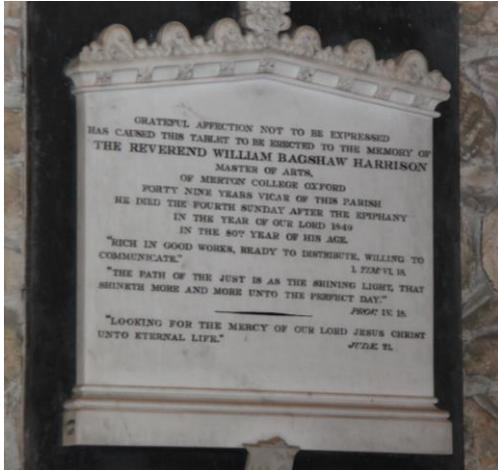


Village Echoes

During the 19th century, vicars, once appointed to a living, tended to stay for life. This was certainly true of William Bagshaw Harrison who was appointed vicar of St Mary's in 1801, a position he held for the next 48 years until his death in 1849, aged 79. This makes him St Mary's longest serving incumbent, pipping James Sanderson Clarke (vicar from 1864 to 1911) by just one year.



Harrison was born in Daventry, Northants in 1769, the youngest of the four children of Henry Bagshaw Harrison and his wife Catherine Wymont. The Bagshaw in the men's names refers to Mary Bagshaw, mother of Henry and thus grandmother of our vicar. William was educated at Rugby School, followed by Merton College, Oxford and ordained as a Deacon at Peterborough Cathedral in 1791. In December 1794 he was appointed as a curate in Bugbrooke, Northants.

However, less than a year later he had moved to Gillingham, Kent, again as a curate, and it is possibly

here that he met his future wife, Charlotte Tonkin. They married in Gillingham on 8th January 1799 and their eldest child, Charlotte Affleck Harrison, was born there in April 1800. Other appointments followed – minor canon at Rochester Cathedral in January 1801, and a perpetual vicar of Darenth in May the same year.

In June 1801 the resident vicar of Goudhurst, Robert Polhill, who had been in office for 42 years, died aged 67. Harrison must have been seen as a safe pair of hands for the inhabitants of Goudhurst as, despite the short duration of his last two appointments, he promptly resigned from both positions and moved to Goudhurst. The official record states that his appointment was considered as *“vital that Goudhurst have a resident and respectable minister as [the parish is] populous and extensive”*. Thus, at the age of 32, he arrived in Goudhurst in October 1801 accompanied by his wife and young daughter. The baptismal records for St Mary's show that the couple had a further seven children (two sons, William Bagshaw 1803; Henry 1813, and five daughters); sadly, his daughter Charlotte died in 1812, just one month short of her twelfth birthday.

Both his sons followed him into the ministry. Indeed Henry, who at the time of his birth was so sickly that he was privately baptised in case he did not survive, went on to become the first vicar of Christ Church, Kilndown. In 1816 Harrison was instrumental in the formation of a National School for the poorer children of the village - one of the first in Kent - and when it outgrew its premises in 1824, he was able to obtain a grant of £120 from the National Society for the Promotion of the Education of the Poor for a new school on Clay Hill. Other than this, nothing is known of the life of William Bagshaw Harrison during his 48 years in the parish, but at the time of his death the newspapers described him as an *“esteemed and venerable vicar, most revered and loved by his parishioners”*.

One mystery remains: in 1937 the parish magazine noted that a *“framed oil painting”* of William Bagshaw Harrison had been given to St Mary's and was to be hung in the vestry. Is this now languishing in someone's attic? If you know of this or its whereabouts, the Local History Society would be delighted to hear from you.