
Reverend Edward Bryan

The divisive vicar of Hensall

Michael Wright and David Hookham



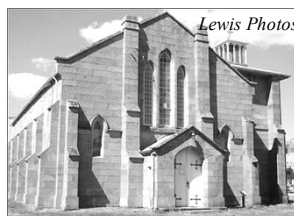
*Revd Edward Bryan
(on the right)
In 1895*

In 1900, after 14 years as vicar of the parish of Hensall-cum-Heck, the Revd Edward Bryan, hallowed and reviled in equal measure, delivered a farewell address to his parishioners, vacated the vicarage, and brought to a close one of the most remarkable ecclesiastical episodes of the 19th century. Among his supporters he inspired affection and admiration.

Yet his critics mounted stiff opposition that reached the level of archbishop, prompted questions in parliament and made Hensall a battleground for the conflicting religious standpoints of his day.

Family Background

Members of the Bryan family were no strangers to the Anglican church. Edward's paternal grandfather was the Revd Charles Bryan, rector of the Gloucestershire parish of St Andrews, Woolaston, and chaplain to the Duke of Beaufort. Edward's father was his namesake, Revd Edward Bryan Snr, who emigrated to Tasmania and became attached to St Mary's Church, Dysart about 20 miles northwest of Hobart, the capital. In 1849, Bryan Snr married Harriet Palmer. Her father was the Revd Philip Palmer, an émigré English evangelist who ministered to the people of old Hobart town.



St Mary's Church, Dysart

Edward Bryan Jnr was born in 1857. Two siblings died in infancy but a brother and two sisters survived. In 1860, life changed dramatically for the Bryans when Edward Snr died suddenly of a heart condition. At that time, the family were living in Victoria where Bryan was chaplain to the Pentridge Stockade, a harsh penal institution designed to help deal with the increased crime rate caused by the Australian gold rush that began in the 1850s. Following the death of her husband, Harriet quickly decided the family's future lay in England. Two months later, the *Wellesley* set sail from Victoria carrying the newly widowed Harriet and her four children: Charles (age 7), Edward (3) and infants Mary and Alice.

Bryan and the Catholic Church

As they settled into their new life in England, the Bryans slipped effortlessly into the comforting embrace of the church, which had a special appeal for Edward. Drawn to

the Oxford Movement - which acknowledged a relationship between the Church of England and the Roman Catholic church - Edward became convinced of the benefits of introducing Catholic practices into Anglicanism. When he entered the ministry, he took with him a new, controversial form of 'ritualism' that included elements of Catholicism: forms of dress; the use of bells, candles and incense; terms such as 'mass'; revering the saints; and venerating the Blessed Virgin Mary. This set him at odds with certain groups within church and society that considered such practices to be a form of idolatry and, crucially, an attempt to separate the Church of England from its Protestant identity.



The Christian Martyr
(Revd Arthur Tooth)
Vanity Fair, Feb 1877

After studying theology in Durham, the newly ordained Revd Bryan was appointed curate of Penistone (1880) before moving to Helmsley in 1882. At this time, talk among the ritualists often centred on the effects of the Public Worship Regulation Act (1874), introduced to parliament as a Private Member's Bill by the archbishop of Canterbury. It was designed to stop Anglican clergy using vestments, candles and incense, and to make them follow carefully the directions in the *Book of Common Prayer*. Prosecutions, often encouraged by the evangelical Church Association, were brought against those who refused to comply; some of them were sent to prison.

After Bryan became vicar of Hensall in 1886, he was seen by his local supporters as a dedicated and saintly man who worked tirelessly for the parish and its people. He was, however, a committed ritualist and his conscience would allow no wavering. So battle lines were drawn in three main areas: the introduction of what were seen as Roman Catholic practices; Bryan's relationship with the school; and the erection of a large crucifix near the church.

Religious Practices

In his 1906 book, *Church and State in England and Wales, 1829-1906*, Michael McCarthy devotes several pages to the happenings at Hensall during Edward Bryan's ministry. McCarthy claims to hold no religious standpoint but rather gives the game away when he



Methodist Recorder, 26 Feb 1903

A Hensall church procession led by Revd Bryan

claims to take the view ‘of the millions of British Christians who have unreservedly taken their stand with Christ—the greatest of all Protestants’ (p15). He lists the offending objects introduced by Bryan, which include: a high altar with candles, a figure of the Virgin Mary, a confessional with stole and rosary, and stations of the cross. These criticisms chimed with those published three years earlier in the *Methodist Recorder*. In his article *The Bane and the Antidote* Methodist minister Revd Henry Bunting tells of the pageantry and processions around the village, boys swinging incense along the way, and recounts a meeting between a schoolboy and ‘gentleman’ that shocked the adult. ‘Can you repeat the Lord’s Prayer?’ asks the gentleman.’ ‘No, Sir; but I can say the Hail Mary!’

Hensall Parochial School

Beset by the joint forces of the Church of England hierarchy, the Church Association and the local Methodist church, Bryan might have thought his foes were all before him. Not so. Perhaps it was his knowledge that Lord Downe (who built the school, vicarage and church) sympathised strongly with the Oxford Movement. Or possibly his feelings of security in that the school had been given in trust to the vicar and churchwardens. But Bryan’s belief that he had unlimited access to pupils - including those of dissenting parents - and could therefore control their religious education, was an error of judgement that led him into extended conflicts on two fronts: with parents and with the school’s current and later ‘masters’ (now called headteachers).



MW

The school and school house (white) next to the old vicarage

George Mason was appointed master in January 1868 after a period of closure following the dismissal of the previous master due to incompetence. Mason, by contrast, is described by a succession of vicars as ‘a careful and painstaking teacher’. In 1884, the diocesan inspector noted: ‘The children are taught with care and showed on the whole a very fair knowledge of the work in which they were examined.’ Yet that same year the vicar, William Hawkins, stated: ‘There is a slovenliness about the work and a want of preparation which evince carelessness and thoughtlessness on the part of the master’. He refused to recommend a merit grant, thereby reducing the school’s funding.

When Bryan took up his post as vicar, tensions soon arose between him and the master and Bryan decided the school needed new leadership. In September 1888, as attitudes hardened, Mason's contract was terminated. When he resisted, the vicar and churchwardens went to Snaith Petty Sessions to secure an 'ejection warrant' against him. A new master was appointed and, until Mason vacated the school house, alternative arrangements were made for the children to be taught in Heck.

Irrespective of the merits of the case, the spectacle of Hensall's vicar evicting the school's master and his family - his next door neighbours - galvanised local opposition. School attendance fell from 92 in May 1886 to 57 in November '88. Some parents sought schools outside the village. Others withdrew their children from religious education. Mason's successor, Harry Caulton, resisted Bryan's interference yet stayed less than two years. More than a decade later, with no resolution to the underlying tensions, Samuel Smith, MP asked the Education Minister if he would intervene to stop the Catholic teaching taking place in Hensall school. The minister declined, stating it was outside of his powers.

The Crucifix

When Edward Bryan erected an imposing three metre crucifix near the church in 1889 it caused outrage on a grand scale. The Church Association accused Hensall of not only teaching 'Romish' practices in its parochial school but of having the only wayside crucifix in England. Members of the Protestant Truth Society (PTS), inflamed by stories of the Hensall happenings, decided to take direct action. Seven men arrived in Hensall by train. They went into the church, 'mocked the village schoolmistress at her prayers' and shouted at the vicar until the village policeman arrived and restored order. Two weeks later, another group of PTS men, this time led by the Society's founder, John Kensit, set off for Hensall with the intention of removing images from the church and taking them to the archbishop of York as evidence of Bryan's Romanising practices. They failed because the church was locked. Reports of the incident state that Bryan was threatened and chased into his vicarage by the men, who chanted the second commandment, 'Thou shalt not make unto thyself any graven image.' After Bryan's resignation, the crucifix was chopped down one night and was never seen again.



L-R John W Fairbairns, Mr Brownridge, Jesse Fairbairns Snr, Hinsley Walker

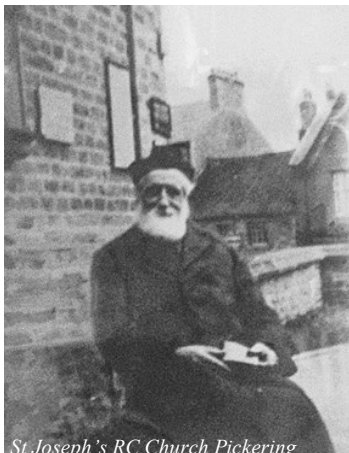
Closure

Although personally sympathetic towards Bryan, the archbishop of York, William Maclagan, felt obliged to follow the wishes of the archbishop of Canterbury and asked Bryan to stop using

incense in church, a factor that brought Bryan's ministry in the Anglican Church to a close. He resigned his living in March 1900 and thereafter, moved to what perhaps was his spiritual home: the Catholic church.

Despite the difficulties there was much he could look back on with satisfaction. He worked hard for his parishioners; had good relationships with influential people who supported his projects; introduced free education by sourcing funds to dispense with the weekly school fee of threepence per child and the one-off winter coal fee of sixpence per child. The newly built church at Heck was a major achievement. And his belief that hard-working communities could gain from the presence of beauty, mystery and symbolism in church ceremonies meant he was never short of supporters.

Post Script



St. Joseph's RC Church Pickering

Fr Bryan as a Catholic priest in Pickering, where he found acceptance and fulfilment



Opening of St John the Baptist Church, Heck 1895

- ◆ Fr Bryan was received into the Roman Catholic church, in Rome, in 1900.
- ◆ He went to Pickering in 1901 to minister to a tiny Catholic congregation that met in a cottage. Within a year, he founded St Joseph's School. St Joseph's parish was established by 1904 and a parish church completed in 1911; he also left a parish hall and presbytery.
- ◆ He retired in 1934 and died in 1937, age 80. (www.stjopickering.org)
- ◆ Ernest Hollingsworth, Edward Bryan's former curate (1890-92) became vicar of Hensall in 1900 and served until 1930, bringing a welcome stability. He continued many of Bryan's practices, but without attracting the same levels of opposition.

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- ◆ James Booth was the parochial school's master from 1900-08, followed by Fred Hutchinson - who served from 1908-46, bringing long-term stability to the school.
 - ◆ The prosecution of ritualists came to an end when a Royal Commission recognised pluralism in worship in 1906.
 - ◆ Today, the Anglo-Catholic approach is recognised as a legitimate element of the Church of England.



St Joseph's Church, Pickering