

# **GREAT STAUGHTON AND ITS PEOPLE**

**HOW A HUNTINGDONSHIRE VILLAGE MADE ITS MARK ON ENGLAND'S  
HISTORY**

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## Rev. Wilson and John Henry Newman: the Church divided

A mere four years into the reign of Queen Victoria, a hugely influential document, entitled *Tract 90*, was published and it threatened to tear asunder the Church of England. Two decades later, in 1860, another best-selling and controversial pamphlet caused uproar, and brought the wrath of the church establishment upon the head of its author.

Two very different events, separated by a period of twenty years, and yet both were connected in the perhaps unlikely shape of the former Rawlinsonian Professor of Anglo-Saxon at the University of Oxford. His name was Henry Bristow Wilson and from 1850 until his death in 1888, he was the vicar of St Andrew's Church in the parish of Great Staughton.

Henry Bristow Wilson (1803–1888) was educated at Merchant Taylors School, where his father Harry Bristow Wilson had been headmaster. Henry, a brilliant scholar, moved effortlessly to St John's College, Oxford, in 1821, graduating with a BA in 1825. He was appointed Fellow of the college at the comparatively early age of twenty-two, an honour he retained until his appointment as vicar of St Andrew's in 1850. He obtained his MA in 1829 and finally, in 1834, a Bachelor of Divinity degree. From 1839 to 1844, Wilson was Rawlinsonian Professor of Anglo-Saxon at the University of Oxford. Fellows were obliged to remain celibate and a convenient way for the College to 'retire' fellows to make way for younger men was to offer them a living when they did eventually marry. Thus, on his marriage, Henry Bristow Wilson became Great Staughton's parish priest.

In 1841, John Henry Newman, priest, theologian and poet, published *Tract 90*, subtitled, *Remarks on Certain Passages in the Thirty-Nine Articles*. It was one of a series of pamphlets called *Tracts for the Times* in which a group of senior churchmen, principally based in Oxford, began to question whether the Church of England, founded by Henry VIII, had really divested itself of its European Catholic heritage. These tracts, which went on sale for mere pennies, attracted a wide readership, testifying to the importance and influence of the Church in the religious, social and educational fabric of the country.

*Tract 90* examined in exhaustive detail the text of the Thirty-Nine Articles. These were established in 1571 in the reign of Elizabeth I and enshrine the doctrine and practices of the Church of England, asserting the newly proclaimed Church's independence both from Catholic ritual and the excesses of Edward VI's Calvinistic Protestantism. Newman's *Tract* called into doubt the legitimacy of the Church of England as established by the Act of Supremacy of 1534.

In his pamphlet Newman argued that the Church of England still retained the trappings of the Roman church and, in his view, should therefore return to its pre-Reformation liturgy and ritual. He campaigned for the greater use of ritual, vestments and Catholic observances in the church. For Newman, the church was 'catholic', a congregation of all the faithful, which should not be confined to a particular place.

His pamphlet put Newman and his Oxford sympathisers on a collision course with the established Church. Newman concluded in this way: 'Man had done his worst to disfigure, to mutilate, the old Catholic Truth; but there it was, in spite of them, in the Articles still.' Had

Newman succeeded in persuading the Church and the public of the rightness of his views, the Church of England would again become, as it was before Henry's break with Rome, part of the European Catholic tradition.

The riposte to Newman's Tract 90 was not long in coming. On 26 March 1841, Rev. Henry Bristow Wilson issued a thirty-page rebuttal to Newman in a pamphlet entitled, *A letter to the Rev. T.T. Churton M.A. Fellow of Brasenose College concerning no. 90 of the Tracts for the times, by J.H. Newman*. In his response, Wilson appealed early on to the general reader, who might swallow Newman's argument whole, that it (Tract 90) 'should be repudiated or avowed'.

Wilson went through Newman's text paragraph by paragraph, concluding with a quotation from the *Books of Homilies* (1547, 1562 and 1571), when the Bible was still in Latin and priests were too ill-educated to compose sermons. The longest of the Homilies concerned the *Perils of Idolatry* and Wilson used a quotation to point out that the setting up of images in a church (which Newman was keen to re-establish, in accordance with Catholic liturgy) could soon lead to the worshipping of them and thus 'it will come to pass that eventually the whole world will fall into idolatrous ways'.

Wilson's arguments prevailed. The arguments in Tract 90 were overwhelmingly rejected and Newman had no choice but to renounce his position in the Church of England: 'I would not hold office in a Church which would not allow my sense of the Articles' and in 1845 he was duly received into the Catholic church.

In 1879 John Henry Newman was made a cardinal and was canonised as a saint in 2019. Music lovers have a particular reason for showing their gratitude to him. He was the author of *The Dream of Gerontius*, set to music by Edward Elgar, and widely considered to be one of the English composer's greatest achievements. Perhaps Henry Bristow Wilson can be given a modest credit for his indirect contribution to the work.

Wilson's next appearance on the public stage took place in 1860, twenty years after his encounter with Newman. In that year a volume was published with the seemingly innocuous title of *Essays and Reviews*. It was the brainchild of Henry Bristow Wilson and it was he, as editor and contributor, who brought together the six senior clergymen and scholars of the Church of England, including Frederick Temple, later Archbishop of Canterbury. The book became a best-seller, going through thirteen editions in five years and selling 20,000 copies. Several hundred articles and books appeared, vigorously attacking or defending the views of its seven authors who were quickly dubbed 'Septem contra Christum' (Seven against Christ) by enraged fellow clergymen. Eminent theologians and clerics hurled invective at each other from the pulpit, in scholarly journals and in the public arena. Even the government found itself being called upon to intervene in an attempt to resolve the conflict between the opposing parties. Wilson himself was brought before the highest ecclesiastical court in the land, the Court of Arches and charged with heresy for his article, *Séances historiques de Genève. The National Church*. What did he write that proved so controversial to the church?

Wilson's essay began on a positive note. He was advocating a 'broad church', liberal in outlook, inclusive rather than exclusive, respecting those, particularly scientists, who held different but equally sincere views. If, said Wilson, people (he probably had scientists particularly in mind) expressed their doubts in an honest and sincere way, and reacted against church doctrine, the threat of eternal damnation would hold no fears for them. If the church persisted in its traditional view, concerned only for the faithful, it might simply decline into a fossilised sect.

The church, he argued, has survived numerous assaults in its 2,000-year history 'through Saxon rudeness, Norman rapine, baronial oppression and bloodshed' and now, in the present day,

there can be no political or ecclesiastical changes so great that the church cannot again overcome them. The time has come, he argued, 'for raising fresh structures; a time for repairing the ancient paths, and a time for filling the valleys and lowering the hills in the constructing of new'.

In the present time, Wilson went on, how many of our fellow citizens are alienated from the Christian community and do not play any role in supporting the ministry? And were there not ancient civilisations that had stories of a virgin birth, a star in the east and the divine origin of earth and man? Surely the Emperor Constantine was right to use the power of the state to disseminate Christian teachings to the Roman Empire. This alliance between church and state, called 'unholy' by some, was the ideal foundation stone for a national church.

This National Church, as Wilson envisaged it, would include scientists, philosophers and the educated elite and its principal purpose was to produce good citizens. If this educated elite were to be excluded from consideration by the church, it would inevitably react by opposing the church's teaching. Indeed, said Wilson, Christianity readily accepted the influence of philosophers and scientists such as Plato and Newton. Why not also acknowledge the massive advances brought about by contemporary scientists? Darwin's *Origin of Species* of 1859 had appeared a few months before *Essays and Reviews*: Charles Lyell's *Principles of Geology* (1830–1833) had refuted biblical chronology. Henry Bristow Wilson made the heretical suggestion that Bible accounts were not necessarily to be taken literally and now scientists and some eminent theologians seemed to be endorsing Wilson's view.

From the start, reaction to the pamphlet from the Church of England establishment was hostile. A Christian journal described Wilson's argument as 'a Tract 90 of the Broad Church trying to be Christian without the Bible'. A petition against it was signed by 11,000 clergymen, traditionalists who believed in the truth of the scriptures and eternal damnation. Protestants, Anglo-Catholics, Evangelicals found common cause in their opposition to the incendiary notions that they believed would shatter the moral authority of the church. Press, pamphleteers and government joined the howling mob. Those in the church wedded to the more traditional view of 'biblical inspiration and eternal torments' campaigned against the book. Demonstrating the ferocity of the debate, Samuel Wilberforce, Bishop of Oxford, obtained a 'synodical condemnation' of *Essays and Reviews*. If Wilson's liberal interpretation of scripture were to be permitted, it was argued, sin would be ubiquitous. The book was roundly condemned by both Houses of Parliament in July 1864.

Wilson, editor of *Essays and Reviews*, was duly brought before the Court of Arches in June 1862 where he was found guilty of three counts of heresy. Stephen Lushington, the Dean of Arches, presiding, pronounced sentence that Wilson should be suspended from his living for a period of one year. Wilson mounted an appeal against the verdict and on 19 and 20 June 1863, he appeared, not before the church authorities, but before the Privy Council, an instrument of government. It was said at the time that the Privy Council's decision to overturn the sentence had 'dismissed Hell with costs'. In many respects the Privy Council's judgement, that a priest who doubted eternal damnation could not be considered a threat to public morality, was a vindication of free speech.

Wilson's appeal was successful and Lushington's decision was quashed on 8 February 1864. Wilson duly returned to his pastoral duties as vicar of St Andrew's Church, Great Staughton.

The reaction of his parishioners to his ordeal must have been heartening for Wilson. The *St Neots Chronicle* of 11 March 1862, when he was about to be arraigned before the Court of Arches, reported: 'We understand much sympathy has been expressed by the parishioners for Henry Bristow Wilson in his present position in the ecclesiastical courts, and confident hopes are

entertained that he will be enabled successfully to resist his prosecutors.' In 1866, when urgent repairs were needed for the church, his student and friend Rev. Robert Bruce Kennard instigated a subscription in Wilson's name, not only to raise the necessary funds for the repairs but also to erect a memorial as a tribute to Wilson for his contribution to English theological thought. In his semi-retirement, Wilson continued to contribute articles on philosophy and scripture to the *Westminster Review*. One such article was a scathing attack on tithes, which benefited the clergy of populous parishes but did nothing for their sparsely populated rural equivalents.

Henry Bristow Wilson died on 10 August 1888 at the age of eighty-five and was laid to rest in the burial grounds of St Andrew's Church where his impressive tomb, inscribed with the words, *Steadfast to the end*, can still be seen. His wife Jane (1820–1892) is buried alongside him. A eulogy to one of the intellectual giants of the Victorian church was delivered by his close friend Rev. R.B. Kennard on Sunday 19 August 1888 in the church of St Andrew, Great Staughton.