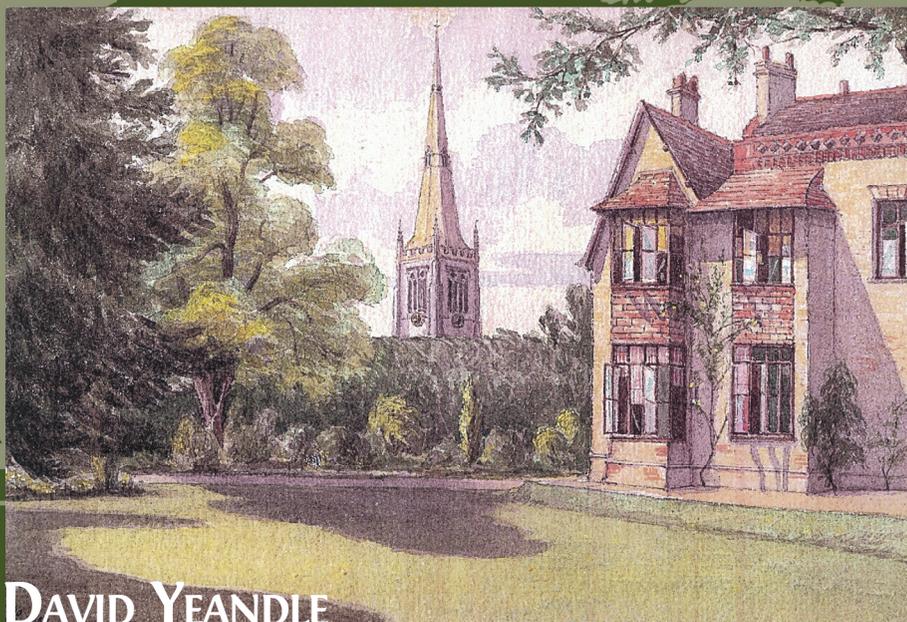


# A VICTORIAN CURATE



DAVID YEANDLE

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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# Introduction

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The present work is based on a little-known booklet, published by the Rev. Dr John Hunt (born Bridgend, Perth, 1827, died Otford, Kent, 1907).<sup>1</sup> The original copy that I have used is in the possession of the Norris Museum, St Ives, Cambridgeshire (formerly Huntingdonshire) and contains manuscript annotations by Mrs Eliza Hunt,<sup>2</sup> the first wife of the author. These provide a key to the many anonymous and pseudonymous references in the text.

The first edition of the booklet (1865) appears to be extremely rare. Reference is made to its availability by post from the freethinking publisher of liberal tracts, Thomas Scott, of Ramsgate.<sup>3</sup> The second edition (1867) is still to be encountered in a number of libraries, including the British Library, but it is nonetheless rare, although it is now available online. The author of *Clergymen Made Scarce* remained anonymous, referring to himself as 'A Presbyterian'.<sup>4</sup> The booklet was issued ostensibly as an open letter to the Bishop of London. The second

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- 1 *Clergymen Made Scarce. Five Years' Experience as a Curate in the Diocese of London: A Letter to the Right Hon. and Right Rev. the Lord Bishop of the Diocese by a Presbyterian. Second Edition, with a Postscript, Containing Two Years' Further Experience in the Country* (London: Hall & Company, 1867). The first edition (1865) was identical, save for the absence of the Postscript.
  - 2 Mrs Eliza Hunt was born Eliza Meadows Shepard Thorp in 1845, in St Ives, Huntingdonshire. See p. 13, below.
  - 3 The only copy that I have traced is in the Lambeth Palace Library: *Clergymen Made Scarce: Five Years' Experience as a Curate in the Diocese of London: A Letter [...] by a Presbyterian* (London: Hall, 1865); call number H5133 298.05.
  - 4 A similar anonymous publication appeared in 1843, though it was written from a more critically analytical and less personal viewpoint: Anon., *The Whole Case of the Unbeneficed Clergy; Or, a Full, Candid, and Impartial Enquiry Into the Position of Those Clergy Commonly Called the Curates of the Established Church. By a Presbyterian of the Church, Etc.* (Second Edition). (London: Hatchard & Son, 1843), <https://books.google.co.uk/books?id=YeFhAAAaAAJ>. An earlier work along similar lines had appeared in 1837: John Jordan, *A Curate's Views of Church Reform, Temporal, Spiritual and Educational* (London: Longman, 1837), <https://books.google.co.uk/>

edition was augmented by a postscript, containing ‘two years’ further experience in the country’.

The booklet deals with John Hunt’s experiences as a curate in the Church of England.<sup>5</sup> The first part, which appeared also in the first edition, concerns the numerous curacies that Hunt held in London; the postscript relates directly to his time at All Saints’, St Ives, in Huntingdonshire (now Cambridgeshire), where he served as curate from 1865 to 1866, when he was aged 38–39. Both parts provide a significant insight at parish level into the corruption and turmoil in the Church of England in Victorian times.

Hunt is not unique in writing about the lot of the struggling curate who is trying to make his way in the Victorian Church of England, but he offers a unique personal perspective. In his person, we encounter, a singular conjunction of factors: he is a Scotsman of lowly birth, educated at a Scottish university. He thus brings a distinctive, atypical viewpoint from which to observe the largely middle- and upper-class Church of England in the nineteenth century. He has no social connections, no influential patronage. He is intelligent and witty. He has only his natural intelligence on which to rely for preferment. He does not suffer fools gladly and is not prepared to submit to those in higher authority who are intellectually his inferiors. He is not dogmatic but is flexible and rational in all that he does. His industry is phenomenal. His published output is immense. He is adaptable in his ability to minister alongside Low-Church and more catholically minded incumbents in both town and country.

In many of these facets, he reflects the state of typical aspects of the Victorian Church but from a distinctive personal point of view and often in sharper focus.

Hunt’s book traces the insecurities of a curate’s existence and also the difficulties he had in establishing himself and gaining a permanent living, including the obstacles of class, origins, and education. The

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books?id=KeXd8fpWE24C. Cf. also A. Tindal Hart, *The Curate’s Lot: The Story of the Unbeneficed English Clergy* (London: J. Baker, 1970), pp. 129, 134.

5 The term curate is used throughout this book, as in everyday usage, to mean an ‘assistant curate’ or unbeneficed clergyman. Cf. E. A. Livingstone, ed., *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), <https://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780199659623.001.0001/acref-9780199659623, s.v. curate>.

conflict between theologies in response to an age of scientific advances, the sale of ecclesiastical livings, and the introduction of ritualistic practices in rural parishes also feature prominently.

The wit, learning, and good humour of Hunt shine from the pages of his booklet. His magnanimity and Christian integrity come to the fore repeatedly in his dealings with opponents, towards whom he apparently bears no malice. He recognizes the need for Christians to accept that even those of a different persuasion have access to the truth. A committed Protestant, he is not antipathetic to traditional catholic teaching or indeed to many of the practices promoted by the Oxford Movement. A staunch Anglican minister, he is entirely orthodox in his teaching, in accordance with the Book of Common Prayer and the Thirty-Nine Articles. He is widely read in the classics and ancient fathers and seeks an opportunity to place his many talents at the service of others.

