

Anthony Johnson

Vicar of St Helen's, 1711-1715

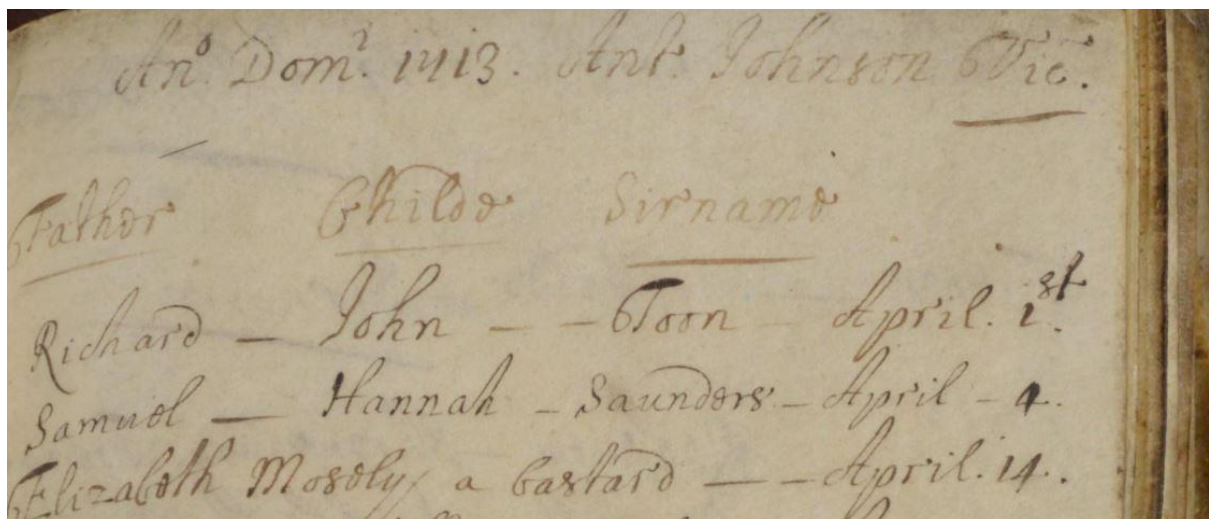
Whilst looking for information about vicars of St Helen's over the centuries, I came across Anthony Johnson. He was vicar for just a short period of time at the start of the 18th century and there are huge gaps, yet to be traced, but the information that is available provides a tantalising glimpse into his story.

Anthony Johnson, the son of Christopher Johnson of Cauldon, Staffordshire, was admitted to All Souls College in the University of Oxford on 17th March 1675/6. He was 18 years old. On admission, he is described as 'pp', which literally means that he was a 'pauper puer,' a poor boy. It is likely that he was expected to wait on other students in order to earn his keep whilst studying there. He graduated BA in 1679 and MA in 1682.

Anthony appears to have been Christopher Johnson's only son. In Christopher's will, written on 21st April 1686 he leaves his son £20, a 2 year old filly 'and my beste bed with all its furniture.' There is no indication that Anthony has a wife or children, though Christopher is very specific in bequests to Anthony's 6 sisters and their husbands and to other family members.

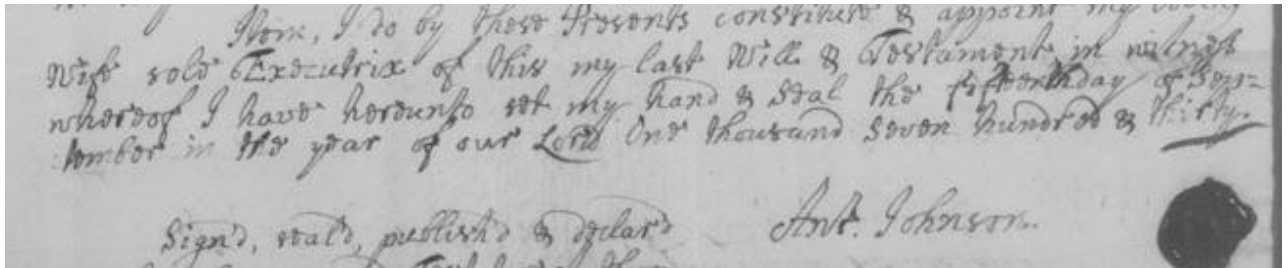
Anthony's whereabouts are unclear for the next 29 years, until Theophilus, 9th Earl of Huntingdon, appoints him vicar at St Helen's Church in Ashby on 17th September 1711.

The Clergy of the Church of England database¹ has four records for Anthony Johnson. Two, possibly three, of them refer to our Anthony Johnson. He was certainly vicar at St Helen's between 1711 and 1715 and in 1721 he was appointed curate at Swarkestone, then rector in 1728. It is possible that he was also vicar at Longford, Derbyshire, from 1684-1701, but this seems unlikely, as the handwriting in the parish registers of the time is not the same as handwriting examples that can be definitely attributed to him.



¹ <https://theclergydatabase.org.uk/>

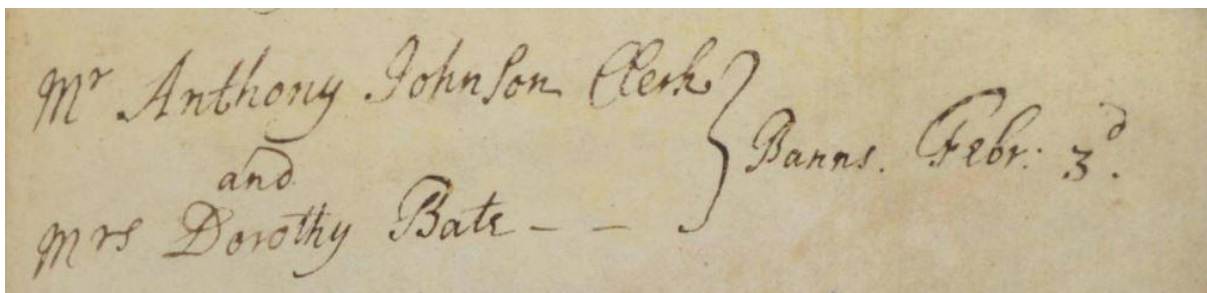
Anthony Johnson's habit was to sign the top of each page of the parish register at St Helen's and the handwriting shown above is the same as in his will (example below), written at Swarkestone in 1730.



Now, I do by these Presents constitute & appoint my
wife sole Executrix of this my last Will & Testament in witness
whereof I have hereunto set my hand & Seal the 5th day of May
1730 in the year of our Lord one thousand seven hundred & thirty.

Signed, sealed, published & declared
Ant. Johnson.

It is not clear why Anthony resigns his post as vicar at St Helen's in 1715, where he is replaced by Rev Joseph Smith, because he remains in the Ashby area, where he marries Dorothy Bate, after banns, on 3rd February 1716. Their marriage is recorded on the first page in the register written in his successor's hand.

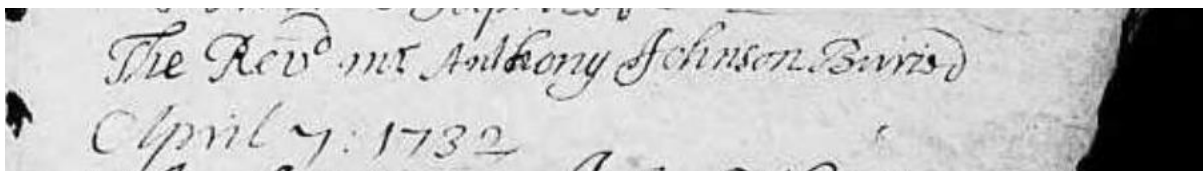


Mr Anthony Johnson Clerk }
and } Banns. Febr. 3^d
Mrs Dorothy Bate - - }

Dorothy belonged to a prominent Ashby family of her day. Her father was Thomas Bate, gentleman and mercer in the town, and her eldest brother was the Rev'd Thomas Bate, who gave a library² to St Helen's Church. Rev'd Thomas Bate was Rector of Swarkestone from 1720 until his death in March 1728, when Anthony Johnson succeeded him. Bate also served as Chaplain to Sir Henry Harpur of Calke Abbey.

Dorothy Bate would have been around 36 years old when she married Anthony, who was about 59. They had no children.

The parish registers of Swarkestone³ are in a very damaged condition, and no examples of Anthony Johnson's handwriting are discernible in them, though his death is recorded on 7th April 1732. He is buried in the churchyard there. His will, dated 1730, is written in his own hand. He describes himself as 'Presbytor of the Church of England.' There are bequests to 4 nieces and he gives twenty shillings to the poor of Swarkestone and appoints his wife sole executrix. The two witnesses, George Pilkington and James Bate, are his brothers in law – Dorothy's brother and the husband of her younger sister, Jane.



The Revd Mr Anthony Johnson Buried
April 7: 1732

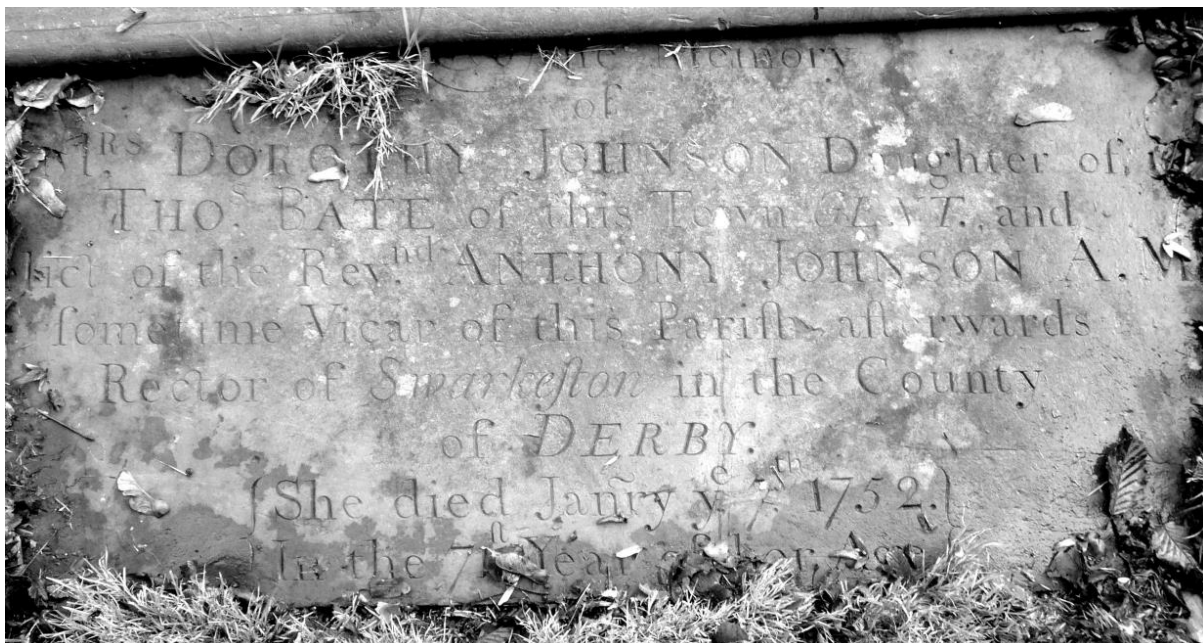
² Ashby Parish Library. A library initially of 445 books, established by Rev'd Thomas Bate between 1707 and 1712, which expanded over the years to around 1200 books. Around 800 books have survived and are now in the care of Nottingham University Manuscripts and Special Collections. Includes a breviary of 1493.

³ In the care of Derbyshire Records Office. Available to view on Ancestry.com.

There is a reference to Anthony and Dorothy Johnson in 'Johnsonian Gleanings' by Aleyn Lyell Read.⁴ It concerns three letters, one from Dorothy Johnson and two from James Bate, Dorothy's brother, written in 1733, 1735 and 1736, now in the collection of Pembroke College, Oxford. Dorothy's letter, addressed to Lichfield barrister Gilbert Walmisley, refers to her late husband's books, saying that *'the books are being sent herewith, with an account for £5 6s 4d, the balance unpaid out of a total of £26 6s 4d.'* Clearly, the bill was not paid, as James Bate's first letter, dated 31 Jan 1735, also to Walmisley, is written on behalf of *'my sister Johnson, who wants payment of £5 6s 4d ... for the parcel of books you had of her at Swarkstone.'* James Bate continues that Dorothy *'wase ... obliged to sell of the study of books at a low rate to turn it into money.'* In April 1736, James Bate writes again, this time to Lichfield book seller John Newton, begging him to prevail with Mr Walmisley, to pay the £5 due to Dorothy, who *'had but little left by Mr Johnson but his books (not but he left her all he had) and those sold at a poore reat.'* James Bate asks Mr Newton to *'doe y best for the widow, who did not relish being kept out of so small a sune by a gentleman so well able to pay.'* It would appear that the account was finally paid at this point.

One more detail in 'Johnsonian Gleanings' is that, in 1730, Anthony Johnson published an octavo pamphlet entitled 'An Historical Account of the Several English Translations of the Bible'.⁵ I've been unable to find a copy of this.

Curiously, in her will of 1751, Dorothy describes herself as a spinster, though in the St Helen's burial register she is described as 'relict of the Rev Mr Johnson.' Whilst she is buried with her family at St Helen's, she does not forget Swarkestone in her will, leaving twenty shillings to the poor of that Parish. The panel of her tomb reads, *"to the memory of Mrs Dorothy Johnson daughter of Thomas Bate of this town Gent and relict of the Revnd Anthony Johnson, AM, sometime Vicar of this Parish, afterwards Rector of Swarkeston in the County of Derby. She died January 7th 1752 in the 71st year of her age."*



⁴ Johnsonian Gleanings by Aleyn Lyell Reade. Part III. Arden Press, Stamford Street, London 1922.

⁵ Johnsonian Gleanings by Aleyn Lyell Reade. Part III. Arden Press, Stamford Street, London 1922. Printed for Rivington (Nichols' Literary Illustrations, III, 673.)