

CHARLES COXWELL OF ABLINGTON

(papers and correspondence, Gloucestershire Records Office,  
D.269B/F13-107, 119, and B 2-14)

Charles Coxwell, parson, magistrate and squire, lived from 1740 to 1829. His long life was mainly uneventful, but he kept several notebooks and journals dealing with himself and his family, so that it is possible to trace his life in some detail, and to give some estimation of his character. Among these papers is a notebook, rather quaintly entitled "A Short Narrative of the life of the Rev. Charles Coxwell, A.M., written by himself; which though little interesting to others may not be wholly so to his widow and children." At this distance of time it is possible that others may find it so.

Charles Coxwell was born at Ablington, near Bibury, where his father John was Lord of the Manor, in a house built by his ancestor which still stands. He was the second son of a family of eleven children. At the age of "nearly six", he was put to school at South Cerney under the care of the Rev. Mr. Remington." Later he attended two other schools also run by clergymen, and then to the Free School at Witney. In 1754, when he was fourteen, his father died suddenly, leaving the estate to be divided between Charles and his elder brother. He entered the Grammar School at Northleach, "for the sake of an Exhibition of Townshend's Foundation, at Pembroke, Oxford." The impression seems to be of a clever boy, from a family not over-endowed with wealth, as Charles and his brother were trying to raise a loan on the estate as a marriage portion for their sister, when it was discovered that the estate was entailed. Charles, as the second son, lost his inheritance. He obtained his B.A. in 1760, when he was twenty. Later he became an M.A. He remained at Oxford, resigning his exhibition for a scholarship, when in 1762 his elder brother died of the smallpox, and Charles inherited the family estate.

The following year he was ordained deacon and preached his first sermon in Enstone Church, Oxfordshire. He now became curate of Cotes in Oxfordshire, until in 1764 he was ordained priest, and moved back to Gloucestershire, where he became for short periods curate of Chedworth, Compton Abdale and Bibury, where he was one day to be Rector. In 1766, when he was 26, he became curate, and shortly afterwards, Rector of Barnsley, not far from his

family home. He continued to hold this office until his death, a period of sixty-three years. During the early period, he lived at Ablington, but paid a servant 2/6d a week to mind his house at Barnsley, obviously the Rectory. When the servant died, Charles Coxwell paid his funeral expenses and engaged the man's wife in his place.

He practised other charities, too. Two cottages in the village which belonged to the Rector, he let rent free as parish houses for the poor, although Coxwell decided who should live in them, and the parish paid for the repairs. Later Coxwell rented them to the overseers of the poor. He started a dame school for the children in the village to be taught how to read. He employed several women over the years, but Elizabeth Keen, first employed in 1768 was to continue until her death in 1828. Over the years, Coxwell calculated he paid her a total of £245.18. 6d, not an overpaid profession!

Another interesting point about these early years at Barnsley are references to the letting of Rectory land for droves of Welsh cattle. This took place about Michaelmas every year, and no doubt the cattle were making their way to London for the Christmas market. The amount paid for them seems to have varied according to the amount of grass in the field, as much as 4d a head for one night. In 1767 Coxwell records "I made this year of the grounds for the use of the travelling cattle £5.17. Od." In later years, however, the grounds were let locally.

In 1770, Charles Coxwell married Mary Small of Cirencester, the daughter of a magistrate. This was to be a long and fruitful marriage, lasting nearly sixty years, and producing thirteen children. To quote Coxwell himself : "February 1771. Left Ablington, and went to live at Barnsley, where he continued for the space of 12 years and four months, during which time he had ten children born, viz: Charles, John, Mary, Anne, Joseph, Eleanor, Thomas Tracy, Elizabeth, William and James. After his return to Ablington on 20th June 1783, he had three children more, viz: Catherine Frances, Henry and Edward." These thirteen children were all born within seventeen years and twelve grew to adults. Their father kept details of the boys' health and education. He paid a guinea to have each inoculated for smallpox, but they seem to have contracted nothing worse than the usual

childhood illnesses. "The numerous branches around about my table", as their father described them, when replying to a letter from one of his curates requesting a rise in salary, must have proved an expense, as in fact their father admitted.

In 1778, he temporarily held the curacy of Winston in addition to his own parish, and was also appointed Chaplain to the Bishop of Bangor, although he leaves no record of his duties. The same year he also undertook to hold the Rectory of Coberley, during the minority of the Rev. William Wright. He only visited Coberley at his induction as there was a curate in residence, and at the end of the period of four years, he calculated he was £504. 8. 5<sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub>d in pocket, which was not a bad return for so little effort. During the next few years he was appointed a Commissioner of the Land Tax, and became perpetual curate of Marston Maysey in Wiltshire. He held this living, which was a poor one, for thirty-five years, and leaves no record of ever visiting it. However, his conscience seems to have troubled him, for in later years when his circumstances improved, he resigned on the grounds he was "unwilling longer to retain the Cure of Souls whom he could not benefit by his doctrine."

In 1787, Coxwell qualified as a J.P. As a magistrate he attended the sessions no more than once a year, but he heard minor cases in his home. A number of papers dealing with convictions for poaching have survived. The culprits were mostly fined five pounds, and afterwards their goods were seized for payment. However, if a miscreant was caught on the estates of the local landed gentry, Coxwell first consulted their Lordships as to what punishment should be given.

In 1789, Mrs. Tracy of Sandywell Park, the godmother of his son Thomas Tracy, presented him with the joint livings of Badgeworth and Shurdington. He held this living seventeen years, and visited it eight times. His interest seems to have been almost wholly financial. The curate had livings of his own to attend and the churches seem to have been very badly served. Later, his son Tracy became the curate. Charles calculated his profits from this living were £45 a year. As Coxwell and the century grew older, his duties increased, and he was appointed to several commissions, became a Deputy Lieutenant of the County, Rural Dean of Fairford, and Chaplain to the Bishop of Bristol.

For three years he held the living of Bibury. It belonged to his neighbours, the Cresswells. Coxwell's daughter, Elizabeth, had married into this family, and Coxwell was to hold the living until a younger son could take Holy Orders. He resigned the livings of Badgeworth and Shurdington in order to do so, but must have felt it worth while, as the income from the living of Bibury was at least £1,000 a year.

In contrast to the indifference in which he held his more distant livings, Charles Coxwell had more interest in the parishioners near his home. During the years he held the Bibury living, he spent £20 a year on sheep to be divided amongst the inhabitants of Bibury, Arlington, Ablington and Winson "soon after Christmas." As he had done at Barnsley, he paid for the local children to be taught to read, and bought them books. He paid particular attention to the children of motherless families and the daughter of his clerk. His wife and daughters also paid for the schooling of individual children.

He gives a list of the local inhabitants for 1806, and includes himself. He was living with his wife and four unmarried daughters, and kept three servants, one a man, quite a modest establishment. However, in 1814 Charles Coxwell was to have a stroke of good fortune, when he inherited "considerable property in both land and money" from a distant relative, a Mrs. Katherine Long of South Wroxhall in Wiltshire. He even received congratulations from his Bishop. It enabled him "to pay off many debts for himself and others, and to make ample provision for his family." There are references to the purchasing of "a chariot", and his four unmarried daughters, though decidedly middle-aged, soon found themselves husbands.

From now until his death at the age of eighty-eight, in 1829, Charles Coxwell lived quietly, gradually relinquishing his various posts. His health was not good; in the later years of his life he suffered from gout and asthma. Five of his children pre-deceased him, two of his younger sons dying within six months of each other, one of a fever and the other "slain by a cannon ball," in Bengal.

Charles Coxwell left a delightful pen picture of himself in his old age; he writes in the third person : -

"He passed with peculiar pleasure the time which he devoted

to the reading of the scriptures or in other useful learning in his study, and a turn for Mechanics afforded him at proper seasons no small amusement in his laboratory. He was never fond of cards; though he would sometimes join with his friends and family in playing them; but chose rather when he could be excused, to dedicate his evening hours to reading and the improvement of his mind.

Being but a timid rider, he declined the exercise of hunting though situated in the Neighbourhood of hounds, but was fond of shooting, albeit he was a very indifferent Marksman as being near-sighted and obliged to make use of glasses. He had some knowledge of Music and performed but poorly on the Violin, having never had the benefit of any regular Instruction, nor opportunities for playing in concert through his residence in a country village; and for singing he had no talent at all.

Having been blest with a good and prudent wife, he left the management of domestic affairs chiefly to her care, that he might have the more leisure to attend to his other engagements.

"In his department as a magistrate, he was accessible to all and gave the meanest complainant a patient hearing. In every case which would admit of it, he inclined to Mercy and never signed but with reluctance a Warrant of Commitment to Prison.

"How he discharged his duty as a Husband, Parent and Master, it were better for his Widow, children and servants to speak than himself.....

"In the later part of his life when by age and infirmity he was confined to his bed or chamber, he amused himself with writing lines of very humble Poetry on various subjects and Occurrences, and applying many of them to the purpose of Religious Instruction. And lastly from the time when he ceased through bodily infirmity to preach his sermons in church, he derived a pleasure from perusing them in his study or reading them to his family on Sunday evenings as at once reminding him on the Doctrines and duties they inculcated and of the pains he had taken in composing and writing them."

There is a final note:

"Mr. Coxwell died in the year 1829 in the 89th year of his age, greatly lamented by his family, and a large circle of friends."

Marjorie Joy