

# *An Ecclesiastical Affair*

Scandal and libel in a Victorian  
Black Country parish

Chris Baker



## The author

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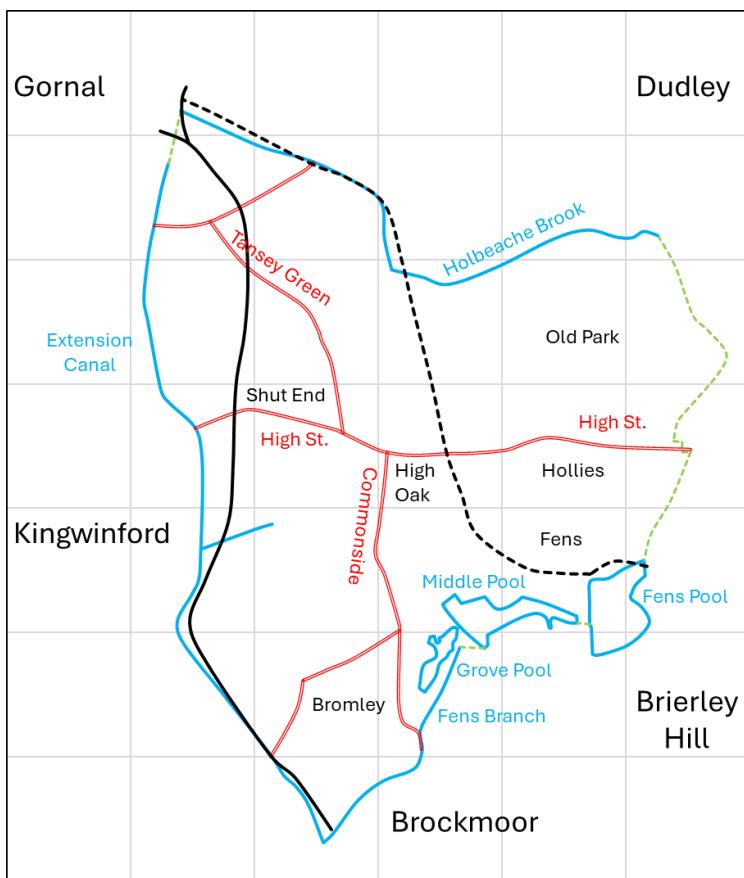
## Prologue

This book sets out to tell the story of a series of events that shook the small Black Country parish of Pensnett in 1870. They concern the affair, if that is not putting it to strongly, between the Church of England incumbent of the parish and a pupil teacher at the church school, that resulted in a clergy discipline trial, a series of libelous pamphlets and flyers that circulated in the village, and a nationally reported libel trial. It is in turn sordid, sweet and comic, with quite a large cast of characters from the church and the village. However before the story can be told, some context is required, and thus in the first two chapters of this book we paint a picture of the village of Pensnett in the 1860s, and give a brief outline of the history of the parish church and its clergy from the creation of the parish in 1845 up to 1867. Chapter 3 then introduces us to Charles Atherton, the curate from 1864 to 1867 and the perpetual curate (or vicar in our terms) from 1867 onwards. His affair with the young girl Agnes Bowdler is described in Chapter 4. Chapter 5 looks at the series of anonymous pamphlets that were circulated around the village, and the libel trial that resulted is described in Chapter 6. In the final Chapters 7 and 8 we think about the immediate aftermath of the events in the 1870s and the effects on those involved and look at the later lives of the main protagonists and the echoes of the events of 1870 down the years.

It is a story that has many resonances with modern day concerns – issues with relationships where one of the parties (usually the man) is in a position of power in regard to the other (usually the woman); institutional amnesia of disturbing events and some might say the hypocrisy of the established church; scandals that disrupt communities; and the use of legal intervention to silence dissent. All of these, and no doubt more, readers will bring to their consideration of the events that are described. But in what follows, we make few comments in this regard, and try to tell the story as it unfolded in as clear a way as possible.

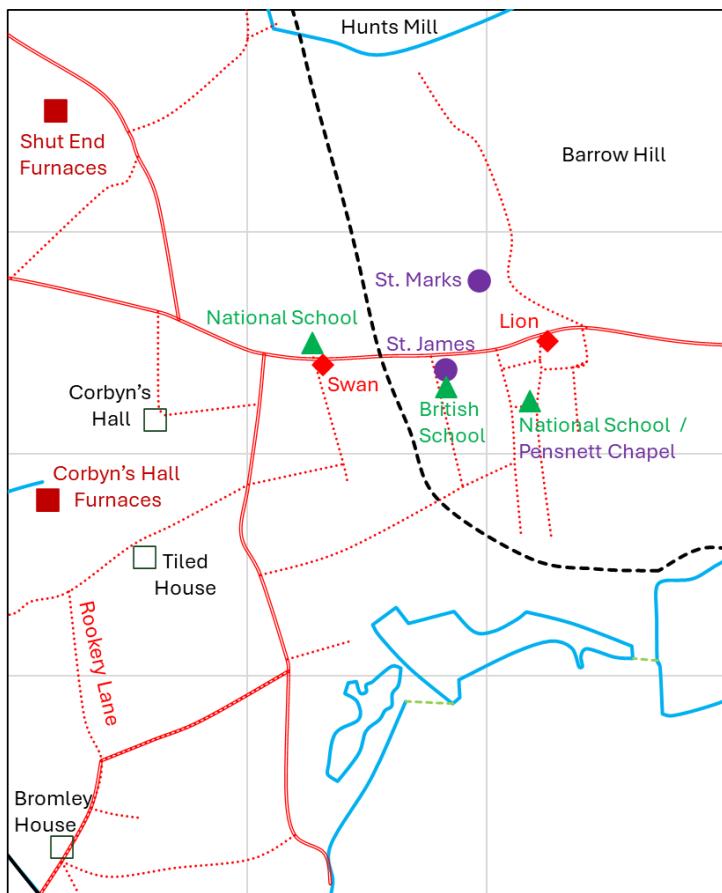
Transcripts of the anonymous letters and pamphlets that were circulated are given in full in the extensive Appendix. This is partly because they are rather entertaining to read, but also because they set the interested reader something of a puzzle, and to join the author in trying to identify who was their author





**Map 1. The parish of Pensnett.**

Blue lines show parish boundaries defined by canals, pools and watercourses; green dotted lines show other parish boundaries; red double lines show major roads; black solid line shows the GWR Kingswinford branch; black dotted line shows the Pensnett Railway main line. Rail sidings are omitted.



**Map 2. Central Pensnett showing places mentioned in text**

Red double solid lines show the main roads; red dotted lines show minor roads; purple filled circles show church and chapel; filled green triangles shows schools; filled red diamonds shows pubs; filled brown squares show furnaces; open black squares show large houses / halls.



# Chapter 1. Pensnett in the 1860s

## The parish

The Black Country parish of Pensnett was a creation of the Church of England in the 1840s. It was formed when the ancient parish of Kingswinford was split into a number of smaller parishes because of the growing population caused by the spread of industry to the area. It occupies the northeastern part of the old parish, with Gornal to the north, Dudley to the east, Kingswinford itself to the west, and the new parishes of Brierley Hill and Brockmoor to the south (see Map 1 on page 2).

The boundaries of the parish were fixed by the geography of the 1840s. The southern boundary is marked by the Fens branch of the Stourbridge Canal and the southern shores of its feeder pools – the Grove, Middle and Fens pools (constructed in the 1780s). The western boundary is marked by the line of the Stourbridge Extension Canal (constructed in the late 1830s) which left the Stourbridge Canal at Leys Junction and continued north to Oak Farm. The northern boundary follows the Holbeache Brook which flows from the area known as Old Park to the River Smestow in the west. The eastern boundary, whilst not marked by waterways, passes through the Old Park and Fens region. These boundaries have remained the same from their first definition to the present time, except for the area of Old Park, which now contains Russell's Hall hospital and has become part of Dudley.

Map 1 also shows the major roads and railways. The main road through the parish is the High Street, the Kingswinford to Dudley Turnpike Road that runs from west to east. There are also north to south roads that cross the Turnpike Road at High Oak – the road from Oak Farm through Shut End along Tansey Green and Commonside that runs south to Brierley Hill. The latter takes its name from the fact that it marked the edge of the common land, the last remnant of Pensnett Chase before the

area was enclosed at the end of the eighteenth century. Before the growth of population due to the industrial development of the early to mid-nineteenth century, the major areas of habitation were in Tansey Greem, around High Oak where the High Street met Commonside, and in the ancient hamlet of Bromley to the south. But by the late 1860s, houses had spread all along Commonside and through Bromley, and there was a whole new estate in the east of the parish spreading south from the High Street between High Oak and the Hollies.

There were two railways that crossed the parish. The first was the GWR branch line from Kingswinford Junction to the south to Oak Farm in the north, close to the Stourbridge Extension Canal. This served the iron works and furnaces at Corbyn's Hall and at Shut End. The second was the main line of the Earl of Dudley's Pensnett Railway that ran from the Wallows to the south of the canal feeder pools, to a bridge under the High Street, and then down a cable hauled incline to the Earl of Dudley's pits to the north of the parish.

The census returns tell us something about those who live in the parish. In 1871 there were 5358 inhabitants, of whom 29% were below the age of 10. Whilst the large majority of those under 40 had been born in the parish or the surrounding area, 44% of those aged over 40 were "immigrants", largely from Shropshire and Wales – Pensnett was something of a migrant society, probably with all the social tensions that that implied.

## **Pensnett at work**

Pensnett grew up because of the spread of industry through the area in the 1830s and 1840s – primarily coal and ironstone mining, which formed the raw material for a number of large ironworks. These were still the major employers in the 1860s. The large eighteenth century estates around Shut End Hall, Corbyn's Hall, the Tiled House and Bromley House were all

heavily mined, often in very close proximity to areas of housing (see Map 2 on page 4). There were also considerable areas of mining waste around the large number of disused pits in the same areas. The major iron works were the Bromley works to the south, on the Fens branch of the Stourbridge Canal, the Corbyn's Hall works, leased by the Gibbons family to a number of others in the 1860s, and the Shut End works of John Bradly and Co, owned by William Orme Foster, the son of the Ironmaster James Foster. The latter was on the site of the ancient Shut End Hall. These were huge concerns, and the furnaces (which were probably around 100 feet high) would have dominated the horizons for those who lived in the area. In addition, there were a number of major brickworks together with a whole range of ancillary enterprises, such as carpenters, blacksmiths, chairmakers, lime kilns etc.

In the 1881 census, which almost certainly also reflects the situation in the late 1860s, 40% of the population were children, 19% housewives or some other domestic service, 2% retired, and 39% eligible for employment. Of the latter 58% were employed in the mining, iron or brick industries. Only 2% could be classified as "professional" in any way, with the rest being involved in various other trades or commerce. Pensnett was very much an industrialised, working-class area.

Unlike most modern housing developments, there was no attempt to separate regions of industry and housing, and these were all mixed up together. As well as the inevitable waste ground around the mines, this level of industrial activity would have resulted in high levels of atmospheric pollutants and the water for drinking and cooking was pumped from probably polluted underground sources. The large-scale cholera outbreaks of the 1830s, which resulted in many deaths in the area, showed how dangerous this could be. The South Staffordshire Waterworks Company were not to provide clean water supplies to the area until 1878.

As well as the heavy industries, a whole range of commercial ventures existed to meet the needs of the population. In an 1868 Directory (a sort of early Yellow Pages) we find, in Pensnett and Bromley, fourteen grocers' grocers, seven butchers, six beer retailers (not counting the pubs), three hairdressers, two chemists, and a malster, corn dealer, plumber, furniture maker, tobacconist, pawnbroker, auctioneer, saddler, wheelwright, stationer and bootmaker.

So, to sum up, Pensnett was a populous and thriving working class village, although it would have been far from being a healthy place to live.

### **Pensnett at play**

Social life in Pensnett was centred around two poles – public houses and chapels and churches. We will think about the latter in the next section. With regard to pubs, in the late 1860s there were thirteen listed in the 1868 Directory and there were probably more that weren't. These were scattered throughout the parish along the High Street, Tansey Green, Commonside and Bromley. In the absence of a clean water supply, beer was the staple drink for most people. Pubs were also important as the hosts of "Friendly Societies" that received regular weekly subscriptions from members that were used to help those who were sick or infirm – for example the Heart of Oak Benefit at Swan Inn, and the outlandishly named Court Magdala of the Ancient Order of Foresters that met at the Fox and Grapes. They also provided facilities for events such as lectures and concerts and, odd as it may sound, for inquests following accidents. Of the thirteen pubs, two enter particularly into our story – the Swan, whose landlord in 1870 was Samuel Page, and the Lion, whose landlord was John Candlin (see Map 2).

Musical concerts of different sorts were an important part of Pensnett social life. St. Mark's church possessed a large choir

that as well as singing at services, also gave concerts on a regular basis performing pieces such as the Messiah. There were also more informal concerts given by different groups – for example a concert by the Glee and Madrigal Society in conjunction with the church choir in 1968. In addition, the Pensnett Victoria Saxhorn band was very active in the 1860s. A regular venue seems to have been the grounds of Pensnett Vicarage where they played on the evenings when the grounds were open to the public, and at the Annual Horticultural and Flower show in the late 1860s. The band played for other church events – the Sunday School “treat” in the Parsonage grounds in 1868, and the Sunday School Christmas Party in the Bell School Rooms in 1870. They also played at celebrations after weddings and at other fetes and carnivals, and at meetings of the Temperance movement in local chapels.

There seems to have been an annual church choir trip, augmented by friends and families, partly financed by a church warden from 1969 to 1971, Benjamin Wood, the proprietor of a forge in Wordsley who lived at Bromley House. We will meet him again later. In August 1869, the church choir and the Pensnett Victoria Saxhorn band travelled on a special charter train to Rhyl, with six concerts and performances packed into the three days – see the advert from the County Express below.

## PENSNETT CHOIR ANNUAL TRIP.

**10 ½ HOURS ON THREE DAYS AT RHYL, NORTH WALES.**

On MONDAY AUGUST 16<sup>th</sup> 1869, the Great Western Railway Company will run a SPECIAL FAST TRAIN from the undermentioned stations via Llangollen etc. to

## RHYL

as follows:-

LEAVING	TIME	FIRST CLASS	COV.CAR
Kidderminster	5.30	15s	7s 6d
Hagley	5.41		
Stourbridge	6.00		
Bretell Lane	6.5		
Brierley Hill	6.10	14s	7s
Round Oak	6.15		
Netherton	6.20		
Dudley	6.25		

## FOR THE GRAND MUSIC GALA!

BY THE PENNETT CHURCH CHOIR, ASSISTED BY THE BRASS AND STRING BANDS OF THE DISTRICT, AT THE  
**TOWN HALL AND ON THE NEW PIER, RHYL**

Of which the following will form part of the programme:-  
On MONDAY, a Grand Performance of *Handel's* Oratorio, the

On the Rhyl Pier, at Three o'clock, by the Pensnett Choir augmented by the leading members of the Choral Societies

## PRINCIPLE VOCALISTS

## MISS CLARA WIGHT,

## The Birmingham Com

MISS HEATHCOTE

R. T. BOX MR. G. MAINWARING

**LEADER OF THE BAND - MR. S. SMITH**

## GRAND MISCELLANEOUS CONCERT

On TUESDAY morning a SPECIAL TRAIN will leave Rhyl for Llandudno where  
**CONCERTS!**

will be given and facilities afforded to parties holding Excursion Tickets to visit Conway, Llanrwst, Carnarvon and the Menai Bridge.

On WEDNESDAY MORNING at Eleven o'clock a  
**SELECTION OF MUSIC**

Including various Ballads, Welsh and English Part Songs and Glees, will be given on the Pier.

## THE PENSNETT VICTORIA BAND

will play on the Pier on Monday Evening from Six to Seven o'clock and on Wednesday from Two to Four.

Parties desirous of returning on Wednesday can do so by paying 9s extra for First Class and 1s for Covered Carriages. The Return Train will leave Rhyll on Monday Evening at 7.50pm and on Wednesday Evening at 6.15pm. Tickets to be had of G. Ford and Son, Stourbridge; G Ford, Brierley Hill; Pritchard, Brierley Hill; Cooper, Pensnett; Laxton, Dudley; Male, Kingswinford; Taylor, Brockmoor; Lorr, High St, Kidderminster; Ford, Cradley Heath; or at the Railway Stations where the Train calls. No tickets can be obtained of the Agents after Saturday August 14<sup>th</sup>.

## County Express August 1869 – Church Choir and Pensnett Victoria band trip to Rhyl

However, their efforts were not uniformly appreciated. Just after the above trip has taken place, the following letter was published in the County Express at the end of August in 1869.

*Sir. As the doings of the Pensnett Church Choir have frequently occupied a prominent place in your columns, perhaps a little further information may be not uninstructive. Last Sunday, but one the congregation were treated with " strike" on the part of a number of the men in the choir, and last Sunday, we had another " strike" of a lot of the boys, following the creditable example of that elders. It may perhaps be some consolation to our neighbours, who must certainly read with natural envy of the achievements of the Pensnett Choir, that they are not the unmitigated blessing they appear to be. Indeed, if their services were paid for by the congregations, I have no doubt that they would find that the respect they have for their duties to the parishioners would receive a very practical recognition. Yours truly. M.*

I suspect that the choir were actually exhausted after the seaside trip and simply wanted a break!

The 1860s also saw the start of organized sport in the village. Football teams were not to be formed until the 1880s, but the Pensnett Victoria cricket team seems to have been in existence from the late 1850s and a few matches are recorded in the press before 1870 – against Kingswinford in 1859, Wednesbury in 1862, Brierley Hill Amateurs in 1864, Netherton Victoria and Quarry Bank Amateurs in 1867 and Cookley and Park Lane Victoria in 1868. The scorecard for the first of these is given below. Note that this is a one-day game yet featured two innings from each side – the pitches were of course not prepared, and the batsman's task was more than a little difficult. The three cricketers from the 1859 scorecard who can be identified are the opener batsman, Joseph Bache (27) who was a chemist and druggist on High St, John Caswell (18) who was an engine fitter from Chapel St., and William Caswell (19) who was a chain maker from Tansey Green – something of a social mix.

PENSNETT VICTORIA			
1ST INNINGS		2ND INNINGS	
<i>Bache b Brewster</i>	22	<i>b Taylor</i>	2
<i>Webster c Taylor</i>	0	<i>c W. Allen</i>	12
<i>Lowdham l b w</i>	6	<i>b Taylor</i>	1
<i>R Bond, Esq. c T. Tinsley</i>	3	<i>b Taylor</i>	1
<i>Matthews c Brewster</i>	1	<i>b Brewster</i>	2
<i>J. Caswell b T. Tinsley</i>	4	<i>b Brewster</i>	1
<i>Stokes b Brewster</i>	1	<i>not out</i>	18
<i>W. G. Caswell b T. Tinsley</i>	2	<i>c J Tinsley</i>	2
<i>Upstone b Taylor</i>	13	<i>b Brewster</i>	5
<i>Guest b T. Tinsley</i>	4	<i>b Taylor</i>	1
<i>Richmonds, not out</i>	0	<i>b Brewster</i>	0
<i>Byes, &amp;c.</i>	12	<i>Byes, &amp;c.</i>	3
<i>Total</i>	69	<i>Total</i>	48
KINGSWINFORD			
1ST INNINGS		2ND INNINGS	
<i>W. Allen b Bache</i>	0	<i>c Bond</i>	3
<i>J. Allen run out</i>	1	<i>not out</i>	0
<i>Brette b Bache</i>	7	<i>b Webster</i>	0
<i>T. Tinsley b Webster</i>	0	<i>c Bond</i>	6
<i>J. Tinsley b Webster</i>	0	<i>not out</i>	19
<i>Fazey b Webster</i>	2	<i>b Bache</i>	9
<i>Taylor b Webster</i>	4	<i>c J. Caswell</i>	8
<i>Brewster c Bond</i>	4	<i>run out</i>	1
<i>M. Baugh b Bache</i>	0		
<i>Barlow b Bache</i>	0		
<i>Turner not out</i>	0		
<i>Byes, &amp;c.</i>	5	<i>Byes, &amp;c.</i>	2
<i>Total</i>	23	<i>Total</i>	39

Scorecard for 1859 cricket match between Pensnett  
Victoria and Kingswinford

## Chapels and churches

The nineteenth century was a time of religious ferment and change. The various non-conformist churches were growing rapidly and as was ever the case with such movements, became increasingly prone to splits and schisms over what would nowadays be regarded as minor issues. Such churches became particularly strong in the new developed industrial regions of the North and Midlands. The established church, partly in response to this, and partly through somewhat more elevated motives, was also experiencing a period of growth, at least in terms of infrastructure, with large numbers of churches being built around this time to serve areas of growing population. The village of Pensnett experienced both of these trends. Wesleyan Methodist churches, the direct descendants of the original Methodist congregations set up in the late 18th century by John Wesley, were to be found in Bromley and the Hollies area. There were two Primitive Methodist congregations, one in the Hollies area and one in Shut End. This branch of Methodism originated in the Potteries in 1811, and was of a charismatic persuasion, whose enthusiasm was much distrusted by the Wesleyans. The New Connexion Methodist chapel of St James was to be found on the High Street to the east of High Oak (see Map 2). The New Connexion formed in Sheffield in 1797 when it split from the Wesleyan Methodists over the role of the laity in the church, and soon spread across the country. A sketch of the original chapel, dating from 1839 and the oldest place of worship in the village is shown below.



*St. James Methodist Chapel, 1839 to 1983.*

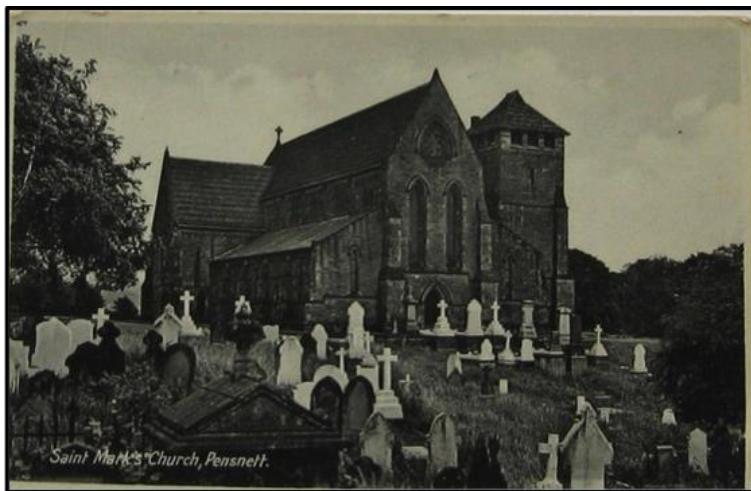
### **St James New Connexion chapel (by BCM 33.4 Bernard Stokes from the Blackcountryman number 33.4)**

The earliest mention of an Anglican presence in the Pensnett area is of the curate of Kingswinford, W. H. Cartwright, at Bromley, in 1834 so one can conclude that there was some Anglican ministry in the Pensnett area before the parish was founded. After the Ecclesiastical District of Pensnett was set up in 1844, and before the church was built, it seems that initially the school building on Bell Street was used as a chapel and is shown on an 1840 map as Pensnett Chapel. The Reverend Francis Fowke was appointed to the Ecclesiastical District of Pensnett in 1845 and was, as late as 1851, living in Hunts Mill, just outside the parish beyond Barrow Hill.



**William Ward 1<sup>st</sup> Earl of Dudley (2<sup>nd</sup> creation)**

The building of a church close to the High Street on the slopes of Barrow Hill began in 1845, on land donated by William Ward, the 11th Baron Ward who was to become the 1st Earl of Dudley (second creation). It cost £6,700, of which £5,500 was provided by Lord Ward himself. The church, dedicated to St. Mark, was consecrated in 1849 with much ceremony and Lord Ward was established as the patron. It was, and is, architecturally striking, with a mixture of styles – indeed it has often been described as being inappropriate for its setting. The original designs show a proposed spire, but this was never built due to fears of subsidence. The religious census of that year indicates that the church provided 955 sittings, but no details of attendance are given. As elsewhere in the parish, the building suffered from significant subsidence, caused by Lord Ward's mining activities, and major restorations were undertaken between 1870 and 1882. We will see in what follows that the life of the church in the late 1860s and early 1870s was far from uneventful.



### **The Parish Church of St Mark (from an old postcard)**

A clear social distinction can be glimpsed amongst those who attended the different chapels and the church. By and large the Anglican church catered for those who would consider themselves the upper level of society – doctors, teachers, owners of industrial enterprises, shop proprietors etc. The elections to school boards in the 1870s and 1880s would later show that these were predominantly Tory supporters. There seems to have been a somewhat wider social mix at the New Connexion Church of St James, with tradesmen, dealers and a wider range of other occupations represented. They seem largely to have been Liberal in their political persuasion. The other Methodist chapels seem to have catered for industrial workers – for example the congregation of Shut End Primitive Methodists were almost wholly iron workers and coal miners, descendants of those who came to the area in the 1830s from Shropshire and beyond. Nonetheless the baptism registers of St. Mark's record many mining and industrial families, so it may simply be these were not featured in the historical record.

## Schools

The education system went through several phases of development in the 19th Century. The system of grammar schools that had been in place since the Middle Ages, gradually evolved, through a series of Acts of Parliament, to change from schools that taught only the classics, to become much broader ranging but still academically oriented schools, with mainly fee-paying pupils. However, there were no such schools in Pensnett or Kingswinford as a whole, and at the start of the 19th century, there was widespread illiteracy amongst most of the inhabitants. It was not until the 1830s and the 1840s that even the most rudimentary forms of elementary education came to be offered to the children of the area. All the Schools that were set up worked on the “mentor” principle, first derived independently by Andrew Bell and Joseph Lancaster in the late 18th century, where the older pupils (12 and above) were paid a small amount to teach the younger children, under the direction of a Schoolmaster and Mistress, perhaps with a number of adult assistant teachers.

In essence there were two types of Schools in the middle of the nineteenth century: National Schools, that were set up by the National Society for Promoting Religious Education, and supported by the established church, and which used the Bell system for teaching; and British Schools that were non-sectarian and were set up by the British and Foreign Schools Society (or, more fully, the British and Foreign School Society for the Education of the Labouring and Manufacturing Classes of Society of Every Religious Persuasion), which used the Lancaster system. Both National Schools and British Schools became eligible for state support from 1833. The Education Act of 1870 allowed the State to provide for up to 50% of the costs of voluntary schools, and enabled a third type of School to be set up – the Board School, where religious education was non-denominational and kept to a minimum. As the name implies,

such schools were supervised by an elected board and a rate could be levied in their support.

For many years the largest School in the area was the Pensnett National School (see Map 2), the foundation stone for which was laid in late 1834. The school was situated in Bell Street, at what later was to become the junction with (unsurprisingly) School Street. Bell Street was named after the school, which was known as the Bell School, because it had adopted the Bell monitorial system described above, as did the National Schools in general. Sermons were preached calling for support of the School at Kingswinford and in the school itself in September 1836. As mentioned above, it seems that in the early years of its life, the school also served as an Anglican Chapel in Pensnett. When the church of St Mark's was built some years later, sermons calling for support of the school were a regular part of its life. The school received capital grants of £70 in 1846 for infant school provision and £735 in 1861 for boys and girls school provision. The latter was for the development of a school on the north side of High Street, which was eventually to become known as St Mark's School. Parliamentary records refer to grants of land in both 1845 and 1861. In 1850 the Master and Mistress were John and Elizabeth Bryce, who will meet later. The School Street building continued in use as a school as the infants' department.

The history of the British School is less clear. A schoolroom was opened at St James New Connexion chapel in October 1839, and sermons were preached in support. An entry in the records of the Parliamentary Education committee in 1854 sets out a grant of £12 to the School at St James (the New Connexion Chapel) and in 1850 its Master and Mistress are recorded as Mr Christopher and Mrs Rosanna Cooke. This was situated behind the church (Map 2). There is also mention in the Parliamentary records from 1862 to 1871 of a British School and it is likely that these are one and the same. In 1871 the British School became

the Board School following the Education Act of 1870, which was later to move to its current site in Bromley.

### **The darker side**

There was a darker side to Pensnett life in the 1860s. Firstly it was a dangerous place, and there were many accidents associated with the heavy industries in the area. Perhaps the most notable accident to occur on the 1860s was the major boiler explosion at Corbyn's Hall in 1862, described here in the Birmingham Daily Post.

*A fearful boiler explosion occurred at about six o'clock on the 27th ult. at the Corbyn's Hall Malleable Iron Works (Messrs. Blackwell and Sparrow), situated about two miles from Dudley, which resulted in the death of four men and serious injuries to about ten others. The exploded boiler was about 30 horsepower and was heated by the flues of the puddling furnaces. At six o'clock number of men were at work in the puddling furnaces, when a fearful explosion took place. The roof of the furnaces was immediately broken through by a mass of falling debris, and the whole place presented a scene of wreck. The bodies of four men were speedily found in the debris, all of them being employed at the works. Ten or twelve others were found to be seriously injured, some of them so seriously that no hopes are entertained of their recovery. The cause of the explosion at present remains a mystery.*

The inquest revealed that the boiler had run out of water before the explosion. Those who died were Thomas and George Hudley, Daniel Mason and Ezekiel Newnman (puddlers), Joseph Harper (a fireman) and Morris Christopher, a labourer. The person in charge, Mark Simpson, was absent from the building when the accident occurred, which seems to have not been an unusual occurrence. He was duly charged by the coroner with manslaughter and tried at Stafford Assizes, but the charges could not be proved, and the judge ordered the jury to acquit him.

Mining deaths were also common. In 1866 Thomas Shuker aged 33 and a colleague, William Borroughs aged 50, were killed when blasting a road through rock with gunpowder at the Old Park colliery. Shuker was killed by chest wounds from flying rock and Borroughs suffered injuries to his head and his arm was blown off. Shuker died almost immediately, leaving a wife and two children, and Burroughs died from his wounds about a week later, leaving a wife and a grown-up family. It was thought that a spark from machinery had caused the gunpowder to explode in an uncontrolled way. In 1870, at the same colliery, Hyram Plant, aged 36, died when buried underneath an unexpected fall of rock, in an area that was perceived as safe. In both cases verdicts of accidental death was recorded at the inquest.

The railway was also a dangerous place, with several injuries reported to non-railway workers crossing the track or climbing onto trains. In 1869, a ten-year-old boy, Albert Fletcher, tried to jump onto a train in the Fens area failed to obtain a firm footing and was dragged along for half a mile before being noticed by the engine driver and fireman. They found him “quiet dead, his body being shockingly mutilated”. In 1868 Thomas Parsons, aged 18, was a fatal victim of a practical joke. He and four others, who had just finished a half day shift at a mine, were amusing themselves by riding on a “dan” down a steep incline. One of the wheels was meant to be braked to restrict the speed of the vehicle, but one of those involved released the brake as a joke. As a result, the dan went down the incline at speed, throwing three of the lads off to the side of the track. Thomas and one other were still in the dan as it hit a water tank, causing his death, but only stunning the other.

Accidents were not restricted to the heavy industries, however. The three canal reservoirs were often the location of accidents - for example in 1870 Samuel Oliver was rowing ab oat on the Fens pool when he got into difficulties and had to be rescued by two policemen. And again in 1870 Julia Price (aged 6) was burnt

to death in her home after being left alone by her mother. Farming accidents could also occur. In 1867

*...a serious accident happened to Mr Phineas Parsons, farmer on the Hollies Farm. A ferocious bull belonging to him tore up the stake by which he was bound and ran into a field after a little boy in the employ of Mr Parsons. In trying to save the boy Mr Parsons exposed himself, the bull turned round and savagely attacked him. The bull threw Mr Parsons into the air and gored him dreadfully. Cries for help being raised, the servants and others came to his rescue. Mr Parsons was fearfully bruised, and his wife narrowly escaped the same treatment. He now lies in a very precarious condition.*

Finally, it is worth mentioning the accident that received the most press coverage of them all, the same text being reported in newspapers the length and breadth of the country. Naturally it involved animals rather than humans and again comes from 1867.

*On Friday evening at the Earl of Dudley's railway at the Old Park Colliery near Dudley, a singular accident occurred. Mr Phineas Parsons, a farmer of Pensnett, has the right to run his sheep on the pasturage near the Old Park Colliery; and on the night in question one of Mr. Parson's men proceeded to drive a flock of 65 sheep from one portion of the land to another, and in doing so the whole flock got onto the tramway. A couple of trucks, loaded with coal had been started in charge of one of the men down the incline, and these trucks overtook the sheep in a narrow cutting, and the consequence was that 23 were killed on the spot, and six others were so mutilated as to render it necessary to slaughter them at once.*

1867 was not a good year for Phineas Parsons.

Pensnett in the 1860s was also a violent place and press reports of drunk and disorderly behaviour were common. Occasionally these incidents took on a more serious nature. In 1870, Levi Massey was charged with attempting to murder a policeman by aiming an air gun at him. From the press reports he was clearly drunk, and evidence was given that an accident caused by a fall

of coal onto his head had had a long-term effect on his mental capacities, which resulted in some very eccentric behaviour.

The violence could also be premeditated. In 1868, Alfred Bowden, a Pensnett grocer, was charged with cruelty to his fourteen-year-old apprentice, Benjamin Homer, who escaped back to the workhouse from which he came. It appears Boden beat Homer regularly, sometimes using a horse whip. Then in 1870 Annie Southall was charged with assault on her ninety-year-old grandmother over a dispute about property ownership.

Not all crime was violent, however. There seems to have been a robust inspection regime for shops and weights and measures, and there were regular prosecutions for selling beer without a license, and for inaccurate weights used for measuring quantities in shops. On one occasion in 1866, when a dozen or more shop keepers were charged with using unjust weights, the list included four grocers from Pensnett. But by far the most common non-violent “crime” however was coal stealing – usually by children from collieries, sent out by their parents simply as a way of providing fuel for cooking and heating. For example, in 1863 twelve-year-old Ellen Donnell was caught by the watchman at Shutt End Colliery taking a bucket load of coal in the early hours. She was cautioned and discharged. Others were not so fortunate and were fined anything up to 10 shillings. It is difficult not to feel sympathy for such offenders.

## Chapter 2. St. Mark's church

1845 -1867

### **Francis Fowke**

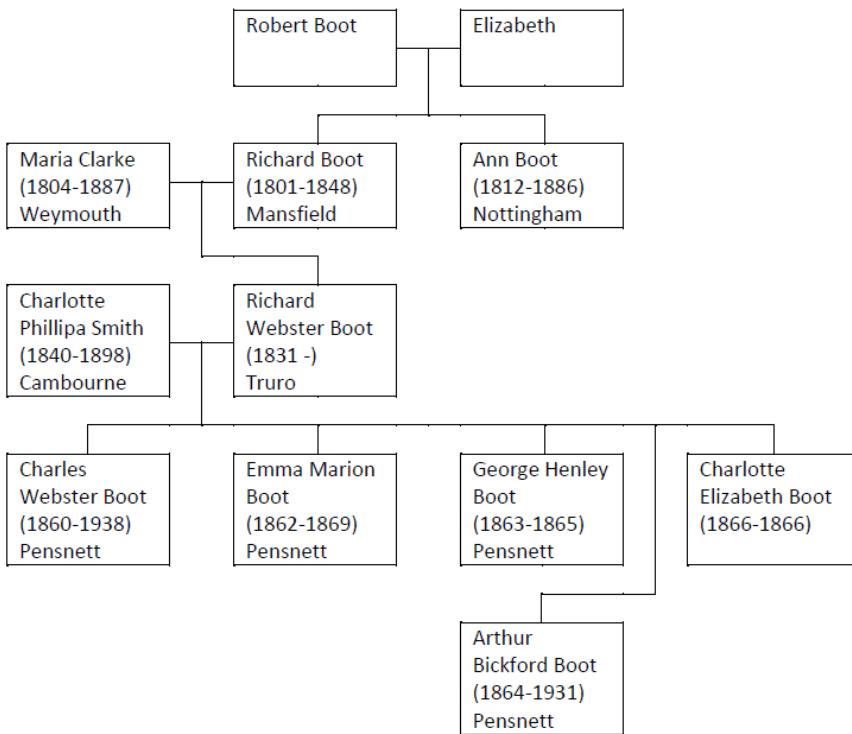
The first vicar of the parish (or perpetual curates as they were then known) was Francis Fowke from 1845 to 1857. He was born at Stafford in 1816 and educated at Peterhouse, Cambridge, gaining a BA in 1840, being ordained deacon and priest in 1840 and 1841, and taking his MA in 1843. Before coming to Pensnett, he served a curacy at Wolverhampton. He was much involved in the building of the new church. He left Pensnett in 1857 and is recorded (in 1902) as having died at some unspecified time, at Withpoort in Orange River State in South Africa, aged 93, although the age and birth date are not consistent. Nothing of his career in between leaving Pensnett and his death is known, although it can be conjectured that he became a missionary in the African colonies.

### **Richard Flint Browne Winslowe**

The tenure of the next vicar, Richard Flint Browne Winslowe, was very short. He was appointed in 1857 after the departure of Francis Fowke, having held incumbencies in Lancashire and Cheshire, and having married Anne Eggers in Brighton in June of that year. Anne died in January 1858, and Richard himself died in June 1858 from an “attack of fever and inflammation of the bowels preceded by an attack of fever contracted by him in the performance of his duty”. He is buried in the churchyard.

## **Richard Boot**

The next vicar, Richard Webster Boot, was born into a family that came from Nottinghamshire (see the Boot family tree below) but his father, another Richard, had moved to Truro at some point before his marriage to Maria Clarke from Dorset in 1827. In the late 1820s, the elder Richard was the Wesleyan Methodist minister but later came to give his allegiance to the Friends and worked as an insurance agent in Redruth. Richard Webster was born in Truro in 1831 and in 1851 is recorded as an Assistant School teacher there. He received his ministerial training at St Bees Theological College in Cumbria, one of the new crop of Theological Colleges set up to provide clergy for the growing number of parishes. He was ordained deacon in 1854 and priest in 1855 by the Bishop of Lichfield and served a curacy at St James in Wednesbury, under the incumbent. Richard Twigg. Twigg was one of the most influential Anglican clergy of the day, who brought together evangelical concern for the salvation of souls and a zeal for mission work, with a Tractarian ritualism and a concern for the needs of the poor. He had a long career as a missionary priest both in the Black Country and elsewhere. Many of Twigg's practices met with severe disapproval from the diocesan authorities. and for Boot it must have been an interesting curacy to say the least with a potentially subversive colleague. Boot came to Pensnett in 1858, aged only 27. He married Charlotte Philipa Smith in Redruth in 1859, and they were to have a number of children – Charles Webster (1860-1938), Emma Marion (1862-1869), George Henley (1863-1865), Arthur Bickford (1864-1938) and Charlotte Elizabeth (1866-1866).

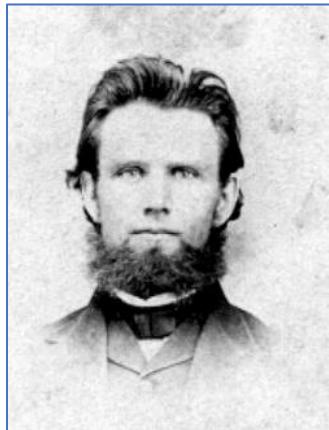


**The Boot family tree**

### **The first scandal**

Around 1860, Boot employed as a curate one William Henry Hyde, originally from Newcastle under Lyme, and educated at London University. Hyde was around 29 at the time, and it is here that this story takes on its most sordid aspect. In the Worcester Chronicle of April 1861, it was reported that he had been brought before the stipendiary Magistrate in Brierley Hill charged with indecently assaulting a member of the church choir - Samuel Bradley, the son of a shoemaker and a parish constable. The paper reports that the major portion of the evidence was unfit for publication. He was committed to trial, but no further

reports appear in the press. It would appear that he was acquitted however as he is recorded as holding a series of curacies mainly in the London area in the 1860s and 70s. He appears in the census records of 1871 as visiting a family in Toxteth in Liverpool, as a clergyman without cure of souls. From 1878 to 1882 he was the vicar of Ditton in Lancashire, but then seems to have reverted to curate status in parishes in Rochester and London. Interestingly William Hyde is not included on the official list of curates of Pensnett church, either through a desire to forget the whole affair, or perhaps because he was simply a short-term hire to assist Richard Boot. Whilst this episode is of no direct relevance to the main story we tell here, it probably set the tone for some of the events that were to follow and to disturb the peace of the parish. Interestingly in 1863, Boot delivered a lecture in “Scandal” in a Dudley hotel – was he reflecting on the Hyde affair perhaps? The contents of this would have been very interesting indeed – and indeed, as we shall see, may well have proved to be prophetic.



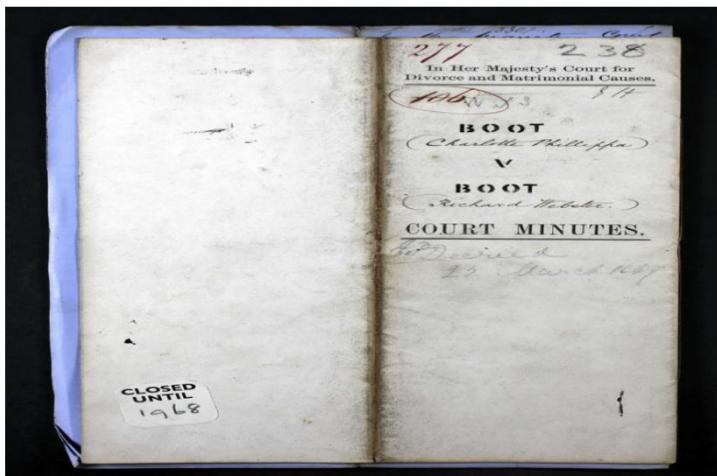
**William Henry Hyde (from Ancestry)**

## The second scandal

The next scandal concerned Richard Boot himself. In 1867 his wife petitioned for divorce due to adultery. In court, it was reported that, in October 1865, Boot had left his wife in Pensnett (and by this time, their three children) and Charlotte Boot had returned to her father's home in Cornwall. The parish records however indicate that Boot ceased to officiate at baptisms and funerals in May that year, in what was probably a developing situation. The alleged adultery was with Eliza Brinton, the daughter of William Brinton, a gardener of Tansey Green in Pensnett, who was employed as a nursemaid at the Parsonage from 1863, when she was aged about 13 or 14. Eliza's father William died sometime after that in early 1864. At some point after that Boot arranged for her to go to a school, from where she wrote some very affectionate letters to him, addressing him as "*my dearest ebby*" and signing them "*your loving and very affectionate Izzy*". Around that time, Boot seems to have got into financial difficulties and his wife's father helped him financially at several points to the sum of several thousand pounds. It was reported in court that, after Boot had left Pensnett, Eliza accompanied Boot on visits around Britain and Europe in late 1865, passing as father and daughter, and witnesses testified that they shared the same room in hotels, and on one occasion in Le Havre, the same bed. (The investigation that revealed this behaviour was commissioned by Charlotte's father.) In January 1866 Boot and Eliza returned to Britain. Boot then traveled to the USA, returning after a couple of months, whilst Eliza went home to Pensnett. Boot was declared bankrupt in October 1866. In court Eliza Brinton herself gave evidence and claimed that no impropriety had taken place. In his summing up the judge commented that

*„if he were guilty, what a monstrous outrage it was that he, a clergyman of the Church of England, should put into the witness box the girl he had seduced and oblige her to commit perjury.*

Without hesitation, the jury found Boot guilty of adultery, and custody of the children was given to his wife. The decree absolute (see below) was granted in March 1867.



### The Boot decree absolute

During the course of these events, the Boots' son George Henley died in January 1865. Charlotte conceived again in June 1865 and the baby, Charlotte Elizabeth, was born in March 1866 but died three months afterwards. It was a very traumatic time for Charlotte and the family. For the Brinton family too, it must have been very difficult coping with the loss of their husband and father as well as the events described above.

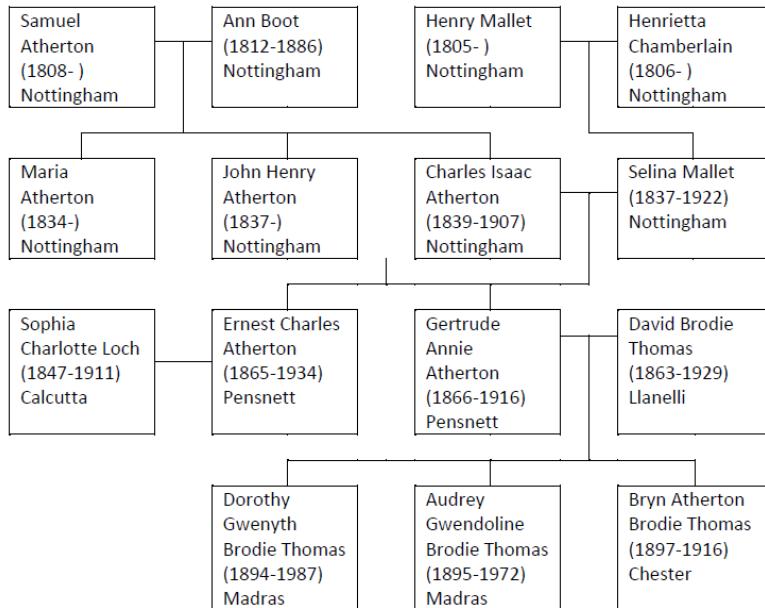
Little can be said of Boot and Eliza after that. There is a somewhat enigmatic reference in the 1870 US Federal census for Milford in Maine, to Richard W. B. Webster with the occupation of preacher, living by himself and born in England in 1831. The name and initials, birth date and occupation seem to be too close to Boot's to be a coincidence— perhaps Boot had planned his exile to the USA on his trip in 1866. No later reference to him could be found either in Britain or the USA.

Eliza is absent from any census from the 1870s onwards, although her mother and her siblings can be traced to Yorkshire from the 1870s to 1900s, and the only possible further reference to her is to someone of that name buried at Witton cemetery in Birmingham in 1879. If it was her, she was 30 years old at the time of her death.

Interestingly there is one further reference to Boot in the press after his presumed emigration to the USA. This is in the Fleetwood Chronicle of 1872, where a testimonial he wrote in 1864 was used in an advert placed by Mr. J Pritchard, a chemist from Manchester, for his “fever and teething powder”, which apparently greatly helped the Boot’s children. If the good Mr. Pritchard had known of the events of 1865 and 1866, I doubt whether he would have been so keen to use that testimonial in his advert.



## Chapter 3. Charles Atherton – Curate and Vicar



**The Atherton family tree**

It was normal practice for the incumbent to appoint a short-term curate, recently out of college, to learn about parish life and to share the pastoral load. In 1863 Richard Boot appointed Charles Isaac Atherton as one such, who is one of the main characters in this story. Charles Isaac Atherton was born in 1839 in Liverpool to Samuel and Ann Atherton. The family tree is given above. It can be seen that Charles' mother Ann was the sister of Richard Webster Boot's father, Richard, and thus Atherton and Boot were cousins. Indeed in 1860, Boot officiated at the marriage of Atherton's brother John in Manchester. From the 1840s to the early 1860s, Charles, his mother, brother John and sister Maria are recorded as living in Nottingham with Ann's mother, without his father. Samuel, a solicitor, disappeared from

the historical record after his marriage, but, as we shall see, reappears in 1871. This strongly suggests that he was out of the UK, either on a series of temporary visits, or on a permanent basis over that period. Ann Atherton seems to have developed a significant business in her own right as a milliner / outfitter, employing up to a dozen people as dressmakers and lace makers. It was in Nottingham that Charles went to the High School and his obituary suggests that as a teenager he worked in the Midland Bank, his abilities earning him the role of Chief Cashier. He matriculated as a Pensioner at St John's College, Cambridge in 1860 and receiving his BA (without honours) in 1863. The Cambridge degrees of that era were not terribly well regarded, and the examinations for the ordinary (non-honours) degrees were not very rigorous but would probably have given him a reasonable grounding in the Classics, Greek and Latin, and perhaps if he was that way inclined, in Mathematics.

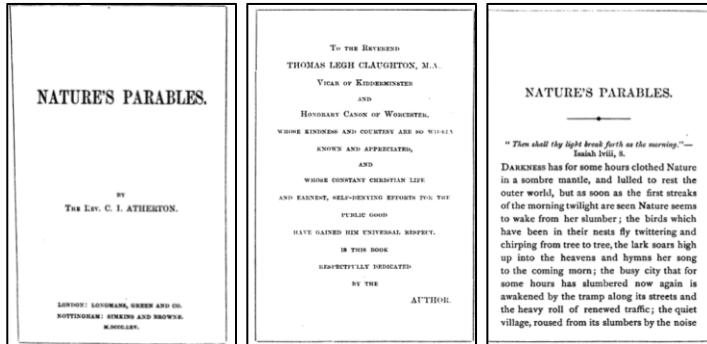


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### **Nottingham High School and St John's College, Cambridge**

Atherton was ordained deacon in Ely in 1863 and priest in Lichfield in 1864, and eventually took his MA in 1866. He married Selina (Linna) Mallet, from a family of lace makers, in Nottingham in 1864 (the wedding again being taken by Richard Boot). Later, in 1871 the then curate lived at a house in the High Oak area of Pensnett, so the Athertons may also have lived there. They had two children – Ernest, born in 1865 and Gertrude born in 1866. He found the time, between family and church duties, to write and publish a booklet “Nature’s parable”

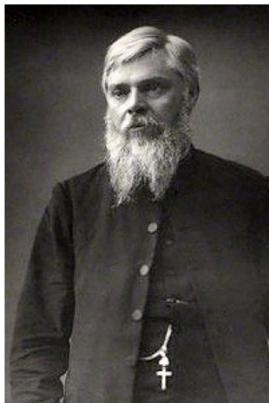
– which are theological reflections arising from a consideration of the natural world – and which can still be read on the web thanks to the Hathi Trust Digital Library.



### Nature's parables

The effect on the life of the parish of the unpleasant episode of the breakup of the Boots' marriage on would have been significant, particularly for Charles, as there were also family issues involved. As curate he would have been left to pick up the various activities of the parish, both in terms of worship and involvement with the local community – and indeed the parish records show that he and the other curate who was in post at the time, took on a very heavy baptism, marriage and funeral load. It would have been something of a baptism of fire for a young and inexperienced curate.

In his early years at curate, he was, probably through his cousin Boot, much influenced by the work of Richard Twigg at St James in Wednesbury. Twigg's curate there, from 1863 to 1865 was George Body, who then became curate at the neighbouring parish of Sedgley from 1865 to 1867. Like Twigg, Body became very well known as a missionary priest, and was to be appointed as Canon Missioner of Durham Diocese. It is clear that Twigg and Body were significant influences on Atherton, although, as their activities were not always viewed favourably by the powers-that-be, perhaps rather dangerous ones.



**George Body**

Whatever the pressures that Atherton felt in keeping the parish of Pensnett going during his time as a curate, he was clearly perceived as doing so successfully and the Patron of the Parish, the Earl of Dudley, presented him to the living in April 1867. Like Boot he was young – aged just 28 at his appointment. One of his first acts was to open up the (substantial) grounds of the vicarage to the local populace. In the County Express in June 1867, we read

*It affords us much pleasure in stating that the energetic and deservedly popular incumbent of Pensnett, the Rev C J Atherton, has generously thrown open his beautiful grounds to the public, under certain restrictions. The parsonage grounds are open every alternate Tuesday evening, and the public of all denominations are admitted by ticket. The grounds were opened for a second time on Tuesday evening last, and, judging from the number of respectable people who attended, the parsonage grounds bid fair to become an “institution” in the locality. The Pensnett Victoria Saxhorn band has been “specially retained” to play on the nights the grounds are open, and several members of the excellent choir also kindly add to the entertainment of the visitors. The grounds occupy a most picturesque situation, and are laid out in a most beautiful manner, nature and art being most judiciously blended. The visitors have the option of listening to the dulcet strains of the band, indulging in innocent pastimes on the lawn, or, if they choose, they may ramble at will under the foliage of the park trees, or luxuriate in the many*

*convenient rustic seats in the dell. We are sorry to learn that some thoughtless young people abused their privileges by dancing on the lawn, a mode of amusement which had been forbidden by the incumbent, while others behaved even worse, and wantonly destroyed many beautiful flowers by pulling them up at their roots. Such conduct of course ill repays the kindness of the incumbent, and it is the duty of all who visit these delightful grounds to do all in their power to check such reprehensible practices. We perceive that the annual Cottage Flower Show and Horticultural Fete will be held in the Parsonage grounds on the 23rd inst. As the grounds are a great attraction in themselves, the show cannot fail to prove successful.*

The behaviour of Pensnett youth has changed little over the years! To get a further flavour of Atherton's priorities and beliefs, it is worth looking at the sermon he preached (and distributed) early in January 1868, which reviewed the activities of the previous year.. Firstly, it is clear from the sermon that he made major efforts to address the physical concerns of the parishioners in terms of providing food and clothing to a population on the edge of poverty and where work was often difficult to find. Secondly, he was concerned not just with the physical needs of his parishioners, but also with the intellectual needs, as evidenced by the formation of the Young Men's Mutual Improvement Society; he encouraged the musical life in the parish led by the choir: and was instrumental in the growth of the boys' and girls' schools, in their new buildings on the High Street. But most of all he was concerned for the spiritual development of his parishioners urging them to become regular communicants, at a time when many church goers simply did not attend the services of Holy Communion; and reminding them that *the time is short and the night cometh wherein no man can walk* and urging them to *walk while you have the light*. In this he shows the conventional, if zealous, evangelical piety that was to characterize his mission throughout his career, very much reflecting the ministry of Richard Twigg and George Body at St James Wednesbury. Indeed, Atherton invited Twigg to preach at St Marks in November 1867.

Certainly, during his career at Pensnett, he showed very considerable energy in opening a Mission Church of Holy Trinity in Bromley in 1867 (also referred to in the sermon) and in developing the life of the National Schools after the 1870 act. He also began the efforts to restore the church building, that by this time was suffering severely from mining subsidence and an accumulation of the grime from the local industries. This restoration was eventually to take over 15 years, being completed in 1882. He also formed a small committee to consider whether or not the missing tower should be built, but the idea was never taken forward. An obituary written in the *Guardian* 40 years later (BNA, 1907a) informs us that

*..... the immediate occasion of Charles Atherton's first interest in Mission-work was the sudden death from a stroke of lightning of a godless parishioner, which made a great impression on the collier nature. Mr. Atherton seized upon it and used it as the starting point of a remarkable spiritual revival in the parish. A great love of souls hence forth possessed his heart and he went forth on Mission enterprises far and wide.....*

There was one other interesting point in the 1868 sermon, which shows that Atherton was clearly not afraid of speaking his mind. It takes either bravery or a degree of recklessness for a young twenty-eight-year-old clergyman to tell some in the congregation

*“....It appears that those who have been loudest in the praise of the choir, and in their desire that a choir fund should be established, are those whose names are not found on the list (of subscribers to the fund). I would venture to remind some of those who appropriate seats in the church that by not subscribing either to the schools or the choir they are absolutely doing nothing for the church, they are having their religion at a cheaper rate than they could have it anywhere else, and they are taking up room that might be better occupied by many families who are waiting for sittings....”*

Unsurprisingly, telling his congregation that some of them were a waste of space did not go down well with some, but rather than making the usual complaint at the church door, the complaint was made anonymously by someone calling themselves “Alpha”

to the local newspaper – which occasioned the printing the week after of a letter from Atherton containing the full sermon, and a letter from another parishioner in Atherton’s defense.

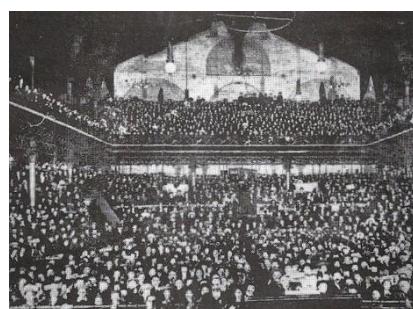


## Chapter 4. The Bowdler affair

The defining event of Atherton's incumbency occurred in early 1870. He seems to have developed some sort of infatuation or attachment to a sixteen-year-old girl, Agnes Bowdler. She was the seventh of eight children of George and Mary Bowdler who were grocers in Bromley, and was a pupil teacher at the National School, where it is likely they became acquainted. At this distance it is not really possible to say anything about the motivations of either Charles Atherton or Agnes Bowdler, or indeed anything else about the relationship and how it began. However, in the court case that will be described in what follows, it was revealed that on March 3rd, 1870, Atherton took Agnes on a trip to Birmingham having given her the money for her fare somewhat surreptitiously in Rookery Lane the night before (see Map 2). The journey itself also seems to have been carried out with a view to secrecy, and from the details given in the court case and the railway timetables for that time, it would seem that Agnes travelled to Dudley Port on a Stour Valley line train to Birmingham New Street that left Dudley at 4.00, and from she alighted at 4.11 She waited for the next train to Birmingham at 5.08, which Atherton had caught in Dudley a few minutes earlier, and joined him in a first class compartment. After alighting at New Street, he took her to a Refreshment room, then to a Jewelers and bought her a necklace and took her to the circus in Curzon Hall on Suffolk Street. This was Hengler's touring circus, which had a national reputation for excellence, and included acrobatics with and without horses. The star turn seems to have been a trained monkey riding a horse. The reviews in the papers in the days following were very good, so it may be supposed that Agnes and Atherton enjoyed themselves. On the return, on a train that left New Street around 9.00pm, they took a cab back to Pensnett, having made it appear to the driver that they had just met each other getting off the train. This was all done without the permission of the parents.

Unfortunately for Atherton and Agnes, they were observed by Cornelius Chambers of Bromley Lane. He was then 32 years old, the manager of a local iron works, a member of St James' New Connexion Church, married to the daughter of one of the founders of the church, and was later to become a liberal county councilor, and a leading figure in the Temperance movement. He claimed he first saw Agnes waiting at Dudley Port station and then observed her and Atherton together in a first-class compartment on the train to Birmingham. Here our story takes a somewhat comic turn, Chambers then followed them around Birmingham – from New Street Station along Corporation Street to Avery's refreshment rooms in Bull Street; after 20 minutes waiting outside, he followed them to a Jewelers shop also in Bull Street hiding in shop doorways on the way; and then to the Market Hall (which was on the route to Curzon Hall) where he gave up his pursuit.

But the tale is perhaps not that straightforward. There is no reason why Chambers, if he was making a trip to Birmingham on his own behalf, would have changed trains at Dudley Port. He would either have stayed on the 4.00 from Dudley into New Street or caught the 5.00 train that Atherton travelled on. There were no trains from Dudley Port to New Street in between. This leads to the suspicion that he was following Agnes – and indeed may have been the one who observed them in Rookery Lane, quite close to his house, the day before. Whatever the truth of the circumstances, Chambers reported this matter to a next-door neighbour of his at Bromley House (Map 2) – Mr. Benjamin Wood, the People's Warden at St. Mark's, whom we have already met.



**Birmingham New St, Corporation Street, Bull Street, Market Hall and Curzon Hall in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century**

Clearly the parents of the girl found out what had happened and threatened legal action, and Atherton wrote to the father on March 14<sup>th</sup> apologising for his actions, for denying them when first confronted, and for having caused him uneasiness. This letter was apparently made public, and Atherton then wrote to the bishop the day after setting out the facts. The bishop at that time was George Selwyn, who had been till 1868 the first Bishop of New Zealand, and would have known Atherton personally, having spent a weekend in Pensnett in April 1869 confirming and preaching. The bishop first instituted an enquiry through the churchwardens and wrote to the parish on April 10th. Whilst acknowledging the indiscretion, he took the view that Atherton was *not unworthy of the confidence of the parishioners*. Clearly this was not felt to be adequate by some and a more formal enquiry was therefore instituted a month later under the Clergy Discipline Act, with a Commission consisting of the rector of St. Peter's Wolverhampton, and the vicars of St. Michael's, Coventry and St. Edmund's, Dudley – some of the most senior clergy in the diocese. They questioned around twenty witnesses from the parish in the hearing at Lichfield, including Cornelius Chambers, Benjamin Wood and Agnes Bowdler and her parents, in proceedings that lasted until 10.00pm in the evening and for Agnes at least must have been very difficult. It would thus have involved an overnight stay in Lichfield for all those involved. The Commission came to the view that, though Atherton had acted extremely unwisely, no impropriety has been committed, and the bishop took the view that Atherton should take a break from the parish for a six-month period, and strongly advised him to do so in a letter of May 27<sup>th</sup>. Atherton took the bishop's advice and absented himself from the parish. He was, however, away for only around four months and returned sometime around the end of September 1870 – he is recorded as taking baptisms and funerals in early October. During his absence, Samuel Page, the landlord of the Swan Inn and a former church warden, committed suicide, in late August. He was well known in the

village, and indeed Atherton and his warden Benjamin Wood had organized meals and functions there. The inquest was told that he had become depressed in recent months following a “reversal in fortune”, perhaps associated with his bankruptcy a year earlier. We will see that the Swan Inn features in some of the anonymous letters that would circulate, and it is a possibility that the scandals surrounding Atherton might have weighed heavily on Page at the time.



**Bishop Selwyn of Lichfield**



## Chapter 5. The anonymous letters

### **By their works he shall know them**

Is it a fact that the Parson kissed and embraced the girl repeatedly in the wood and dark lanes? *Yes*

Is it a fact that he went down on his knees in his library with one arm around her waist declaring his love and trying to get an answer from the girl that she loved him? *Yes*

Is it a fact that he made arrangements with the girl for going to Birmingham? *Yes*

Is it a fact that he met her in a certain lane, the night previous to going to Birmingham, and gave her money to pay her fare, and a note stating the time and place of meeting, and parting with kisses and embraces? *Yes*

Is it a fact that he bought a necklace for her and declared he did not care what he did for those he loved? *Yes*

Is it a fact that he took her to the Circus and gave her the advice that “when everything else failed on this earth, to take to this”? *Yes*

Is it a fact that he enquired whether she was cold or not, and replying she was, saying, “Ah, Agnes, you want my arm around you to keep you warm?” *Yes*

Is it a fact they rode by themselves in a First-Class Carriage, and that he frequently kissed her? *Yes*

Is it a fact that they rode together in a cab from the station, and that she was to thank him for giving her this ride down, so that the Cabman might not think anything wrong? *Yes*

### **By their works he shall know them**

Is it a fact that he told the girl to look at him in the pulpit and when he wink'd his right eye, it meant Birmingham? *Yes*

Is it a fact that when the girl's mother went to see about her daughter about being in Birmingham on the previous day, he stigmatized the man who took her there "as a villain who wanted hanging, and whether he be married or single, his motives were bad"? *Yes*

Is it a fact that after the mother's departure from his house, he sent for the girl, and persuades her to tell a lie to her parents? *Yes*

Is it a fact that when charged with being with her in Birmingham, he strongly denied it on several occasions? *Yes*

Is it a fact he gave and instructed another party to give for him, apologies confessing "the lies he told". *Yes*

Is it a fact that judging from the man's conduct at the present time, he seems to glory in the matter? *Yes*

And this is the man who occupies our pulpit, this is the man who takes upon himself the responsibility for ministering to the wants of the people, this is the man from whom we might have expected more independence, more straightforwardness and to have been actuated by motives less selfish, hold up before the people as their pattern, in all good things.

No doubt these few facts will be denied as previous facts have been in this scandalous affair before, but still they remain facts, which cannot be denied.

*Beware of wolves in sheep's' clothing!*

**By their works he shall know them (continued)**

After the incident in Birmingham took place in April 1870, a number of anonymous fliers circulated around Pensnett. The first of these is reproduced above.

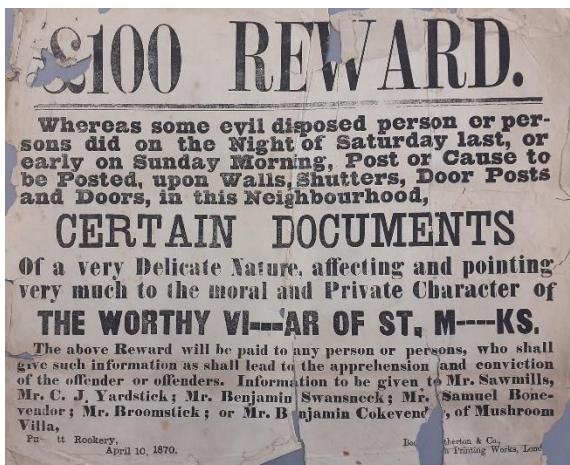
This essentially gives an account of the incident, perhaps with some embellishments. It is undated but seems to come from sometime around April / May 1870 i.e. not long after the incident. It would be interesting to know where the author's information came from – some of it must ultimately have come from Agnes, if it were not simply made up – through the transmission of village gossip. These proved to be the first of a number of such documents whose transcripts are given in the Appendix. The next two that followed were written as doggerel ballads to be sung to popular music hall tunes. The first of these (The Parson's Intrigue) had eight, ten-line verses and the second (The Model Parson) twenty nine, four-line verses, going over much the same ground as in the extract above. They both refer to Benjamin Wood as Atherton's henchman and apologist. The Parson's Intrigue ends with the rather damning couplet.

*“And oh, dear oh! Don’t all of us know, this parson’s religion is nothing but show”.*

A further document entitled “Another Pensnett Mystery” seems to date from around this time and suggests a relationship between Selina Atherton and Wood, who apparently bought her “garters with silver buckles”. It also introduces the practice of referring to various church members by none too polite nicknames. The writer of these documents also produced a poster in the same style that was clearly posted around the village, offering £100 for his identification.

On his return to the parish in September 1870, another series of anonymous letters began to be circulated around the parish and posted on a weekly basis to Atherton himself. Again, some of these survive in the archives. These were of the form of (fictional) notices of sermons that Atherton was to preach the following Sunday – on Character, Faith, Morality, Virtue,

Truthfulness, Harvest, Character, Charity and Faith. These too are given in the Appendix. They all contained implicit attacks on the character of Atherton and other church members, although their names were changed in a rather Dickensian fashion to those that referred either to their jobs or their physical appearance. These letters must have caused deep distress to members of St. Mark's, as was presumably intended to be the case. In places they include fairly obvious sexual innuendos aimed at a wide range of church members, male and female, and in particular Agnes Bowdler – who it should be remembered was probably a fairly naïve 16-year-old girl at the time. Various extra allegations are made: that Agnes (referred to as *Flowing Hair*) and another girl gave Atherton an expensive present of a gold pencil case before he left the parish in May 1870 for three months; that there was sexual impropriety and inappropriate touching at the Ladies Bible Class; a description of a “tickling” match with female “starters” and male “riders”; that Benjamin Woods engaged in illicit activities with a maid and so on. The truth of these allegations is impossible to judge of course.



The scurrilous poster

## Chapter 6. The libel trial

*“Sheepskins and beeswax,  
Thunder, pitch and plaster,  
The more you try to pull it off,  
It's sure to stick the faster”*

My dear parishioners

On Sunday next, I shall deliver an address on charity. Since my return amongst you, I have done all the good I possibly could for those who would uphold me in my damnable and lustful practices, whilst to those who have desired to speak and act according to the dictates of their own consciences, I have done all I could to injure them in their business, and have actually sent to Brierley Hill and Dudley for articles which cost no more than tuppence before I would spend a farthing with some of my dear parishioners, but truly charity inspires towards our enemies forgiveness and humanity. **Mr. Buttons**, the tool of the hundred-faced man **Yardstick**, doing his dirty work, which he dare not do himself, because he would sell a yard or two less calico per week; “henchman bold” to himself, and the laughing stock of the village. Why should you put yourself forward to defend me? Did you not forbid my late curate, Rev B\*\*\*\*y from visiting at your house? And did you not forbid your wife from speaking to him, because you were jealous of him? Oh, mushrooms!!!! What a man to be played with in this way; but I hope I shall hear no more of you making yourself so busy in this matter again, or I shall have to call your attention to an occurrence soon after your marriage.

We all recollect the fun and stir a short time ago about Mr. Button's daughter being christened, and the admirable repast that was provided at his house for a few friends.

**Sermon notice - Charity**

The wines were excellent and soon began to tell on the company. Our holy vicar proposed the health of one and another till he was quite done up. The following was the last he tried at – “This is the happiest moment of my life (hic), my Curates attend to the church (hic), my wife attends to the curates (hic) and I propose my excellent friends health, Mr. Cooper (hic) and down he tumbled into his chair. This holy man of God quite drunk and incapable of taking care of himself.

I might here explain that the packman’s daughter is the wife of our old friend “Buttons”; also that **Dirty White’s** wife did exceedingly well in the tickling match, and had she had a better jockey, she might have been close on the favourites.

What Christian men I have around me. There’s little **Buggins** who can’t go along the street on the Sabbath morning without disgracing himself by fighting, and then running away. There’s our old friend **Buttons** leaves the holy sanctuary. He can’t get home without threatening to give another \_\_\_\_ good hiding, but dare not, so fetches others to do it, and so set up a fight on Sabbath evenings. With such defenders, the Church of Christ must and shall overcome its enemies.

An offertory as usual for necklace and silver buckled partners.

Subscriptions received – Eggs and ham 6s; Cork leg 3s; Joey 3d,

Vicar, St Mark’s

Boot, Hatherton and Co, Printers, Coventry

### Sermon notice – Charity (continued)

It was the last but one of the anonymous letters, on Charity, that would result in a libel action being brought that attracted local and national publicity. The full text of the letter is given above.

It is possible that this letter was chosen as the subject for a libel action, as it contained only minor references to the female members of the congregation, and had little implicit sexual content, and would thus have been the least painful one to make fully public. Its form is typical of them all. It can be seen that it is of a thoroughly scurrilous nature, beginning with a verse from a music hall song, and signed by “Boot and Hatherton” inevitably linking the old scandals with the new. Whilst the letter contains allusions to a number of potential incidents that would have been well known in the locality, it is not possible to fully understand them all now. However, the following can be identified from the libel proceedings described below, and from the other letters.

The vicar is of course Atherton himself.

- *Buttons* refers to the churchwarden, Mr. Benjamin Wood of Bromley House, Bromley Lane, who has already been mentioned. At the time he was aged 31, married to Eliza Bryce, daughter of John Bryce, an Iron and Coal Master, and his wife Elizabeth. John Bryce himself had been both Parish Clerk and Schoolmaster at the National School and Elizabeth was still a teacher there in 1871. Their son David was to become churchwarden a few years later.
- *Packman's daughter* refers to Eliza Bryce / Wood herself.
- *Yardstick* and *Cooper* refer to Charles Cooper, Churchwarden from 1860 to 1866, and described in the 1871 census as a Mercer i.e. a dealer in cloth – which would fit in with the use of a yardstick and make sense of the reference to calico. The insinuation might be that as a former churchwarden, he had the current churchwarden, Wood, doing his bidding. Such a thing is

not unknown in the Anglican Church. In the 1871 census his domestic arrangements are interesting, as he is recorded as living with Elizabeth Pope (aged 34, four years his junior), who is described as an assistant. Whilst this arrangement may be entirely innocent, it would no doubt result in gossip – and was clearly referred to another of the sermon outlines (on Virtue).

- Rev B\*\*\*\*y” must refer to Atherton’s curate from 1867 to 1868, George Henry Brierley, but why he should be so honoured with a mention it is not possible to say.
- *Buggins* refers to Benjamin Blewitt, a butcher and farmer, and a member at St Mark’s.
- *Dirty White’s wife* possibly refers to Ann Bryce, wife of David Bryce who seems to have been notable by wearing a somewhat grubby surplice in church.

Atherton and Wood brought a libel case against John Talbot, a stocktaker of Pensnett and John Candlin, the landlord of the Lion Hotel on High Street, whom they regarded as being responsible for circulating the letter, if not for writing it. They did so with the full approval of the bishop, who presumably felt that this was the only way to resolve the issue. Another document, which was referred to in the press as another letter, but not produced in court, described the vicar as “*kissing her twice*”. This may refer to the musical hall song that is used as a heading for the letter on Morality.

*I kissed her two times on the cheek.*

*I would have kissed her thrice.*

*But I whispered “Ain’t it naughty”?*

*She said “Yes, but it’s so nice”*

The main reason for the action seems to be that Atherton denied this “kissing”, and also denied that he was drunk at the meal at the Swan Inn after the christening of Benjamin Woods’ daughter in late 1869. The case was originally heard at Brierley Hill Petty Sessions on December 8th, but the crowd of 1000 people from

Pensnett trying to enter the court had resulted in a transfer of the case to Wolverhampton, although a considerable number made the trip there as well for the hearing on December 14th. A series of witnesses were then called, who described seeing versions of the libelous document in the Swan Inn and elsewhere around November 9th, which established in the mind of the magistrate that a libel had been committed, but in the first instance it was not clear who the author was. Due to the lateness of the hour, the case was adjourned for a week and the court reconvened on December 23rd. At the reconvened hearing the authorship of the libelous pamphlets was again probed by the stipendiary. Benjamin Blewitt (butcher and a member of St. Mark's) told of an altercation (both verbal and physical) with Talbot on a Sunday in October 1870, and he was identified as the *Buggins* in the letter. Atherton himself was then called to give evidence, and in that evidence the issues that were behind the charges laid under the Clergy Discipline Act were exposed and made public in the national press. Following these revelations, the magistrate expressed the view that there was enough evidence to take Talbot and Candlin to trial. He did however ask if, for the sake of the peace of the parish, some agreement could be found between the parties. After some discussion between Atherton, Talbot and their legal representatives, it was agreed that apologies should be made and the libel proceedings halted, and the case was closed.

That was, however, not the end of the anonymous letters and pamphlets. The last of the letters above, on Faith, hints that a new series of documents was in preparation. These seem to have gone under the title of the Pensnett Review. One of these survives in the archive (number 2) and is dated December 1st, 1870 – i.e. while the above legal proceedings were underway. This is a particularly vicious document, alleging that Atherton conspired against Boot to obtain the living of St Mark's.

The final document that survives is dated March 10th, 1871, and returns to some of the themes of the earlier letters, but

particularly lampooning Wood's desire to be nominated for the new School Board. It is doubtful if this was the end of the matter however, and it is likely that there are other later letters and documents that have not survived.

The question of who actually wrote the string of anonymous letters does not seem to have been resolved. The letters show a good, if somewhat twisted, grasp of biblical quotes, music hall references and past history and it seems to the author that those who were named in the libel trial were not of an adequate educational level to have written them and were probably no more than distributors of the letters. Two general possibilities for the actual authors come to mind. Firstly, there was clearly some antagonism between the Anglican and Non-Conformist churches at the time, and it seems possible that someone in the well-educated non-conformist circle of Cornelius Chambers, horrified by the seeming lack of moral probity in the Anglican church, might have been responsible. Against this was the intimate knowledge that the letters showed of Anglican church affairs, which would point to somebody within the Anglican congregation – perhaps the “Alpha” who complained about Atherton’s 1868 new year sermon. Of the two possibilities, the author favours the second, but it is unlikely that the writer will ever be identified.

## Chapter 7. The aftermath

Whilst the formal proceedings of the libel action were closed in late 1870, no doubt the emotional and mental wounds took longer to heal. With regard to Agnes herself, it is not clear what happened to her immediately after the 1870 incident. She does not appear in the Pensnett entries for the 1871 census, carried out on April 2nd. There are two possible explanations for this. The first, and most likely, is that she appears in the census as the Annie Bowdler, aged 17 and born in Bromley, living at her uncle's home in Stourbridge – sufficiently far away to be removed from the local gossip. The other, less likely but more intriguing, possibility is an entry in that census of the correct age of one Agnes Brice who is recorded as a domestic servant working for Rev. Francis J Burlton, the curate of Stottesdon in Shropshire (near Cleobury Mortimer) and is registered as being born in Staffordshire. The name of Brice provides the possible clue. It has already been noted that John Bryce was the Parish Clerk of Pensnett in the 1850s and his daughter was married to Benjamin Woods. Indeed in 1871 his widow Elizabeth was also living with the Woods in Bromley House and was still the Infants Teacher in the National School. Also, Agnes Brice does not appear in any census records before or after 1871. It can thus be conjectured that there is a possibility that sometime in late 1870 or early 1871 Agnes was “found” a position in domestic service by the churchwarden at St. Mark’s and his wife and mother and given what was to be a temporary false name. Or in more blunt terms, she was sent away so she would be no further cause of embarrassment. Presumably the Burlton family would have been known to the Bryces through Anglican circles. At the time that Agnes was employed, Francis Burlton was over 60, with six children (including four unmarried daughters in their 20s and 30s which gives the whole affair a Jane Austen touch). For someone who was used to the responsible teaching role, she probably would have found the imposed role of domestic servant more than a little difficult. Of course, it is quite possible

that both these explanations of her absence are “correct”, and that, the census entry for Cleobury was an entry of who should have been there rather than who was there. Certainty is not possible.

In the census returns of 1871, Charles’ wife, Selina Atherton was not at the Vicarage, although the rest of the family and a number of visitors were, including Ann and Samuel Atherton, the latter making his first appearance in the historical record since his marriage in the 1830s. Selina was at the home of her sister Henrietta Baldwin and her family in Carrington in Nottinghamshire. Whether this was due to the events of the previous year it is not possible to tell, but her absence from the vicarage may well be related to these events. Thereafter, however, things seem to have settled down and Selina returned. It is from this period that we have the earliest photograph of Charles Atherton (see below). This is from the 1949 history of the church, and thus has a Pensnett source, and was probably from the period between 1870 and 1874 when he was in his early thirties.



**Charles Atherton in the early 1870s**

No doubt the lives of others involved were similarly affected and the pain caused would remain for some time. Atherton himself is recorded in the press as engaging in all the normal aspects of church life, and as noted above, was quite heavily involved in the restorations and alterations of St Mark's that began in the early 1870s. He left Pensnett for Nympsfield, Gloucestershire, in 1876, partly it would seem to lighten his workload due to a period of ill health. The social event to mark his departure heard warm words and glowing tributes for his preaching and his pastoral work. The report in the local newspaper notes that

*If the bearer was told that there was a hell and a judgment to come, he was reminded that by the acceptance of the Sacrifice once offered, there was the bright hope of immortality in the glorious abode of the spirits of just men made perfect. Truly has Mr. Atherton's career at Pensnett been far from an uneventful one.*

That last phrase might be regarded as something of an understatement. Tributes were also paid to Selina

*..... who has ever heartily entered into his schemes for improvement and afforded that consolation to him in his hours of unremitting toil, which it is Woman's and above all the true help-mate's province to impart.*

Atherton's departure in some ways marks the beginning of the community forgetting of the events of Atherton's incumbency. The 1949, 1965 and 1999 histories of the parish make no mention at all of them, and whilst the latter has access to the copies of the Pensnett Review fails to understand their context, as the nature of the original scandal had been forgotten. In any case, after Atherton's departure, the church settled down, under a series of unremarkable vicars, to the routine of Anglican life, with the major concerns being how to stop the church falling into the Earl of Dudley's mines beneath the land he had so thoughtfully provided.



## Chapter 8. Later years

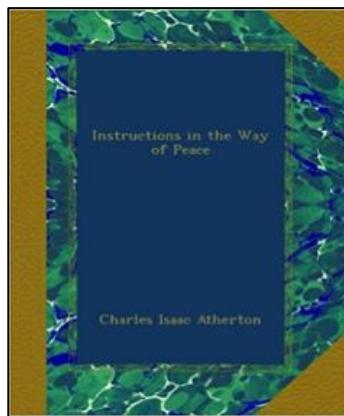
Charles Atherton's later career can be traced quite easily through ecclesiastical records. After two years at Nymphafield he moved to St Paul's in Bedminster, a working-class area of Bristol, in 1878 where, through his leadership, the church entered a period of very considerable growth. From 1885 to 1887 he spent a short period as Vicar of Snaith in Yorkshire (effectively swapping Livings so that he could recover from a further period of ill health – see below), followed by two years as Rector of Faringdon in Devon, where he was also appointed Diocesan Missioner. In 1885 he published a further book, "Instructions in the Way of Peace" (Atherton, 1885), which can be purchased as a special printing from Amazon.



**St. Bartholomew, Nymphafield; St. Paul's Bedminster St Paul. St. Laurence's Snaith**



**St. Petroc, Faringdon, Exeter Cathedral**



**Instructions in the way of peace**

He then moved to become Canon Missioner at Exeter Cathedral in 1889 where he remained until his death from throat cancer in 1907, becoming Canon Treasurer in 1891 and Warden of the Society for Mission Clergy. An article in the “Evangelical Monthly” in 1893 (a monthly publication intended as an insert to parish magazines) fills out the account of his career, although with a specific ecclesiastical spin. His time in Pensnett is described as follows.

*There was a widespread revival of religious life in Pensnett from 1864 to 1876 – large and earnest congregations in the church, intensely moving prayer meetings, out of door services at the coal pits and elsewhere – on fact all the characteristics of the early days of mission work in the Black country.*

Agnes Bowdler of course gets no mention. His later mission work both nationally and within the diocese of Exeter is reported in similarly glowing terms, and his preaching described as follows.

*Canon Atherton is a powerful and ready speaker and his sermons rarely fail to move the hearts of his hearers. He believes in conversion, which lies at the root of all mission work.*

This article also gives us another picture of Atherton – see below where he would be in his early 50s.



THE REV. CANON CHARLES ISAAC ATHERTON, M.A.,  
DIOCESAN MISSIONER FOR EXETER.  
(From a Photograph by Morris, Russell & Sons, 17, Baker Street, London, W.)

### Charles Atherton from the 1893 Evangelical Monthly

A lengthy obituary was published in the *Guardian* and republished in a *St John's College* magazine in 1907 which tells much the same story as the *Evangelical Monthly* in somewhat more measured terms. It is clear that he had considerable gifts in both administration and as a missioner and a considerable capacity for work, organized major diocesan gatherings and touched the lives of both individuals and churches. Again, no

mention is made of the incident with Agnes, or of the libel case. A common theme throughout his career seems to have been the recurrence of periods of ill health that required he lighten his workload. His life is celebrated in a monument situated in the south aisle of the cathedral. In his will he left an estate valued at £3713, a not inconsiderable sum).



### **The Atherton memorial**

Selena Atherton outlived her husband, dying in 1922. Their oldest child Ernest followed his father to St John's in Cambridge, and, like his father, became a clergyman, holding a series of parishes in the Devon. He married Sophia Loch, 20 years his senior and had no children. His sister Gertrude married Captain David Brodie-Thomas and had three children, Dorothy Gwenyth, Audrey Gwendoline and Bryn Atherton, all born in Madras in India. Neither of the two girls married and both lived to very old age until the 1980s. Bryn was killed in action in 1916. Gertrude also died that year. Selina would thus have experienced the death of her daughter and grandson within a few months of each other (see the family tree in Chapter 3).

The other major character in the saga is of course Agnes Bowdler herself. Tracing her fortunes is not altogether straightforward. As noted above, she does not appear at all in the 1871 census, at least not under her proper name, but does

reappear in the records again in 1875 when she married Samuel Edward Worton in Sheffield. The later census records reveal (after allowing for transcription errors in her surname that complicated the search) that both she and Samuel worked as schoolteachers in Halifax and Leeds, with Samuel becoming a headmaster at a County (Board) school in Elland by 1911 and Agnes becoming headmistress. She appears twice in the press in that period – in 1882 at a trial of a mother of one of her children who assaulted her in school and was duly convicted and fined; and in 1884 when she was herself accused of pulling a child's hair out - the case was dismissed, and Agnes emerged with no stain on her character. Samuel appears to have been a noted organist and gave concerts throughout the area at Methodist chapels and other venues, including at Leeds Civic Hall. They had five children – Frederick born in 1876 who died in infancy, Ralph born in 1883 who died aged 15, Adelina Minnie born in 1878, Bertrand born in 1885, and Percival born in 1886 who all survived into old age. Agnes died in 1935 in Liverpool, four years after Samuel. Pictures of them both survive – one posed photograph of Agnes and Samuel in Blackpool possibly on their honeymoon, and others of Samuel himself, including one of him at the organ.



**Samuel Worton and Agnes Bowdler (from Ancestry. Used by permission of Edward and Agnes' great-granddaughter, Soo Linacre)**

The census records indicate that Samuel himself was born in Pensnett, and in the 1871 census, when he was 15, he lived close to the New Connexion Chapel and is recorded as a pupil teacher. His father is recorded as an engineer. Lodging next door were William Hinton and Sarah Gibbons, the teacher and assistant

schoolteacher at British / Board School associated with the chapel. This, and the fact that Samuel and Agnes later moved in non-conformist circles, suggests that Samuel's position as a pupil teacher was at this School. Samuel's connection with the New Connexion church is further confirmed by the fact that in 1887 he wrote a testimonial letter that was read out at an event to mark 50 years the involvement with the church of William Barlow of the Tiled House – as founder, Steward, and Sunday School Superintendent. Also, a John Worton was a major benefactor in the building of the original Schoolroom behind the chapel, indicating a further family connection. It would seem likely that Agnes and Samuel had known each other from childhood. Unfortunately, there is no record of what happened to Agnes between 1871 and her marriage in 1875 in Sheffield, and how she again came into contact with her childhood friend. In Anglican eyes Agnes would thus have compounded her sins in leading the vicar astray by marrying a Methodist.

But there is a little more of the story to be told. In 1883 the Bishop of Ripon led a large-scale mission to the churches in Leeds. His chief assistant was George Body whom we have already met as a curate in Wednesbury and Sedgley in the 1860s but was now at a parish in North Yorkshire. On his team we find his close friend, Charles Atherton, then vicar of Bedminster. The events were well advertised in the press, including the names of the missionaries, and it seems very likely that Agnes would have been aware of Charles' presence in her locality. One wonders if they met. As mentioned above, Charles Atherton and his family made the rather dramatic move to Snaith from 1885 to 1887, and for that period they were within 20 miles of Agnes. Was there more to this than a simple move because of ill-health? There is a family story that her daughter Minnie had two very valuable rings and a diamond brooch that had been given to her mother by "Uncle Charlie" so "she would have something to fall back on if she ever needed money". There is no obvious "Uncle Charlie" in the family so this opens up a whole new area of

speculation that they met again while Charles was at Snaith, with or without the knowledge of their respective families.

## Epilogue

Both Charles Atherton and Agnes Bowdler seem to have found some sort of success and stability later in their lives. There are, however, many questions that the sources are simply unable to answer. What were the long-term effects of the events on the Atherton marriage? Did the events of 1870 and her possible exile leave their mark on Agnes in any way? Were there lasting effects on the life of Pensnett parish? Did Francis Burlton ever manage to marry off any of his spinster daughters? And who was Uncle Charlie?

The question of who wrote the anonymous letters also remains unanswered. The author's thoughts, as far as they go, have been set out at the end of Chapter 6. However, it may be that interested readers could help out here, by a careful study of the letters themselves to see if they hold any clues, and also perhaps by a study of the census returns for Pensnett in 1871 to try to identify those in the parish with a social and educational background that would have given them the ability to write the letters. I suspect that there will not be many in that position. If any reader would like to take up that challenge, the author would be glad to hear from them.



## Appendix – anonymous letter transcripts

Dudley Records Office holds a bundle of documents of different sorts that relate to the events of 1870. These are mostly undated and not chronologically arranged. These are summarised below and arranged in chronological order through a consideration of internal evidence within the texts. The suggested order is, however, far from certain. The original wording has been kept as far as possible, although the punctuation and presentation has been changed to make the text more easily readable than it was in the original, where in this regard the presentation was, to put it mildly, somewhat haphazard. But nothing of any substance has been changed.

### **By their works he shall know them**

This document has already been discussed in Chapter 5. It was probably written not long after the Atherton / Bowdler incident in late March / early April 1870. It gives some information that wasn't reported in the court proceedings – the giving of the train fares the day before; the misleading of the cab driver on the way home; the interaction with Agnes' parents and the attempted cover-up. All these have the ring of truth. In addition, there are reports of supposed conversations between Atherton and Agnes and of a signal made by “winking” from the pulpit, which are probably less reliable, and very strong condemnation of Atherton's actions, stated with some passion. Notice the title includes the word “*he*” rather than “*ye*” as might be expected.

**By their works he shall know them.**

Is it a fact that the Parson kissed and embraced the girl repeatedly in the wood and dark lanes? *Yes*

Is it a fact that he went down on his knees in his library with one arm around her waist declaring his love and trying to get an answer from the girl that she loved him? *Yes*

Is it a fact that he made arrangements with the girl for going to Birmingham? *Yes*

Is it a fact that he met her in a certain lane, the night previous to going to Birmingham, and gave her money to pay her fare, and a note stating the time and place of meeting, and parting with kisses and embraces? *Yes*

Is it a fact that he bought a necklace for her and declared he did not care what he did for those he loved? *Yes*

Is it a fact that he took her to the Circus and gave her the advice that “when everything else failed on this earth, to take to this”? *Yes*

Is it a fact that he enquired whether she was cold or not, and replying she was, saying, “Ah, Agnes, you want my arm around you to keep you warm?” *Yes*

Is it a fact they rode by themselves in a First-Class Carriage, and that he frequently kissed her? *Yes*

Is it a fact that they rode together in a cab from the station, and that she was to thank him for giving her this ride down, so that the Cabman might not think anything wrong? *Yes*

**By their works he shall know them**

Is it a fact that he told the girl to look at him in the pulpit and when he wink'd his right eye, it meant Birmingham? *Yes*

Is it a fact that when the girl's mother went to see about her daughter about being in Birmingham on the previous day, he stigmatized the man who took her there "as a villain who wanted hanging, and whether he be married or single, his motives were bad"? *Yes*

Is it a fact that after the mother's departure from his house, he sent for the girl, and persuades her to tell a lie to her parents? *Yes*

Is it a fact that when charged with being with her in Birmingham, he strongly denied it on several occasions? *Yes*

Is it a fact he gave and instructed another party to give for him, apologies confessing "the lies he told" *Yes*

Is it a fact that judging from the man's conduct at the present time, that he seems to glory in the matter? *Yes*

And this is the man who occupies our pulpit, this is the man who takes upon himself the responsibility for ministering to the wants of the people, this is the man from whom we might have expected more independence, more straightforwardness and to have been actuated by motives less selfish, hold up before the people as their pattern, in all good things.

No doubt these few facts will be denied as previous facts have been in this scandalous affair before, but still they remain facts, which cannot be denied.

*Beware of wolves in sheep's' clothing!*

**By their works he shall know them (continued)**

### **Ballad - The Parson's intrigue and the Warden's dodge**

This contains eight, ten-line verses to be sung to the tune of “Simon the Cellarer”, a drunken music hall character. Lack of any further detail beyond the description of the incident itself suggests it was written around April 1870.

Whist it is essentially doggerel, it was composed with some skill and wit. It confirms that Agnes Bowdler and Atherton met in the school and paints a picture of Benjamin Wood as Atherton’s henchman, who travelled to Lichfield to plead his case with the Bishop. Wood is identified as either simply B\_n (Ben) or B\_y (Benjy). The nickname *Buttons* is also used to describe him for the first time – it will be seen that this is common in later documents. Buttons was at that time a name for a young male servant or pageboy commonly having gilt buttons down the front of his jacket, and of course a common pantomime character. The fact that the writer knew the tune Simon the Cellarer suggests that he would also have been aware of this character.

The ballad ends with the rather damning couplet “*And oh, dear oh! Don't all of us know, this parson's religion is nothing but show?*”.

Air – Simon the Cellarer

Our Parson's a model the ladies all say,  
And a beautiful model is he  
He loveth them much, he is merry and gay,  
And playful as Parson can be.  
In church he is is grave, but in school looketh sly,  
At a pretty young maiden, with bright laughing eye,  
And a slave to the charms which he cannot evade,  
An agreement to meet at the station is made.  
And, oh dear oh! don't all of us know,  
They went to the Circus at Brummagem, 0!

The parson he sits in his study so snug,  
And he chuckles with roguish glee,  
As he buries his feet in the cosy hearth rug,  
And thinks of his nice little spree.  
He makes it his duty his pupils to teach,  
That when in the pulpit he goeth to preach,  
If he winketh his eye, she will know it means Brum,  
And then may look forward for pleasures to come.  
But, oh dear oh! the Parson don't know  
That a rod lies in pickle to wallop him, 0!

Though he feels safe within, there is danger without,  
For scandal hath tainted the gale  
And louder than gossips or slander, can shout,  
The necklet hath told its own tale.  
But the parson is cunning, and trusts to his skill,  
In words sweet and oily, the tempest to still  
And if that won't do, he can tell a big lie,  
Or threaten that legal proceedings he'll try.  
But, oh, oh, oh! don't we all know  
The parson is trying to gammon us, 0!

**Ballad - The Parson's intrigue and the Warden's dodge**

There lived in his parish a useful young man,  
Who he thinks knows a wrinkle, or two  
So he makes up his mind, it will be a good plan  
To ask him the best thing to do.

Little B\_y felt flattered, and looked mighty wise,  
His addled pate scratched, and did strongly advise,  
That the parson should own all the story was true,  
To humbly confess, and for pardon to sue.  
And, oh dear oh! don't wo all know  
The parson he wrote an apology, O!

These worthies together had worked in the Church,  
Though their sins of commission were grave.  
And they meant not each other to leave in the lurch,  
But each try the other to save.  
Said B\_n to the parson, " Cats out o'the bag,"  
"And there's nothing left for it but bluster and brag"  
"It is quite useless longer to try on the meek,"  
"So go in' to win and show plenty of cheek."  
But, oh dear oh! they found it no go,  
To make the folks swallow their blarney O!

Little **Buttons** to Lichfield then said he would go,  
And plead for his friend in disgrace,  
And at once strutted off, full of swagger and show,  
To make very light of the case.  
But the matter was weighty, and proof had been sent,  
Of the parson's misdoings, before B\_n went:  
All in vain even his efforts to cram down his trash,  
And **Buttons** soon found that his tale wouldn't wash.  
For oh, oh, oh! don't all of us know  
That B\_n also wrote an apology, O!

**Ballad - The Parson's intrigue and the Warden's dodge  
(continued)**

Little B\_n and the parson are at their wits end,  
Nor either can tell what to do;  
For they hold a position they cannot defend,  
And both of them look very blue.  
But deep in the winecup there sparkleth wit,  
And, while in close confab the two worthies sit,  
They boldly determine to catch at a straw,  
And trust to the aid of a treacherous law.  
But, oh, oh, oh! don't all of us know  
They are making a rod that will wallop them, 0!

The beginning is come, but the end is not yet,  
For the future a tale will unfold;  
And the cap on poor **Buttons** will be a tight fit,  
When the whole of the story is told.  
The parson may fast, he may preach, pray, and rant,  
But folks won't believe hypocritical cant;  
Example and precept should go hand in hand  
And. parsons should do what their duties demand.  
And oh dear oh! don't all of us know,  
This parson's religion is nothing but show!

### **Ballad - The Parson's intrigue and the Warden's dodge** **(continued)**

### **Ballad - The model parson.**

This contains twenty-nine, four-line verses telling the story of the incident, produced in two columns on one sheet. Lack of any further detail of the aftermath of the event suggests it was written around April 1870.

Again, this is composed with considerable skill and represents a significant effort. It paints a picture of Pensnett church, its services and its choir, even referring to its lack of spire. Passing reference is made to Boot, before going on to adopt a heavily moralistic tone

### **The model parson**

Now once upon a time was made  
An Act for Church Extention,  
That Parsons might from vice persuade,  
And preach for its prevention.

A church was reared, a stately pile  
Mid sooty vapours dark.  
As massive columns decked the aisle,  
Its patron was St. Mark.

And there each hallowed Sabbath morn,  
The organ's solemn strain  
Gave voice to echoes newly born,  
Which pealed them back again.

But ever boomed a dreary bell,  
Of sad prophetic sound.  
From out the chinks the lonely bell  
Ill omen'd answers found.

Portentous of its coming shame,  
No heavenward spire was built:  
The tower shrunk back from Sol's bright flame,  
And bowed its head in guilt.

To train the conscience of the young,  
And make their morals pure,  
With ready zeal a parson sprang;  
"He was a perfect cure."

**Ballad - The model parson.**

Nor did he take that office high,  
Nor bow at alter foot,  
Without a previous warning cry  
Of what befell poor B--t

Tho' zeal outrun discretion oft,  
He wrought with main and might  
The cross banner held aloft,  
And showed by candlelight.

Hymns were sung in dulcet strains,  
Processions charmed the eye.  
A foresight they of brighter plains,  
Where pleasures never die.

And when the harvest moon's pale beam  
Shone out with silver ray,  
A festal crowd thronged in a stream  
To celebrate the day.

The church was decked with garlands green,  
And sheaves of golden wheat.  
And choicest flowers and fruits were seen  
On alter, desk, and seat.

And when the holy Christmas time  
Came round with ice and cold,  
And bells rang out their merry chime  
To gladden young and old,

### **Ballad - The model parson (continued)**

Again the glorious pile they dress  
In wreaths of evergreen,  
And ivy branch and holly press  
To grace the laity scene.

And maiden fair with trusting heart,  
Obedient to his call,  
With eager haste performed her part  
To decorate the wall.

To Bible class and oft to prayer,  
Each sinner was invited,  
And Benedict, with maiden fair,  
In loving faith united

And often to his house they came  
To taste the cheering cup,  
Enjoy the joke, and merry game,  
And afterwards to sup.

Nor did those pleasures seem to pall,  
By passion's power excited,  
No finger wrote upon the wall,  
Foretelling prospects blighted:

But sad to say, in evil hour,  
Beneath that very roof,  
The tempter came, with subtle power,  
And showed the cloven hoof.

### **Ballad - The model parson (continued)**

Not all the blaze of outward rite,  
Nor works done in the past,  
Can dim the blot, or heal the blight,  
That on his name was cast,

However great might be the need  
Of mission church, or aid,  
In darkest nook to sow the seed,  
And Satan's power invade.

No denser darkness ever hung  
On man's benighted mind,  
Than senseless folly o'er him flung,  
To smite with passion blind.

Ah! little thought he of the fate  
That for him was in store,  
Or of the tale they would relate  
Who brought it. to his door

In vain he laid. the crafty scheme  
To hide his guilty plan,  
And little did he reek or dream  
His steps were known to man.

And when he bought the gaudy toy,  
The damsel's neck to grace,  
Was marked the blush of new-born joy,  
That flushed each glowing, face.

### **Ballad - The model parson (continued)**

Of no avail the brazen look,  
The tale was all too true.  
And in his shoes the parson shook  
As scandal louder grew.

In his despair he called out then,  
Where is my henchman bold?  
And straitway went to little Ben,  
To him the tale he told.

Go put this matter straight for me,  
Upon it rests a curse!  
And little Ben they all agree  
But made matter worse.

With legal phrase, and business tact,  
In black and white to hold.  
He said the parson owned the fact,  
And all the Lies he'd told.

Ye matrons grave with daughters fair,  
In whom now can ye trust?  
Words are trifles light as air,  
And Parsons are but dust.

Price Threepence

For the benefit of P\_\_\_\_tt Ch\_\_\_\_h Young Ladies' Improvement  
Society

**Ballad - The model parson (continued)**

### **Another Pensnett mystery.**

This consists of one sheet of prose, written sometime before the Bishop's Commission reported and thus in April / May 1870. In it the writer broadens his attack to other members of the church. It suggests a relationship between Selina Atherton and Wood, who apparently bought her *garters with silver buckles*. Characters are referred to by pseudonyms, some of which can be identified.

- *Buttons* for Benjamin Wood has already been mentioned, but here he is also referred to as *Cokevendor of Mushroom Villa* – i.e. a coke dealer of Bromley House. He was actually a forge owner. He may also have been a coke vendor, but why his house is referred to as *Mushroom Villa* is something of a mystery.
- *Bonevendor* is probably Samuel Blewitt, a butcher on High Street.
- *C. J. Yardstick* refers to Charles Cooper, a dealer in cloth who was a previous church warden.
- *Mr. Sawmills* is possibly the other church warden Joel Hildick, who was a Timber Merchant.
- *Mr. Swansneck* cannot be identified.

The Female Bible Class is mentioned for the first time and will be referred to again in later documents. The final phrase

*the sacred spot which was desecrated by applying to the "Unknown man" known only by the Holy vicar himself, or to Mr Cox of the Wednesbury Street Works*

remains a mystery.

## Another Pensnett Mystery

"**Buttons**, (alias **Cokevender**, of Mushroom Villa) being in possession or filthy and disgusting letter, sent to a young lady with bright flowing hair, and who attends divine services at St. Mark's, from " early morn till dewy eve," and this said letter making serious charges against the very delicate character of the **Model Parson**, the said **Buttons** has undertook to clear the whole matter up and put things in their proper places in a graceful and dignified a manner as he has tried (but most lamentably failed) to do with the case which is still pending and awaiting the Bishop's instructions. How is it that he is the " Henchman bold" in this case as well as the former?

Is it because he has the good of the Parish at heart or is there something. Hanging over him similar to that which befell the **Model Parson**? Is it the garters with silver buckles which he bought and presented to the **Model Parson's** wife, and which he has repeatedly laughed and joked about, will tell " Its own tale?" Or is it because he has found it convenient to have more than one string to his bow, and therefore, become partner; with the **Modal Parson**, who has been seen committing adultery with this said young lady more times than one?

The **Model Parson**, **Buttons**, or that very scrupulous man **Bonevender**, who consoles himself upon the amount of muscle he has or will have next year, if it don't come this, or that virtuous man, **C. J. Yardstick**, who received a Testimonial to depart, and promised to do so, but altered his mind after receiving tile Testimonial, or **Mr. Sawmills**, or **Mr. Swansneck**, or any Members or the **Female Bible Class**, held at the Parsonage, or this chaste young damsel herself can be informed of the time and of the sacred spot which was desecrated by applying to the "Unknown man" known only by the Holy vicar himself, or to Mr Cox of the Wednesbury Street Works.

Another Pensnett mystery.

*I kissed her two times on the cheek,  
I would have kiss'd her thrice,  
But I whisper'd ain't it naughty?  
She said, yes, but it's so nice.*

My Dear Parishioners,

On Sunday evening next, I shall deliver an. address on "Morality", My excuse for bringing this subject before you, is solely owing to the amount of immorality existing in this neighbourhood, and which from time to time. I have endeavoured to check without any good result, still by silent prayer, and perseverance, I do not despair from obtaining my end. You know "dear parishioners" I am well qualified to speak on this subject, having had considerable experience (and likely to have more) in the bitter. fruits of immorality. Yes, dear parishioners, I little thought my little games would be found out. my wicked ways be talked about and placed before the public in the wav they have been, but as I stated to you the other evening, the more mine enemies persecute me, the nearer I get to the cross of Christ (what blasphemous language, but they know no better, I can gull them with anything.)

*Oh! Shouldn't I like, oh my!  
Upon my word its true  
I would if I could, but if I can't,  
How can I? How could you?*

### **Sermon notice – Morality**

I shall never forget the Sunday evening, before my transportation, how affected those two lovely creatures, **step and fetchit** and **flowing hair** were. They wept like children at the thought of my leaving them, I embraced, and told them I would come again, and while I was away I would write to them; but all to no purpose, I could not comfort them, I kissed them and at last had to forcibly break away from them, the poor tender hearted creatures, but now it comforts me to find they are so true to me, and have actually presented me with a gold pencil case at the cost of three pounds ten. This kindness shown to me whose only faults are the loving sin adultery, lying, winking with the eye and a few more little cherished sins. quite unmans me: and makes me childlike and simple, till I am forced to cry out in the impressive words of the poet

*Don't be foolish Joe.*

What a noble example for any other member of the Female Bible Class to follow, if there should be anyone who feels desirous of tasting this worlds pleasures, if she will apply to me, I will arrange time and place for a rehearsal of "Natures Parables" while my wife is away from home.

My address will be taken from Proverbs 10.10 - *He that that winketh with the eye causeth sorrow: but a prating fool shall fall.*

An offertory will be made to defray the expense of necklaces and silver buckled garters presented by myself, and my henchman **Buttons**.

Vicar of St. Marks  
Boot, Hatherton and Co. Printers, Coventry

#### **Sermon notice – Morality (continued)**

## Sermon notice – Morality

In testimony at the libel trial, Charles Wall in the Fountain Inn in mid-October 1870 heard the phrase “*I kissed her two times*” while one of the notices was being discussed. As this is close to the line in the opening verse, this suggests a date of September / early October 1870, which is consistent with the fact that it refers to Atherton’s return to the parish around then.

The opening lines themselves come from the American song “*It’s naughty but it’s nice*”. The second quoted verse is from an English nursery rhyme, and the phrase “*Don’t be foolish Jo*” is from the 1847 “negro song” “*Blue eyed Rosie Lee*”.

This document introduces *Flowing Hair* (Agnes Bowdler) and *Step and fetchit* (probably another girl) who are alleged to have given Atherton a gold pencil case worth £3 10s before his “transportation”. An invite is given for Female Bible Class members to attend a rehearsal of Nature’s Parables (Atherton’s book) while his wife is away. What form this might take isn’t spelled out, but the innuendo is clear. The biblical text from Proverbs is an accurate one from the Authorised Version. It is stated that the offertory at the service will be used to defray expenses of necklaces and silver buckled garters (i.e., those bought by Atherton and Wood for Agnes and Selina), which is a recurring refrain in the documents that follow. It contains the first mention of Hatherton and Boot as publishers, which occurs in most of the documents that follow.

## Sermon notice – Virtue

By comparison with the contents of other documents this can be dated as late September / early October 1870 – specifically as it announces a “leg tickling match” that is reported in a later document.

The opening verse is a parody of the 1864 song “Pretty Polly Perkins of Paddington Green”

*She was as beautiful as a butterfly  
And proud as a Queen  
Was pretty little Polly Perkins  
Of Paddington Green*

Polly is replaced by *Flowing Hair* (Agnes) and Paddington Green by Tansey Green. Agnes was from Bromley of course, but Eliza Brinton, from the Boot scandal, was from Tansey Green. This seems to be a deliberate conflation of the Atherton / Bowdler affair with the Boot / Brinton affair. The second quoted song is from 1862 – J.H.Stead’s song and dance routine “The Perfect Cure”. Atherton has already been referred to in that way in “The model parson”

The notice refers again to *Yardstick* and his *Virtuous Housekeeper* – Charles Cooper and his assistant Elizabeth Pope. It also introduces *Butcher Beckley* (Benjamin Beckley, Butcher on High Street) and *Grandfather and Grandmother Wheelwright* (Charles and Martha Wall on Commonside), with the latter accused of listening at doors. The biblical text is from Proverbs 6.3 in the Authorised Version. The document announces that Female Bible Class will shortly be holding annual “leg tickling” match. *Bonevendor* is taking bets and *Flowing Hair* and *Step and Fetchit* are favourites.

*She was as beautiful, as a butterfly,  
And as proud as a queen,  
Was the pretty little flowing hair'd one,  
Late of Tansey Green*

My Dear Parishioners,

On Sunday evening next, I shall deliver an address on "Virtue" one of the noblest gifts one can enjoy, and that which all admire, no earthly joy can be complete and lasting without it, so my "dear parishioners" you see the importance of this address at this time. I have spoken to you on many occasions on this subject yet there still remains a great lack of this noble gift amongst us. I know I have committed myself and been found out in my sensual practices but still in spite of what mine enemies say about me, I defy them to do me any harm. Yes "my dear parishioners" I have plenty of cheek and impudence which I mean to use and so thwart mine enemies' intentions.

*For I'm a cure, a cure; a cure,  
For I'm the perfect cure.*

I am sorry my first pastoral letter should have hurt the sensitive mind of **C J Yardstick** and his **virtuous housekeeper**, but the truth does sometimes become painful to ones mind, I am rather afraid he's showing the white feather, but be careful **Yardstick** and keep your "pecker up" or not a single order shall you have from the clothing club.

### **Sermon notice – Virtue**

I have already given orders to one of **Butcher Beckley's** **oldest** customers. not to have any more meat from his shop. and since that time, she has not had any. So beware **Yardstick** or you will bitterly rue the day. Such is my Christian feeling towards mine enemies. -still I pray for them. and shall be ready at any time to receive a. subscription from them towards establishing a fund, for any unfortunate member of the **Female Bible Class**. who may get into trouble through my rehearsals of Natures parables with them. Look at **Grandfather and Grandmother Wheelwright**, and their Bull pup son. what an example they set, how arduous they worked and see how the old **Granny** goes snooking about at night. listening at people's doors to hear if anyone says anything about me.

I might here say that **step and fetchit** has been to the Vicarage for a rehearsal last week, in the absence of my wife we had a glorious time, and everything work'd smoothly,

My address will be founded on the following - *He winketh with his eyes he speaketh with his feet, he teacheth with his fingers.*

The offertory as usual for necklaces and Silver Buckled garters presented by myself. and my henchman to **Buttons**.

N B The-Female Bible Class will shortly hold their annual Leg tickling match, Stakeholder **Mr Bonevendor** Betting 10 to 1. on **flowing hair**, 8 to 1 on **step and fetchit**, one or two outsiders may come in for a place.

Vicar St. Marks,  
Boot Hatherton and Co, printers, Coventry

#### Sermon notice – Virtue (continued)

*Champagne Charlie is my name,  
Out at night for a game my boys,  
Champagne Charlie is my name.*

My dear Parishioners,

On Sunday evening next, I intend to give airs address on truthfulness. which you know, my dear parishioners, is a great attribute of mine, and a great virtue to all, and we all know with what contempt, all sensible people look upon a liar. You know my dear parishioners what troubles and anxieties I have had to undergo during the last six months, and easily I might have got through it if I had told a lie or two. But, my dear parishioners, my conscience would. Not let me, so I have been at martyr to the truth.

*But now my boys, let's go all in  
Heads or tails I'm safe to win  
Tommy Dodd, Tommy Dodd  
Hurrah for Tommy Dodd*

"*Slap, Bang here I am again*" and now will make up for all the lost time with the young ladies, no doubt they have been put about by my absence. Poor things: and you see we have been unable to have a harvest thanksgiving as usual. Eh, that was a jolly time. when the young ladies used to decorate the walls of our holy sanctuary, while I held the chair with one hand and tickled their pretty legs with the other.

### **Sermon notice – Truthfulness**

Ha! Ha! Ha! Oh. How they would follow me about. and hug and kiss me and of course I had to return the compliment.

I may here state that I have had tea provided for the young lady of **flowing hair** notoriety, also that graceful young lady **step and fetchit** in my private room every Sabbath afternoon during my absence. showing my liberality and kindness toward the members of our Female Bible Class, whilst the poor old men and women must look out for themselves.

One thing has pained me since my return. that is **Mr Bonevendor**. It has stated to many of mine enemies that I am a bad man and. that if he was on his deathbed he would not send for me. Ah, he does not know what sin he has committed in my absence, such as horse racing and betting on the race and ordering the parties to throw up the sponge. Oh, it is very wicked of you Sammy.

My address will be founded on the words *All liars shall have their portion in the lake which burns with fire and brimstone.*

An offertory will be made to' defray the expense of necklaces and Silver Buckled Garters presented by myself and my henchman **Buttons**.

Vicar St. Marks

Boot Hatherton and Co, printers, Coventry

### Sermon notice – Truthfulness (continued)

### **Sermon notice – Truthfulness.**

The document makes reference to Atherton's time away from the parish and the probable date is in mid-October 1870. It contains verses from two music hall songs “Champagne Charlie is my name” by Alfred Lee and George Leybourne from 1866, a fairly obvious reference to Atherton's supposed drinking habits, and some doggerel featuring “Tommy Dodd” – a musical hall slang name for the one who goes “out” in a coin tossing game. One song that features this phrase also includes “Slap, Bang here I am again” as in the document.

The document describes young ladies decorating the sanctuary (for harvest?), whilst Atherton holds a chair in one hand and tickles their legs with the other – this is perhaps a precursor to the Tickling Match described below. It is alleged that Atherton arranged tea parties for *Flowing Hair* and *Step and Fetchit* while he was away. Poor relations with *Bonevendor* are described, and he is castigated for his betting activities. The apocalyptic scripture text that is quoted is from Revelation 21.8.

## Notice of Harvest festival

The date is probably in mid-October 1870, although any Harvest Festival at St. Mark's could be expected to have occurred in mid-September if the practice of previous years had been followed. The verse with which it begins isn't obviously a quote from anywhere although "la de da" was a slang term from the 1860s. As it refers to Atherton's and Boot's behaviour it may indeed be an original composition.

*Flowing Hair* is quoted as saying that "if I (Atherton) had done to her in public what I have done in private mine enemies might well talk about me". The document describes the leg tickling match held the Tuesday before, in terms of horses and jockeys (the by-names of whom are given) and much sexual innuendo of a fairly unpleasant nature. The following identifications can be added to those made earlier.

*Packman's daughter* - Eliza Bryce, Benjamin Wood's wife

*Dirty white and Dirty white's wife* – David Bryce and Ann Bryce

*Miss Popwell, Grandfather's beauty, Cornfield, Buxom widow' Pumice stone* and *Granny's darling* cannot be identified, but no doubt they were all church members.

The notice ends with the announcement that the silver buckled garters and necklace together with pencil case are on display, with a private viewing for ladies.

*To la de da with the ladies,  
For that is the style that suits,  
The noble frame and glorious name,  
Of Atherton, successor to Boots.*

My dear parishioners.

On Sunday evening. next you will perceive by notice already given, that the service or solemn mockery, will be a continuation of the harvest thanksgiving. The walls of the holy sanctuary will be beautifully decorated, and I shall try and fool my henchman **Buttons** to send for more flowers from Covent Garden Market. Since issuing my last pastoral **flowing hair** as stated- "if I had done the same things to her in public as I have done to her in private, mine enemies might well talk about me.". What a confession to make, but children and. fools generally speak the truth.

The leg tickling Match took place on Tuesday evening, the excitement was intense, Betting freely on the favourites **Flowing hair** and **Step and fetchit** 8 to 1, **Virtuous housekeeper** 12 to 1, the **Buxom widow** had her admirers, and a good round sum was laid on her at 20 to 1, **Dirty white's wife** was freely backed at 15 to 1. Of the outsiders **Packman's daughter** and **Sawmills wife**. 28 to 1 was offered and taken, while **Miss Popwell** was short of her jockey. and **Grandfathers beauty** was hardly in condition so soon after her severe illness. Soon after the match began **Grandfathers beauty** was seen to be in distress, the **Virtuous housekeeper** looking up smartly. while **Sawmill's wife** was doing well, **Packman's daughter** - soon followed the Beauty, while **Dirty white's wife** was doing merrily and enjoying the fun much, while the favourites were working away rapidly.

### Notice of Harvest festival

After a little white the **Buxom widow, Sawmill's wife**, and the **Virtuous housekeeper**, dwindled away through giving vent to their feelings, so being overcome were left behind. Now the excitement was intense both working away at a rapid rate, **Flowing hair** working well, **Step and fetch it** doing wonders. At last, **Step and fetch it** left leg began to weary, and she had to succumb to **Flowing hair**, who won by 3 tickles and a  $\frac{1}{2}$ . **Bonevendor** expressing himself well pleased and satisfied, handed the stakes over, while too much praise cannot be given to the **Holy vicar's** wife. for the admirable talents display'd in starting them so well. The following are the entries,

**Starters**

Packman's daughter  
Step and fetch it  
Dirty white's wife  
Flowing hair  
Miss Popwell  
Sawmills Wife  
Grandfather's beauty  
Buxom widow  
Virtuous housekeeper

**Jockeys**

Sawmills  
Dirty white  
Buttons  
Holy Vicar  
Yardstick  
Cornfield  
Pumice stone  
Granny's darling

A special offertory will be made for purposes which cannot be made public.

NB I might here say that the silver buckled garters and necklace. together with the pencil case will be on view, a private view for ladies.

Vicar St. Marks

Boot, Hatherton and Go, printers, Coventry

**Notice of Harvest festival**

*Oh! cackle, cackle, cackle, cackle, a morning's early dawning,  
Cock a doodle doo my friends, gives us all a warning  
Fresh new laid eggs for breakfast every morning,  
Chuck, chuck; chuck, chuck, chuck, chuck cock-a-doodle doo.*

My dear parishioners,

On Sunday evening next, I intend to give an address on "Character." A good character is invaluable, and no one knows the worth of it more than myself, and no one would prize it more if I could establish in the minds of my "dear parishioners a feeling of confidence and respect towards me. I am very sorry I doubted the sincerity of my excellent friend **Yardstick**, who declares his steadfastness towards me, and to stand by me through thick and thin. Hurrah for **Yardstick!** - a perfect model of innocence and sincerity. but who nevertheless always goes the way (right or wrong) which pays best. Also, that naughty **Sammy Bonevendor** has said "if I do not pay him my account for meat he shall place it in the County Court." Oh, you naughty little false man I do not owe you a fraction, but you shall hear of this again very soon.

What an excellent plan I adopted for the decoration of our holy sanctuary; but what opinion had I of the ladies and gentlemen. who did the decorating, that I could not trust them together? Does it not plainly prove what has been stated in one of my former pastorals, concerning the leg tickling on the chair to be true? **Flowing hair** denies having said what was reported in my last pastoral, about my private and public performances with her, but it's as true as the gospel,

I daresay, she will deny telling anyone about sleeping at the vicarage, and breakfasting on ham and new laid eggs, and of having spent a pleasant hour with me in my study, with the door firmly fastened!!

#### Sermon notice - Character

What a touching, and beautiful scene, was witnessed at the last Tea Meeting of the **Female Bible Class**, held at the Vicarage; picture to yourself my dear parishioners, a blooming young damsel, who was stricken by illness, I was so affected that I immediately placed chairs together and laid her down on them, declaring my belief all the while, that she wanted bleeding, and while another loving sister held the basin, I gently moved her dress, and touched her in a very sensitive part quoting a passage from Natures Parables the while, when she instantly recovered. What an instructive, and practical lesson, to place before them, a lesson which they will never forget.

**Buttons** - you've been up to your dirty work again, spying and holding out inducement in the shape of money, and then denying it. Why, you will get noted for your lies as bad as myself, and that need not be, but you shall hear more from me next week Mr **Buttons**.

An offertory as usual for necklace and silver buckled garters presented by thyself and **Buttons**.

N. B. A new series in preparation and will appear in a few weeks.

Subscriptions received at headquarters with thanks during the week, Sympathy 5s. Joseph 2s, Redhot 3s, Collier 6d, Chip in milk 1s.

Vicar St. Marks  
Boot, Hatherton and Go, printers, Coventry

#### **Sermon notice – Character (continued)**

### **Sermon notice - Character**

It is explicitly stated that this follows on from the Harvest document, so a date in late October 1870 is most likely. It begins with a quote that is probably from a children's rhyme, although the precise equivalent cannot be located.

The animosity against *Bonevendor* continues and he is said to be taking Atherton to court for unpaid bills. *Flowing Hair* denies the comments from the last notice concerning public and private actions. There is an unpleasant description of sexual touching in the Ladies Bible Class, whilst quoting Nature's Parables. Notice is given that a new series of documents is in preparation. The document ends (as do those that follow) with a list of "subscriptions" - perhaps for unfortunate members of the Female Bible Class referred to in the Sermon Notice on Virtue.

## **Sermon notice – Charity**

This document was circulating in the Swan Inn on 9th November 1870 according to witnesses in the libel trial, and thus a date of late October or early November 1870 is likely. It begins with a verse from an unknown source, which records clearly indicate was known and used in the 1870s. Its use here seems quite appropriate.

The letter describes how Atherton is no longer giving his business to local shopkeepers who are critical of him. It castigates *Buttons* for doing the dirty work of *Yardstick* (a previous church warden) and threatens to reveal something that occurred just after *Buttons'* marriage. A christening party at the Swan is described, where Atherton is alleged to have been drunk. *Buttons* and *Buggins* are said to have been in a violent altercation with others after a church service.

*Sheepskins and beeswax,  
Thunder, pitch and plaster,  
The more you try to pull it off,  
Its sure to stick the faster*

My dear parishioners,

On Sunday next, I shall deliver an address on charity. Since my return amongst you, I have done all the good I possibly could for those who would uphold me in my damnable and lustful practices, whilst to those who have desired to speak and act according to the dictates of their own consciences, I have done all I could to injure them in their business, and have actually sent to Brierley Hill and Dudley for articles which cost no more than tuppence before I would spend a farthing with some of my dear parishioners, but truly charity inspires towards our enemies forgiveness and humanity. **Mr. Buttons**, the tool of the hundred-faced man **Yardstick**, doing his dirty work, which he dares not do himself, because he would sell a yard or two less calico per week; “henchman bold” to himself, and the laughingstock of the village. Why should you put yourself forward to defend me? Did you not forbid my late curate, Rev B\*\*\*\*y from visiting at your house? And did you not forbid your wife from speaking to him, because you were jealous of him? Oh, mushrooms!!!! What a man to be played with in this way; but I hope I shall hear no more of you making yourself so busy in this matter again, or I shall have to call your attention to an occurrence soon after your marriage.

#### Sermon notice – Charity

We all recollect the fun and stir a short time ago about Mr. **Button's** daughter being christened, and the admirable repast that was provided at his house for a few friends. The wines were excellent and soon began to tell on the company. Our **Holy Vicar** proposed the health of one and another till he was quite done up. The following was the last he tried at – “This is the happiest moment of my life (hic), my Curates attend to the church (hic), my wife attends to the curates (hic) and I propose my excellent friends health, Mr. Cooper (hic) and down he tumbled into his chair. This holy man of God quite drunk and incapable of taking care of himself. I might here explain that the packman's daughter is the wife of our old friend **Buttons** also that **Dirty white's** wife did exceedingly well in the tickling match, and had she had a better jockey, she might have been close on the favourites.

What Christian men I have around me. There's little **Buggins** who can't go along the street on the Sabbath morning without disgracing himself by fighting, and then running away. There's our old friend **Buttons** leaves the holy sanctuary. He can't get home without threatening to give another \_\_\_\_ good hiding, but dare not, so fetches others to do it, and so set up a fight on Sabbath evenings. With such defenders, the Church of Christ must and shall overcome its enemies.

An offertory as usual for necklace and silver buckled partners.

Subscriptions received – Eggs and ham 6s; Cork leg 3s; Joey 3d,

Vicar St. Marks  
Boot, Hatherton and Go, printers, Coventry

#### Sermon notice – Charity (continued)

*He's just the man that would,  
He's just man that would,  
Of course he would, you know he would,  
He's just the man that would.*

My Dear Parishioners,

On Sunday evening next, I intend to give an address on “Faith”. No doubt you have heard much on this subject, but still there remains much more to be said. I have a faith, a living faith, that mine enemies will soon be tired and worn out, and that I shall be at liberty again, to carry on my hellish, and devilish work, under the garb of a minister of Christ.

It's very strange but still true, --those birds of a feather flock together. Here's the smiling and innocent **David** been up to a nice little game. with his maid servant. But for decency's sake we'll not mention what past.

*Derry down, down, down, derry down*

Not but what our old friend **Buttons** did the same thing with his maid servant, not a long time since, and myself, my dear parishioners, you know my little games to well for me to repeat them. What a pretty sight to gaze on in our holy sanctuary, poor **David** with his browny white surplice on, noble **Buttons** parading the aisles, while I myself read in my usual style *Thou shalt not commit adultery*. How solemn and inoffensive we look, while one exclaims to the other, *When shall we three meet again.*

### Sermon notice - Faith

How pugilistic my defenders are, and how courageous. There's that great dirty looking man **Grandfather Wheelwright**, who is quite as clean before he's washed as after, challenges, and wants to fight that poor one-armed man, the greengrocer, because he dare to say what he believed to be true. What valour characterises them. Look at **Buttons** and his two bungeys, what a glorious conquest they achieved, the other Sabbath evening, each armed with a stick they gave two kicks and a blow with a stick, and then took to their heels. Such deeds will surely be handed down to future generations, and I myself would propose a full Choral Service to commemorate this affair. If so be, we could have another drunken spree after it, at the expense of our liberal friend **Buttons**. I have heard that those pleasant and agreeable looking people (who look as if they lived on crabs and vinegar) **Mr & Mrs Swansneck**, are busying themselves again in this matter, if so, I shall assuredly place them in the coming category. And though they have caught a mackerel this time, (to wit, the Choristers feast,) they will very likely hook a sprat just now.

Many of my dear parishioners are anxious to know where **Flowing hair** and myself went, when the excursion to Kenilworth Castle took place. This is a question which I do not feel inclined to answer at present.

The new series will commence next week.

Offertory as usual for Necklace and Garters.

Subscriptions received, Lily 3s. X. Y. Z 23, 6d,

Vicar St. Marks

Boot, Hatherton and Go, printers, Coventry

### Sermon notice – Faith (continued)

## Sermon notice - Faith

This implies a new series of documents will be circulated in the following week. The likely date is mid-November 1870, with the first edition of the Pensnett Review out in the last week of November. The verses that open the document cannot be traced but the phrase “derry down” etc. is a fairly common folk song refrain.

It introduces *David* who played a nice little game with his maidservant and alleges that *Buttons* did the same not long ago. *David* is probably David Bryce, the future churchwarden, David is said to wear a browny white surplice in church. This possibly identifies him as *Dirtywhite* and his wife Ann as *Dirtywhite's wife*. The allegations are followed by the well-known witch's quote from Macbeth. Altercations after church services are again referred to, and *Mr and Mrs Swansneck* are referred to in rather obscure terms. A question is raised, but not answered, about what Atherton and *Flowing Hair* did during the recent excursion to Kenilworth Castle.

## Pensnett Review 2

If there ever was a Pensnett Review 1, a copy has not survived. Review number 2 is dated December 1<sup>st</sup>, 1870. This particular document does not refer to any song. It is perhaps the most vicious of them all, with a sustained attack on Atherton's character, and a suggestion that he forced Boot out of the parish to obtain the living. How he was meant to have manipulated the divorce court is not clear. The document then moves on to make allegations of ingratitude against some unnamed couple in the village. A verse referring to *Flowing Hair* with tassels on her boots, and a riddle relating back to the eye-winking exercise is given. The printers are again said to be Boot and Hatherton from Coventry, but this time it is said that the document is printed on behalf of Sarbuts. This word is apparently Birmingham slang for a police informer, that according to the OED was first referred to in the Birmingham Daily Mail in 1897, so this may be of some etymological significance!

## Pensnett Review

No. 2 Thursday December 1, 1870  
Post free

(From our special correspondent.)

To-the Saints in and round about Pensnett.

Holy Brethren. You will remember that in the clays of my predecessors in the Apostleship, Peter and Paul) and also in later times, how the enemies of our religion persecuted the saints on earth. Being carnal and sensually minded, they heeded not the things above, but pandered to the things of earth, reviling the Elders and Apostles of the churches, and bringing contempt upon the ordinances of the same. But beloved as there were scoffers then, so also are there scoffers now, and I intreat you to avoid such unseemly persons, and keep in memory the things I have spoken to you. Recollect that divine saying "*By their fruits ye shall know them,*" and when my persecutors and slanderers speak disrespectfully of me, rebuke them, and say "*Ye understand not the spirit*".

(To be continued.)

### Our Holy Vicar

Why this man got nearly all the evidence which was adduced against the **Rev Boot**; and after it was arranged for a Curate to be placed here, and the parishioners paid what was owing to them, this treacherous wretch reaped up all the evidence he could get and forced the matter into the Divorce Court. And why did he do this?

## Pensnett Review 2

Simply because he wanted the living and did not care a fig neither for the feelings of his friend, nor the interests of the parishioners, so that he might have it. And now what has he done with it? Why split on the very same rock: and he must surely have followed the Rev Boot had he had a Curate who could have sunk low enough to prove as treacherous to him as he himself did to the Rev Boot.

And now the poor cowardly poltroon goes skulking about at night disguised, for fear the "dear parishioners" should recognize him, and if it should so happen that circumstances compel him to come out in the daytime he goes about like a convicted felon. Surely judgment is come to this man in this world for his hellish actions toward his friend.

(To be continued)

### **Village Gossip**

A few years ago, a remarkable circumstance took place, a child was born four months after the marriage of a renowned [but at that time poor] lady and gentleman and nothing was provided to wrap the innocent babe in: things had to be borrowed from - the neighbours before the sweet little cherub could be made comfortable. Since that time this worthy couple have made rapid strides in the world and have perhaps forgotten the friend who were so kind to them then. Who are these remarkable persons?

(To be continued)

### **Pensnett Review 2 (continued)**

### Law Intelligence

The Pensnett scandal - This case is to be heard on the 6th of December.

### Tit Bits

*Those tassels on the boots*

*A style I'm sure that suits*

*Our "flowing hair" with hair in curls*

*Those tassels on the boots*

Why is love like a potato? Because it shoots front the (right or left] eye.

Strive to learn from all things.

N. B. A small space allotted for correspondents.

Published for **Sarbut** by Boot, Hatherton and Go, printers, Coventry

### Pensnett Review 2 (continued)

## Up in a balloon

The last of the documents is dated March 10<sup>th</sup>, 1871. If there were any others between the second edition of the Pensnett Review in December 1870 and this one, they have not survived. It announces a forthcoming confirmation, presents a satirical self-defense of Atherton's own character, and mentions some of those in earlier documents. In the main, however, it satirizes Benjamin Wood's election to the new Kingswinford School Board – giving him the post-nominals MKSB and saying his somewhat dubious character is ideally suited to the position. It also indicates that *Miss Popwell* and *Step and fetch it* are due to open a new school in Chapel Street. It ends in the usual way with printer details, but also includes the name *Charliekey* – perhaps some reference to Atherton?

My dear Parishioners,

In placing another pastoral into our hands allow nee to call your attention to the Confirmation Service and address by the Bishop on Friday next. You must "my dear parishioner" see the necessity of this Service, so that you may lead a godly, righteous, and sober life, not heeding the things which belong to the flesh, but looking forward to the time when you may gratify all devilish and lustful desires, without a stain upon your character as I have done since I came amongst you as your spiritual guide. Though, you will have perhaps a little more difficulty than myself in doing so, for I have appearance in my favour, some would take me for a broken down sportsman, or billiard marker out of a situation, or a bully for some of the characters, my friend **Sammy Bonevendor** can so delicately and gracefully describe when talking about his customers and neighbours: but "dear parishioners" I can defy anyone to speak against my position as a minister of Christ, or against my moral character either.

*So let the bottle pass and have another glass  
To the girls I love so well and true.*

Hurrah! hurrah! hurrah! for my old friend **Buttons**. Congratulate him "my dear parishioners" upon his success, for a better man, could not be found. The right man in the right place, a man who not only reads his Bible, but who lives up to its requirements and one who can either make a bet on a horse race, or swear as heartily as a bargeman, or defend a minister of Christ who loves wine and strange women better than his own wife, or better than his Lord and Master above.

### Up in a balloon

Yes, my old friend **Buttons**, deserves the honour of being a Member of the School Board, all communications to be addressed **B. Buttons**, esquire, M.K.S.B, Mushroom Villa.

I must also, my dear parishioners, call your attention to the proposed School **Miss. Popwell**, and Miss. **Step and fetch it** intend opening in Chapel Street. It will be under the superintendence of myself, and friend **Buttons** who has offered a Prize for the first pupil a who can spell *parrish* with one *r*.

I might also say, my dear parishioners, that I shall give the Special Address on Sunday evening next to the newly Confirmed, believing it cannot come with better grace from anyone than myself for who has experienced as much as I have, for breaking my Confirmation vow, and who can tell them so well the sweets as well as the bitters of vice, immorality and beastiality, so well as those who have suffered therefrom.

My compliments to **Virtuous housekeeper, Flowing hair** and others which I have not had time to notice, but who shall receive my best attention in my next.

(To be continued.)

Charliekey  
Pensnett,  
March. 16, 1871.

Boots, Hatherton and Go, printers, Coventry

### Up in a balloon (continued)