with the result that he was third from bottom in the poll and never again stood for elected office.\textsuperscript{24} This was another of the ironies of Hunt’s life, where his work for the benefit of others did not always result in reciprocal support for himself. Hunt joined in occasions of royal and national celebration, such as Queen Victoria’s Diamond Jubilee (1897), but he may have harboured latent republican sympathies. Hart notes: ‘speaking in 1898, on the reign of Queen Victoria, he expressed his opinion that the reign had been a prosperous one as well as a long one, and after mentioning railways, the telegraph, and other benefits to the public, remarked that the people of Britain were republicans in all but name.’\textsuperscript{25} As Hunt’s churchmanship became broader towards the end of his life, so his political activity waned, and his ‘domination of village affairs came to an end in the mid-1890s’.\textsuperscript{26}

A look through the pages of the \textit{Sevenoaks Chronicle and Kentish Advertiser} in the 1880s and beyond shows how heavily Hunt was

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\item \textsuperscript{19} \textit{Sevenoaks Chronicle and Kentish Advertiser}, 2 April 1886, p. 5, and 27 July 1888, p. 8.
\item \textsuperscript{20} Clarke and Stoyel, \textit{Otford in Kent}, p. 222.
\item \textsuperscript{21} Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{22} Cf. ‘On Wednesday evening, in very unfavourable weather, a fairly attended gathering of Liberals was held at the Vicarage, Otford, the promoters being the newly-formed Liberal Association, of which the Rev. Dr. Hunt, vicar of the parish, is president’, \textit{Sevenoaks Chronicle and Kentish Advertiser}, 14 May 1886, p. 6. This fairly lengthy article gives valuable insights into Hunt’s political thinking.
\item \textsuperscript{23} Clarke and Stoyel, \textit{Otford in Kent}, p. 222.
\item \textsuperscript{24} Clarke and Stoyel, \textit{Otford in Kent}, pp. 225f.
\item \textsuperscript{25} Hart, \textit{Poor Man’s Friend}, p. 3; cf. Clarke and Stoyel, \textit{Otford in Kent}, p. 233.
\item \textsuperscript{26} Cf. Clarke and Stoyel, \textit{Otford in Kent}, pp. 225; 233.
\end{itemize}
involved in local affairs, e.g., as a member of the Diocesan Education Society, a school manager, a speaker at dinners and other gatherings, an exhibitor at horticultural shows, and more.\textsuperscript{27}

One of the ways in which he sought to have a moral influence was through his strict Sabbatarian views. These were communicated to his flock in sermons and addresses as well as through the pages of the Otford parish magazine, which he introduced in 1891.\textsuperscript{28} He wrote short articles on Sunday observance\textsuperscript{29} and was a frequent contributor to \textit{The Day of Rest}, an ‘Illustrated Journal of Sunday Reading’, published by Strahan, which was intended to provide wholesome reading material for a properly observed Sabbath. His tone could become acerbic when berating people for their failure to observe Sunday appropriately, as Hart notes, quoting from the Otford parish magazine: ‘After thirteen years, your indifference to the services of religion has been to me a continual sorrow. The Sunday is spent in idleness, with no higher aspirations than belong to the cattle of the fields.’\textsuperscript{30} Stern admonitions or disapproving looks were also meted out at the Old Catholic Congress to clerical participants who indulged in secular entertainment in a casino and feasting on the Sabbath.\textsuperscript{31} Furthermore, he berated his parishioners for their moral turpitude, pointing to the number of illegitimate births in the parish and lax sexual morals.\textsuperscript{32} He disapproved of excess, both regarding drinking and smoking, but he was not a teetotaller and allowed these pleasurable vices in moderation.\textsuperscript{33} Parish accused him, in the exchange reported earlier, of wanting to ‘Shut public houses on Sunday […] and […] deprive the working man of his Sunday beer’.\textsuperscript{34} This, understandably, did not increase Hunt’s popularity amongst some members of the village.

\textsuperscript{27} Cf. Sevenoaks Chronicle and Kentish Advertiser, 13 June 1884, p. 5.
\textsuperscript{28} Cf. Hart, \textit{Poor Man’s Friend}, p. 2; Clarke and Stoyel, \textit{Otford in Kent}, p. 223. The magazine was entitled ‘Otford Church and Home Magazine’.
\textsuperscript{29} E.g., John Hunt, \textit{Should Museums, etc., be opened on Sunday? A lecture […] Reprinted from The Day of Rest} (Sevenoaks: J Salmon, 1881).
\textsuperscript{30} Hart, \textit{Poor Man’s Friend}, p. 2. See also Clarke and Stoyel, \textit{Otford in Kent}, p. 223, whose account varies slightly.
\textsuperscript{31} Cf. Hart, \textit{Poor Man’s Friend}, p. 6. Hunt describes these events in \textit{Contemporary Essays in Theology}, pp. 427f.: ‘I almost tremble to record how the Sunday evening was spent.’
\textsuperscript{32} Clarke and Stoyel, \textit{Otford in Kent}, p. 223.
\textsuperscript{33} Cf. Hart, \textit{Poor Man’s Friend}, p. 3; Clarke and Stoyel, \textit{Otford in Kent}, p. 226.
\textsuperscript{34} Clarke and Stoyel, \textit{Otford in Kent}, p. 222.
Despite this sternness, Hunt was a man who showed warm Christian love towards his neighbour. His kindly nature led not only to the personal dispensing of charity to those in need, ‘without regard to creed or character’, but also to the reorganization of Otford’s charities, as recorded in his epitaph, putting them on a ‘liberal foundation’. He gave an annual ‘treat’ to those villagers who were older than himself. Although his simple trust in human nature led to people taking advantage of him on occasions, he strove continually for the good of humanity: ‘in all matters appertaining to the Parish and its welfare he was always prepared to do his best for the general good’.

Hunt travelled abroad frequently for both religious and more touristic reasons. This began before his time in Otford: the contact with foreign personages and clerics with a different, not always sympathetic, outlook from his increased his comprehension of human nature and spirituality. In 1904, he gave a lecture at Otford on his reasons for foreign travel, which was reported in the local press:

The Vicar of Otford, the Rev. Dr. Hunt, gave an interesting lecture on his travels at the National Schools on the 4th inst. In the course of his remarks, the Rev. gentleman said:—‘There are certain reasons why men travel—one is to see the country, another is to learn the language, and a third is to see something different from what they see at home.

We English may be very great people, but we live in a small island. The world outside of us is very large. To see the manners and customs of many men, and many nations makes a man very learned [...].’

Hunt was a competent linguist, with a particular penchant for German, which had featured in his publications and aided him in his theological research. He had cherished a strong pro-German bias for many years. He favoured Germany as the home of the Protestant Reformation and felt an affinity with its people. The same cannot be said of the French nation, to whom he felt a considerable antipathy, which he did not

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35 Cf. Hunt’s Obituary, p. 228, below.
36 Cf. ‘On Tuesday the Vicar (Rev. J. Hunt. D.D.) gave his annual treat to all persons in the village who are older than himself. Five years ago, his seventieth birthday, there were 22 persons eligible and this year there were only 11’, Sevenoaks Chronicle and Kentish Advertiser, 18 July 1902, p. 8.
37 Cf. Hunt’s Obituary, p. 228, below.
38 Sevenoaks Chronicle and Kentish Advertiser, 5 February 1904, p. 8. The full text is reprinted in the Appendix, p. 204, below.
disguise. His negative remarks about the French were unrestrained, as was his adulation of the Germans.\textsuperscript{39}

Hunt continued to travel abroad until the end of his life, including a pilgrimage to the Holy Land. Through contact with many diverse people and varieties of the Christian religion, he was able to gain a sympathetic understanding of those who were different, such as the Church of Rome, without falling prey to blind prejudice. His travels were also the occasion for humorous encounters and many anecdotes.\textsuperscript{40}

His somewhat forbidding outward appearance and bearing, with long white straggly beard, dark coat, and shovel hat, were the occasion for both respect and mirth.\textsuperscript{41}

Hunt’s literary outpourings were numerous; his theological works were long and contained much profound thought, but he failed to make a lasting impression nationally or internationally. Perhaps this had never been his ambition.

Although Otford was by no means a rich or prestigious living, Hunt was able to make a considerable impression on the church, village, and neighbourhood. The son of a humble tradesman, he became, by dint of his calling, a gentleman.\textsuperscript{42}

After twenty-three applications for curacies and the like, ten appointments—many very short in duration—and thirteen rejections, he had eventually become his own master. His scholarship had made his name known far afield, and it is to be hoped that his experiences and example led in some small part to the much-needed reform of the Church. Although at times he may have been difficult in his social interaction with others, showing on occasion a supercilious bearing and an unwillingness to compromise, there is no doubting his deep faith, strong intellect, and Christian charity.

A man ‘more sinned against than sinning’, he deserved better in this world than was meted out to him. Yet, he settled down to a life of

\textsuperscript{39} For examples, see Hart, \textit{Poor Man’s Friend}, pp. 5f. and \textit{Contemporary Essays}, Chapter xiii ‘A Visit to Munich’.

\textsuperscript{40} Cf. Hart, \textit{Poor Man’s Friend}, p. 7; Clarke and Stoyel, \textit{Otford in Kent}, pp. 224f.

\textsuperscript{41} Cf. Hart, \textit{Poor Man’s Friend}, p. 7; Clarke and Stoyel, \textit{Otford in Kent}, p. 224.

\textsuperscript{42} Cf. Nicholls, ‘Social Expectations’, p. 157: ‘Formerly “the approved method of converting tradesmen’s sons into gentlemen”, a clerical career had to compete with a multitude of professions which provided an easier path to genteel status, and a better pecuniary reward.’
pastoral care, scholarship, and domesticity in Otford, where his position in society allowed him to show his ‘rare simplicity of nature’ and ‘rich humanity’, whilst remaining true to his roots as ‘a level-headed, rugged kind-hearted Scotsman’. Outpourings of grief and affection were very much in evidence at his funeral, and touching tributes, such as that from his curate, John Martin, show that this ‘Christian scholar and sage, who was in heart as a little child’, was much loved and greatly revered in this small, rural community. Inscriptions on his tombstone in the graveyard of Otford Church further attest to the affection and esteem in which he was held: ‘The poor man’s friend’ and ‘He loved the sheep and the sheep loved him’. For all his learning and scholarship, he had found his niche in the gentle Kent countryside, where he could truly show his worth.

11.1 Transcription of Hunt’s Epitaph in Otford Church

To the Glory of God
& in Memory of
the Revd John Hunt, D.D.

Vicar of Otford for 29 years.
Born at Bridgend, Perth, on the 21st January 1827,
he died suddenly at the Vicarage, Otford, on the 12th April 1907.
During his incumbency he did much to place the charities of Otford on a liberal foundation, & was lovingly called the poor mans friend.
For his ‘Religious Thought in England’ & ‘Pantheism’
his name was held in honour far outside the limits of his own parish.
A writer of strong intellectual force
& one of the deepest philosophical thinkers of the church,
he rested his soul on the truth that God is love.
He possessed a rare simplicity of nature & withal a rich humanity
as a preacher of religion, he was ever loyal to what is written.
& his faith was based on the divinity of Jesus Christ.
He left a deep impress on men.

43 From the memorial in Otford Church. See below.
44 Words from Hunt’s Obituary, p. 228, below.
45 Words from John Martin’s wreath. See Appendix, p. 231.
And his teaching lives on in the hearts of his people
as a precious heritage
Nature had so endowed him that all who knew him said this was a man!

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This tablet was erected by parishioners and friends47

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Fig. 4 John Hunt in old age in Otford, c. 1905, courtesy of Mr Edwin Thompson,
Otford and District Historical Society.

47 For a photograph of the original, see https://www.findagrave.com/memorial/
33393484/john-hunt.