

WHO WAS DOCTOR FOSTER ?

Philip Brown

The well-known version of **Doctor Foster**, which first appeared in print in 1844, has been variously connected with Edward I's visit to the city and the state of turnpike roads.¹ However, there is a less well-known version in the *Opies'* book, which may well point to a separate, and already well-documented, event in the city's history.

This first made its appearance in **Gammer Gurton's Garland**, an early collection of nursery rhymes made by Joseph Ritson, and published in 1783 or 1784. After his death in 1810, a larger edition was produced, based on manuscripts assembled by Francis Douce of the British Museum and now housed in the Bodleian.

Old Doctor Foster went to Gloster,
To preach the word of God.
When he came there, he sat in his chair,
And gave all the people a nod.

This gives us the option of thinking that Foster may have been a Doctor of Divinity or in some other field of learning, instead of the common assumption that he was a medical man. It is possible that both rhymes have the same origin.

The crucial first clue was provided by local historian Janet Wilton, who knew of this interest in Dr. Foster and similar topics. She reported that in 1961 or 1962 her daughter visited Deerhurst Church. The Revd. Hugh Maclean told the school party that Doctor Foster has been an emissary of William Laud, when he was Archbishop of Canterbury; that he had visited Gloucester with instructions that all communion tables should be placed at the east end of the church instead of their post-Reformation or 'Puritan' position in the centre of the chancel: but that he had not been able to reach Deerhurst because the Severn was in flood.

In the Priory Church of St. Mary at Deerhurst there is still a communion table rather than an altar, and it is positioned in the centre of the chancel: at some periods in its history it has been in a north-south position, at others east-west. There is no altar rail, unless you count the high wooden rails at the entrances to the chancel itself. Arthur Mee, writing in **The King's England: Gloucestershire**, believed the arrangement to be unique.

As is well-known, when William Laud became Dean of Gloucester in 1616, he decided to move the communion table in the Cathedral from the middle of the choir to the east end. He clearly believed that the Puritan tendency to site it in the chancel had led to informality and misuse; by restoring it to the east end he would ensure that it was approached with a proper reverence.

The decision caused a furore. A libel, or pamphlet, denouncing the move and calling on others to resist it, was published in St. Michael's Church. Some of Laud's opponents were summoned before the High Commission, the ecclesiastical court which developed a reputation for severity (later under Laud himself) and which was finally abolished in 1641, along with the Star Chamber. The Bishop of Gloucester, Miles Smith, who held office from 1612 to 1624, swore that he would never enter the Cathedral again.² (David Verey and David Welander.)

Although this episode bore similarities to the story from the 1960s it was clearly not identical. Laud had given the instructions himself at the first Chapter meeting, and they only applied to the Cathedral. However, it was a pointer.

Moreover, the biographies of Laud showed he left Gloucester in 1621. He recorded this in his diary, an edition of which can be found in the Cathedral Library: 'The King's Gracious Speech unto me, June 3, 1621, concerning my long service. He was pleased to say: He had given me nothing but Gloucester, which he well knew was a Shell without a Kernel'. In 1629, his ecclesiastical ambition reached its fulfilment when he was appointed Archbishop of Canterbury.

Hutton, a biographer of Laud, wrote 'Established at Canterbury, with the full support of the King, he determined upon a great effort to make the English Church recognize and display its unity through an uniformity of worship and ceremonial . . . Accordingly, at the beginning of 1633 he instituted a visitation of all the dioceses of his province . . . The work was continued in the following two years, and was placed in the hands of his vicar-general, Sir Nathaniel Brent, Warden of Merton College, Oxford.'³

BRENT'S VISITATION TO GLOUCESTER

The vicar-general had been appointed by George Abbot, the previous Archbishop. Laud and Brent did not always see eye to eye — in fact, Brent seems from various sources to have been a fair-weather friend to whoever held influence at any time.

Much of the evidence surrounding the visitation is to be found in the **Calendar of State papers (Domestic)**. In Vol. 260, the entry for February 22 1634 concerns memoranda written by Laud for Brent's instruction. In addition the Vicar-General is 'directed privately to charge the Archbishop's officers specially to give good example' by conforming to good church practice.

In Vol. 285, the entry for March 26 1635 again refers to memoranda issued by Laud. These are even more specific. 'At Gloucester attention was specially to be given to the carriage of Marwood of the choir and Henry Horsington, dwelling in Barton Street . . . the latter of whom had vilified the King's declaration and Dr. [Thomas] Iles, one of the prebendaries, and the Dean and Chapter, calling them a company of knaves for maintaining the choir, because their service profanes the church of God. He has likewise been bold with myself and the High Commission. I pray speak privately with William Hewlett (one of the choir?) and he will help you to proof of all this which, if you can get, I shall proceed as I see cause'.

The existence of the High Commission reminds us that the edicts of the Church of England at this time were reinforced by ecclesiastical law. So it was no coincidence that Sir Nathaniel Brent was also Doctor Brent; he had been made Doctor of Common Law at Oxford in October, 1623.⁴

The report which Brent made to Laud is to be found in the Preface to the **Calendar of State papers (Domestic)**, 1635. Here it is said to be 'of such paramount importance that we have purposely reserved it for printing entire in this place'.

Brent arrived in Gloucester in June, 1635. "Junii 8 et 9. — Here was much solemnity, many orations, and great entertainment. In the Cathedral Church many things amiss. No cope; the fabric in decay; an annuity of £201 per annum given by one Mr. Cox is scarce well-bestowed. The Schoolmaster refused to take the oath. I suspended him, but decreed the execution thereof should be stayed until they heard from me again. I visited the great hospital near Gloucester, and find that the information given to your Grace is utterly mistaken; yet some things are said to be amiss, of which I was promised a particular relation, but the promisers failed me. The Bishop made and sealed in my presence a deed of gift unto your Grace and to the Dean and Chapter of Gloucester, of all his household stuff at the Wymiard, and at his palace in Gloucester, to the use of himself whilst he lived, and of his successors after him. In these parts they are much given to straggle from their own parishes to hear strangers, which fault I have much laboured to suppress both there and elsewhere'.

The Bishop was Godfrey Goodman; Geoffrey Soden's biography of 1953 gives a detailed analysis of events. The 'great hospital' is thought to be St. Bartholomew's Almshouses, the mediaeval building which occupied the site where the Westgate Galleria now stands.

On the second day of his visit, Brent set down his written instructions, every bit as precise as those given to him by Laud. There is a transcript of these in Hockaday's 'Abstracts' in the Gloucestershire Collection. The original is in the County Record Office (Gloucester Diocesan Records 189) and yields further information.

It seems that whenever Brent visited a centre of population in the county (e.g. Cirencester, Moreton-in-Marsh) a document was drawn up, generally containing thirteen clauses. Each time these rules appear in the manuscript they are preceded by several pages bearing the names of parishes and clergy.

The Gloucester pages contain the names of a number of city parishes (St. Nicholas, St. Mary de Crypt and St. Aldate among them) and a greater number of rural ones (Upton St. Leonards, Elmore, Longney, Sandhurst and Hartpur for example). Each is followed by a name and one of three titles: "vicarius", "rector", or "curatus". A number of them are annotated in a different hand: "comp." for "comparet" (he is present). Deerhurst is **not** among them.

The first and tenth clauses are as follows:

'1. The Judge did admonish all Clergy men that appeared this day to provide for themselves Canonical coats and garments according to the Canon by the 10th. July next and to certify thereof the next Court after.'

'10. That the Communion Table be set at the upper end of the Chancel north and south and a rail before it or roundabout it to keep it from annoyance by Bartholomew day next and to certify there the Court day thereafter'.

The standard opening 'The Judge did admonish . . .' reinforces the earlier statement about church law and the status of the visitor. The inference from this and from the other documents

examined is that Brent and his 'officers' did not attempt to visit every parish in every diocese. Taken as a whole, Brent's report indicates that in each diocese, he naturally visited the cathedral city, other larger towns, and occasionally some smaller parishes. But the speed of his progress (he only spent two days in Gloucester before moving on) would clearly have precluded visiting every village and hamlet in each diocese. So he appears to have relied on many of the priests coming to him and assenting to his instructions.



William Laud, Archbishop of Canterbury

From J. Hartgers, *Vermeerdert Engelandis Memoriael Tot Eevwige Gedachtenis*, 1649

Less happily, Laud made use of informants, and expected Brent to do the same. To return for a moment to the summary of Laud's original instructions (Feb. 22 1654): 'In several places attention was to be given to circumstances respecting which the Archbishop had received private information from persons with whom the Vicar General was to communicate privately, and not mention their names'. It was a kind of ecclesiastical espionage — another indication of the extremely tight control which Laud attempted to exert during his primacy. It is clear that it caused much offence. 'I pray you, speak privately to William Hewlett . . .'

If we move ahead to the **4th. Report of the Historical Manuscripts Commission of the House of Lords**, we can find even further evidence of this iron discipline. After receiving Brent's reports, Laud despatched a final document to each diocese. This consisted of 'Orders . . . to be observed by the Dean and chapter and others . . . made upon their answers unto the articles of inquiry given them in charge of His Grace's Metropolitan Visitation . . . The attention to detail is remarkable. It seems that his original concerns about the choir at Gloucester were well-founded. 'Thomas Longe and Richard Longe, two of your choristers, who are presented for incorrigible boys, be forthwith removed from their places or stations in your church and others chosen in their rooms'.

To return to the rhymes and the story: I cannot find any specific reference to Deerhurst, nor establish that Brent intended to go there. It may be the reverse: floods prevented the Vicar from coming to Gloucester. This might explain why the parish does not appear in GDR 189. On the other hand, Laud continued to have the position of the communion table as one of his prime concerns, and it would appear that St. Mary's escaped his attention.

Also, we may have found a Doctor, but he has the wrong name. A search was made through **Alumni Oxonienses** and **Alumni Cantabrigienses** (both in the Gloucestershire Collection) for a real Doctor Foster who would have been qualified to 'preach the word of God'. Oxford and Cambridge were the only English universities in existence when the rhyme was first published.

ANOTHER DOCTOR FOSTER

The only Foster (or Forster or Forester) I could find who might be suitably qualified was William Foster, a graduate of St. Catherine's College, Cambridge, who became a Doctor of Divinity in 1617. In a copy of G. F. Browne's history of the College (1902) it is clear that he went to Cambridge in 1589. In 1598, he became vicar of Ridgewell in Essex. It seems that he then returned to his native county of Lancashire to 'reduce Popish recusants' there, these being Anglicans who still wished to accept the authority of Rome. They were in fact punishable under laws imposed in the previous century. In 1609, he was made 'King's Preacher' at Garstang. In

1617, he was made Doctor of Divinity by Royal Letters 'one of our chaplains, employed as our stipendiary preacher for the reducing of Popish recusants within our County of Lancashire to good conformity'. He became Prebendary of Chester, and in 1633 Bishop of Sodor and Man. He was buried at Barrow on February 26 1634.

Thus he appears to be the only Doctor Foster who might have come here 'to preach the word of God', but in all other respects he is an unlikely candidate. He seems to have spent most of his working life in the North of England, and there is no evidence that he ever came this way. He was concerned with Catholic sympathisers, whereas Gloucester's tendencies at this time were strongly Puritan. Finally, he died sixteen months before the visitation.

A NICKNAME AFTER ALL

It follows that 'Doctor Foster' in the 1810 rhyme, and quite possibly both, must be a pseudonym or nickname which rhymes with the name of the city. The rhymes both have a note of mockery; but it would have been dangerous to refer to the Archbishop's chosen representative by name. Gloucester may have been predominantly Puritan but there were many whose sympathies lay elsewhere; and there were the informants. Anyone who invented such a rhyme (and I suspect Langley, the dissident schoolmaster!), or repeated it, ran the risk of being reported to the High Commission. Compare the well-known case of John Workman, whose outspoken Puritan views brought him before the court on April 25, 1635, where he was suspended from his duties as a preacher and fined.⁵

In any case, satirical writing from **Gulliver's Travels to Private Eye**, including a number of nursery rhymes on the way, have used alternative names for the targets of their scorn. In 1636, Laud himself, who was also President of St. John's College, Oxford, and a major benefactor, entertained the King at Christ Church. A play had been written for the occasion by William Strode, the Public Orator, and was called 'Passions Calmed, or the Floating Island'. The Character of Malevolo, a play-hating Puritan (cf. Malvolio in **Twelfth Night**), is an obvious parody of William Laud's most persistent enemy, William Prynne, who was to be his chief tormentor at his trial. Here, as elsewhere, I have drawn on Hugh Trevor-Roper.⁶

Satire the rhymes must be; taken together (as I prefer) they provide a picture of a rather superior individual ("Gave all the people a nod") who came to lay down laws where none was wanted. To some perhaps ill-concealed amusement, "He stepped in a piddle, Right up to his middle" (we now have the Bowdlerised version instead of the better rhyme). This could refer to the open sewers in the city streets, through which he must have picked his way. On the other hand, it may well be a reference to the Severn in flood, perhaps invading the lower reaches of the city. An unwelcome visitor, 'he never came here again'.

There is another factor. Hugh Trevor-Roper refers to the letters of a Buckinghamshire clergyman, Dr. John Andrewes. Shortly after Brent's visit to that part of the world, he met a man out riding. He was asked if Brent's intentions were serious. Surely after he had gone, people would simply go back to their old ways. In short, his measures were inviting popular ridicule. We can safely assume that similar feelings were aroused elsewhere. Besides, 'the Archbishop was asking too much of his countrymen. To persuade them to decorous worship would be the work of time and gentleness. He strove to hurry it on; and he would fail, for the present moment . . .'

As a postscript, on visiting the County Record Office to find out what the weather was like when Brent came here, the only file thrown up by the catalogue was 'Floods, weather and tidal damage to drainage work near the River Severn, 1585-1940.' The list of documents (most of them relating to sewers), read: "1631-1635: missing"!

I have no idea how the explanation offered to the party of schoolchildren came to be handed down; but it is supported by a weight of evidence. It is a working hypothesis, and I like it.

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If you have any other further ideas, please write to me at 12, Court Gardens, Hempsted, Gloucester GL2 6JX, or ring me 0452 302249.

1. Iona & Peter Opie **Oxford Book of Nursery Rhymes**.
2. David Verey & David Welander **Gloucester Cathedral**, 1979.
3. William Holden Hutton **William Laud**, Methuen, 1895.
4. D.N.B.
5. **Calendar of State Papers Domestic**, vol. 256, G.R.O.
6. Hugh Trevor-Roper **Archbishop Laud**, 1963.
7. C. H. Simpkinson **William Laud, Archbishop of Canterbury: 1573-1645**.