

MINUTES OF THE 37th MEETING OF AYNHO HISTORY SOCIETY HELD IN AYNHO VILLAGE HALL ON WEDNESDAY 30th MARCH 2011

Present: – Rupert Clark – Chairman
Brian Reynolds – Treasurer
Peter Cole – Secretary

1. Chairman's Report

Rupert Clark

Rupert said that two items had come up and had been purchased for our Archive. One is an advert for BSA motorbikes, with the Cartwright in the background. The other is a couple of postcards, one of the Old Rectory, with its original wing, and the second is believed to be the Cartwright Cross in the Churchyard, covered in ivy. We also have a bottle marked H C Haines of Brackley. Does anyone recall this name?

Regarding Nelson's carriage mentioned last month, Rupert has approached the Naval Museum in Portsmouth. They have no knowledge of such a carriage, but suggested trying "Carriage Driving" magazine. They recognised the photograph. It is a Bryczka, from Poland. The dates tie up. And there are only two in the country.

He has had a letter from Nick Allen to say that in Exeter cathedral there are records of carvings of musical instruments done by William of Adderbury, and there are similar carvings on corbels in several North Oxfordshire churches. There are several on Adderbury Church, but as they are outside, they are rapidly crumbling away. He has passed this information on to Richard York, who gave us his talk on old instruments, and also to our ARMS group.

2. Finance Report

Brian said that at last night the funds stood at £1,134.08, all but £52 of which is in the Bank.

3. Secretary's Report

Peter Cole

At the request of Aynho Parish Council Peter has drafted an account of the last year's activities for the Annual Village Report. This will be circulated to everyone shortly before the Annual Village Meeting on Monday 18th April.

He emailed the person who had been interested in the Parkers, who had featured in the 1976 photo of Aynho Parish Council last month, and she was very pleased to receive a copy of the photo.

At this point Mrs Hodges asked to speak about the May meeting, which will be a visit to the Grammar House. It is suggested that everyone meets here in the Village Hall first. This will enable her and Sally Strutt, who is giving the talk, to give out some general information first, and to decide how many groups to split the people attending into. There may be some refreshments afterwards in the Hall.

4. The Cartwright Papers

Jim McDermott

Dr Jim McDermott said that he would be talking about just one Cartwright - William Ralph, who was squire of Aynho from 1792 until 1847.

Why William Ralph? Firstly, he was one of the longest serving of all the Cartwright squires. He is the earliest of them to emerge from the fog of the past as an identifiable personality. We don't have enough of the earlier Cartwrights' personal papers to round them out as people rather than historical figures. Finally, he was also squire during a particularly troubled period in English history - one that saw periods of war, explosive population growth, inflationary pressures and occasional outbreaks of civil unrest.

His father died when his son was just one year old, so for the next two decades, Thomas's widow, Mary Catherine, acted as guardian of the estate, assisted by several trustees, including her second husband, Sir Stephen Cottrell. Cottrell behaved admirably, never stepping on toes at Aynho and forming a very affectionate and lasting bond with young William Ralph.

So how did Mary Catherine 'do' as squire-regent? It's hard to judge accurately, but we can say that rents due to the Cartwrights at least kept pace with inflation. Additionally, investments worth some £12,500 were generating further interest in William Ralph's name. By late eighteenth-century standards, this was a very healthy financial state, though it didn't quite run to matching William Ralph's ambitions.

He was a good pupil at Eton, and from there he went to Christchurch College Oxford, where the breaking news of the French Revolution may have ignited a first spark to the tinder of his life-long loathing of political and social radicalism. William Ralph was a conservative with a very large C.

During these years there was very little to disturb the domestic tranquillity at Aynho. There were dynastic pressures as William Ralph was the sole male among five children. His family were quite worried lest he should break his neck getting thrown from his horse, which would give the Welbeck family a chance to inherit Aynho.

In 1791 William Ralph embarked upon his first foreign tour through the Low Countries and Germany, and eventually to the Russian capital, St Petersburg. Here he immediately made a huge impression. This may have been the natural Cartwright magic, but he had also had some good advice from Sir Stephen Cottrell, who'd observed that "foreigners are inclined to be civil to Englishmen, and therefore it is but our duty to reciprocate: not least by having a certain facility in foreign languages".

The fact that William Ralph made a good impression is quite notable. Englishmen were not flavour of the moment at St Petersburg, as Pitt's government was threatening war over the Russian occupation of the Turkish Black Sea port of Ochakov. Yet, not only was he apparently popular at the Russian Court, but he was also spoken to personally by the most powerful man in the Russian Empire, Prince Potemkin, commander of the Russian Army.

The young squire-to-be returned to Oxford in time for the start of his third year in September 1791, but his wanderlust was by no means yet satisfied. He celebrated his coming of age and legal inheritance at Aynho with an expensive party, and almost immediately, he was off again, retracing his tracks of the previous year. It was a bit more dangerous this time, as the French Revolutionary Armies were sweeping into the Spanish Netherlands, and by the time that Cartwright reached Berlin, he had experienced countless hair's-breadth escapes, according to the correspondence of his sister.

William Ralph had time, during these escapades, to send his step-father (with whom he shared a great passion for hunting) a detailed report on the quality of German, and particularly Saxon, horses. He then moved on, via Dresden, to Prague. As England was moving towards an alliance with Austria and Prussia against the French, it was thought appropriate that young Englishmen travelling abroad should give the right impression to Johnny Foreigner. Sir Stephen therefore sent to the travelling William Ralph a pattern for a uniform, so that he could look "en militaire" at balls he attended.

The final news of this tour was sent from Vienna, where William Ralph took a hot-air balloon ride. He returned to Aynho, and from then until his death his feet would be planted firmly in English soil.

One probably intentional consequence of his second foreign tour had been to avoid the upheavals at Aynho, which took place during his months abroad. This was the enclosure of the demesne and remaining common lands, involving some 2400 acres, most of which were held by the Cartwrights. His calculation of the cost of enclosure was a little low. The final tally was £3000 for Commissioners' fees and the administrative costs of getting the Enclosure Act through Parliament, the cost of building fences to delineate the new boundaries and modernization and re-routing of local roads. Fortunately for William Ralph, the pain of all of this - other than that to his pocket - was

felt by his steward, Robert Weston, while the squire himself perambulated around Europe.

Back at Aynho by mid-1793, William Ralph settled enthusiastically into the role of squire. The following April he married his first wife, Emma Maude. As to the Cartwright domain, its core estate had just been re-organized on more scientific lines, and could be expected to produce greater revenues in the coming years. War with France apart, things seemed to be set fair for future prosperity.

However, it seems that one of the less fortunate legacies of William Ralph's European tours is that in some ways he had ceased to have the outlook and mentality of a country squire. He was, of course, still very much a conservative. Indeed, like most Englishmen, he probably looked at a continent that was increasingly in flames and congratulated himself and his compatriots on the English virtue of not wanting anything to change much, ever. But a taste of the high life seems to have made its mark. Status is mainly about perceptions, and William Ralph decided to drastically adjust perceptions of the Cartwright dynasty at Aynho.

They had been there for almost two hundred years by now, and occupied a house that was, by contemporary standards of gentility, somewhat homely, and definitely *nota la mode*. Parts of its fabric were serviceable and could be retained, but the squire decided to sweep away the cobwebs quite spectacularly, with a comprehensive re-building by one of the men of the age - Sir John Soane.

Unfortunately the accounts for this work seem to have been retained by Hoare's Bank, who may have made their active control of the accounts a condition of the arrangement. This remodelling of Aynhoe Park was the biggest thing to have happened to the village since the Civil War. It replaced a comfortable, if dated, gentleman's house with an edifice worthy of an earl at least, and possibly a duke. And it nearly pauperised William Ralph. We'll mention his gambling, or rather his investments, in a moment, but his profligacy created total debts of some £50,000, of which, during the remainder of his life, he managed to repay £35,000, leaving a huge hole in the estate's balance sheet with which the next generation would have to wrestle. Indeed, the Cartwrights were never to fully recover their former prosperity, even with the 1881 windfall from cousin Fairfax William Cartwright of Flore, with its tasty portfolio of London properties that would allow William Cornwallis Cartwright to live off metropolitan rents and leave the Aynho estate to run itself. In a sense, what William Ralph did was to gamble (though not intentionally) that the golden age of English agriculture would continue indefinitely, allowing rising rural prosperity to absorb the costs of his improvements. But as we know now, from the end of the Napoleonic wars onward, the state of the land could be by no means relied upon.

Mention of Napoleon brings us to William Ralph's relatively brief military career as Lieutenant Colonel of the Brackley Battalion of Volunteers. They were formed in 1794, and they were disbanded in 1809, when it had been long apparent that the Emperor wasn't coming.

On domestic life at Aynhoe Park, William Ralph enjoyed entertaining, and, as someone who didn't bother much to count his pennies, the entertainment was fairly lavish. It contrasted strongly with the increasingly parlous state of life for ordinary folk in the village, and as the war dragged on, the rural population increased, markets contracted and agricultural depression became an uncharacteristically familiar part of life.

Cartwright's apparent indifference to the plight of his tenants was not unusual for the age. What we might consider to be unjust inequality was rather the way that things had always been, which, to any contemporary gentleman, was entirely correct and not to be messed with. The consequences of social experimentation could be observed just across the Channel, and few Englishmen would have wished it upon their own country. As always, we should judge a man by the standards of his age, not our own.

Jim turned then to the defining activity of William Ralph's life - his political career. As someone whose parliamentary career lasted almost exactly half a century, William Ralph had to suffer elections frequently. He fought fourteen and lost only one. This became quite an expensive business. In 1831, during a short but quite frenzied election campaign, he and his fellow Tory, Sir Charles Knightley, managed to run up expenses of £13,000, a quite staggering sum for the day. One of the pleasures of examining material in these elections is being able to immerse one's self in the language of the hustings. If you think that today's parliamentary exchanges lack the last degree of politeness, you might feel a little distressed by the tone of correspondence addressed to William Ralph. He was accused of "dark, base, foul, slanderous and malignant insinuations" against Lord Althorp. By another correspondent, he was heartily congratulated upon identifying his opponent as a "little, dirty, methodistical, whining hypocrite".

His enthusiasm for political life was, or became, intense, and he was a good parliamentarian, attending frequently and often sitting upon government committees.

So what sort of interest did William Ralph represent? He was a radical, abolitionist, chartist republican. He represented the gentry interest, and, with one quite startling lapse, he represented it solidly and unswervingly for half a century. As the backbone of backbench politics, he was fervently for the Corn Laws, as these were a safety net for grain prices and agricultural well-being. He was for King, constitution, and tradition (except where that went against enclosures, because he was very much in favour of those). He was dead against the French, Catholics, sedition, Catholics, non-conforming Protestants, Catholics, public disorder, Catholics, a free press and Catholics. And Jews too!

William Ralph was a fervent supporter of William Pitt the younger, to the point of adulation. Pitt's death in 1806 was traumatic for William Ralph, as was the rather more violent demise of another Prime Minister, Spencer Perceval, six years later. Cartwright was involved in attempts to raise funds for statues of both men to be commissioned and placed in the Palace of Westminster.

He attended most sittings in the Commons, and his voting record is well known to us. It largely followed expected patterns. However, his speeches always stressed his independence upon all matters. William Ralph firmly believed in the integrity of his stances upon a range of issues. He was, after all, returned to Parliament again and again by his constituents. A degree of permanence in a political career convinces an incumbent that he's on the right track, and William Ralph appeared to have possessed this certainty. He voted for every measure to maintain public order raised in the House between 1798 and 1827; he voted against Catholic Relief nine times. He voted against reforms to public education four times, and he voted for every single Enclosure Act presented to the Commons between 1799 and 1837.

As an old-style Tory, so to speak, William Ralph was instinctively against change. But he was on record as claiming that he wasn't against electoral reform per se. In fact, he fully agreed that the larger towns and cities that had grown up during the past half century - Manchester, Birmingham, Liverpool - should have adequate representation in Parliament.

In 1829 he made a quite remarkable u-turn when he finally voted for Catholic Emancipation. He justified it - as he was obliged to do - on the basis that if the Duke of Wellington (the then-Prime Minister) and, more importantly, the King himself, had declared that it was time to lift the civic and political burdens upon Catholics, it was hardly the place of a backbencher to stand in their way.

So, to summarize the political element of William Ralph's life, he was one of the old reliables - independent on micro-issues but a loyal administration man on the major policies, and a pillar of the county political establishment.

This makes the contrast between the public Cartwright and the Squire all the more pronounced. There's a vigour to his political life that is entirely missing from the evidence of his stewardship of

the estate he inherited. During these years Aynho seemed to have been neglected to the point of near abandonment. William Ralph regarded his domain rather as a birthright than as a responsibility, and his "hands-off" policy with regard to the estate coincided with a prolonged depression in agriculture and rural industry, food-price inflation and accelerating population growth. The normal maintenance of estate properties that constituted the squire's principle duty to his tenants appears to have been allowed to lapse, probably because of the ongoing financial burden of the decision to improve Aynho Park and his occasional and quite disastrous forays into stock-market speculations.

Unlike other villages, Aynho was unable to expand. As every direction in which building work might relieve pressures on population growth was demesne land, so the natural encouragements to packing one's bag and leaving - the hopes of better conditions elsewhere - were emphasised at Aynho by the fact that people were living in increasingly crowded accommodation with increasingly fewer prospects for work. Many people therefore emigrated to cities or even to the U.S.A. and Canada. William Ralph's reaction was to encourage emigration, giving some of his tenants small gifts of money to move away which were never repaid, rather than to embark upon expensive measures to alleviate these several problems. The fact that he seems to have been largely indifferent to these issues doesn't detract from the reality of what he was, and was not, able to change.

That may have been cold comfort to the villagers of Aynho, and it seems that, by the time of his death, Aynho had largely fallen out of love with the Cartwrights. His heir, Sir Thomas, outlived his father by only three years and therefore made little impression locally; but it is likely that the decision of his own son, William Cornwallis, to live abroad while renting out Aynhoe Park was not taken solely as a matter of economic expediency or love of Italy. Perhaps there was a sense that absence might help to repair a relationship that his grandfather had allowed to decay.

In conclusion Jim said that the lack of personal correspondence in the collection from, rather than to, William Ralph prevents us from fully rounding out his character, and this is a shame, because its contradictions are fascinating. It would be useful to have had more personal insights into his thinking than the speeches he made to his constituents and in Parliament. These give a real sense of an eighteenth century squire thrust uncomfortably into the changing social conditions of the nineteenth, yet despite or because of his failings, he was one of the more colourful members of his dynasty. His childhood letters to and from his sisters suggest a warm family relationship, but it seems that his own children didn't grow up in quite the same environment. Their few remaining items of correspondence to or about their father hint at a man more respected than loved. In response to questions, Jim said that until 1867 MPs were not paid, they were expected to live on their own means. The Enclosure Act affected mainly the east side of Aynho estate, north of the present road. He confirmed that the Cartwrights and Cottrells (or Cottrell-Dormers) inter-married several times over the years.

Rupert said that he had googled Mary Catherine, and she has been described in her own right as a fine example of a woman running a significant estate. He thanked Jim for a fascinating talk.

5. A O B

It was agreed that the Society should contribute £30 towards the Newsletter production costs.

The question whether a contribution should be made towards a picnic bench on the Sports Field should be referred to the next Committee meeting.

6. Forthcoming Meetings

April 27th	Welsh Roads	Bruce Smith
May 25th	History of the Grammar House	Sally Strutt
June 29th	Ridge and Furrow	Barry Smith