

Chapter 3

High Church or Low Church?

Although the Feoffees, with their considerable financial resources, were the major agents in the day-to-day administration of the parish, the Vestry came into its own where ecclesiastical matters were concerned.

It is difficult to realise nowadays how large an influence the church had over all sections of society. Those who rented allotments from the Feoffees were forbidden to cultivate their plots on Sundays, even though it was the only free day of the week for many working men, and they were not even allowed to visit their allotments during the hours of Divine Service. Members of the Colyton Mutual and Providential Society, whatever their religious persuasion, had to attend a church service, with a sermon, before they could enjoy a procession led by military bands, a dinner and finally a dance in the Assembly Rooms.¹ The Jubilee celebrations held in June 1887 were marked by not one, but two services in the parish church. Holy Communion was celebrated at 9.30 a.m. and a special service was held in the afternoon, attended by the Volunteer Band, the Friendly Societies wearing their insignia, the Sunday schools and many of the general public, after they had processed round the town.²

In 1851 Colytonians drawn to the Church of England could go to the parish church of St Andrew, so graphically described by Samuel Seaward in his walk around Colyton, while the Unitarians gathered in George's meeting-house. A separate Nonconformist group was accommodated in the Independent Chapel, and small groups of Wesleyans and Baptists also met in their own places of worship. Roughly two-thirds of the population, drawn from all sections of society, adhered to the Church of England, while the Unitarians, who comprised a number of mainly upper-middle and middle-class families, and the other Nonconformists, who came very largely from the working classes, made up the remaining third of church or chapel goers.³

Before 1860, the members of these varying religious groups seem to have lived in reasonable harmony, partly because the Reverend Frederick Barnes, Vicar of Colyton, belonged to the Protestant tradition, and so was not too far removed

from the dissenters and Nonconformists, and partly because the leaders of the different groups liked and were tolerant of each other. Dr Barnes was only in Colyton for some three months a year, being also a Canon and Subdean of Christ Church Cathedral, Oxford, and his curates looked after Colyton and the other two parishes of which he held the living, namely Shute and Monckton, during his absence. But in spite of his comparatively short stays in Colyton, or perhaps even because of them, Dr Barnes continued to be liked and respected by his parishioners. In the early days of his ministry he struck up a close friendship with the Unitarian minister, the Reverend Joseph Cornish, the two of them holding whist parties alternately at the vicarage and the parsonage,⁴ and good relations between Anglicans and Unitarians continued after Cornish's death. The Reverend Jacob Pady, who preached at the Independent Chapel of the Congregationalists, was also reported as being not too bigoted to be seen occasionally at a church service.⁵

All this, however, was to change in 1860 when the Rev. Mamerto Gueritz was appointed to replace Canon Barnes by the Dean and Chapter at Exeter, patrons of the living at Colyton. The parishioners, steeped in Protestantism for at least two and a half centuries, as the history of the parish has shown, found themselves faced with an ardent Anglo-Catholic vicar, whose background was quite different from anything to which they were accustomed, and who was determined to bring spiritual renewal to the parish and to enrich the church services with the colour and music beloved of the Oxford Movement, to which he belonged.

As his first name would suggest, Mamerto Gueritz was born in Spain.⁶ His grandfather, a young lawyer from Louvain in Belgium, killed a man in a duel, and had to flee the country. He went to Spain, joined the Royal Walloon Guard, in which he attained the rank of captain, married, and was killed at the battle of Baylen in 1808 when his eldest son, José, was ten years old. José was at once enlisted into the regiment, a not uncommon way of providing for its orphans.

As he grew up, José became a supporter of those who wished to restore the Spanish constitution, revoked by King Ferdinand in 1814, and he must have felt relief when Ferdinand was ousted by the revolution of 1820. Shortly after this, he married a lady of Madrid, and transferred to the Provincial Militia of Jativa in Valencia. Here Mamerto was born in 1823, shortly before a French army marched into Spain and put Ferdinand back in power. José was arrested and sentenced to life imprisonment as a Constitutionalist, but he escaped and managed to reach London. As he had served with the Spanish troops under

Wellington at Waterloo, the British Government granted him a military pension for life, and this enabled him to send for his wife and Mamerto, who sailed from Alicante in a small English ship carrying a cargo of oranges, landing at Axmouth in Devon. The family then settled in Plymouth, the cost of living being lower than in London, and converted to the Protestant religion.

José died of consumption in 1832, when Mamerto was only nine years old, but friends and supporters kept the boy at school until he was thirteen. He was then apprenticed for seven years to a major wine importer in Plymouth. During this time, he helped in a Sunday school for poor children and through this work he became convinced that he had a calling to the priesthood.

There was no chance of the young Gueritz being able to afford the cost of training for holy orders without outside help, but a Protestant society in Bristol supported him, and sent him up to St Edmund's Hall, Oxford, where he worked extremely hard in order to overcome his lack of a public school education. It is reported that when he was disturbed by a rowdy group of students outside his window, he simply poured water over their heads to disperse them and then went back to his books. Unfortunately, he was unable to sit his final examinations, having suffering a breakdown which was ascribed to overwork, so that he left Oxford with only a pass degree.

Unfortunately, too, from the point of view of the Protestant society which funded him, Gueritz became influenced by the High Church Oxford Movement while he was an undergraduate, and from being an evangelical Protestant he became a Tractarian, or an Anglo-Catholic as he might be called today. The Tractarians, unlike some Protestant churchmen, did not believe that education, civilization and reason would cure the evils and sorrows of mankind. They thought the church needed spiritual regeneration, and in order to accomplish this, they developed a two-pronged attack, first by attempting to evangelize the poor, particularly in the large towns, and second by raising the standard of worship through beautifying services by the use of music for the ear, and colour for the eye.⁷

A year after his first clerical appointment, Mamerto Gueritz married Ann Derby of Plymouth. For the next eleven years he served as a curate in various parishes in Devon and Cornwall, where he experienced some of the difficulties that could arise when attempting to alter long-standing church practices. Nevertheless, when he became Vicar of Colyton in 1860, he lost no time in putting Tractarian principles into effect. Colyton might not rival Liverpool or the East End of London in the extent of its slums, but the poor were present in

rural areas as well as in large conurbations, and Gueritz was prepared to speak up for them.

In October 1862, Gueritz addressed the guests at a dinner which followed the inaugural meeting of the Colyton District Agricultural Society. He was reported in the press as saying that the society had not been founded merely to help the farmers, who were able to look after themselves, but to improve the lot of the labourer. In his view, the labourers of Devon and Somerset were too badly fed and housed to be able to do a good day's work. He ended by asserting that he would be glad to assist the society 'by heart and by purse' as far as was in his power, so long as it continued to work for the improvement of the labouring classes as well as the farmers.⁸ Again, in 1863, Gueritz reported to the Commissioners on Children's Employment on the conditions of work of the young female lacemakers in Colyton, which he considered injurious to their health.⁹

There is no record of any public response to Gueritz's support for the labouring classes, although the farmers may not fully have appreciated it, but his reforms in the church services met with overt hostility. Under the previous vicar and his curates the main services had been matins and evensong, with saints' days seldom observed and Holy Communion only infrequently celebrated. Under Gueritz, however, services on saints' days became a regular occurrence, Holy Communion was celebrated every Sunday morning, except for the first Sunday in the month, matins was said daily at 9 a.m. and choral singing was introduced.¹⁰

Battle lines were soon drawn. Only six months after Gueritz's arrival in Colyton, the Unitarian minister delivered a series of lectures in the course of which he advised parents not to send their children to the new national day school, which had replaced the Church of England Sunday school, because it was run by Puseyite priests.¹¹ By 1862, the Vestry meeting was raising objections to the numbers and cost of candles used on saints' nights and at midnight services, and attempting to reduce the parish clerk's salary from the 10 guineas a year he currently earned, 'his services being considered by a large number present perfectly unnecessary in the present quasi-choral service attempted in our church'.¹² Candles, indeed, were a constant source of complaint, some members of the Vestry remarking that they 'certainly did require more light in the church, but not of this sort'.¹³

It must be remembered that all payers of the poor rate, whatever their denomination, were not only entitled to vote for Vestry members, but were also

able to serve on the Vestry themselves, if elected to do so. The Unitarians in Colyton came largely from the well-to-do classes, and formed a powerful group of electors. Some of them were indeed Vestry members, so that from the start of his incumbency the new vicar was faced with a rebellious element within the parish body responsible for ecclesiastical affairs. In addition, at this time a church rate as well as a poor rate was levied on all parishioners who had the appropriate property qualifications, and so Colytonians who were not members of the Church of England were contributors to the upkeep of the parish church.¹⁴ This gave rise to the feeling that St Andrew's was not the domain of the vicar alone, but in some measure belonged to the whole parish, a feeling that was intensified in a number of Unitarians because they, or their forebears, had actually bought pews in the church at a cost of £25 each when the previous vicar was trying to raise money to provide free seating in the north aisle.¹⁵

Nowhere is this sense of ownership better illustrated than in the long-running case of the church bells. It is not clear exactly why such action was taken, but some friction must have been present, because in 1864 the vicar prohibited the customary bell-ringing before leaving the parish for a few months 'to recover his equilibrium'.¹⁶ By 1867 the old team of bell-ringers had rebelled, and had been replaced by young and inexperienced men, and the ears of Colytonians were described as 'tortured by the discordant jinglings of these tyro campanologists'.¹⁷ Nine months later, on New Year's Eve, the old ringers temporarily reclaimed the bell tower and rang what was described as one of the best and most correct peals ever heard in Colyton for one hour and five minutes from 11.30 p.m. The account of this event which was sent to the press concluded by saying that the bells were the property of the parish, not of the incumbent, and that their control was therefore in the hands of the churchwardens, both of whom the parishioners should take care to elect.¹⁸

The changed use of the bells, increasing emphasis on the sacraments, the introduction of candles, surplices and stoles, a robed choir, Gregorian chanting – all these innovations were greeted by complaints which found their way, anonymously, into the papers. The consistently acid style of the reports indicate that only one or two correspondents may have been involved, but other incidents occurred which showed that opposition to the new ways was not confined to a vocal few.

A major dispute developed in 1863, when **Gueritz** refused to marry his parishioners during Lent, thinking it absolutely wrong to do so. As it happened, the marriage of the Prince of Wales took place in Lent that year, and **Gueritz**

wrote to the queen to protest at the bad example being set to the nation.¹⁹ This infuriated a large number of Colytonians, who demonstrated their displeasure by erecting a pump at the top of Market Place, inscribed with the words 'The Surplus of a fund collected to commemorate the wedding of HRH the Prince of Wales during Lent, March 1863, has been devoted to the erection of this fountain by the patriotic Protestants of Colyton, as a permanent memorial of That National Triumph and in vindication of their own loyalty by vote of committee'. The pump is still standing in Colyton for all to see.²⁰

The following year brought another clash, this time between the vicar and the Unitarians, news of which reached the press. A poor but much respected parishioner called John Pavey died, and his family assumed that he would be buried in the churchyard of the parish church, next to his wife who had predeceased him. But John Pavey was a Unitarian, and therefore not a Christian at all in the eyes of Gueritz, because Unitarians did not believe in the divinity of Christ and consequently did not accept the doctrine of the Holy Trinity. The vicar felt that he could not conscientiously perform the burial service, during which the name of the Holy Trinity is invoked. After much pressure, he agreed to bury Mr Pavey, not next to his wife, but in the place generally reserved for suicides. Once again, the stubborn independence typical of Colytonians came to the fore. The sexton dug the grave next to John Pavey's wife, the vicar refused to read the service, and the Unitarian minister proceeded to do so, standing outside the churchyard wall, while the vicar's supporters stood inside, with their hats on, 'in evident token of derision and contempt'. By his actions in this episode, the vicar was said to have contrived to 'outrage the feelings of the dissenters, to insult the dead, and to disgust the parishioners generally'.²¹

Complaints about the incident were made to the Bishop of Exeter, a commission of enquiry was set up, and as a result Gueritz was admonished, and charged with the costs of the enquiry. A poem, published anonymously in the press soon after this finding was released, demonstrates the glee with which it was received in Colyton. Just one verse will serve to give its flavour.

O Reverend M. Gueritz,
Your merits, your merits
In bigotry's annals have found their award!
And spite of yr. nonsense,
Your cant and yr. conscience,
You've got a good lash from your Spiritual Lord!²²

By 1866, matters had reached such a pass that effigies of **Gueritz** and his curate were burnt in the streets of Colyton, following the celebration of a mass in Colyton Church.²³ Years later, the vicar's granddaughter wrote, 'Grandpa was burnt in effigy in a Colyton bonfire for wearing vestments! (but the curate wouldn't burn though Grandpa did)'.²⁴

The curate in question, the Reverend W.H.B. Proby, exacerbated rather than ameliorated the vicar's troubles. In the last three years of the 1860s, **Gueritz** spent a considerable amount of time in London, immersing himself in the worship of churches congenial to him, and assisting the parish priest at St Matthias', Stoke Newington. During his absence Proby's tactless behaviour, coupled with his devotion to the Ritual revival, led nearly 200 adult members of the Church of England in Colyton to send a memorial to the queen in 1867 asking for an investigation into the Ritualistic innovations which were being made.²⁵

Warfare continued sporadically throughout the 1870s, with Proby starting the decade by circulating pamphlets against Protestantism which divided churchgoers from dissenters even further.²⁶ However, the Unitarians themselves were facing problems at this time and for a while turned in on themselves. The years between 1873 and 1876 were described as 'a time of storm and stress, civil war raging more or less between various persons connected with the society'.²⁷ The Unitarians, though, were considerably more successful than the supporters of **Gueritz** in keeping their difficulties out of the newspapers, and no detailed account of these troubles has been found. Gradually, however, the vicar began to gain a measure of acceptance, and he was elected a Feoffee in 1873, thirty years after his arrival in Colyton. The choir went from strength to strength, and became a source of pride to the parish when the vicar and his son, the Reverend José **Gueritz**, took twenty-six surpliced choristers, and twelve unsurpliced, to Axminster to take part in the East Devon Choral Festival, where they acquitted themselves well.²⁸

Gueritz had never been a killjoy, and from the start of his incumbency he used his feeling for music and colour to enliven events outside the church as well as within it. In this respect, it is instructive to compare accounts of the treats given to Sunday scholars by the different denominations. The Independent Chapel, with a congregation drawn mainly from the poor, could manage little more than tea-meetings, although the Bible class did present a silver cruet stand 'of a very chaste design' to their pastor, as a token of 'their love and esteem for his valuable labours'.²⁹ The Unitarians also favoured tea-meetings, at one of which 100 copies of 'Hymns for the Christian church and home' were handed to the

children for use in George's meeting.³⁰ On another occasion, their Sunday-school treat was held out of doors and 'innocent games were heartily engaged in by the young, while the aged watched with delight their youthful gambols and wandered through the grounds charmed with the mingled beauty of the place'.³¹ But the Church of England Sunday school treat was a considerably more robust affair. After prayers and a sermon, a procession bearing evergreens, arches, floral devices, flags and banners marched behind a brass band to the Dolphin Inn, where tea was served in the yard, before moving on to the vicar's field to enjoy evening sports, with prizes, and dancing.³²

By the mid-1880s, Gueritz's battle was largely won. His work with the children of the parish meant that a generation within the Church of England had grown up to whom the Anglo-Catholic ritual was the only known form of worship, and who accepted it without question. On one matter dear to his heart, however, he was not to meet success until the 1890s, and that was the reordering of the interior of St Andrew's from the state described by Samuel Seaward, where the pews were occupied largely by the well-to-do while the poor parishioners sat in galleries along the walls, to one where all the worshippers could see and hear the services from free seats and where access to the altar was unimpeded. His first attempt at change came in 1866, but was voted down by the Vestry, as were further moves in 1869 and 1876. In 1892, however, a Vestry meeting was held in the absence of Gueritz's principal opponent, and the wholesale alterations proposed were unanimously agreed. By 1900 the galleries had been removed, along with the private pews, and all the seats in the church were free. This triumph was celebrated by a fully choral service attended by the Bishop of Exeter, who preached a sermon which gave thanks as much for Gueritz's forty years in the parish as for the completed changes to the interior of the church.³³

It was not Gueritz's personality which initially upset his parishioners, but his sincere conviction that it was his duty to change their long-established ways of worship, as well as some of their equally sincerely-held religious beliefs. It is a measure of his success that once the new ways had become the established ways, he gained the affection of Colytonians. When he and his wife celebrated their golden wedding, a number of presentations were made to them, including a handsome reading lamp from none other than 'The Ringers of the Parish Church', and when he finally retired in 1901 through ill health, the people of Colyton made him a gift of £120, the present-day equivalent of £4,800 or more. He spent his last years living with his widowed daughter in Colyton, where he died in 1912, aged eighty-nine.³⁴