

## The Rev. William Norris (1795 – 1893) – founder of St. James' Church

In 1795, the year of William's birth, Emsworth was part of the parish of Warblington. His father, also called William, had been Rector of the parish from May 1789; qualified in civil law from the University of Oxford he had been recommended to the vacancy by his widowed mother, Williams's grandmother, Anne Norris. Anne had bought the advowson in 1786 from the Lord of the Manor, Thomas Panton of Newmarket. An advowson is the right to recommend to the Bishop of a diocese a priest entitled to receive the tithes collected in the parish, otherwise known as the benefice.

William Norris was the third of four children and first son, born to Mary Ann, wife of the Rector. Their eldest child, Anne, was baptised in 1791 and Mary Ann baptised a year later; William was baptised on 28<sup>th</sup> June 1795 at St. Thomas a Becket, where, scarcely a month later, on 22<sup>nd</sup> July his elder sister, Mary Ann, aged two years and eight months, was buried. William's mother had one more child, James, baptised on 16<sup>th</sup> January 1797.

William attended Trinity College, Oxford, graduating B.A., in 1816 and MA in 1819. In May 1819 he was licensed as his father's curate on a stipend of £75 per annum, and was ordained in the newly consecrated St Marylebone Church, London, a month after his appointment to Warblington. His father, the Rector, died eight years after Williams's installation and may have been unwell for some time. The last time his father is recorded as the chairman of the parish vestry, effectively the predecessor of a parish council, is 10 June 1823. Until 1818 the Rector had officiated at most of the marriage services in the parish but in July of that year his son began to take over, conducting seven of the remaining eight marriages. The Rector's name is recorded at only eleven of the 116 marriages celebrated in his Church from 1819 until his death in March 1827, and in most the officiating priest is the curate, Rev. William Norris, (it is possible to differentiate between the two by their signatures in the Register). However on Monday 22<sup>nd</sup> April 1822 the Rector did join in Holy Matrimony his son to Ann Frances Butler.

William was to marry on two more occasions and experienced personal tragedy that must have tested his faith and Christian resolve. A year after his marriage, Ann Frances died on the day she gave birth to a daughter, Mary Ann. William married again in 1828, this time to Grace Hawkins from Lewell in Dorset only to lose her eight days after the birth of their son, William Thomas, born 4<sup>th</sup> June 1830. In September 1832 he married for the third time. His bride was Emily Short, daughter of Grace and Charles Short of Woodlands in Warblington (later known as Southleigh House, part of which survives at the junction of Bartons and Horndean Road). Charles Short was a senior lawyer, Clerk of the Rules in the Court of Queen's Bench, and had bought Woodlands in 1820. William and Emily did not have any children and William became a widower for the third time when Emily died in January 1859. Emily would, no doubt, have supported William through another tragedy, the agony of the loss of his only son. William Thomas was to visit Australia, possibly to see his stepmother's brother, Augustus Short, who was Bishop of Adelaide. On 1<sup>st</sup> July 1856 26 year old William boarded a schooner, *Wyvern*, in Nelson, South Island, New Zealand, bound for Sydney, Australia, a journey across the Tasman Sea of a month to six weeks. By the end of August reports began to arrive that the *Wyvern* was delayed and then at the end of September the news that she had been presumed lost with all those on board.

William's only daughter, Mary Ann, lived until 1900, married and had four daughters, the eldest of whom, Frances, was mother to John William Campbell killed in Belgium on 14<sup>th</sup>

May 1918 and memorialised in both St Thomas a Beckett and the Ploegstreert Memorial, Belgium; the great-grandson of William Norris.

In a will written three years before his death, Williams's father bequeathed, '*all that my Advowsons, Right of Patronage of and in the Rectory of or living of Warblington*' onto my eldest son who on the 26 April 1827, 'was admitted and instituted to the Rectory of Warblington' by Bishop George Tomline. The new Rector appears to have brought energy and determination to address the problems of his parish, principally the lack of places of worship for a growing community, albeit at some distance from the parish church. Just over two months after his inauguration he presided over a meeting of the vestry called to consider the propriety of enlarging the parish church by '*throwing out two transepts [sic] to the North and South*'. Each proposed transept was to be 280 square feet in size and hold ten pews, those in the north, '*erected by the various parishioners owners of Houses in the Parish who have applied for the same*' and those in the south to provide free-sittings, '*erected and forever hereafter repaired, maintained and kept by the Rector of this Parish for the time being*'.

The intention to provide free-sittings is a reflection of a concern that Rev Norris showed in what was probably his inaugural sermon as Rector, preached on 13 May 1827 on a text from Colossians Chapter 3, 'Whatsoever ye do, in word or deed; do all in the name of the Lord Jesus'. In it he expressed his gratitude not only to those attending the service, but also to those attending the Sacrament of 'the Lord's Supper', applauding the 'manifest increase and improvement, both in the numbers which attend this holy rite, and the devout manner in which it appears to be received.' He concluded his sermon with a specific address 'to my poorer parishioners' reminding them that 'the poor man has as much need to be cautious in his conduct, notwithstanding his poverty, as the rich man has, notwithstanding his wealth,' assuring them that a poor man cannot be guiltless before God, 'if while he pleads his necessities, he is at all guilty of idleness; or if, relying upon the immediate pittance of parochial relief, he is willing to barter that independence which is his natural birthright as an Englishman.'

What was very evident is that the poor had little opportunity to nourish their spiritual needs; St Peter's Chapel, built by subscription in the centre of Emsworth had very limited accommodation for those who could not afford to rent a pew, the means by which the Chapel was run. The Rector also found himself coming under pressure from the gentry moving into the parish in the early part of the nineteenth century. His future father-in-law, Charles Short, wanted to convert an 'ancient Oratory situated on the north side' of the parish church for use of himself and family. A fortnight later, William Padwick, another lawyer who had bought the Manor of Hayling from the Duke of Norfolk in 1825 made a similar request for the Oratory at the 'south side' of the church for the use of those who lived in a property he owned, Oak Lodge. Described as a "querulous megalomaniac" and a member of the vestry William Padwick had objected to the nomination of James Cullis as Churchwarden 'who is a Carpenter at Emsworth and Clerk at the Chapel of Ease at Emsworth and consequently a person unfit to be a Churchwarden'. The complaint seems to have had little effect as James Cullis remained churchwarden.

In 1834 the Government reorganised how the poor were given aid by bringing together several parishes into Poor Law Unions. Warblington joined with Hayling and Havant to form the Havant Union, the first meeting of which was held in The Bear, Havant, on 30th May 1835. William Norris was one of three representatives from Warblington and the Rector found himself at the heart of a controversy. One of the members of the Union, a magistrate, Sir John Theophilus Lee, sought to bypass the Union and increase the allowance paid to one of his employees. When the Relieving Officer, a paid employee of the Union, enquired into

the circumstances of the employee he reported that the reason for the employee's poverty was the low wages paid by Sir John. This led to a rancorous meeting of the Union at which Sir John insulted the Chairman, John Barton, resulting in the suspension of business. William Norris was charged to make a report on the whole affair which would be submitted to the Poor Law Commissioners. His conclusions were unambiguous, as a clergyman and a gentleman, the Havant Union was determined to work for the benefit of the poor in an objective and responsible manner. Sir John Lee did not attend further meetings of the Union.

The planned expansion of the parish church did not happen nor was it possible to extend St Peter's Chapel, as there was not enough space for additional building bounded as the Chapel was by the property of Thomas Cluer, Shipwright and home and garden of James Preston. The position facing the parish was clearly stated in the *Hampshire Telegraph and Sussex Chronicle* of 29 July 1839, '*The only means afforded in Emsworth for Divine Worship, according to the forms of the established Church, are by a Proprietary Chapel, containing no more than 500 sittings, none of which are free [emphasis original]. Much time and trouble have been expended in endeavouring to procure the enlargement with free sittings, and the Consecration of this Chapel, but owing to the peculiar nature of the property it has been found impossible to accomplish it*'.

In June 1839 the Rector made an application to the Incorporated Society of the Church of England for support to build a new chapel in Emsworth that would have 566 seats, 334 of which would be free. He reported that through the '*exertions that have been already made to raise the funds*' £494 had been collected, not including £500 from the Diocesan Church Fund. The original subscription list has not been located, but taking the names of subscribers as published in editions of the Hampshire Telegraph it is possible to reconstruct it. The Rector and his brother Rev James Norris each gave £100, their mother Mary Ann, £10 their sister Anne, £10 and William's daughter Mary Ann, £2. Thus the Norris family contributed £212 to the building of what would become St. James' (*about £10,000 at today's prices*) Or another way of putting it, the family contributed ten per cent of the final cost of building St. James, £1,908 15s 5d.

The Chapel was consecrated by Bishop Sumner on 10<sup>th</sup> November 1840, hence this year's 175<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebration exhibition at the Museum. A year later Emsworth became a recognised district within the Parish of Warblington and through the generosity of William Norris, who endowed St Thomas with £1,000, some of the tithes of the parish could be diverted to support the incumbent vicar of St. James'. On 1<sup>st</sup> December 1858 Henry Winter Sheppard who had been in post from 1844, was appointed Rector of Emsworth and the district became a parish in its own right in 1866 before recombining in 1924.

William retired aged 83 in 1878 in favour of his nephew, William Burrell Norris, and lived at the Rectory for a further fifteen years before his death on Saturday 21<sup>st</sup> January 1893. He had been a loyal servant to his parish, generous to the poor and energetic in ensuring all had the opportunity for appropriate worship; that legacy still stands.

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