

TORY NEIGHBOURS: WEST SOMERSET IN THE 1790s

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I

On 19th July 1988 a beacon was lit in the grounds of Raleigh's Cross Inn on the Brendon Ridge to commemorate the four-hundredth anniversary of the defeat of the Spanish Armada. The instruction given to the watchmen on the original site a little further east on Elworthy Barrows was to watch for the beacon which stood on Cleeve Hill near Watchet within site of shipping in the Bristol Channel. Should the watchers at Elworthy see one light down on the coast they knew that unidentified sail had been sighted and that they must light one of their fires too, to pass the message on. Should there be two lights on Cleeve Hill, they knew that a hostile fleet was approaching; should they see three, then the enemy had landed. [1]

Those instructions, actually pre-dating the armada scare by several years, were a response to a situation of grave national danger. Invasion by sea was anticipated, invasion by Catholic Spain of Protestant England, an invasion at first undertaken by insinuating priests, among whom was Robert Parsons, born at Nether Stowey in 1546. [2] No-one saw Revolutionary France in the same light as King Philip's Spain, although to many Jacobinism was as evil as Catholicism; certainly no-one around Stowey saw the quiet Abbé Barbey [3] as anything more than a refugee from the atheistic intolerance of his native land. Yet there were, perhaps, greater dangers. Those scurrying Jesuits had been few and far between and the families who sheltered them, well enough known to the local magistrates, were often crippled or at least constrained by the fines imposed by a vindictive Parliament, which saw all Catholics as potential traitors. The issue was less clear cut in the 1790s, for there were those who had quite openly rejoiced at the fall of the Bastille and espoused the excesses of Robespierre and Marat. The House of Hanover was not much more popular in many eyes than the House of Valois.

21

Somerset society had perhaps never been aristocratic, but since the 15th century at the earliest the county had been the home of many prosperous gentry, often noted for their political independence and anti-government attitudes. John Pym the radical in the 17th century and Sir William Wyndham the High Tory in the 18th, both men of West Somerset, had been leaders of opposition in their day. By the end of the 18th century there was still that streak of anti-establishment: Sir John Trevelyan was returned as MP for the county in 1780 largely with the support of Dissenters, [4] and when in 1807 the electors returned the previous Whig sitting members, one of them had first to contend with an opposition crying "No Popery," and had to declare that he was against the abolition of slavery. [5]

Bridgwater's limited electorate was swayed one way or another by the views of their controllable corporation; Minehead could be controlled by the Luttrells, the borough's patrons. In 1796, in order to restore his recently lost influence, John Fownes Luttrell was advised to appoint an election agent, to repair his houses, evict those tenants who deserted at the last election and build a new Market House. Such measures proved entirely successful, and members of the family usually occupied one seat and a paying guest—often paying handsomely—took the other until the borough was disenfranchised in 1832. [6]

The county's governors, Whig or Tory, supporters of North or Pitt or Fox, bitter rivals for place and position, yet stood united against any who might challenge the supremacy of landed wealth and of the Established Church. It perhaps came as something of a surprise to Mr Luttrell's steward at East Quantoxhead in the 1770s that he was wasting his time appointing a court day which clashed with the great cloth fair at Wells, for he was assured that the village clothiers, among the more prosperous members of the community, would certainly absent themselves. [7] But what had happened to tradition, what had become of the age-old instrument of government through

22

which the manor had been administered for generations? This kind of industrialisation—the cloth mill, the linen house and the tannery carefully hidden in sheltered coombes and wooded valleys, had long been a feature of West Somerset, [8] but a new introduction, or rather the considerable extension of an old, still, after more than a century and a half, puzzles the visitor by the scars it has left. A ruined mining engine house in a field and a cottage named the Counting House are what remains at Dodington of a once thriving industrial venture.

Before about 1713 a search for copper ore had begun on the north side of the Quantocks in East Quantoxhead, Kilton and Dodington. [9] Serious workings were undertaken at Dodington by Derbyshire miners presumably working for George Dodington, who amassed a fortune in government service. Dodington's heir, George Temple, Earl Temple and Marquess of Buckingham, established more permanent mines in Dodington and elsewhere along the Quantocks. [10] The Dodington mines were under the direct control from about 1784 of two Cornishmen, Samuel and Matthew Grose. They brought with them not only their engineering skills but ardent Methodism. In 1795 Samuel Grose was the first to sign his name when his fellow enthusiasts requested a magistrate's licence to hold regular services in Nether Stowey. [11]

Few thought the Cornish miners, Methodists or not, exactly revolutionary, though their enthusiasm disturbed many of the neighbouring Anglican clergy. But times were out of joint. Every parish, without exception, was having to reach deeper and deeper into its collective pocket to support an increasing number of paupers, and starvation was never far away. Indeed, in 1794 a note was found fixed to a gatepost in Stogursey which threatened an armed uprising unless agricultural wages rose so that workers could buy bread. Another such note was found on the door of the parish church there in the following Spring. [12] The threat proved empty, perhaps because the next few harvests improved and corn could again be

23

imported as Britain regained control of the sea. The crisis returned in 1801 and the West of England "from the Land's End to Bridgwater" rose en masse. Men hereabouts patrolled the countryside in a peaceful demonstration and succeeded in forcing down the price of provisions. [13] It is against this background of invasion threat from abroad and unrest at home that the two strangers, obviously French spies by their curious behaviour, caused widespread local gossip and then the intervention of an agent sent down by the Home Office in London.

II

West Somerset is still not entirely in the 20th century and there is a persistence among its families which is a little uncanny. Luttrells have owned the manor of East Quantoxhead since 1230; Acland-Hoods, and before them Aclands, Palmers and Verneys have been at Fairfield since about 1260; Wyndhams have been at Orchard since the reign of Henry VII. Parsons may have come and gone in the parishes, but their attitudes changed little; most 18th and 19th-century rectors of Nether Stowey lived at Windsor, where they were canons of St George's Chapel; [14] George Buxton was rector of Holford for 44 years but lived all that time in Buckinghamshire. [15] Little less remarkable, therefore, was William Holland who became vicar of Over Stowey in 1779. He lived there for a time but in 1786 he became also the incumbent of Monkton Farleigh, some miles beyond Bath, and he went to live there in 1792. A family tragedy brought him back to the Quantocks, and here he remained until his death in 1819. Here he began a diary which eventually was to number ninety-nine volumes, the earliest purchased from "bowing Mr Francis Poole of Stowey." [16] Those which survive, the originals still in the possession of a descendant, provide a lively commentary on the West Somerset scene between October 1799 and October 1818 through the eyes of a pugnacious and High Tory Welshman.

24

The very first entry reveals Holland at his racy and outspoken best: "Went with my wife to Stowey and she bought a gown of Mr Frank Poole who smiled and bowed graciously. Saw that Democratic hoyden Mrs Coleridge who looked so like a frisky girl or something worse that I was not surprised that a Democratic Libertine should choose her for a wife. The husband gone to London suddenly, no one here can tell why. Met the patron of democrats, Mr Thomas Poole, who smiled and chatted a little. He was on his gray mare, Satan himself cannot be more false and hypocritical." (Oct 23, 1799).

Democrats and Dissenters were Holland's particular dislikes, and not far behind was the so-called Somerset labourer. "At church none of the Methodists. They are a little shy since I gave them a trimming sermon ... but it matters not for the rest of the parish are well pleased. These gentry must be looked after, for I fear that Democratic Orators are got amongst them" (Oct 27, 1799). "Mr Hurley is to send me a bag of red potatoes," Holland confided a few days later; "Tho' an Anabaptist I do not dislike the man for he seems to be a fair dealer. I wish all sectarians were like him for in general I have found them full of malice, ignorant, narrow minded and void of either candour or charity" (Oct 31, 1799). Not a bad description of Holland himself.

And yet the man was a conscientious parish priest according to the standards of the day, prepared to walk miles to read services for his fellow clergy, caring for the poor in his own parish. But he cannot resist every opportunity to attack Methodists: "I saw a great number of people passing about dusk, I suppose it was from a Methodist Meeting ... These men do a great deal of harm, they pretend to great sanctity, but it is ostentation, not reality. They draw people from the Established Church [this is clearly the rub], infuse prejudices in them against their legal pastors, and of late they are all Democratic and favourers of French Principles and I suspect that some of the Philosophers get among them under the Characters of

25

celebrated Preachers [is he thinking of Unitarian preachers?] and so poison their minds against the Established Church" (May 11, 1800).

Holland's diary tells much about the details of parish administration, the problems of pauperism, and the particular pressures brought about by the acute food shortages. "Farmer

Morle tells me how he has been summoned by the Palmers before Mr Bernard and Mr Ackland [two magistrates] without real cause. The Law is too lenient to the Poor in this Kingdom. They summons the Overseers [of the Poor] before the Magistrates for not complying with their unreasonable demands and tho' they do not always gain their ends yet it teases and harasses the Overseers and takes up their time which is a great hardship" (Feb 23, 1800). A few months later comes the same theme again: "Our Poor Rates are four times the sum they were two years ago. The Justices attend to every complaint, right or wrong, and every Scoundrel in the Parish croud to make their complaints. Where it will end I cannot tell, the Justices if they are not more cautious will create the evil they meant to avoid, They plead the dearness of provisions and think by granting them all demands to make them quiet but it has a contrary effect. They expect to be kept in idleness or to be supported in extravagance and drunkenness. They do not trust their own industry for support. They grow insolent. Subordination is lost and they make their demands on other people's purses as if they were their own" (Oct 13, 1800). And yet Holland is not without compassion and practical care. "Still more rain," he wrote in November 1799, "where will it end? The Poor, the Poor, how are they to live this winter? We must do all we can to assist and Providence will do the rest" (Nov 7, 1799). And so on Christmas Day 1800 he gave the Sunday School children of his parish a good dinner and had a great many people to eat in his kitchen; perhaps as many as thirty dined at his expense (Dec 25, 1800).

Holland was, in fact, a curious mixture, often sharply critical, especially of his fellow clergy, and yet full of practical charity. Mr

26

Reeks, the rector of Aisholt, was "a worthless little man and a disgrace to his profession" (Dec 12, 1799) who killed himself by drinking and was idle and dissolute, and yet Holland had no hesitation in caring for his parish during the last months of his life. Davies of Stogursey was "grown fat, purse and unwieldy. He must take care of himself otherwise it will not do" (May 9, 1800); Mr Jenkins, mayor of Bridgwater and also a clergyman, was "vain, insolent and ostentatious but he has some good qualities. He makes a good mayor but what business had he to serve the office" (May 22, 1800); Poole of Shurston "seems a Squire Buck Parson rather than a Divine, a man of some fortune but not much religion, yet good tempered" (May 27, 1800). Indeed, among his neighbours the only ones Holland had time for were Mr Mathew of Kilve, "a quick sensible intelligent gentlemanlike man" (Feb 8, 1800), "a botanist and intelligent on any subject" (May 9, 1800); and the exiled Abbé Barbey, who regularly dined at the Rectory and taught French to Holland's daughter. And there was also Lewis of Cannington, once Holland's curate at Over Stowey and now curate of Holford as well as curate of Cannington, Holland's diary entry for 29 January 1800 is typical of his sharp, acerbic phrase and his kindness of heart: "Met Mr Forbes the surgeon going to kill a few patients ... Just as I was going to sit down to dinner a note came from Mrs Lewis of Cannington desiring me to go and bury a corpse at Holford. Twas not a very pleasant request at that time but Mrs Lewis had tried all the clergymen around and her husband, who was formerly my curate, is always ready when able to help anyone. I therefore took a glass of wine and mounted my horse defended from the rain and sleet by my thick Beaver. was there before the corpse was ready."

Politics, international as well as national, were a consuming passion. "A great Revolution once more in France," he wrote in November 1799; "that rascal Beunoparte is returned from Egypt having stolen away from the Army and left 'em to Old Nick." But immediately follows an intensely local piece

of observation: “met two Miss Rolins from Stowgurse, They were dressed very smart yet trudging along in the dirty road with a servant maid attending. I never think young ladies appear to advantage along a dirty highroad and I would advise all ladies when obliged to pass thro’ dirt not to draw their petticoats too high behind for I can assure them that they discover in so doing more than is to their advantage. The female leg never looks so well behind as before” (Nov 21, 1799). Back to politics again in February 1800: “Little news in the paper. The intended Union with the potato headed Irishmen does not go on well” (Feb 11, 1800). And in February 1801: “I sent Robert for the paper a report having prevailed that Mr Pitt had resigned. This is not true but strong altercations in the Cabinet about Hanover. If Mr Pitt resigns we are ruined” (Feb 3, 1801).

And when the talk was of politics, then Holland saw either French Atheists or Democrats at every turn. He consented to preach the Sermon at Nether Stowey Club Day in 1800 “but I do not much approve of their conduct, a little Democratic” (May 24, 1800). Nevertheless he took his daughter Margaret with him to watch the parade, noted the excellent dinner, the loyal toasts, the race for young girls for ribbons. “A little before dusk there was a large Cavalcade marching up Castle Hill for another race downwards. We stood on one side but this was so terrible a race [perhaps this is what he considered Democratic] petticoats tucked up to the knees and stays open, or taken off, that I began to think it became almost indecent, I dont think I shall stand by to countenance such exhibitions in future for I hate to see the female character let down” (May 29, 1800). Stowey, that is Nether Stowey, was, of course, full of Democrats, including “conjurer Coles as they call him. He is a clockmaker and an extraordinary genius but a Democrat and from having too much Religion has now none at all” (Nov 28, 1800).

West Somerset actually was full of Somerset folk, whom the Welshman Holland did not entirely care for: “The Somersetshire people are of a large

size and strong but in my opinion very slow and lazy and discontented and humoursome and very much given to eating and drinking” (Oct 29, 1799). “The Lower Classes have no Pride of this kind among them, and the Somersetshire Lower Classes less of this Pride than any other. Tho’ they have many good qualities yet I am not clear whether Falseness and Meanness be not the characteristick of the people” (Dec 24, 1799) “They never keep their word in Somersetshire. The common people have no notion of that kind of Honour” (Dec 15, 1800); “A Somersetshire man is a strange animal, ignorant yet conceited and wonderfully obstinate. he is always wrong in his notions yet thinks that no one understands anything but himself” (Jan 19, 1801).

And yet Holland relaxed one winter evening in the company of two elderly Somerset men, and probably never enjoyed himself so much in all his life: “About dusk I put on my thick Bearskin coat and went to my neighbours Mr Riches, found James in the yard, We went in—desired me to sit down. By and by in came Mr Thomas, who took out his pipe and smoaked, not forgetting to offer me one very civilly. I offered to take off my hat in the house, No, No says Master James, keep your hat on. So we all three sat down with our hats on before a roaring fire drinking brandy and water and talking politicks, another time of coursing and shooting, another time of Methodists and Religion, they are desperate toads. I was in good spirits, told many stories and cracked some jokes which made their sides shake and about nine o’clock returned home. Mr James and Mr Thos Rich are two old batchelors worth sixty or seventy thousand pounds tho’ they live like substantial Farmers. Dine at the head of

their table with the servants below, a cloth being laid on the upper end with a fowl or duck dressed in a better manner for my Masters. They are loved and esteemed by the servants. Mr James I believe has. never been from home further than Bridgewater or Taunton, Mr Thomas has been a traveller, entered a Volunteer in the Militia and marched as far as Plymouth, for which reason he always comes to church

29

on Sunday in a tye wig well powdered, and has but lately left off his fine Scarlet Coat, the great and brilliant Testimony of his military Genius' (Dec 3, 1799).

III

If you have time to visit Over Stowey you will be able to see the house, called Cross Farm, where Holland spent that companionable evening; and in the over-restored church is a remarkable memorial to those two bachelor farmers. It is by the Bristol artist Henry Wood in the classical manner: above the inscription a sarcophagus and below a fine trophy of plough, harrows and other farming implements.

William Holland seems to have recognised those two brothers as his social equals and for once could find no words of criticism. They kept their servants in their place and were yet modest in their lifestyle, open in their conversation and liberal in their hospitality. Whether Holland realised it or not they epitomised the substance and the independence of West Somerset society. Stogursey may have been home to a hothead with thoughts of positive action against starvation; Nether Stowey, thanks to the aspirations of that remarkable tanner, was the occasional centre of an equally remarkable literary and scientific circle. But the villages round about had no such Democratic pretensions. These two places had, in fact, unusual histories, for both had once been boroughs with distinct urban characteristics in the Middle Ages. Yet by the end of the 18th century they were actually large villages rather than towns, though Nether Stowey, thanks to its position on the Bridgewater to Minehead road, still had shops enough for most local needs and a vigorous social life. The surrounding villages, each with its local craftsmen, were essentially dependent upon the land and the generosity of the local farmers; each dependent for every year's success or failure on the uncertain grain harvest and the price of corn for bread.

30

The news of Nelson's victory off Cadiz, heard by Mrs Holland at Mrs Woodhouse's (Nov 6, 1805). gave Britain command of the seas and eased both political and economic tensions, but not before the government, learning of Napoleon's invasion plans, had undertaken a huge valuation of crops and stock with a view to possible financial compensation, and had made elaborate evacuation plans. Typical of that native Somersetshire suspicion and obstinacy that Holland had noticed, one farmer in West Quantoxhead had refused to answer the government enquiry lest the information be used for altogether more sinister purposes, [17] After Trafalgar the threats of starvation, invasion and Democracy receded, and while Thomas Poole continued to receive his interesting friends the workhouse at Over Stowey was not the only one to become a little less crowded, the parish Overseers a little less harassed. More positively, John Poole established a remarkable school at Enmore in 1810 which taught their letters in trays of sand to children of three and four and which received the approbation of William Holland (Dec 12, 1810). Tom Poole built a schoolroom at Nether Stowey two years later. [18] It does not seem to have occurred to Holland, or at

least he did not mention the notion in his diary, that all this education might actually lead to enlightenment. Actually, Holland himself must surely have mellowed, for on September 18 1817 he went to dine, as he says, with the “Celebrated” Mr Tom Poole on Stowey Fair day. And in the family party was “an odd genius a Mr Coleridge, I think a son of a Mr Coleridge who distinguished himself some time ago as a writer” (Sept 18, 1817).

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- [1] Somerset Record Office, Nettlecombe (Trevelyan) MSS., DD/WO 49/3.
- [2] Victoria County History (V.C.H.), Somerset, v. 193.
- [3] Mrs H. Sandford, *Thomas Poole and his Friends* (London, 1888), i. 116-17ff. Barbey, according to the fuller, typescript version of William Holland’s diary (see note 16 below) was a canon of Lisieux, “a good Latin scholar, well read in Divinity and History ... the best of all emigrants I ever met with.” Somerset Record Office T/PM/ay 1.
- [4] *History of Parliament, House of Commons. 1790-1820*, ed. R.G. Thorne, ii. 341-2.
- [5] *Ibid.* iii. 597.
- [6] *Ibid.* ii. 352-3.
- [7] V.C.H. Somerset, v. 125.
- [8] e.g. *ibid.* 4, 101, 125.
- [9] *Ibid.* 67, 125.
- [10] J.R. Hamilton and J.F. Lawrence, *Men and Mining in the Quantocks* (Bracknell, 1970), 7, 29ff.
- [11] V.C.H. Somerset, v. 199.
- [12] Hamilton and Lawrence, 20.
- [13] Sandford, ii. 42-3
- [14] V.C.H. Somerset, v. 198.
- [15] *Ibid.* 5.
- [16] *Paupers and Pig Killers: the Diary of William Holland, a Somerset Parson, 1799-1818*, ed. Jack Ayres (Gloucester, 1984), republished 1986 by Penguin Books, 9. Subsequent references are given by date of diary entry in the text.
- [17] Taunton, County Hall, V.C.H. Somerset files.
- [18] V.C.H. Somerset, v. 199.