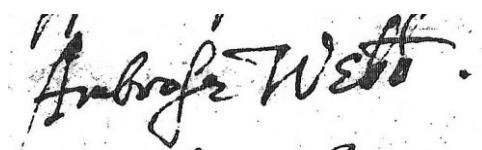


Some Contentious Basingstoke Clergy
Barbara Applin
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Researching for the revision of the Basingstoke volumes of the Victoria County History, we have come across two interesting Vicars of St Michael's. (As you will see, spellings at this time were quite uncertain, often several different spellings in one document.)

Ambrose Webb, MA, Fellow of Magdalen College, was Vicar of Basingstoke from 1593 to 1648. He took some of his parochial duties seriously. In the 54 wills we have read during the time he was Vicar we found that five people appointed him as an overseer to help the executors and he witnessed six wills. He also acted as an appraiser five times. This meant helping to draw up inventories, going round the whole house, shop or whatever, listing every item found there and giving it an approximate value – sometimes appraisers lost patience and said 'and some other lumber', which is frustrating to a researcher. Unfortunately we don't have his own will or inventory but we can tell that four of these wills and three of the inventories are in his handwriting



Date	Testator	Overseer	Witness	Appraiser	Source
1604	Henry Rich, clothier	✓	✓		TNA Prob 11/103
1605	Edmund Cunliffe	✓			TNA Prob 11/107
1605	Richard Hall, clothier	✓			TNA Prob 11/105
1605	Thomas Normington, yeoman		✓		HRO 160A/65
1606	Walter Bernard, miller	✓	✓	✓	HRO 1606A/4
1606	Robert Stocker, yeoman	✓			TNA Prob 11/109/328
1609	Thomas Fachin senior, glover		✓	✓	HRO 1609A/27
1628	John Warner, hosier and clothier			✓	HRO 1628B/82
1629	John Goringe, dyer and yeoman		✓	✓	HRO 1630A/44
1636	Richard Hannington, yeoman			✓	HRO 1641A/3

In 1632 John Hall left 40s "to Mr Ambrose Webb Vicar of Basingstoke to buy him a gown".¹ Some other people, however, were not satisfied with the Vicar's work. In 1607 Sir James Deane (who left money in his will to endow the Deane's almshouses in London Street and to pay for a schoolmaster at the grammar school in the Holy Ghost Chapel) obviously felt that Ambrose Webb's preaching was no improvement on that of previous Vicars:

... many tymes heretofore the said towne of Basingstoke has beene and at this present is destitute of some good and godly preacher to teach and instructe the people there in the principles of Religion and to leade there lives according to the Lawes and Commandments of Almighty God.

so he left money

*to the intent and purpose that after my decease for ever a good and learned preacher and a Graduate of Divinitye of one of the two universities of Cambridge or Oxford may there from tyme to tyme bee had and mainetained for the preaching of Gods holy word in the said towne of Basingstoke.*²

Further endowments were made by Sir James Lancaster (1618) and Richard Aldworth (1646), suggesting that the Vicar was still not doing as well as he should.

Ambrose Webb resented the intrusive role of the Lecturer. In 1636-7 another man of influence in the town, George Baynard, took legal action against him *for repelling Baynard from the sacrament of the Lord's supper and for some irregularities in the performance of divine worship*.³

In the following open letter to his parishioners on 18th August 1641, the Vicar reacted strongly to this action and expressed his opposition to the Lectureship.

Friends: on my visits to Basingstoke, I continue to reflect with gratitude as to the fine state of preservation of our ancient Parish Church as a result of much work undertaken some six years past, including giving new colour to the Arms of the King & Queen. But I note that there is still a damaged communion Cup; and the costs of its repair must soon be found from payments of dues.

I am now in the 80th year of my life: and have been for 48 years Vicar of this Parish. I do not approach the next few years with optimism: nor do I bring them a good humour. Whilst I rejoice that my good lord and King Charles has graciously ordered a new Charter at this time for our town, so that we may better order our common life, and Honour and Dignify our town with the Office of Mayor, seven Aldermen, seven Burgesses, High Steward, Recorder, Town Clerk, and two Sergeants at Mace – yet I do fear for the wellbeing of the town so dignified because one George Baynard, a so-called gentleman, of this town is no fit person to hold so dignified an office – for have I not had reason to dispute with him about the right to certain seats in this Parish Church: and did not this same and naughty man take proceedings against me for repelling him from the Holy Sacrament of our most Blessed Lord?

And I do fear that this man may use the power of his office to do me harm, and to insinuate into the pulpit of this church a Clerk to preach on Lecture Days – the which I shall oppose.

I do cause the Parish Register to be upkept. In the year of our Lord 1640 there were 19 Marriages, 74 Baptisms, and 62 Burials. But this year, such is the civil unrest and commotion that I do fear the records are incomplete and the tasks aforesaid, neglected.

Indeed, everything is at a low ebb. There is much unrest. Commerce is uncertain: agriculture neglected for fear. The Children at Holy Ghost School have for long been ill-taught, and no fit and able Priest has been found since 1608 – because of the ill-will and omission of the aldermen – who have proven themselves unfitted by neglect of their responsibilities for the task allotted to them. It is of good consequence that my Lord, the Bishop of Winchester has newly appointed my Son to succeed John Mason who has for too long held this office.

How much we do value the arduous labours of our Petty Schoolmaster, Richard Goddard; and the Beneficence of Sir James Deane whose generosity has given to our town the almshouses. For in our town we do care mightily for Old and Young.

I remind you of the payment of dues and fees for the use of the pulpit cloth of green velvet for funerals, 12d. And the cost of tolling the Knell must also be met.

And I recall to you, Brethren, that the last bell to be hung has engraven upon it the goodly motto 'God be our gyd'. In these troublous times, I pray that God will hear that prayer. May there be Peace in our Church: Peace in our Town, and amongst those called to new office under the new Charter newly-enacted at this season.

His fears were well-founded. Baynard did indeed take up the cause of the Lecturer.

An order was made by the House of Commons, on the 12th March, 1641-2 – that upon reading the humble petition of George Baynarde, gentleman, mayor of the town of Basingstoke, in the County of Southampton, as well on behalf of himself as of the rest of the town. ‘It is this day ordered, that Ambrose Webb, Vicar of the parish Church of Basingstoke aforesaid, shall permit Mr. John Brockett, clerk, [Rector of Ellisfield] the free use of the pulpit in the said church to preach on the lecture days in the said parish Church according to the intention of the benefactors for the maintenance of that lecture, from time to time; and also to permit such succeeding lecturers as shall be hereafter to preach in the said church.’⁴

Matters got worse by 1646.

... the Vicar having given dissatisfaction to the Parliament and the parishioners, on the 23rd of July, the committee for plundered Ministers ordered, ‘That the articles exhibited against Ambrose Webb, Vicar of Basingstoke, in the County of Southampton, be referred to the Committee of Parliament for the said County and division in which the said parish is situated, or to any three of them who are desired; to receive Mr. Webb’s answer to the said articles, and to call before them and examine the witnesses that shall be produced, as well for the proof of the said articles, as of the said Mr. Webb’s defence, and to certify the said articles, answer and examinations to this committee.’ The result of these proceedings does not appear, though we may presume that they terminated in the exculpation of Mr. Webb, as he continued in possession of the Vicarage until the time of his death.’⁵ I

n the same year the Churchwardens’ accounts report that the parish clerk went to Odiham to seek after the chalice or communion cup which was taken out of Vicar Webb’s house by the parliamentary soldiers 21 May 1645 and detained still by them.’⁶

Baigent & Millard summed things up. When Ambrose Webb died in 1648 he had held the Vicarage for 54 years, and during the unsettled times of his incumbency, was frequently at warfare with his parishioners and troubled with prosecutions in the consistory court.’⁷

Ambrose’s son Edward also fell out of favour. Although, to his father’s delight, he became Master of the Holy Ghost School in 1639 and his appointment was confirmed in 1643, he was replaced in 1644.

The next Vicar was Stephen Webb, otherwise known as Stephen Evered, who had been Lecturer for Basingstoke in 1647 and possibly earlier. We don’t know if he was related to Ambrose Webb – could he have changed his name to get Ambrose’s support for being appointed to the Lectureship, and to suggest himself as his successor as Vicar, even though his MA was at Trinity College, Oxford, not Magdalen College which had the advowson?

In 1624 Stephen Purchis, clothier, left his son a house in Church Street between the land of John Stocker on the north side and the land of Winchester College on the east side now in the use and occupation of Stephen Webb clerk.’⁸ Further research might one day help us to say just where this was.

Stephen Webb also acted as witness to a will (Richard Craswell or Creswell in 1622, HRO 1622B/11) and his name is on the probate accounts of John Reeve who died in 1624 and the commission to administer the oath to his widow Johan Reeve (HRO 21M65/D8.84)

He was even more ready than Ambrose to go to battle.

On 18th July 1655 Thomas Robertson and Ambrose Rigg [of the Society of Friends] being at Basingstoke, were told that the priest of that Parish had uttered several invective speeches against them; they, desirous to clear themselves, sent to the priest to come to them, but received this short answer, “I will not come. You may expect to be shortly in prison.” They nevertheless held a meeting

*in a Friend's yard, to which many of the town resorted. As one of them was preaching, the priest, with a Justice of the Peace and some others, came in and in much anger demanded, "What a tumult is here? By what authority do you speak here?" The Friends answered, "Our authority is from the Lord."*⁹

The Friends were sent to prison.

So far we have found only one occasion when Stephen helped any of his parishioners (Henry Rich, clothier, 1624) with a will and that was before he became Vicar, but Stephen's own will in 1660 makes his religious position very clear.¹⁰

In the name of God Amen I Stephen Webb Minister of Basingestoake in the County of South[amp]ton Doe make this my last Will and Testament Imprimis I bequeath my soule into the hands of my God the Father mercies to bee saved by the merritts of his Sonne the Lord Jesus Christ through the Grace of his holy Spiritt abhorring new [Errour] as well as the old [Armenianisine], [Antinomianism], [Socinianisine], Anabaptisine and Quakerisine, greiving att the sadd divisions and causeless dissentions, which have beene amongst Brethren to the obstructing of much good and opening a gapp to unspeakable evil.

This displays the learning he had needed as Lecturer, though his difficult handwriting almost defeated attempts to transcribe it and identify the 'heresies' he condemned. How many of these, apart from Quakerism, would have been practised in Basingstoke?

¹ HRO 148M71/8/8

² HRO 148M71/8/5/2

³ **The Town and Manor of Basingstoke** Baigent & Millard (B & M) page 412

⁴ B & M pages 23-24

⁵ B & M page 24

⁶ B & M page 517

⁷ B & M page 519

⁸ TNA Prob 11/144/415

⁹ B & M page 535

¹⁰ TNA Prob 11/301/3