

## **Revd William Gretton - from St Mary's Parish News April 2018 by John Read**

Between 1714 and 1868, St Mary's was served by 5 long-standing vicars, all but one of whom are commemorated in the church by way of a wall memorial, ledger stone or stained glass window. The odd one out is Revd William Gretton (Vicar 1766-1804), who has no memorial in the church, despite being listed in the Dictionary of National Biography, a multi-volume series containing biographies of figures of national importance.

William Gretton was born in London in 1736, educated at Peterhouse, Cambridge, and after taking Holy Orders, became in 1761 Vicar of Littlebury. In 1766 he was also appointed Vicar of Saffron Walden, a position in the gift of Sir John Griffin Griffin of Audley End, later the 1<sup>st</sup> Lord Braybrooke. Sir John officially appointed him his domestic chaplain in 1784, although Gretton himself said that he had held this post for 26 years when Sir John died in 1797. In this position, it was his duty to officiate every morning of the year at the private chapel in Audley End House. This meant that on Sundays he had to ride on horseback back to Walden to take the morning service at the parish church.

Gretton formed a close friendship with his patron, which would have helped when, in 1790, Sir John and his wife offered to take a leading role in financing the extensive church restoration work necessary due to the dilapidated state of the building at that time. This restoration work was presided over by Gretton and his churchwardens from 1790-93, and, in a way, it could be said that the church building is his memorial, even though many historic features were destroyed at that time. His legacy also includes the many writings which he inserted in the parish registers of both Saffron Walden and Littlebury. This included a commentary on the progress of the restoration works, and a full description of the funeral procession from Audley End to the parish church when Sir John died in June 1797. Typical of his writings is the following description of his friend's character: 'To detail his several and numerous perfections would indeed be an arduous attempt. Suffice it to say of him, that if unfeigned piety, if humanity, beneficence, charity, philanthropy, be virtues estimable in heaven, laudable on earth, all these were practised in a superior manner.'

Notes by Gretton in the registers also describe funerals of other parishioners. For example, in 1775 he commented: 'Sarah Archer, relict of Alderman Henry Archer, was buried in the church. I preached a sermon from 1 Thess 4.13.4. for which I received £2.2.0, a hat band and gloves.' Also surviving separately are his daily diaries in which he recorded the weather, the birds he saw in his garden and the plants he grew.

Later in 1797, after the death of Sir John, the Mastership of Magdalene College, Cambridge, of which the occupant of Audley End was hereditary Visitor, fell vacant. Sir John's successors at Audley End, presumably in accordance with his intentions,

nominated Gretton to the vacant position, which he took up in addition to his duties as Vicar of Saffron Walden. The fellows of Magdalene were not pleased at having Gretton foisted upon them, as they had at least three more qualified candidates for the post amongst their number. Their misgivings proved well-founded as Magdalene's reputation for scholarship plummeted during his Mastership. However Gretton rose to the pinnacle of his career in 1800-01, when he took up the post of Vice-Chancellor of Cambridge University under the traditional rotational system. It is Gretton's later career at Cambridge which must have led to his having an entry in the Dictionary of National Biography.

Gretton remained Vicar of Saffron Walden until 1804, and of Littlebury until his death in 1813. He was buried at Magdalene College, which could explain why there is no memorial to him in St Mary's.

John Read