

The Country Parson's Flock: Bemerton in 1632

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Ten days ago we returned from a holiday in Italy, to Pompeii and the other sites around the bay of Naples. It was the first time that I had been to mainland Italy, but it was a kind of homecoming for me, as in student days I spent much time in the company of the likes of Catullus and Juvenal, Tacitus and Martial. Now for the first time I knew the kind of surroundings they operated in. I took with me a book I have had for years, *Poets in a Landscape*, by a marvellous classical scholar and polymath, Gilbert Highet, a description of his exploring, 50 years ago now, the sites and scenery connected with the major Latin poets. For me – and I suppose it is part of the reason I have spent my life studying local history – works of art and music and literature are enriched by visiting and getting to know their context – the places that inspired them. And so it has been a great pleasure to make Ronald Blythe's acquaintance, and an honour to publish his own exploration of the 'Divine Landscapes' connected with George Herbert. He does for Herbert what Highet did for Vergil.

But for enthusiasts of location in literature I feel it is something of a disappointment when one turns to the introductions to editions of Herbert's works - Patrides and Slater's for example – and to find that they talk largely about metre and form, literary antecedents and the like, and say little or nothing about Bemerton. I'm not saying that the mysteries of literary criticism are unimportant, but it is like reading the programme note to a symphony, full of musical technicalities and instrumental nuts and bolts – and then being told nothing about the places and the passions that swept its composer on.

So, if we do form our own mental picture of George Herbert's Bemerton, it is largely the one that he chooses to give us, in his poetry and prose, and which his biographers (or rather hagiographers), notably Izaak Walton, reinforce. I have for years had my own mental picture of him, thus formed, the saintly but sickly priest, quietly and earnestly ministering in a sequestered country parish (in stark contrast to his pluralist or fanatical fellow-clergy), whose chief relaxation is to stroll through the meadows to the ancient peace of the nearby cathedral city, and to join in the music and worship. It is, you will admit, a comfortable and uplifting portrayal, and we have sufficient testimony from people who knew him to be sure that in broad terms our impression of his saintliness is perfectly correct. Nothing I am going to say or suggest this evening is in any way intended to denigrate him or to challenge our appreciation of him. On the contrary I feel that we owe it to his memory to use whatever sources are available to us to reconstruct as full and rounded a portrait of him as possible. A biography which makes out that someone is perfect, and living in an unreal world - well not only is it rather boring, but it is also unconvincing, less than human. Somebody used the expression, 'pilloried in stained glass' in such a context, and there is that danger with Herbert.

I should add that his two best biographers (in my view) do not fall into this trap. The American scholar Amy Charles, whose book was published in 1977, is sceptical to the point of scathing about Walton's *Life of Herbert* (the origin of most of this saintliness) and critical of those writers who, down the centuries, have rehashed his dubious piety and platitudes. She delved in some of the original local sources and realised, for example, that the glebe terrier of the parish drawn up in 1616 described a functioning parsonage, with garden, outbuildings and backyard, and no hint of dereliction. She concluded (and I paraphrase) that, when Herbert arrived in 1630, after some years lying empty the house might have needed 'updating', as a modern estate agent would put it, but it was far from being the wreck that Walton pretends. The other biographer who knew and could empathise with Bemerton was John Daniell, a Wiltshire clergyman himself and clearly well-acquainted with the chalkland landscape. I think that he is a much under-rated local historian, who died in 1898 five years after his life of Herbert was published, in the poet's tercentenary year. But neither Daniell nor Charles exploited all the resources available to them for describing Herbert's parishioners, and several other sources have been published or have become accessible in the county record office since they wrote.

So what I thought would be a good idea to attempt this evening was to try to use local historical sources to introduce you to some of George Herbert's flock, on an individual basis. And that is what I am going to do, for the most part of this lecture. But at the end I want to look at his parish as a whole, and suggest that it was rather different from what many Herbert enthusiasts, including some scholars who should know better, have assumed.

Well, first to Herbert's incumbency and congregation. As you probably are all aware his time here was brief, beginning formally I suppose on 26 April 1630 when he was instituted rector of Fugglestone and Bemerton, and ending with his death on 1 March 1633, just short of his 40th birthday, followed by his burial near the altar of St Andrew's chapel, Bemerton two days later.

Not quite three years of his life, and yet he is always associated with Bemerton because it was here that he prepared his collected poems, *The Temple*, for publication, though many of them were certainly written long before he arrived (they were published posthumously, later in 1633). It was at Bemerton too that he worked on his most important prose work, *The Country Parson, His Character, and Rule of Holy Life*, also known as *A Priest to the Temple*. It was not published until 1652, by when the world of religion was a very different place. It is generally and, to some extent plausibly, assumed that Herbert garnered the experiences of his ministry in his Wiltshire parish to draw up this handbook of model clerical practice, and that (to use a hackneyed phrase for once in its precise meaning), he practised what he preached.

This Wiltshire parish, Fugglestone with Bemerton, in fact included three communities (the third was Quidhampton), each with its own agricultural territory, and each with its linear village strung out along the ancient valley route between Salisbury and Wilton. It may surprise you to know that (in theory at least, though some may have

managed to evade the list) we know the names of all adult males who were living here in 1641/2, less than a decade after Herbert's death - 43 in Fugglestone and Quidhampton together, and 26 in Bemerton. This is because all men were required to profess their support for the principles of the Church of England, and the list of those who did so (known as the Protestation Returns) survive and have been published – many years ago – for the parish. If we multiply this total, 69, by about three, to include women and children, we arrive at a total population of about 200, perhaps split fairly evenly between the three villages. That round number, 200, was given again in a return of religious allegiance about a generation later, and it has been suggested that it referred to the total population of the parish.

So, about 200 parishioners, including children. Almost the whole parish belonged to one of two large landowners, and so most of these inhabitants were tenants of one or the other. In broad terms the western half, Fugglestone and part of Quidhampton, belonged to the earls of Pembroke, of Wilton House, as successors to Wilton abbey, the medieval owner. The eastern half, Bemerton and the rest of Quidhampton, had had many owners, but by about 1615 it had come entirely into the ownership of a family called Grobham, whose principal estate was at Great Wishford, further up the Wylye valley. This manor was to stay with the Grobhams (later Grobham Howe) for about two centuries, until about 1800 or a little later.

When Herbert arrived in April 1630 both manors had new lords. Sir Richard Grobham had died in the previous July, and his whole estate, which included a portfolio of land all over Wiltshire, was inherited by his brother John Grobham. Herbert's kinsman, William Herbert, 3rd earl of Pembroke, had died even more recently, on 10 April, two weeks before the poet's institution – he too was succeeded by a brother, Philip Herbert, who became the 4th earl. At about 40 years of age he was only a little older than the poet.

So it was all change in 1630 – two new landlords and a new rector. For any parish at around this time we might hope to find at least some documentary evidence. And, for George Herbert's there is the parish register, which would have been his responsibility. During his incumbency it records 14 baptisms, 6 marriages and 13 burials, though some parishioners who we know died in this period seem to have been omitted, or were buried elsewhere. There are also some twenty wills, between 1631 and 1647, nearly all of them, one assumes, of people the poet would have known personally. Then there are court records, the minutes of business meetings held to run affairs in each manor; and, most importantly, there is a survey - a detailed written description - of all the tenancies held under the Wilton House manor (the western half of the parish), made in February 1632. In addition it is quite reasonable (as I have already done) to extrapolate from records of rather earlier and later periods to draw conclusions about such things as topography, population, agriculture and industry. An exhaustive study of a neighbouring parish, Netherhampton, on the other side of the valley, was published nearly twenty years ago (by the late Henry Shute), also using Wilton estate records, and he showed that there was a very considerable level of continuity there from one generation to the next. When the Bemerton Local History Society puts something

similar in hand for this side of the river we shall know much more about (at least part of) Herbert's flock than I am able to tell you tonight.

Well let us begin with the parish register, patchily kept but not bad during the 1620s and 1630s. If one's eye wanders up the page from the record of George Herbert's own burial, about seven lines up one finds that two tenant farmers, John Young and Richard Thring, were buried within little more than a week of each other, on 8th and 17th April 1631. Perhaps there was some sickness going round, or a bout of severe weather finished them off, or maybe it was just co-incidence. Both left wills, with inventories taken after their death of their possessions for probate purposes, and both described themselves as yeomen (small farmers) of Quidhampton.

Richard Thring, the later to die, was a widower, with two surviving sons, Richard and John (who took over the farm), and a daughter, Susan. Richard may have had a somewhat inflated view of his wealth, since in his will he left Susan £100, though as it turned out the total inheritance was assessed at £240. Susan, armed with this dowry, one assumes, went off and got married shortly afterwards, and perhaps left the parish (since there do not seem to be any baptisms in the register attributable to her union). Most tenancies here, including Richard's, were copyhold (the usual form of tenure whereby tenants' names were recorded in the manorial accounts and a copy made as proof of title) - and most of these were described as a yardland, which here meant about 20 acres of arable land, as well as the right to pasture sheep and other livestock. His sons Richard and John appear to have inherited an amalgamation of three such farming units, since their father when he died (in April, remember) was growing 20 acres of wheat, 18 of barley and 3 of oats and vetch (presumably another 20 acres or so was lying fallow, making about 60 acres in all). Only around 19 acres was attributed to them in the Wilton estate survey, so the rest, one assumes, was either part of the Grobham manor, or they were farming as sub-tenants to other Wilton estate copyholders. Some of their inheritance, therefore, was out in the fields shooting up now that Spring had arrived, but there were also still stocks of barley and wheat in the barns and in a granary on staddle stones; 86 sheep, with 16 lambs, 4 carthorses, 4 cows with 2 calves and 2 yearling bullocks, and 4 pigs.

The farmhouse, a modest affair, was on two floors, with three rooms - the hall, the kitchen and a bedroom downstairs, two more bedrooms and a wool loft upstairs. Altogether there were 4 beds - so one assumes that both sons and the daughter lived at home with their father. There were only two chairs, so at mealtimes the sons perhaps sat on the form, which is also listed. Other furnishings included two tables and a cupboard with two shelves.

John Young, the other casualty that April, was a married man, whose wife, and now widow, had the unusual name of Elflet, and there were two servants (by which they presumably meant farmworkers) living with them - these two had their own bedroom, but only one bed between them! After John died Elflet lived on for another nine years, and she too left a will with probate inventory. She had run the farm down a bit, it seems, as her estate was worth £127, down from £231 when husband John had died.

But then there were no surviving children, and her bequests were to various individuals. There is a whiff of George Herbert's caring country parson in her will. She asks that one of her appraisors (the valuers of her estate) be my friend Hugh Chibnall, curate of Fugglestone. When John had died, he too had called on friends, 'beloved friends' he calls them, to witness his will and to act as appraisors. They were John Bacon and John Hillman, who both had interesting stories of their own.

John Hillman was the miller at Quidhampton, but it was not a corn mill. His was a fulling mill, for the cleansing, felting and finishing of cloth - the Salisbury area was still an important clothmaking centre, though by now in decline, and the fulling mills dotted up and down the south Wiltshire rivers had been crucial to its prosperity. At Quidhampton the fulling mill was operating from about 1577 or earlier until it was finally destroyed during the agricultural labourers' revolt in 1830. It stood on the river close to the present turning into the village from the Harnham main road, opposite Wilton House park wall. Hillman presumably employed staff, as in 1632 the will of John West, fuller of Quidhampton, was proved. In 1616 Hillman had been one of the 'questmen', as they were known (churchwarden's assistants or sidesmen), who had helped to draw up a terrier of the land and tithes that belonged to what would become Herbert's living.

John Bacon, the other 'beloved friend' who was to be an appraisor, was another small farmer in the parish, and by now something of a village patriarch. In his late 70s by 1631, his copyhold tenure dated back to 1575, 56 years before, when he was quite young. Another named 'life' on this copyhold was Margaret Elliott, a year older than John, and still alive in 1632, though widowed and known by her married surname of Foreman. The parish registers do not survive for the relevant years, and we cannot check, but she surely must have married into the Quidhampton yeoman family of Forman, that in 1552 had produced Quidhampton's most famous son, the astrologer, magician and medical quack, Dr Simon Forman. He had moved to Salisbury, then to London, fell in with Shakespeare and his circle and became embroiled in scandals and lawsuits of various kinds. Whole books have been written about him, including his supposed liaison with the dark lady of Shakespeare's sonnets. Margaret, 79 in 1632, would have been Simon's exact contemporary, and it is likely, therefore, that her late husband had been one of his five brothers, and so she had been the colourful doctor's sister-in-law. Herbert would have heard of Forman's exploits and adventures (who hadn't?) and would doubtless have encountered many older parishioners, like Margaret, who remembered him from forty or more years before.

In his manual for country priests Herbert heads one chapter: 'The Parson in Circuit'. He advises clergy to visit his parishioners on weekday afternoons, when they are 'wallowing in the midst of their affairs'. He goes on - 'wherefore neither disdaineth he to enter into the poorest cottage, though he even creep into it, and though it smell never so loathsomely; for both God is there also, and those for whom God died'. The inventories of people like John and Elfler Young, by no means the poorest cottagers, somehow enable us to creep in with Herbert's parson, find the sickly old man in his chamber within the hall, sitting up in his joined bedstead, wrapped in his feather bed, propped on a bolster, with coverlet green rug and mattress, his linen shirts over in a

corner, a coffer, table and two stools against the wall and a fire burning (I haven't made any of those up - they are all listed in the inventory). And when Elflet died, nine years after her husband, it was in the same room, now called the parlour, with much the same furniture around her. One recalls, in Walton's account, that Jane Herbert, George's wife, bought a pair of blankets to give to a poor widow in the parish – it would be pleasant to find the very blankets turning up in probate inventory after the woman had died.

Just a month before Herbert took up his living, on 12 March 1630, a meeting was held of the manorial court in Bemerton. This is interesting because it relates, not to the Wilton estate part of the parish, but to the Grobham manor embracing Bemerton and part of Quidhampton. The minutes of this meeting, which are in Latin, begin by listing all the farmers on the manor, eight freeholders (who would have sublet to tenants), four leaseholders and ten copyholders (all of whom were probably hands-on farmers or, if not themselves, supervisors of employees or sub-tenants who were). Then there is a second list of the eight people who had actually turned up to the meeting (the homage, as they were known). The business dealt with several changes in tenancy, and then consideration was given to two requests from tenants. Robert Strugnell and widow Katherine Scamell both needed wood to repair their barns. And both were given permission to cut down trees - three and two respectively - on the land they tenanted, provided that they planted others in their place. We think of Herbert himself, their neighbour, at exactly the same moment in history, contemplating the repairs needed to his property after the winter's ravages.

There were no more meetings of the court for a few years (or if there were the minutes were kept in a different book, which has been lost). Perhaps the new Grobham landlord decided they were unnecessary. But the meetings resume in 1635, and standards seem to be slipping. The minutes start off in Latin, but that becomes too difficult or time-consuming for the clerk or secretary who is writing them up. The jurors (that is to say, the villagers who are attending), he tells us, '*dicunt et presentant super sacris in his verbis Anglorum sequentur, videlicet*' (they say and report on their oaths in these words in English, as follows:). -- And off we go - more changes in tenancies, fines for non-attendance, more trees cut down for repairs, and clearly one tenant is planning to build a new house altogether, which will require the timber and planking from four trees. Everyone has to make sure that the fence in the marsh (part of the common meadow) is put into repair; arrangements are made too for managing the common sheep flock, including fines set if sheep or cattle stray on to the highway (except at sheertyme). Next year there are other problems - the tracks to Kingsmead and Oats Close need repairing; tenants have taken to keeping pigs on the common illegally and are fined. Judging by the names the offenders are respectable members of society, so the fines are probably not punitive, but simply a way of collecting an unofficial rent for an activity not covered by commoners' rights. Next we read that William Scammell is in trouble for not keeping his gate at the town's end in repair, and for neglecting a fence. These things mattered, of course, because everyone in the village would suffer if the stock got into their gardens through one person's negligence. The hayward, who is to be responsible for supervising taking the grass crop from the meadows, is appointed,

and two other local worthies, Philip Stevens and John Best, are charged with organizing the beating of the bounds, for which they will be paid.

With a jolt we are back to George Herbert's concerns, though he was dead by the time that this particular perambulation was arranged. In his chapter, 'The Parson Condescending', he explains that the country parson particularly likes procession, and maintains them, because there are contained four manifest advantages – and these he lists: blessing the fruits of the field; justice in preserving the bounds; the neighbourliness of accompanying each other on the walk, and reconciling differences; and the opportunity to dole out poor relief. And who were Philip Stevens and John Best, the organizers of this event. As far back as 1616, twenty years before, they were the Bemerton churchwardens. So these are the men that Herbert was referring to when he wrote: 'the country parson doth often, both publicly and privately, instruct his churchwardens what a great charge lies upon them, and that indeed the whole order and discipline of the parish is put into their hands.' And he was quite right. We look back at the court meetings, and we find that when trees were to be cut down for repairing houses it was Philip Stevens who was to decide where their replacements were to be planted.

Such an office, Herbert decrees, was not to be vilified or debased by being cast on the lower rank of people - no indeed, both Stevens and Best were leaseholders, along with another man who attended the meetings, Edward Ward. He was a 'questman' or sidesman, the churchwarden's deputy, but 1635 was his last meeting. He died in 1636 and left a will, in which he professes in simple piety the beliefs that Herbert had instilled or reinforced in him: 'First I commend my soule into the hands of Almighty God my maker assuredly believing through the only merit of Jesus Christ my Saviour and Redeemer to be made partaker of life everlasting.' His body is to be interred in Bemerton church, and he leaves £1 to buy a pulpit cloth for the better adorning of the same church. St Andrews church today, as we all know, is quite a plain building, but it has a spectacular and glorious modern altar cloth. Clearly this faithful worshipper wanted to do something to make his church special, just as its modern congregation has done. Edward's considerable wealth enabled him to leave £100 each to his two daughters, to be paid them on their marriage (a dowry in other words) but he adds the stipulation, that they are not to match or bestow themselves in marriage without the consent or good liking of their mother'.

All this came a little after Herbert had died, though during his lifetime Stevens, Best and Warde, along with the curates, must have been Herbert's right-hand men, his trusted neighbours in Bemerton. But another record of a court meeting has survived from the Fugglestone and Quidhampton end of the poet's parish. It took place in August 1633, a few months after he died, but one of the problems it addressed must have been dragging on for some time. In among the changes in tenancy, broken fences, and trees for mending (all in Latin) is a complaint - levelled against some of the leading small farmers, including John Bacon who we met earlier - that they have extremely dangerous hearths so that the fires are built up against the walls - this was causing great fear and concern on the part of their neighbours, and they were ordered to put matters right.

Again we are back to Herbert's country parson, whose consideration of providence used the motif of fire - fire which unexpectedly overturns things, just when the farmer has safely gathered in his harvest. It was one of the stories – clearly a great worry in the minds of some of his parishioners - that he used to explain spiritual truths.

Strange at first sight that it was the more affluent inhabitants who seemed to be taking risks, since they had the most to lose, but I suspect that it was not their own homes that had the dodgy chimneys – it was those of the humble cottagers, their employees in what we would call tied cottages, about whose welfare Herbert is so concerned, but who at this date are largely absent from the records. Apart from their names – in the protestation rolls and the registers – we know nothing about them.

But I want to introduce one more individual, like the churchwardens and the miller John Hillman a leaseholder (or tenant by indenture), in this case of the Wilton estate. His name was John Puxton, and he leased Fugglestone Farm – which was more or less where the Wilton House Garden Centre is now. In fact there were two John Puxtons, father and son, and they probably never lived there, but installed tenants. John senior lived in Salisbury and was an alderman, listed in a document of 1626 next to John Ivie, and alongside other city notables of the time, such as Henry Sherfield and Bartholomew Tookey. A few months after this 1626 document (a list of ordinances) was signed John Ivie became mayor of Salisbury, and during his mayoralty disaster struck, in the form of plague.

This was in Spring 1627, just three years before Herbert came to Bemerton. Ivie, in recalling the terrible year, notes that: 'And as many persons of the city that had any friends in the country that would receive them into part of their houses or barns did fly as if it were out of an house on fire; insomuch they did load forth of goods and wares above three score carts a day until all of any ability were gone, and this in four days.' Puxton was doubtless part of this exodus (perhaps one of many who had sought refuge here and had risked Herbert's parishioners with contracting the plague. Puxton had connections with various places around Salisbury, but Fugglestone and Wilton were where much of his property lay. If he did flee the epidemic his action did him no good. He died on 10 April 1627 and was succeeded by his son, John Puxton junior. If we are to give credence to one of Walton's anecdotes, about the gentleman who used to walk into Salisbury with the poet, Puxton junior would fit the bill very well. Herbert is reported to have said to this man: 'I do this (that is, ask about your faith) the rather because though you are not of my parish, yet I receive tithe from you by the hand of your tenant. . .'

In the record office at Trowbridge is a small undated survey of Mr Puxton's farm, as it was still described some years later, it was apparently drawn up when the lease was offered for sale. Puxton had let the farm to a tenant, Charles Black, for 12 years, and then to a certain Thomas Cutler, who was responsible for making the survey. Cutler tells us that he spent at least £100 'in setting up of hatches and in trenching and drowning the meadows'. Since all this was done after Puxton had sold the lease of Fugglestone Farm, which was after 1632, it seems fairly clear that the creation of the

water meadows in at least part of Herbert's parish was executed after his death. Indeed this is very likely, as the floating of water meadows in south Wiltshire had only just begun in the 1630s.

At first glance the Puxton story, introducing the plague and the water meadows, may seem irrelevant to my attempt to describe Herbert's parishioners, but think about it (and now I am moving on to my closing theme, the nature of Herbert's parish as a whole). When we read his portrayal of the country parson, who preaches to country people, which, in Herbert's words, 'are thick, and heavy, and hard to raise to a point of zeal' - (so you have to tell them stories). - when we read this we are inclined to assume that Herbert is describing some isolated, backward community lost in the Wiltshire downs. The impression is reinforced by Izaak Walton's anecdotes of what appear to be poor, ignorant rustics, stopping their ploughing when they hear the church bell. Though in fairness to Walton I don't think he ever describes the parish as in any way remote, or rustic, or secluded - he knew it too well - we load his account with such an impression because we have a different concept of town and/or country. But some more recent writers have followed this line, imagining Bemerton as 'an Arcadian parish' (A G Hyde in 1906), or 'a tiny parish of a few hundred rustic souls . . . the meadows of Bemerton where he once lived and worked are hallowed ground (Pat Magee, 1976).

Well, leaving aside the meadows, which, as I have said, I am pretty certain had not been created (in the form in which we recognize them) when Herbert was alive, what was the nature of his parish? If I described it as suburban, rather than rural, I think you might say - yes, well it is now (thinking of the Wilton Road and Bemerton Heath and Fugglestone Red), but in his day it was out in the country, separated from Salisbury by Fisherton, which was itself semi-rural. Ah yes, quite so, but Herbert's parish was not Bemerton, it was Fugglestone with Bemerton, and Fugglestone was very much a suburb - not of Salisbury, but of another town, Wilton. Herbert's parish extended as far as what later became the carpet factory and now also the shopping outlet; the approach to Wilton House and some of what is now its park; up the Avenue to embrace what became Wilton Fairground, the former railway station and now the park-and-ride facility. Looking the other way its development was influenced by its proximity to Salisbury. We have noted the fulling mill - a little further there were old and important paper mills (just over the parish boundary, but right next to Bemerton), and there are references to tentering racks (used for drying cloth in the woollen industry) and gravel pits. Salisbury gentry, like Puxton, and intellectuals, like Forman, had interests in, or connections with the parish. Traffic was undoubtedly heavy (relatively speaking, in 17th-century terms) along the westward roads out of Salisbury through the parish, especially on market days. What is now, or should be, a country lane linking the three village streets was then a thoroughfare between major nearby towns. This was no sequestered downland parish. And Salisbury itself, in Herbert's day, was not some genteel, Trollopian, ideal of civilized living, to which the poet repaired for music and culture. It was a city in turmoil, ravaged by plague, in a kind of civil war with itself, between the reactionary, wealthy, St Thomas's parish, and the radical puritan, deprived poor of St Edmund's. It was struggling to cope with an influx of vagrants, rough sleepers tramping through places like Bemerton to find that Salisbury's streets were not paved with gold,

and being sent back again the way they had come. Herbert would have seen the Salisbury of John Ivie, not that of Seth Ward, a generation later.

There are plenty of other themes and, in my view, misconceptions that could be explored when considering Herbert's time at Bemerton, as portrayed in his own works and those of his biographers. Was he exceptionally devout compared with his fellow clergy (as Walton maintains)? I could show you another clergyman of this period, Thomas Crockford, from further up the Wyllye valley, whose surviving writings suggest an equally conscientious man of God labouring in three adjacent parishes. Then again, how much of what we are told about Herbert's activities at Bemerton actually took place at Fugglestone church? And what was the significance of Wilton House, and the wealthy, intellectual society surrounding it, to Herbert's parish and parishioners? (Was it, for Herbert's parishioners, if not for the well-connected Herbert himself, like being in bed with an elephant – as Canadians describe their proximity to the United States?). But I think I am going beyond my brief. The thought I would end with is this.

Many scholars in recent years have delved into the significance and purpose of Herbert's *Country Parson*. They have seen in it theological messages reflecting the Laudian and Puritan debates of the time, they have seen it as a political statement about the authority of church and state at parish level, or as a literary conceit, a kind of utopia not grounded in any kind of reality. They have viewed it as a kind of theological football to be used by later churchmen to kick at their opponents. In no way am I qualified to join in such debates. But I do feel it the duty of the local historian to tug at some of these academic sleeves, and to say - just a minute, maybe Herbert's parish as you imagine it is nothing like the parish he actually lived and worked in - and here is some of the evidence you could have used but have ignored.

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