

The Reverend Humphrey Perkins of Barrow-upon-Soar, 1646-1718

by Bernard Elliott

To-day the Reverend Humphrey Perkins is best remembered for the school which he founded in the village of his birth, Barrow-upon-Soar; yet his clerical career is important in several ways. It shows that a boy of middle-class parents could in the late seventeenth century make his way up the clerical ladder of preferment, but only so far. Humphrey Perkins never reached the top – he never enjoyed a well paid prebend or other Cathedral dignity. His career shows, too, the extreme importance of influence in ecclesiastical affairs at that time. Humphrey Perkins was fortunate in that he possessed several influential friends – otherwise, with his background, he would not have enjoyed such success in the clerical world as he did. He was a pluralist parson and, while the Anglican authorities realised that they could do little to stem the practice, they did take measures designed to curb its growth.

Finally, his career is important in an attempt to form a judgment of the Church of England in the early eighteenth century. Hard things have been said about it, but the research of church historians¹ has shown that the clergy of that time led more conscientious and dutiful lives than some scholars have credited them with; and the evidence that we have of the life of Humphrey Perkins bears out this contention.

Humphrey Perkins came of middle-class yeoman stock. His ancestors had for generations been farmers in Barrow-upon-Soar and his father, William, was a farmer of more than average means, for in the Hearth Tax assessment of Charles II's reign, he was taxed in respect of two hearths.² There are other strands of evidence which suggest that William Perkins was a substantial yeoman. For his first wife, he married in 1628 Ann Parker of Kibworth who came of well-to-do parents.³ In the Easter books of Barrow-upon-Soar, wherein is recorded the tithe money paid by the villagers, in 1666 William Perkins paid sixpence, but in 1668 1s 1d.⁴ Presumably, he had grown more prosperous.

By his first wife, William had three children, of whom the first two died soon after birth. The third child, a boy, born in March 1635, survived, but this time the mother died.⁵ William, however, soon took another bride, but of her we know little. Her Christian name was Alice and her maiden name may have been Shuttlewood.⁶

His second marriage must have taken place in 1636,⁷ for in 1637 the parish register began to record again the baptisms of William's children. By his second wife he had five children, born between 1637 and 1646, only one of whom died; and the last and youngest son, Humphrey, was born just after the middle of December, 1646, being baptised on the twentieth of that month,⁸ the Reverend Humphrey Babington being his godfather.⁹

From the age of five to nineteen, he possibly attended the local village school,¹⁰ which he left in June 1665 for Trinity College, Cambridge.¹¹ At that time it was the custom to seek admission to a college through one of its fellows, and since his godfather was a Fellow of Trinity¹² he was able to secure the admission of his godson to his college. Boys from homes similar to that of Humphrey Perkins entered as sizars. That is, in return for performing certain tasks, such as waiting in hall or ringing the chapel bell, the college authorities gave him an allowance. Nevertheless, it has been reckoned that a sizar still needed £15 a year from home to maintain himself.¹³

One of Perkins's friends at Trinity was the great scientist, Isaac Newton. Newton was slightly older than Perkins and had been given his degree in the year that the latter had gone up. A notebook of Newton's contains the following extracts for the year 1665: "Received of my tutor 10/- which I lent Perkins" and "received 1/- from Perkins".¹⁴

For the next three years Humphrey Perkins studied at Cambridge, and was awarded his degree in 1669.¹⁵ This was merely a formal ceremony, but the award of a degree enabled him to proceed to the next stage of his career, which was ordination. Before he could receive deacon's orders, he had to show the officiating Bishop that he had been presented to a vacant curacy in the diocese.¹⁶ Fortunately for Humphrey Perkins he was able to meet this requirement, for in March 1699 the reverend John Rustat, rector of Holme Pierrepont and Widmerpool in Nottinghamshire, had offered the curacy of Widmerpool to him.¹⁷

Armed with his presentation deed, Humphrey Perkins presented himself that same month to his bishop for ordination. This was Archbishop Richard Sterne of York, who on 7 March 1669 conferred deacon's orders on him at his palace at Bishopthorpe.¹⁸

Humphrey Perkins now returned to Widmerpool to begin his work as curate there and to consider whether he should take priest's orders. Some men without hope of ever securing a benefice remained deacons for life in view of the legal expenses involved in becoming a priest. Soon after returning to Widmerpool, however, Humphrey Perkins became engaged to Eleanor Rustat, the Reverend John Rustat's youngest daughter. This naturally increased his prospects of succeeding his father-in-law as rector of Holme Pierrepont; but, for this, he had to be in priest's orders, for the Act of Uniformity of 1662 required the possession of holy orders as a necessary qualification for institution to a benefice.¹⁹ So, on 27 February 1670, Humphrey Perkins was ordained by Bishop William Nicholson of Gloucester in the palace of the bishop of Ely at Holborn.²⁰

He now began to play an active part in running the parish of Widmerpool. Thus, on 26 April 1670, he accompanied his father-in-law to Nottingham

for the archdeacon's visitation.²¹ A few months later, on 21 February 1671, he married Eleanor.²² For the next five years, the newly-married couple lived in the Rectory at Widmerpool, which was a good living. According to the *Valor Ecclesiasticus* it was valued at £14 16s od, while the Parliamentary Commissioners of 1650 put its value at £100.²³ Then, in 1676, Humphrey Perkins received his first major appointment when Charles II conferred upon him the royal living of Toft-near-Newton in Lincolnshire.

On 31 January 1677, the Lord Chancellor issued the Presentation Deed, whereby the King presented Humphrey Perkins to the bishop of Lincoln for the latter to institute him as rector of Toft-near-Newton;²⁴ and on 1 February the new rector signed the parish register for the first time.

This appointment was an important step in his career, for Toft was a valuable living, worth £80 a year,²⁵ which placed its owner in the ranks of the best paid clergy. Competition for such livings was extremely keen and possibly Humphrey Perkins owed it to his wife's uncle, Tobias Rustat, who, as under-housekeeper at Hampton Court and page of the backstairs,²⁶ might have had some influence with the King.

For the rest of his life, Humphrey Perkins was to enjoy the benefice of Toft, but he stayed in Lincolnshire only for the next three years, for in 1680 he moved back to Nottinghamshire.

The year 1680 is the *annus mirabilis* of Humphrey Perkins's life, for in that year he received the two chief appointments of his career. On 2 November he was appointed an Extraordinary Chaplain to the King²⁷ and towards the end of the same month he succeeded his father-in-law as rector of Holme Pierrepont. According to Sykes, nomination to the office of a royal chaplain was accounted traditionally a sure way to greater ecclesiastical preferment.²⁸ But Humphrey Perkins climbed no higher: the post of extraordinary royal chaplain was for him merely an honorary appointment.

Nevertheless, it did possibly increase his standing among his contemporaries and there is no doubt that he himself thought highly of the privilege, for in his will he insisted that it should be mentioned in an inscription to be placed on the wall of the school he was founding at Barrow-upon-Soar. There is little doubt that he owed the royal post to Tobias Rustat. The latter had only a limited amount of influence with Charles II and so he could not acquire for Humphrey Perkins an office that would have made him a really important figure in the Church.

Humphrey Perkins had to be content with the Rectory of Holme Pierrepont, to which he succeeded that same month of November, 1680, his father-in-law having died in London on 19 October 1680.²⁹ The patron of that benefice was Henry, second earl of Kingston,³⁰ who, on 22 October, forwarded his Presentation Deed to the archbishop of York, requesting him to institute the Reverend Humphrey Perkins to the church of Holme Pierrepont.³¹

On receipt of the Deed, the archbishop sent for Humphrey Perkins and finding him a fit person for the office, issued on 24 November the Institution Deed, by which he gave the new incumbent charge of the spiritualities of Holme Pierrepont, its cure of souls with the duties and privileges involved. The archbishop then issued an Induction Mandate to the Reverend George

Masterson, prebend of Southwell and vicar of St. Mary's, Nottingham, for him to induct the Reverend Humphrey Perkins with the temporalities of the Church.

His institution and induction were fixed for 29 November 1680³² and on that day he was inducted to the parish church of Holme Pierrepont. In this ceremony, the Reverend G. Masterson put into the new rector's hands some emblem, such as the key of the church door or a bell-rope, to show that he now had charge of the temporalities of the parish, i.e., its revenues and possessions. The following Sunday, 5 December, the Reverend Humphrey Perkins read aloud in the church his assent to the first three articles of the thirty-sixth canon of the 1604 canons.³³

He was to remain rector of Holme Pierrepont for the rest of his life. Possibly, he looked forward to further advancement – if so, he was to be disappointed, for he climbed no higher. His middle-class background and lack of really influential friends accounted for his inability to go further. At Holme Pierrepont he enjoyed a fair measure of prosperity and comfort. The living there brought in £65 a year, which together with his Toft income of £50 gave him a stipend of £115 a year.³⁴ The Rectory itself was a commodious building, consisting of four bays³⁵ and obviously intended to accommodate a large family.

From the archdeacon of Nottingham's call books, we see that Humphrey Perkins was most conscientious in attending the archdeacon's visitation each Spring until the last years of his life when ill-health prevented his attendance. The parish register, too, gives us a glimpse of the rector at work amongst his people. It seems that there were about fifteen families in the parish in 1680 and on an average he baptised four babies a year. His right-hand man for many years was Jonas Bettinson and in his will Humphrey Perkins left £5 to Jonas's daughter, Elizabeth. Each year from 1680 onwards he signed the Holme Pierrepont parish register, always starting his surname with a long tail to the capital P.

He was required to hold Matins and Evensong every Sunday and presumably he did so, like his successor, the Reverend Scrope Berdmore, in 1743.³⁶ A suggestion that Humphrey Perkins held services other than on a Sunday is contained in the churchwardens' accounts, for the bell-ringers received 1s 0d on 5 November, on 29 May and on Ascension Thursday, when presumably services were held.

The churchwardens' accounts refer to the payment of bread and wine at Christmas and at Easter. In 1681, Robert Barley paid for bread and wine at Christmas 3s 4d and at Easter 2s 10d. In 1688, Robert Herrick paid at Easter 8s 0d. So, Humphrey Perkins gave the sacrament to his parishioners at Christmas and at Easter at the very least.

In October 1693 his wife Eleanor died³⁷ and on 9 June 1697 he married Anne Chesswell. The marriage settlement then made was to have important results for education in North Leicestershire.

In 1712 Humphrey Perkins bought land at Radcliffe-upon-Trent.³⁸ His main purchase was made on 1 November, when he bought a farm, Home Close, from Gervas Rossell. It comprised two acres around the farmstead, some sixty acres in the open fields and two closes of three acres. About the

same time he bought two more closes from William Pilkington. This land Humphrey Perkins purchased to meet the terms of the marriage settlement, in which he had agreed to provide Anne with an estate to be used on his death for her maintenance. Thus, he bought the Radcliffe estate in the first place to carry out the condition of the marriage settlement.

From 1708, when he last signed the churchwardens' accounts, his health was declining. In 1712, he attended for the last time the archdeacon's visitation at Nottingham and in 1715 he was permanently excused. He signed the parish register up to 1717, but the signature suggests a weak and ailing old man and on 7 February 1718 he signed and sealed his will in the presence of Jonas Bettinson.³⁹ Much of it consisted of plans for endowing a school at his native village of Barrow-upon-Soar.

The vicar of Barrow-upon-Soar and the rector of Loughborough were to act as trustees and on his wife's death they were to use the rents of his estate at Radcliffe-upon-Trent for the payment of a schoolmaster at Barrow-upon-Soar. He emphasised that the education to be given in this school was to be free and he wished a special plaque to be placed on the wall of the school.⁴⁰

Within a few months of making his will, Humphrey Perkins died and was buried on 10 December 1718.⁴¹ So came to an end the life of a little-known parson of the early eighteenth century. The Reverend Humphrey Perkins was not an outstanding figure in the Church: in no way did he influence his contemporaries as did Sancroft or Wake. Nevertheless, his career shows that, even in the eighteenth century, the Church of England had conscientious and hard-working servants. Their inclination was, as Sykes has pointed out, towards practical Christianity: "The eminent practical character of this presentation of religion was well suited to the temper of the age".⁴² It was in keeping with this aspect of Christianity that Humphrey Perkins sought to benefit the children of Barrow-upon-Soar; and so to-day his name is remembered by many hundreds of children in North Leicestershire, who have good cause to be thankful for the generous provision he made in his will for the endowment of a school at Barrow-upon-Soar.⁴³

Notes

1. Cf N. Sykes, *Church and State in England in the XVIII century* (Cambridge, 1935)
2. G. F. Farnham, *Quorndon Records* (1912), 421. According to W. G. Hoskins, *The Midland Peasant* (London 1957), 300, this would be a house with five or six rooms
3. *Leicestershire Marriage Licences*, Book III f. 66. Cf. B. Elliott, *History of Kibworth Grammar School* (Kibworth, 1957), where William Parker was a school feoffee
4. DE Leicestershire Record Office (Henceforth L.R.O.) 108/10
5. *Barrow-upon-Soar Parish Register*, vol. 1
6. The will of George Shuttlewood of Holwell, Melton, mentions his brother-in-law, William Perkins (LRO Box 1249 No. 53), but whether this is William Perkins of Barrow-upon-Soar is not known
7. It is uncertain where the marriage took place: there is no mention of it in *the Barrow-upon-Soar Parish Register*

8. *Barrow-upon-Soar Parish Register*, supra. The actual wording is "baptised December 20th 1646 Humfray Pirkins the soone of William and Ales his wife".
9. Humphrey Babington's will: "I give unto my godson Mr. Humphrey Perkins twenty shillings". (Somerset House, 1692 f. 21)
10. A school certainly existed in Barrow-upon-Soar in the 1640s, for Henry Wigley of Scraftoft left it for St. John's College, Cambridge in 1643, J. Venn and S. A. Venn, *Alumni Cantabrigienses* (4 vols. 1922-27), I, iv, 403
11. Venn, *op. cit.*, I, iii, 347
12. Venn, *op. cit.*, I, i, 62
13. W. J. Harrison, *Life in Clare Hall, Cambridge (1658-1713)* (Cambridge 1955), xiii
14. The note-book is in Fitzwilliam Hall, Cambridge. No other student with the surname of Perkins was then in residence at Trinity
15. Venn, *op. cit.*, I, iii, 347
16. N. Sykes, *op. cit.*, 199
17. Nottinghamshire Record Office (Henceforth NRO), CL 170
18. *Ibid.*
19. N. Sykes, *op. cit.*, 201
20. *Gloucester Diocesan Subscription Book (1662-1680)*; NRO, CL 170, *Archdeacon of Nottingham's call book*, 1675. Venn, *op. cit.*, I, iii, 347 incorrectly states that the Bishop of London ordained Humphrey Perkins
21. NRO, CL 170
22. NRO, PR 538 *Holme Pierrepont Parish Register*, 1564-1729; *Notts. Marriage Licences* (British Record Society) 1,265
23. Godfrey, *Notes on the Churches of Nottinghamshire*, 240
24. *Lincoln Diocesan Records*, P.D. 1677/57; *Speculum Dioeceseos Lincolnensis*, I, 131
25. *Ibid.*
26. D.N.B., L, 2
27. PRO, *Lord Chamberlain's Books*, 5, 16 (15). The warrant is as follows: "These are to require you to swear and admit Mr. Humphrey Perkins Master of Arts in the place and quality of Chaplain in extraordinary to His Majesty to enjoy the same place with all rights and privileges thereto belonging and this shall be the warrant"
28. N. Sykes, *op. cit.*, 151
29. NRO, PR 538
30. Godfrey, *ibid.*
31. *Lincoln Diocesan Records*, P.D. 1677/57
32. NRO, CL 170 *Exhibit Book*
33. NRO, PR 538
34. Equivalent to about £2,500 in modern money
35. NRO, An account of what glebes and tithes belong to the *Rectory of Holme Pierrepont*
36. *Archbishop Herring's Visitation Returns*, iv, 67
37. NRO, PR 538
38. LRO, *Deed of agreement between Gervas Rossell and Humphrey Perkins* 1 November 1712
39. The original will is now in the Borthwick Institute, York, Copies of it are to be found in the LRO and the NRO
40. The inscription on the plaque is as follows: "The Reverend Humphrey Perkins late Rector of Holme Peirrepont in the County of Nottingham and one of the Chaplains Extraordinary to His late Sacred Majesty King Charles the Second

settled and endowed this Schoole with the Rents of certain lands and Tenements lying and being in Ratcliffe upon Trent in the County of Nottingham as in and by his last Will and Teastament plainly appears”

41. NRO, PR 538

42. N. Sykes, *op. cit.*

43. The school is now a high school in the Leicestershire Plan of secondary education