

## **Administrative practices and the ‘middling sort’: place, practice and identity in 18th century rural England**

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One of the quintessential sites for a particular form of English identity is the country churchyard. Here the social structure of the village is preserved in death with, for the eighteenth century, the poorer villagers being notable by their absence. The surviving headstones mark the resting places of the more prosperous, those we have come to know as the ‘middling sort’.<sup>1</sup> In the Vale of Belvoir on the Leicestershire/Nottinghamshire border there was a particularly strong tradition in the mid to late nineteenth century of finely carved slate gravestones.<sup>2</sup> When these are compared to the records of parish office holding there is a considerable correlation with those who held the office of churchwarden. For example, at Screveton, Pevsner and Williamson note a particularly fine example of a slate headstone with masonic emblems by Wood of Bingham.<sup>3</sup> William Gibson, who is commemorated by the stone, was a churchwarden from 1795 to 1801. In another Nottinghamshire churchyard, Langar, is a grade 2 listed headstone to Gervas Howe who died in 1783. He too, was a long serving churchwarden. The cluster of family headstones commemorating the Howes lies close to the south porch of the church, but this is as far as our churchwardens get, for the interior of churches is reserved for the memorials to incumbents

and landowners. However, churchwardens leave their marks here in other ways. In Langar it is in an inscription on one of the beams supporting the roof of the nave, which associates William Wells and Henry Wright as churchwardens with the re-roofing of the nave in 1750. At the west end of another church, that at East Bridgford, is a series of tablets bearing the details of charitable donations to the parish, including one recording

Mr JOHN WILSON bequeathed by will dated Jan<sup>r</sup> 20 1792 to JOHN WILKINSON & Jno MILLINGTON Churchwardens and their successors in the same office, the sum of Forty Pounds the interest arising therefrom he directed to be given in Bread yearly on the 12<sup>th</sup> of January to the poor of this Parish. Mr THOS HOLLAND Bequeathed by will to JOHN WILKINSON and HENRY STOKES, churchwardens and their successors in the same office the sum of 40 pounds. The interest arising therefrom to be given to the poor of this parish at the discretion of the Churchwardens Jan<sup>r</sup> 1<sup>st</sup> 1828.

Similar plaques and headstones could be found in many rural churches, so much so that they fade into the background, being part of the taken for granted furniture. This chapter seeks to bring them into sharper relief, by using them to tell us something about the nature of the 'middling sort' in eighteenth century rural England. The work of Henry French has shown the importance of parish office holding in the identity of the parish elite. He notes that 'there can be little doubt either that parish office was the administrative experience *par excellence* of the 'middling', or that it

reinforced certain values.<sup>4</sup> However, he tells us very little about the content of this experience. By contrast Keith Snell has explored the role of the parish overseer in some detail, albeit for the nineteenth century. This is part of an agenda to 'infuse cultural meaning into administrative history, to extend such history to show how it has many cultural and social causes and ramifications'.<sup>5</sup> In this chapter, I seek to show, drawing upon archival and printed sources, that the practices of parish administration, specifically those associated with the office of churchwarden, reproduced and reinforced a particular form of authority. That form of authority was very much a personal one shaped and guided by custom. So, the East Bridgford bequest is one to personally named wardens, rather than to a corporate body. This was a form of accountability which rested very much on the personal character of the office holder and, in this, reproduced a very Anglican form of authority. That is, while the Church of England had a strongly hierarchical form of authority, as exemplified in the figure of the bishop, it was one which also allowed a considerable degree of autonomy in practice.<sup>6</sup> The incumbent holding his benefice as a freehold was subject to little effective discipline in practice and the same could be said to be true of the churchwardens. This reinforces a particularly English focus on character, as opposed to system or education, in the formation of leadership.<sup>7</sup> This discussion, therefore supports that of French on the importance of gentility as a status to be aspired to.

## Records of accountability

The discussion presented here is based on two types of sources. At its core is a systematic analysis of the surviving churchwardens' records from 20 parishes in the Deanery of Bingham, Nottinghamshire.<sup>8</sup> This area was selected for analysis because of its largely rural character in the eighteenth century. Lying to the south of Nottingham, it was affected by the industrial development of that town, with the growth of framework knitting later in the century.<sup>9</sup> However, it remained largely agrarian with only small towns at Bingham and Radcliffe on Trent. Some of the pastoral land close to the Trent was an early target of enclosures to support stock rearing, but much of the land lay in open fields until the second half of the century. Even with the enclosure movement, agrarian practices in the area remained conservative.<sup>10</sup> Likewise, the religious complexion of the area was overwhelmingly Anglican, with Methodism only starting to make limited inroads at the end of the period.<sup>11</sup> This makes it a good area to study the nature of administrative practices that might obtain in rural parishes, shielded as it was from urban or commercial influences. This study was guided by the nature of practices to be examined, rather than by the survival of records. The parishes all belonged to the same administrative unit of the church and so offered the possibility of transfer of practices. In many other studies, which have focussed on rich investigations of specific parishes, much has been guided by the availability of records.<sup>12</sup> However, this means that we are unsure about

how representative such parishes are of wider practices. Examining a set of contiguous parishes, as Pitman did for Norfolk for an earlier period, allows us to draw some conclusions about how common certain practices were in the local area.<sup>13</sup> The disadvantage of selecting this focus on one connected group of parishes is that we are the mercy of the survival of records. Of the 55 parishes in the Deanery, only 22 useable sets of papers survived and very few of these were continuous runs. In addition, very little record of any formal vestries survive, with the records being overwhelmingly in the form of sets of accounts. This body of material enabled some useful conclusions to be drawn, pointing in particular to the personal form of accountability noted above, but the limitations created by the form of the records and the local focus of the investigation need to be corrected by the use of other forms of evidence.

That form of evidence is the surviving and published diaries of the period. The most famous of these is the diary of 'Parson Woodforde'.<sup>14</sup> Incumbent of Weston Longville in Norfolk from 1776 to 1803, these diaries are famous for their detail, especially of Woodforde's eating habits! Their meticulous recording of the mundane details of everyday life suggests that they might be a valuable source of information on parish life, specifically on interactions with parish officers. They have been published in full and an analysis of them for details of parish life helps to supplement the findings drawn from Bingham. Of even more value, however, is another published diary, that of Thomas Turner of East Hoathly in Sussex.<sup>15</sup> Turner, a shopkeeper, was both a meticulous diary

keeper and a conscientious parish officer. His diary takes us into the world of the vestry and provides a valuable secular counterpoint to Woodforde's clerical concerns. These two major sources have been supplemented with the other published eighteenth century diaries, mainly from clerics, that are used in the major works of church history of the period.<sup>16</sup> Of course, there are many limitations to diaries as a source. They are inevitably selective in what they cover and many are of the form of commonplace books or journals, rather than diaries. In addition, many show the marks of retrospective completion. However, in what they record, or perhaps more importantly don't record, they give us an insight into priorities, as well as, sometimes, content which complements the material drawn from the accounts. In the discussion that follows, therefore, the evidence from the diaries is interwoven with the analysis of the accounts in order to explore whether the patterns found in Bingham were of wider relevance. A brief outline of the key findings from this analysis is presented before some key themes are selected for further discussion.

### **Practices of accountability**

On the 20<sup>th</sup> April 1778 Woodforde notes in his diary 'I sent a note to the Gentlemen at the Heart at their Easter meeting, nominating M. Burton my Churchwarden'.<sup>17</sup> This brief note encapsulates much of the 'ideal type' of the selection of parish officers – the meeting at Easter and the selection of two churchwardens, one for the incumbent and one for the people. In

East Hoathly Turner records a clear pattern for the selection of parish officers: churchwardens and the overseer of the poor at Easter and surveyors for the upkeep of roads in the parish in December. He does not mention the other parish officer, the constable, perhaps because this was regarded as of much lower status and was the office most likely to be occupied by those below the rank of farmer. In the hierarchy of office the churchwarden was at the apex, although in many cases the role was blurred with other functions, notably the care of the poor. The main functions were the maintenance of church discipline, the care of the fabric of the church and the support of the incumbent in the provision of materials (such as those for communion). However, in many cases these functions overlapped with others. Many churchwardens' accounts in Bingham record matters such as the provision for the poor, most notably in the supply of materials for the poor to work on. This was taken furthest in the parish of Shelford, where from 1729 the separate sets of accounts were replaced with one unified set under the control of a 'parish officer' who combined the roles of churchwarden, overseer and surveyor. Here, too, accounts were presented every six months. This was atypical, but it reminds us that it is dangerous to assume that the 'typical' pattern as laid down in works such as Tate obtained everywhere.<sup>18</sup> A closer examination of practices across a particular set of parishes and over time enables us to test this pattern.

For Tate, the post Reformation church settled on a pattern of annual office holding, with two wardens being selected at a vestry of the

substantial inhabitants at Easter. Although not specifically laid down in the legislation, by custom one of the wardens represented and was selected by the incumbent, the other by the people. They served for a year and presented their accounts to the meeting in the following year. They were responsible for getting agreement to the setting of a church rate, if needed, to cover expenditure and for its collection. They were confirmed in office by the archdeacon at his half-yearly visitation, which they were required to attend. At the next visitation they were to present any concerns about parishioners, the fabric of the church or the conduct of the incumbent. They in turn faced the possibility of presentation by the incumbent if he felt they were neglecting their duties.

In the Bingham deanery some of the smaller parishes departed from this pattern, with five having only one warden. One parish, Langar, had three churchwardens. The majority of parishes, therefore, had two wardens but the patterns of selection can be complex. In only four of the parishes is there a classic pattern of single year office holding. In many there is the emergence of extensive periods of office holding by one warden with others serving shorter periods. In Bingham, for example, William Petty served as warden from 1771 until past the end of our period. Because of disputes in the parish we know that he was the incumbent's warden.<sup>19</sup> In this case his counterpart generally served an annual term of office, until George Baxter, his bitter rival, served a six year spell. In this case we know that Petty 'had refused to have anything to do with him [Baxter] since his appointment and "always turned away from him".'<sup>20</sup> Other

parishes also had long serving wardens. Richard Watt, for example, served single handed at Stanton in the Wolds from 1780 to 1815; in Flintham, John Jebb's term of office as what appears to be the incumbent's warden of six years was followed by the ten year tenure of Charles Neale.<sup>21</sup> Their counterparts over the same period generally served two year terms. In Wiltshire Spaeth notes that "Landholders shared the office of churchwarden between them, with each farm taking its turn, a procedure that ensured that the richest farmers did not monopolise parish office"<sup>22</sup> We might see below that the motive for this practice, also noted in Tate, might be as much about the avoidance of office as a desire to occupy it. In 1757 Turner notes that William Piper was selected as overseer 'but as it was proved Will. Piper had served it very lately, it was agreed Ed. Hope should serve it.' This did not settle the matter, as six days later 'Called a vestry to consult about the overseers that were nominated on Monday last, they both declaring they will not serve it, but (as is the custom of our vestries) we came to no resolution concerning it'.<sup>23</sup> This indicates some of the conflicts over serving, and customs of the rotation of office could help ease such conflicts. In the parish of Screveton, for example, examination of officeholding over the years 1761 to 1780 indicates two patterns. The first is a regular pattern of office holding, separated by about seven years. Within this, there is a practice of serving for two years, first as the people's warden, then for the incumbent. What emerges from this is the variability of practice across

the deanery with the system employed being shaped by local custom, something Pitman also points out for a much earlier period.<sup>24</sup>

It was noted above that vestry minutes are fragmentary for the Bingham parishes examined, but we might be able to glean some patterns from the dating of the accounts. In the same 1757 meeting on Easter Monday that Turner notes officers being selected he also records 'I made up my accounts with the parish'.<sup>25</sup> Similarly, albeit for a period just beyond our timeframe, William Holland, incumbent of Over Stowey in Somerset, notes a parish meeting held in the rectory on Easter Monday, 1814, 'where we signed'.<sup>26</sup> However, analysis of the accounts from Bingham parishes does not confirm this pattern. Only 379 of 672 of the balanced accounts bear the date of agreement, perhaps reflecting the local nature of the accounts as discussed more below. Of those which are dated, very few are in March or April, when Easter usually falls. A slim majority (199 or 52 per cent) were dated in May or June, but the rest were scattered through the year, with 15 per cent being signed in October and November. Of course, it may be that officers were chosen at the Easter meeting with accounts being approved later, but at the least the Bingham sample indicates a considerable decoupling of the two events, with the lack of a smooth transition between the two. This mattered for wardens given the likelihood that they were owed money at the end of their term of office. When Turner made up accounts following his term as overseer the result was that, 'there remains due to me £25 14s. 10.5d'.<sup>27</sup> This pattern of indebtedness is also demonstrated in the Bingham sample and

it has considerable implications for those who held parochial office. Of the 672 balances 53.27 per cent were negative, that is, wardens were owed money at the end of their term of office. This varied considerably from parish to parish, with 81 per cent of the unfortunate officers of Shelford being owed money. In Langer, Gervas Howe whose fine headstone we have already noted, served with Mathew Dextor in 1756; when accounts were settled two years later he was owed £22 16s 2d. Despite this (or perhaps to ensure he recovered his money) he served another two years term of office with Dextor, at the end of which he was still owed £10. Despite having this balance agreed in December 1760, he was not reimbursed by his successors until June 1762.<sup>28</sup> It would only be the wealthier inhabitants who could stand this level of indebtedness (as well as a fine slate headstone).

This brief summary suggests some features of the system of parochial office holding, with specific reference to churchwardens. One outstanding feature is that practice varied considerably from parish to parish, with no clear template. There are some standard underlying features, but considerable variability around the pattern of two wardens holding office for annual terms. What was common was the personal nature of accountability, something which is explored further below. Here three aspects are selected for further discussion, all concerned with the ways in which accounting for actions was carried out in practice. We look at the forms in which accounts were presented, the places in which this occurred and the involvement (or lack thereof) of the incumbent. Before that,

however, Turner's diary gives us a good insight into the operation of the system that we have outlined. As a conscientious parish officer, he opens a door to the otherwise hidden world of the parish meeting, showing us the debate and contention that lay behind the signed accounts. He also gives us more detail of the pattern of meetings, particularly when, as in 1756, he records what appears to be a comprehensive list of meetings. There were two meetings to select officers: the churchwardens and overseers were selected at the Easter meeting and a meeting was held in late December to select the surveyors.<sup>29</sup> William Cole, incumbent of Blechley, also notes the surveyor being regularly chosen at a Vestry on St Stephen's Day (26<sup>th</sup> December), although in Over Stowey this meeting was held in October.<sup>30</sup> It was the best attended meeting in East Hoathley with Turner noting attendances of 16 in 1755 and 13 in 1756. Attendance at other meetings ranged from 12 to 6, with a median attendance of seven or eight at the 14 meetings for which Turner gives us the details. This is certainly a healthier attendance pattern than that indicated by the signatories to the accounts in one Bingham parish, West Bridgford, where attendance never got beyond six in the period 1769 to 1800, with the median value being four. In 1756 Turner records five meetings at East Hoathley in the year. In March there was a 'public vestry' to set a poor rate, although this ended (as did so many of the meetings Turner records) in disagreement. At the April meeting the churchwarden and overseer were selected. Here Turner refers to an 'electioner', presumably a deputy, for each office. Interesting, he only mentions one warden and

there is no mention of the selection or confirmation of the incumbent's warden, either at this meeting or any that Turner records. In May and October there were vestries called to consider the affairs of specific people, with the year concluding with the election of surveyors after Christmas. The other meetings that Turner records (some more comprehensively in some years rather than others) are entirely secular in their concerns and show very little involvement of the incumbent, something we will return to.

### **Forms of accountability**

The accounts of the Bingham parishes bear some of the marks of the process by which they were rendered. Throughout the century we have references to the 'giving up' of accounts. So at Edwalton in 1725 when the accounts note, 'Paid for ale when these accounts was given up'.<sup>31</sup> This continues late into the century and in other parishes, so in Willoughby on the Wolds in September 1786 we have 2s 6d 'Spent when the accounts was gave up'.<sup>32</sup> Part of the process may then have been the oral 'giving up' of accounts, but there was also allowance, as at Orston in May 1783, 'for Transferring the Accounts into the Book'.<sup>33</sup> Turner records in 1758 that he attended the parish meeting where 'I made up the accounts between Mr Joseph Burges the present overseer and the parish, and there remains due to the parish £11 7s 6d'.<sup>34</sup> His skills from keeping his shop seem to have been transferred for the assistance of his less able peers. The marks of this uneven practice are clearly visible in the Bingham

parish accounts, where there is a bewildering range of account formats. In many cases, especially at the beginning of the century, we have a simple record of the amount either owing to or due from the wardens. Although there is a clear process of greater detail during the course of the century, so that many more accounts give full details of transactions and when they were incurred, this was by no means a linear process. So in 1799, for example, we can still find the bare statement in Wysall 'William Case in Hand on the Church account 15s 7d'.<sup>35</sup> This suggests the local nature of accounts, where details were conveyed orally and were approved at the time, with participants not seeing the need to record details for further scrutiny. After all, the accounts did not go elsewhere for scrutiny. There is just one mention of accounts at the annual visitation of the archdeacon, when in 1777 William Hutchinson, late churchwarden of Bingham, was presented for 'not passing his Accounts of all and Singular his Receipts and Disbursements of Money by him received and Disbursed as Churchwarden of the said Parish in 1775'.<sup>36</sup> Unfortunately, a settlement was reached and the case dismissed before proceeding to a hearing, so we have no further detail. This exception does rather point up the lack of scrutiny that these accounts were subject to outside the circle of the parish elite. However, this did not preclude the keeping of records, at the centre of which was 'the book'. In Hickling in May 1800, for example, William Mann's accounts for the year 1799 include the sum of 2s 6d 'Spent when I Received the Book'.<sup>37</sup> Wardens frequently charged sums of money for entering up their accounts. In Orston, for example, in

May 1783 there was a charge of 1s 'for Transferring the Accounts into the Book'.<sup>38</sup> What we have therefore is a process in which much of the conduct of the churchwardens was in their hands during the course of the year, with them maintaining records in whatever manner they found suitable until they were to be transferred into the accounts book. This also meant that their stewardship of money during the year was relatively opaque, with little recorded connection between their actions, perhaps as agreed by a vestry, and the transactions they recorded.

Whether decisions at a vestry were minuted is also difficult to ascertain because of the lack of surviving records. The Shelford book records decisions taken in 1723 about the use of a house owned by the parish and records that it was 'Agreed that no Officer shall have power to give any thing on the Parish Account to any Travellour whatsoever.'<sup>39</sup> There are also notes in Bingham, but these are very much fragments. This is where Turner's diary is so valuable in giving us an insight into the conduct of such meetings. From his records, these were often fractious affairs, fuelled by considerable volumes of alcoholic drink. All the vestries he records took place at 'Jones's', otherwise the village inn the Crown (until at the end of the period concerned Jones failed and the vestry moved to the Maypole). We get here confirmation of the social nature of these occasions conveyed by the spending on ale and food recorded in the Bingham parish accounts. In October 1756, Turner notes that a number left a vestry meeting which had already run from 4.30 until 7 as, 'they found if they stayed they must spend their own money and not the

parish's. ... The rest of the company stayed on until gone 11 having spent 3s 6d of the parish's money and a 1d of their own.<sup>40</sup> This sociability often had predictable results, with Turner frequently bewailing the poor behaviour that too much drink led to. At Easter 1760 he records that 'We had several warm arguments at our vestry today and several volleys of execrable oaths oftentime resounded from almost all sides of the room, a most rude and shocking thing at public meetings'.<sup>41</sup> Not all meetings ended this way and Turner does record more agreeable and sociable events. In April 1764 he records a meeting which started in the afternoon and continued 'till near 3 o'clock in the morn before we broke up and spent 10s allowed out of the poor book and a halfpenny each'.<sup>42</sup> Turner often regretted the consumption of alcohol that these events led him to, but he often fell back into temptation. His diaries confirm the focus on the inn that we get from other records. Woodforde notes parish meetings at the (variously recorded ) Hart or Heart public house in Weston Longville. In East Bridgford in the Bingham deanery the 'giving up' of accounts frequently happened at John Hose's inn.<sup>43</sup>

This sociability, and the venue for it, might have prevented the full involvement of the incumbent in parish matters. Jacob notes that the vestry 'was chaired by the incumbent' but evidence for this is very patchy in both the Bingham sample and in the broader diaries.<sup>44</sup> This is not to say that incumbents were completely absent. In East Bridgford at mid-century 'The Rev. Peter Priaulx was an active rector in many ways, as a man of business and a disciplinarian. He insisted on full and precise

details in the parochial accounts of overseers, constables, and churchwardens at the vestry meetings.<sup>45</sup> Turner notes the presence of Thomas Porter, the incumbent, at three of the fourteen meetings he records, but none of these was the parish meeting at which accounts were approved. Some accounts are signed by incumbents in the Bingham sample, but very few. In Somerset Holland records calling a number of vestries to do with concerns about parishioners. In 1803 he recorded an Easter Monday vestry

After dinner the Parishioners met. I represented the Altar in the Chancel and the Cloth that covered the Communion Table as shabby and rotten and proposed repairs and a new one. Farmer Morle agreed to rectify them at once. Mr James Rich objected with some warmth. I told him that I would present them, which fired him still more. I believe he had been drinking, however I gave him some strong replies and appointed Farmer Morle for my Church Warden and he partly declining for the other Church Warden, Farmer Dibble was chosen in his stead.<sup>46</sup>

Eleven years later he noted 'I had Prayers in the afternoon to take in the Farmers who were coming to settle Parish matters. They retired to my house where we signed and I gave them a Jug of Strong Beer.'<sup>47</sup> Cole in Blechley also notes two Easter meetings both held after Matins at which wardens were chosen.<sup>48</sup> However, by contrast, many of the other clerical diaries are simply silent about parish matters. Benjamin Rogers of Carlton

in Bedfordshire notes his son losing his way back from a fair on Easter Monday but nothing of a parish meeting.<sup>49</sup> The strongest evidence for the lack of clerical involvement comes from the diaries of James Woodforde and it is worth looking at this evidence in more detail.

We have already noted Woodforde sending his selection of warden down to the meeting at the Hart. In his first full year he had noted 'Could not attend our Parish Meeting to day, but desired Mr Dade to nominate John Bowles my Churchwarden'.<sup>50</sup> And this was followed the next year by the similar passage we have already noted. There is then a two year gap until the note of 'A Parish Meeting at the Hart to day. I did not attend, but nominated Mr Mann to be my C. Warden.'<sup>51</sup> This is the last mention of the selection of churchwardens. Woodforde's diaries are famous for their attention to mundane detail, but parish matters are rarely featured. The only detail of involvement comes in 1784, when two meetings are recorded. On 26<sup>th</sup> May that year he attends a meeting in the church 'held for examining things belonging to the Church'.<sup>52</sup> Two months later another meeting was held in the church about 'moving the Singing Seat'. Eight parishioners attended and there was some debate:

Mr Peachman with some others were for letting of it remain where it is - but they all said they would agree to have it placed wherever I pleased - Accordingly I fixed to be a proper place for it behind the Font and so inclose the Belfry - was concluded on and so the Vestry

was dissolved - They all behaved extremely obliging to their Rector.<sup>53</sup>

This is the only comprehensive entry about parish business and afterwards notes are restricted to his provision of extracts from the registers that the wardens needed for visitation purposes. That parish meetings continued is seen from the entry in January 1789: 'Mr Howlett & Mr Forster called here this Afternoon as they were going to a Parish meeting at the Heart to speak to me respecting the Rent due for the Poor Cottage where Dick Buck &c live, which belongs to the Widows Charity - I told them that I expected the Parish would pay the arrears'.<sup>54</sup> But there is no sign that Woodforde had any interest or desire in being involved in parochial affairs. This perhaps supports the lack of mention in other clerical diaries, where the emphasis is more on ecclesiastical preferment than parish business. In 1757 a letter from George Woodward, rector of East Hendred in Berkshire noted

the poor people have had a bad time of it, and as to corn and firing it is not much better still: we have set a collection on foot for their present relief, but I am afraid it will be of little service, as there are but few in our parish, who are able to contribute much; I gave them a guinea to begin with, and did intend to go round the town my self yesterday with the officers, but it was so very snowy, that I did not care to venture, so how it has turned out, I have not yet learned.<sup>55</sup>

This was his only mention of parish business (as published) and it seems something of a grudging and limited engagement.

The holding of parish meetings in the village inn might have been something of a stumbling block. It was not that incumbents were adverse to either drink or some types of inn. Visitations were also social occasions, such as that attended by William Cole in 1766, where 44 clergy dined with the archdeacon. Cole was not averse to functions in inns, attending a meeting of the licensing justices at the White Lion in Little Brickhill and one of surveyors of roads at the Bull at Stony Stratford.<sup>56</sup> We have noted that the Rev William Porter in East Hoathley was also not averse to meetings in village pubs (nor to drinking heavily at more private functions) but the general attitude displayed towards farmers might have been a considerable barrier.<sup>57</sup> This comes across from the comments about the attitudes and behaviour of farmers at the annual tithe dinner. Given when the tithes were collected at the end of each year, this generally took place in the rectory, with the most respectable farmers in the parlour, the rest in the rectory kitchen. A dinner and beer would be provided and some incumbents dreaded these events. George Woodward complained to his correspondent in 1758 that

Next Monday is our farmers' tithe feast, which is but a troublesome time, and I am always heartily glad when it is over; for it's very disagreeable sitting for half a day amongst such sort of folks, in a

cloud of tobacco, attending to the price of corn and fat hogs, and almost stunned with the noise of their rustic mirth.<sup>58</sup>

Woodforde recorded that at his tithe 'frolic' in 1781 that 'Stephen Andrews and John Pegg very soon got quite drunk by strong Beer - The latter was quite beastly so and spued about the Passage &c. - very shameful in him'.<sup>59</sup> On the other side of the country, in Somerset, William Holland noted of his 1804 tithe dinner

The rest of the Farmers came and paid very well and were cheerful. Some of them at the other end of the table helped themselves to the strong beer rather too plentifully and Bristow I was obliged to check once or twice for swearing and he spat on the floor every word he spoke, a vulgar dirty dog. However they left me very tolerable, Old Charles Selleck who is seventy seven in high glee, Mr Rich and our part of the table were sound as Rocks.<sup>60</sup>

Incumbents were therefore dependent on farmers, both for their income and for their support as parish officers, but there is an increasing feeling of social separation from them. Evans observes this in the context of the enclosure movement, from which many incumbents benefitted as their tithes were converted into consolidated glebes.<sup>61</sup> Alongside this came their participation in the ranks of the magistracy and the elevation of their social status. Incumbents were critically aware of this in their diaries. When William Cole moved from Blechley to Waterbeach in Cambridgeshire

in 1767 his main complaint about being surrounded by Dissenters was not their theology but their lack of social deference. He complained in a letter that 'I can't cross the Yard to go into my poor Business of a Garden, but this mechanical Teacher [a collar maker and presumably lay preacher], with the usual puritanical Assurance and Forwardness, must needs greet me every Time he sees me with Good Morrow! or How d'ye Neighbour?'

<sup>62</sup>He was one of the incumbents who did seem to be involved in parish business and was certainly not averse to engaging with those who worked his land, provided the proper relations were observed. So in 1766 he records

I was in the Clay Pit Close between 6 & 7 in the Morning. Will Travel mowed this day for me. We carried 2 Loads. Tansley drunk, & quarelled with his Companions all Day long. The Chancellor of Lincoln called upon me, having dined with Mrs Willis, who asked me to meet him: but I chose to be among my Hay People, it being a particular Pleasure & Amusement to me: however I drank Tea with them.<sup>63</sup>

The other clerical diarists pay considerable attention to their own agricultural affairs, even when they tell us nothing about parish business. So James Newton of Nuneham Courtney in Oxfordshire has nothing on his relations with parish officers but extensive records of farming matters, such as in March 1759 'Draw'd Faggots Home from Forewood & begun plowing the Turnip Land. Employ'd Howse at Bab Whyatts Close & took

Him with me to the Crofts etc.<sup>64</sup> Similarly, Benjamin Rogers of Carlton in Bedfordshire notes in April 1729 'Sow'd my Home Close; it took about 12 Bushel of Seed. We Harrow'd it for 2 days, and loaded the Harrows well, and afterwards rak'd the loose Turf that was turn'd up with the Harrows into the Furrows.'<sup>65</sup> It was not an aversion to farming but one to farmers that conditioned their responses to and distance from their parochial officers.

## Conclusion

This relative distancing of incumbents from their parish officers reinforced the patterns of accountability noted above and paralleled the pattern of authority in the church more generally. That is, whilst there was a clear hierarchy of authority with structures laid down for its exercise, in practice the system allowed for a considerable amount of discretion and autonomy at every level. So several writers on the church in the eighteenth century have commented on the ineffectiveness of church discipline as expressed in the annual archdeacon's visitations. They note the frequent recording of 'omnia bene' in churchwardens returns to the questions posed by archdeacons before their visitations.<sup>66</sup> Cole, for example, was scathing of his archdeacon, recording after the visitation dinner in 1766 that he 'ended, most quaintly, (in the State of the Church-Wardens' Presentments, to which he alluded), that he was very glad to find, as he hoped he always should do, That All was well.'<sup>67</sup> This complacency meant that incumbents in their turn were free to engage

with their churchwardens as they chose and it would appear, both from the evidence in the Bingham accounts and that in diaries, that in practice this meant for many involvement only when the fabric of the church was involved. Because of this, the parish elite were free to devise their own practices of accountability, resulting in widely varying practices shaped in large part by custom and tradition.

The evidence presented here about the form and content of administrative practices suggests that some of the classic accounts, such as that of Tate, need a little refinement. The greater availability of records now makes it possible to carry out more systematic comparative analyses. We need more of these to be able to account for the variation which might occur between regions. One way of doing this might be by using the diaries we have examined as a guide to sample selection, although this will, of course, be conditioned by the survival of records. However, the argument here about the variability of practice and the personal nature of accountability might be thought to have broader application. Gregory has argued that we need a greater focus on taken-for-granted practices when considering the formation of national identity in our period.<sup>68</sup> He suggest the Book of Common Prayer as one vehicle for such practices. Given their centrality to the concerns of the 'middling sort' another vehicle might be the type of administrative practices we have examined. This is particularly the case if we contrast the *personal* nature of the practices we have examined to the more *systemic* forms of accountability to be found in Scotland in the same period.<sup>69</sup>

If we explore the Scottish experience in brief against the dimensions we have examined, then the English experience is thrown into sharp relief. In Scotland, the kirk session, a group of four to six elders, held office for life. It could not convene without the presence of the incumbent, for the moderator was the moderator, or chair, of the meeting. It met on a regular basis, in the church or, more infrequently, in the minister's house. Indeed, it was a point of pride to some in the Scottish system that it lacked the sociability that was such a feature of the English system. Conscious of this contrast, the Reverend Charles Skene Keith, minister of Keithhall, declared in his survey of the agriculture of Aberdeenshire that

The Elders, or Church-wardens, receive no recompence - not even a dinner from the funds of the Church Session, which are applied solely to the relief of the poor. The parochial clergymen, in country parishes, generally give them their dinner twice or thrice a year: and the only reward of these worthy men, who manage the poor's funds in Scotland, arises from the general esteem of their neighbours, and the approbation of their own minds.<sup>70</sup>

The results of the decisions of these bodies were recorded in considerable detail, with registers being completed against detailed national guidance and being subject to an archiving process involving local universities. The record of decisions was used as a check against the recording of financial transactions, which were generally noted in detail throughout the century. This detail was then used in the six-monthly reconciliation of money on hand against transaction records and the minutes of decisions. On top of

this local process was a regular system of 'revision' of the session's records by more senior bodies, part of a system of 'discipline' that ran from top to bottom of the church. The consequence of this system of accountability was that very few balances (under five per cent) were negative at year end. The contrast with England is stark and indicates the differences that could exist under the cover of a shared commitment to Protestantism. This suggests that we need to pay attention to differences within the emerging identity of Britain, as well as to those forces making for shared identity.<sup>71</sup> Looking at this through the lens of routine administrative practices can be a revealing way of identifying such differences.

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<sup>1</sup> For another perspective on gravestones, see K.D. M. Snell, *Parish and belonging: community, identity and welfare in England and Wales, 1700-1950*, (Cambridge, 2006).

<sup>2</sup> P. and B. Heathcote, *Vale of Belvoir Angels*, (Lowdham, 2009).

<sup>3</sup> N. Pevsner and E. Williamson, *Nottinghamshire*, (Harmondsworth 1979), 304.

<sup>4</sup> H. French, *The middle sort of people in provincial England 1600-1750*, (Oxford 2007), 252.

<sup>5</sup> Snell, *Parish and belonging*, 14.

<sup>6</sup> On the eighteenth century church see J. Gregory, *Restoration, Reformation and Reform, 1660-1828: Archbishops of Canterbury and their Diocese*, (Oxford, 2000); J. Gregory and J. Chamberlain (eds) *The National Church in Local Perspective: The Church of England and the Regions 1660-1800*, (Woodbridge 2002); W.M. Jacob, *Lay People and Religion in the Early Eighteenth Century*, (Cambridge, 1996); M. F. Snape, *The Church of England in Industrialising Society: the Lancashire parish of Whalley in the Eighteenth century*, (Woodbridge, 2003); D. Spaeth, *The Church in an age of danger: parsons and parishioners, 1660-1740*, (Cambridge, 2000).

<sup>7</sup> A. Mutch, 'Weber and Church Governance: Religious Practice and Economic Activity', *Sociological Review*, 57(4) (2009), 586-607.,

<sup>8</sup> A. Mutch, 'Custom and personal accountability in eighteenth century south Nottinghamshire church governance', *Midland History*, 2011, 36(1), 69-88.

<sup>9</sup> S. Chapman, *Hosiery and Knitwear: Four Centuries of Small-Scale Industry in Britain c.1589-2000*, (Oxford, 2002).

<sup>10</sup> J D Chambers, *Nottinghamshire in the Eighteenth Century: A Study of Life and Labour Under the Squirearchy*, (London, 1966 [1932]); D. V. Fowkes, *The progress of agrarian change in Nottinghamshire c1720-1830*, (University of Liverpool PhD thesis, 1971).

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<sup>11</sup> Beckett, J. (ed) *A Centenary History of Nottingham*, (Chichester 2006).

<sup>12</sup> A. Mitson, 'The Significance of Kinship Networks in the Seventeenth Century: South-West Nottinghamshire' in C. Phythian-Adams (ed), *Societies, Cultures and Kinship 1580-1850: Cultural Provinces and English Local History*, (London 1993), 25, examines eleven contiguous parishes in south west Nottinghamshire. By contrast, H. R. French, *Middle Sort*, examines parishes in Essex and Lancashire, while J. Kent 'The rural 'middling sort' in early modern England, circa 1640-1740: some economic, political and socio-cultural characteristics', *Rural History*, 10(1), (1999) 20 examines three parishes in Hertfordshire, Norfolk and Staffordshire, recognising that these were diverse but hoping that they 'may not be unrepresentative as settings for a study of the rural middling sort during the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries.' Closer to the area and time of this study, Chambers examined the accounts of six Nottinghamshire parishes, although the selection criteria are not clear: Bleasby, East Bridgford, Laxton, Sutton Bonington, Kingston on Soar and St Peter's, Nottingham - Chambers, *Nottinghamshire*, 59.

<sup>13</sup> Pitman examined eight contiguous parishes in Norfolk, where an exploration of patterns of office holding indicates differences that 'were influenced by the presence of particular approaches to participation, distinct parochial traditions.' This work suggests the contribution that can be made by systematic comparisons between parishes in a defined area. J. Pitman, 'Tradition and Exclusion: Parochial Officeholding in Early Modern England, a Case Study from North Norfolk 1580-1640', *Rural History*, 15(1), (2004), 27-45.

<sup>14</sup> James Woodforde, *The diary of James Woodforde, vol 1 and vols 8-17*, (Norfolk, 1991 - 2007)

<sup>15</sup> D. Vaisey (ed) *The diary of Thomas Turner 1754-1765*, (Oxford, 1984).

<sup>16</sup> Those consulted were: D. Gibson (ed) *A parson in the Vale of White Horse: George Woodward's letters from East Hendred, 1753-1761*, (Gloucester, 1982); G. M. Ditchfield and B. Keith-Lucas, *A Kentish parson: selections from the private papers of the Revd Joseph Price Vicar of Braborne, 1767-*

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1786, (Kent , 1991); G. Hannah (ed) *Diary of an Oxfordshire Rector: James Newton of Nuneham Courtenay, 1736-86*, (Stroud, 1992); C. Linnell, *Diary of Benjamin Rogers 1720-1771*, *Beds Hist Recs Soc*, 30, 1950. J. Ayres (ed) *Paupers and pig killers: the diary of William Holland a Somerset parson 1799-1818*, (Gloucester 1984) and F. G. Stokes (ed), *The Blecheley diary of the Rev. William Cole, 1765-67*, (London, 1931); Paul Brassley, Anthony Lambert and Philip Saunders, *Accounts of Reverend John Crakanthorp of Fowlmere 1682-1710*, *Cambridgeshire Records Society*, 8, 1988; David Stoker, *The Correspondence of the Reverend Francis Blomefield (1705-52)*, *Norfolk Record Society*, LV, 1990 (the Bibliographical Society 1992); Doreen Slatter, *The Diary of Thomas Naish*, *Wiltshire Archaeological and Natural History Society*, XX, 1964, *Devizes* 1965; C. Linnell, *The Diaries of Thomas Wilson D D, 1731-37 and 1750, son of Bishop Wilson of Sodor and Man*, London, SPCK, 1964.

<sup>17</sup> Woodforde, *Diaries*, Volume 8, 1778-1779 (1998), 34.

<sup>18</sup> W. E. Tate, *The Parish Chest: A Study of the Records of Parochial Administration in England*, (Chichester, 1983).

<sup>19</sup> A. Henstock, 'A Parish Divided: Bingham and the Rev. John Walter 1764-1810', *Transactions of the Thoroton Society*, 85, (1981), 90-101.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 96.

<sup>21</sup> Nottinghamshire Record Office (hereafter NRO), PR15640, Stanton on the Wolds; PR19566, Flintham.

<sup>22</sup> Spaeth, *Age of Danger*, 100.

<sup>23</sup> Vaisey, *Thomas Turner*, 95.

<sup>24</sup> Pitman, 'Tradition and exclusion'

<sup>25</sup> Vaisey, *Thomas Turner*, 95.

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<sup>26</sup> Ayres, *William Holland*, 262.

<sup>27</sup> Vaisey, *William Turner*, 95.

<sup>28</sup> NRO, PR6916, Langar, 14 June 1762.

<sup>29</sup> Vaisey, *Thomas Turner*, 35-79.

<sup>30</sup> Stokes, *William Cole*, 168; Ayres, *William Holland*, 47.

<sup>31</sup> NRO, PR2590, Edwalton, 1725.

<sup>32</sup> NRO, PR799, Willoughby on the Wolds, 29 September 1786

<sup>33</sup> NRO, PR19469, Orston, 5 May 1783.

<sup>34</sup> Vaisey, *Thomas Turner*, 143.

<sup>35</sup> NRO, PR789, Wysall, 1796.

<sup>36</sup> University of Nottingham, Southwell Archdeaconary Act Books, AN/A 82/1, 21 January 1777

<sup>37</sup> NRO, PR15483, Hickling, 31 May 1800.

<sup>38</sup> NRO, PR19469, Orston, 5 May 1783.

<sup>39</sup> NRO, PR2865, Shelford, 3 July 1723

<sup>40</sup> Vaisey, *Thomas Turner*, 67

<sup>41</sup> Vaisey, *Thomas Turner*, 204.

<sup>42</sup> Vaisey, *Thomas Turner*, 290.

<sup>43</sup> A. Du Boulay Hill, *East Bridgford, Notts: The Story of an English Village*, (Oxford, 1932),

<sup>44</sup> Jacob, *Lay people*, 11.

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<sup>45</sup> Du Boulay Hill, *East Bridgford* 94.

<sup>46</sup> Ayres, *William Holland*, 80.

<sup>47</sup> Ayres, *William Holland*, 262.

<sup>48</sup> Stokes, *William Cole*, 29, 204.

<sup>49</sup> Linnell, *Benjamin Rogers*, 85.

<sup>50</sup> Woodforde, *Diaries*, Volume 1 1776-1777 2nd ed (Norfolk 1991), 121.

<sup>51</sup> Woodforde, *Diaries*, Volume 9 1780-81 (Norfolk 2000), 30.

<sup>52</sup> Woodforde, *Diaries*, Volume 10 1782-4 (1998), 244.

<sup>53</sup> Woodforde, *Diaries*, 10, 261.

<sup>54</sup> Woodforde, *Diaries*, Volume 12 1788-9 (2001), 112.

<sup>55</sup> Gibson, *George Woodward*, 94.

<sup>56</sup> Stokes, *William Cole*, 59.

<sup>57</sup> Vaisey, *Thomas Turner*.

<sup>58</sup> Gibson, *George Woodward*, 114.

<sup>59</sup> Woodforde, *Diaries*, 9, 200.

<sup>60</sup> Ayres, *William Holland*, 97.

<sup>61</sup> E. Evans, *The Contentious Tithe: The Tithe Problem and English Agriculture 1750-1850*, (London, 1976), 106.

<sup>62</sup> Stokes, *William Cole*, 311.

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<sup>63</sup> Stokes, *William Cole*, 68.

<sup>64</sup> Hannah, *James Newton*, 16.

<sup>65</sup> Linnell, *Benjamin Rogers*, 7.

<sup>66</sup> Spaeth, *Age of Danger*; Gregory and Chamberlain, *National Church*.

<sup>67</sup> Stokes, *William Cole*, 34.

<sup>68</sup> J. Gregory 'For all sorts and conditions of men': the social life of the Book of Common Prayer during the long eighteenth century: or, bringing the history of religion and social history together', *Social History*, 34(1), 2009, 29-54.

<sup>69</sup> A. Mutch, 'Systemic accountability and the governance of the Kirk: the Presbytery of Garioch in the eighteenth century', *Northern Scotland* 3, (2012), 45-65; 'Shared Protestantism' and British identity: contrasting church governance practices in eighteenth-century Scotland and England', *Social History*, 38(4), 2013, 456-476.

<sup>70</sup> G. S. Keith, *General View of the Agriculture of Aberdeenshire*, (Aberdeen, 1811).

<sup>71</sup> J C D Clark, 'Protestantism, nationalism and national identity, 1660-1832', *The Historical Journal*, 43(1), 2000, 249-276