

Marmaduke Vavasour 1796-1879

Vicar 1833-1875

When Marmaduke Vavasour was appointed vicar at St Helen's, Queen Victoria was still 4 years away from her accession to the throne. When he retired in 1875, she was a widowed grandmother. During his tenure, there were also many significant local events. A second Anglican church, Holy Trinity, was built and opened in Ashby in 1838, providing a new place of worship on the west side of town and easing the pressure on St Helen's in an era of huge congregations. On 1st August 1849, Ashby Railway Station opened on the Midland Railway line, revolutionising opportunities for travel to distant places.

This period also saw a hugely significant report by the General Board of Health on the sanitary – or insanitary – state of Ashby published in 1849, at a time when typhus was endemic and mortality rates at all ages were shocking. The consequence of this was the founding of a local Board of Health, a focus on improving water supply and sanitation and the provision of a new burial ground for the town with the opening of Ashby Cemetery in 1857.

Marmaduke Vavasour was the son of Thomas Hippon Vavasour of Rochdale, Lancashire. His father was descended from a branch of the Vavasours of Hazlewood in Yorkshire, whose ancestor, Moshe le Vavasour, probably came over with William the Conqueror. Hazlewood castle passed through many generations of the family over 900 years until the direct line died out in 1826. Marmaduke was a family name, which re-occurred regularly through the generations.

Thomas Hippon Vavasour (1750-1819) was the son of John Vavasour and his wife Elizabeth, the daughter and sole heiress of Mr Hippon of Newall near Pontefract. Thomas married Penelope Smith (1757-1826) in 1777 and they had at least 12 children, over a period of twenty years, all of whom were baptised at St Chad's, Rochdale. Marmaduke was the youngest, born on 14th March 1796.

Marmaduke's sister Julia married the Rev Richard Vavasour (a cousin?) of West Meath in Ireland in June 1812. His sister Anne married James Hargreaves of Bank Hall near Burnley in 1814 and his sister Mary married the Rev John Harvey Ashworth. In fact, Marmaduke's own daughter, 14 year old Penelope, was staying with her Aunt Mary in Hampshire at the time of the 1841 census.

Thomas Hippon Vavasour and his family lived in an area of central Rochdale known as 'the Butts.' At the baptism of his first child, Thomas, in 1777, he is described as a 'chapman,' an archaic term for a pedlar, but in subsequent baptism records he is described as a merchant. A clue as to his exact trade comes in an article in *the Globe*¹ on 25th December 1809 under the heading 'Partnerships dissolved.' He and other members of his family were woolstaplers, indicating that they bought wool, sorted and graded it and sold it on to a manufacturer. Thomas died on 26th October 1819 '*at his house in Rochdale in his 70th year.*'² His widow, Penelope, died on 29th October 1826 at Berwick Lodge in Gloucestershire. It is likely that she had moved there to be cared for by one of her children, possibly Marmaduke. She died just three days after his marriage to Mary Anne St John.

Marmaduke attended Brasenose College, Oxford, graduating with a BA in 1820 and an MA in 1822. He was a 'Hulme Exhibitioner' at Brasenose, a recipient of a fund for poor students, to support them

¹The Globe. 25 December 1809 (FMP)

² Leeds Intelligencer. 8 November 1819 (FMP)

through their studies and for four years after graduation.³ He was ordained deacon on Christmas Day 1822 in a ceremony in the chapel of Christ Church College, Oxford and was ordained priest in December 1823 in Gloucester Cathedral.

On 19th October 1826, he married Mary Anne St John at Severn Stoke, Worcestershire. Her father, John Francis Seymour St John, was the Prebendary (Canon) of Worcester Cathedral.

Vavasour was Curate of Broadwell, Gloucestershire, before his appointment as vicar of Ashby in December 1833, following the resignation of the Hon & Rev Charles Dundas.

By the time Vavasour arrived in Ashby, he and Mary Ann already had a large family. Penelope was born in 1827, John St John in 1829, Frances Barbara in 1830, Mary Ann Elizabeth in 1831, Louisa Jane in 1832 and Marmaduke Walter in 1833. All were baptised – all but Penelope by their father – in the parish church of St Paul's, Broadwell. Two more children were born in Ashby; Augusta Sophia in 1835 and John Francis Stukeley in 1838. Their eldest son, John St John, lived for just 11 weeks and was buried at Broadwell on 16th March 1829. All of his siblings survived to adulthood.

The census of 1841 records a family of 7 at the Vicarage in Ashby, attended by 6 servants. Fourteen year old Penelope is absent from home, staying with John Ashworth and his wife Mary in Kingsclere, Hampshire.⁴

In July 1835, Marmaduke Vavasour paid a visit to his home town of Rochdale, where he married his niece, Frances Maria, daughter of his older brother Walter, to local priest, Rev William Topham Hobson⁵. In August 1844 he was appointed Rural Dean, a post he held until 1858.

Vavasour's eldest daughter, Penelope, was married at St Peter's Church, Netherseal on 23rd January 1849 to John Morewood Gresley, a clergyman and a member of the long seated local family which later produced the well-known railway engineer, Sir Nigel Gresley. Penelope was 21, John 32.

By the time of the 1851 census, just four of the Vavasour children were still at home; Frances, Mary Ann Elizabeth, Louisa and John. Vavasour senior was away from home and Marmaduke Walter had flown the nest. He was lodging in the home of Thomas Turvey, teacher of music, in Birkenhead and working as a 'general and North America merchant.'

Vavasour's career progressed further. In October 1851 he was appointed to an Honorary Canonry in Peterborough Cathedral.

In January 1853 his second daughter, 22-year-old Frances, married Montagu Webster, a clergyman, at St Peter's Church, Netherseal. The service was conducted by her brother-in-law, John Morewood Gresley, Rector of Seile. Webster, a Sutton Coldfield native, served his curacy in Seals (Overseal & Netherseal) under John Gresley and later became vicar of Hill, Sutton Coldfield. Frances died in Hill in 1871, aged just 41 years.

On June 2nd 1857, Vavasour's third daughter, Mary Ann Elizabeth, was married at St Helen's to Rev John Denton, who had come to Ashby as Vavasour's curate in 1854, becoming incumbent of Holy Trinity Church in 1856. Denton was 27, his bride 26.

³ Hulmeian Exhibitions. Information from Brasenose College Register 1509-1909. Blackwells, Oxford, 1909 & from Wikipedia on the 'Hulme Trust.' Trust set up on 1691 by William Hulme to be used for educational purposes.

⁴ 1841 Census (FMP)

⁵ findmypast.co.uk/bna/viewarticle?id=bl%2f0000174%2f18350703%2f027&stringtohighlight=vavasour

The 1861 Census records Vavasour and Mary Ann, both now 64 years old, alone in the vicarage with their three servants; a cook and two housemaids.

On 8th August 1867, Vavasour's fourth daughter, Louisa Jane, married Joseph Taylor, an Atherstone Solicitor. Taylor wasn't a clergyman, but he was the son of a clergyman. They were married by the bride's brother, John, who was by this time Curate at St Helen's. Louisa was 35 years old, a very advanced age for a Victorian bride. Three years earlier, her younger sister, Augusta Sophia, then 29 years old, had married Edward William Cradoch Middleton, described as a 'gentleman' on the marriage certificate. This ceremony was also presided over by John Vavasour, Curate at St Helen's and the bride's brother.

In 1871, Marmaduke and Mary Ann had company in the house on census day. Their second daughter, Frances Webster, was there with her three year old son, Arthur. This must have been very shortly before her death, which took place later that year. Fourth daughter Louisa was there too, with her children, Edith and Robert. There were five servants in the house.

What of the Vavasour sons? Marmaduke Walter was the elder of the two surviving sons and his story is a sad one. He married, aged 26, Sybil Catherine Holdsworth in Kingsclere, Hampshire. How they met is not clear. They had two children, Marmaduke and Caroline, and lived in Broughton, near Salford, where successive census returns described him as a 'receiver land steward' and a 'land owner'. In 1877 they were divorced and a year later, aged 44, Marmaduke Walter took his own life by shooting himself in the head in a hotel in Hull. His brother John's evidence at the inquest painted a sorry picture. Marmaduke Walter had been in constant pain, possibly from rheumatism, and had recently been operated on for a tumour. Reconciliation attempts with his wife had failed and he had recently 'speculated and lost money'. 'His son had begun to go blind recently, and that had been a great trouble to him.'⁶ He was buried in Hull Cemetery two days after his death with just four mourners in attendance: his brother, his nephew W S Gresley, his brother-in-law Rev John Denton and the family solicitor E F Mammatt. His two children were brought up by their mother, Sybil, who remarried within a year. Marmaduke Walter's son, also Marmaduke, was described as an 'invalid' in both the 1881 and 1891 census returns. In 1901, he was described as 'feeble minded.' He died in 1902.

John Francis Stukeley, the youngest of the Vavasour children, followed in his father's footsteps. He too was a recipient of a Hulmeian Exhibition at Brasenose College Oxford, graduating in 1861. He was ordained Deacon in 1863 and priest in 1864. Having served his curacy in Ashby, from 1866-1872, he was appointed to the post of Rector of Snelland, Lincolnshire, where he remained until shortly before his death in 1900. He married Eleanor Elizabeth Brooke and they had four children.

In January 1849, William Lee, Superintendent Inspector to the General Board of Health, led an inquiry in Ashby on the insanitary state of the town and its very high mortality rates. His report was shocking. The death rate for children under a year old was 1 in 6 and 45% of the town's children died before they reached the age of 5 years. There was little or no fresh water supply, the streets – and the brook – ran with sewage, typhus was endemic and life expectancy in Ashby in 1849 was 52 years and 6 months. In the neighbouring village of Smisby it was 63 years and 3 months.⁷ For some reason, the vicar 'was prevented from attending after the first day of the enquiry.'⁸ This seems a strange

⁶ Leicester Journal. 14 December 1877 (FMP)

⁷ Leicester Chronicle. 16 June 1849 (FMP)

⁸ Leicester Chronicle. 16 June 1849 (FMP)

state of affairs when one of his primary concerns ought to have been improving the health and wellbeing of his parishioners.

On 15th November 1849 Marmaduke Vavasour and other clergy in the town led a day of thanksgiving



“for the mercies vouchsafed to us in the abatement of the pestilence which lately afflicted many parts of this nation.”⁹ The pestilence was cholera.

Collections at church services went to Leicester Infirmary, where patients were being treated.

“From the united exertion of our vicar, Mr Vavasour, Mr Fell, Incumbent of Trinity Church, and Mr Lowe our curate, a sum of upwards of £36 was realised in aid of the funds of the Infirmary.”

Marmaduke Vavasour retired due to ill health in 1875, in his 78th year, and his son in law, John Denton, took his place at St Helen’s. He and Mary Ann retired to Clifton, Bristol, where they lived at No.13 Prince’s Buildings, a Georgian property close to the Clifton Suspension Bridge. He died there on 6th November 1879, in his 83rd year, and was brought back to Ashby to be buried on 12th November.

There is very little record of Marmaduke Vavasour’s clerical life in Ashby, despite his almost 43 years in the town. He put his name to a subscription appeal for money to build Holy Trinity Church in 1837 and donated £100 to the cause. He was treasurer of the ‘Ashby Saline Bathing Institution,’ a short-lived venture launched at a public meeting in the already declining Bath rooms in 1853,” to establish baths and provide accommodation of the poorer classes of the surrounding districts.”¹⁰ He served on various committees and left some of his books to the Ashby Parish Library.¹¹ A window at St Helen’s is dedicated to his memory and a fine monument stands above his grave in Ashby Cemetery.

At the time of his death, St Helen’s was undergoing a huge extension and restoration project, “but owing to the kindness of the contractor, Mr Lilley, and the exertions of the Clerk of the Works and Mr C Matthews, the churchwarden, it was so arranged that the last rites were performed in the late Vicar’s

⁹ Leicester Journal. 23 Nov 1849. FMP

¹⁰ Nottinghamshire Guardian. 6th October 1853 (FMP)

¹¹ Now in the care of University of Nottingham Special Collections

old church.”¹² The funeral procession walked from the vicarage, via the gate into the churchyard, to the west door of the church, through a double line of “the leading inhabitants and tradesmen”¹³ of the town and the bells rang a muffled peal. His body “was enclosed in three coffins, the outer one being of massive oak, with substantial brass ornaments, including a plain brass Latin cross and a plate with the following inscription:- “The Rev Marmaduke Vavasour, Honorary Canon of Peterborough, Vicar of Ashby de la Zouch from 1833 to 1875; born 14th March, 1796; died November 6, 1879.”¹⁴ He left a personal estate of less than £2000. Mary Ann survived him by less than two years and is buried with him in Ashby.

***Julie Starkey
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¹² Ashby Gazette. 22 November 1879 (FMP)

¹³ Ashby Gazette. 22 November 1879 (FMP)

¹⁴ Ashby Gazette. 22 November 1879 (FMP)