REVEREND MANTON AND
THE TITHES OF
HOUGHTON ON THE HILL

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The account of tithing at Houghton on the Hill in the eighteenth century illustrates the problems of a cleric of this period immediately after his induction to a parish. Robert Manton was the son of Nathaniel Manton of the City of London, a knight who was educated at Oxford. He gained his BA in 1668 at the age of 20 and then went on to become rector of Withcote in 1677, where he would have been able to claim the great and small tithes of this small parish. This sparsely populated parish in the east of the county was not one from which a good living was to be made. Manton’s fortune changed 29 years later in 1706 when he was inducted to the rectory of Houghton on the Hill, a larger and potentially more productive parish, five miles east of Leicester. When a new incumbent was inducted to a living he had no information about the tithing customs of the parish or the names of his new parishioners. As Manton himself said, ‘I heare not of any Easter Roll’. He had to find this out from a parish that was not always friendly and with some people still grieving for the previous incumbent. The parish customs and practices of tithing continued into the nineteenth century in those parishes that had not been enclosed.

The 1707 terrier is generally typical of a pre-enclosure parish in Leicestershire but unusual in that the tithing customs are more detailed than most. Tithes were collected in kind as in the medieval period, the value rising and falling with the market value of the produce. Complex spatial and temporal rules governed the tithing of sheep to ensure that money or wool passed to the incumbent. Items such as hay-silver and waxshot would have been familiar to parishioners in the sixteenth century, as would the mixture of pennies and groats used for payment. It is interesting to note that the parson was to select his fleece from ten, after the parishioner had chosen two, thus preventing the tithe gatherer from taking the most valuable items of the farmer’s stock. Pigeons were an item not always subject to tithe being feræ naturæ – wild things although contemporary lawyers were quick to recognise the profit to be made from any disagreement that arose. The number of disputes over tithes fell with the increase in enclosure whereby tithes were extinguished in favour of an allotment of land to the incumbent. In some

1 The Easter or Paschal Roll or Book took the form of a list of all the communicant members of the parish and the payments that were made every Easter for their offerings. These included a range of modus payments such as a hearth penny for fuel, a garden penny to cover the tithes of their garden produce and odd pennies for foals or cattle where the parishioners were not likely to have enough stock to produce sufficient young animals for tithing.

parishes these disputes often arose in advance of enclosure thus enhancing the amount of land that would be allotted to the incumbent in the tithe award. Disputes over unpaid tithes were common in the ecclesiastical courts of the Leicester Archdeaconry and in other dioceses in the eighteenth century.

Tithe cases brought to the courts by the clergy are often seen in eighteenth century in terms of the 'avaricious parson'. It must be remembered that the clergy had a duty to maintain the value of their livings for their successors as this was their main source of income from their parochial duties. The rector of a parish was also responsible for the maintenance of the chancel, for this he received the great tithes. No tithe disputes have been reported from Withcote or Houghton on the Hill between 1560–1640 and no disputes between 1705–1712 found in the cause papers of the Leicester Archdeaconry records.

Manton’s inclusion of a statement with the glebe terrier about an area of tithe-free land in his parish is interesting. He was obviously worried about loss of income not only for himself but also for future incumbents of the living, citing the land formerly held by Mr John Allen and known as Reedam. The custom of the Rector tendering ten shillings to the parishioners and their return of it would suggest that this may have been an invention by his flock. Unfortunately, the glebe terriers of Houghton give no information about the glebe land, they only relate to the parsonage house but do include a tithe barn of 4 bays and a hay barn with a stable of 2 bays in 1690.2

The statement that ‘some few persons of the Town have about hay time, forcibly driven in the Town-herd of cattel to eat up and destroy the grass’ would indicate some local tensions over the tithe of the land. Manton claimed that he had received ‘no benefit from Reedam for these two years last past’, that is, since his arrival in the parish.3 As there had been a similar incident fifteen years earlier the parishioners were probably repeating a previous trial of strength. His only course of action was to claim damages either by arbitration or in the civil court as his predecessor had done. Manton had obviously tried to find a document that would ‘determine the right in this case’ but without success. The document that he was looking for is transcribed in Nichols, ‘Feb 1 1615. All the lands, etc in Houghton, then or lately in the possession of John Allen, which, on the dissolution of the Carthusian priory, had been granted to George Salter and John Willins, and by them surrendered back to the king, were granted to George Low, of London esq. and Edward Sawyer, of London, gent, to the annual value of 63s 1½d.’4 How the portion of John Allen’s land came to be tithe-free is not clear but the history of land ownership had obviously been retained in the village for a sufficiently long time to be recorded by Nichols’ informant. Manton’s case for his right to the tithe hay lay in the claim that it was ‘generally known and owned that for these

2 Record Office for Leicester, Leicestershire and Rutland. Glebe terriers 1D41/2/325. Two other terriers were checked, one from 1674 and an undated item produced by Joseph Birkhead, Manton’s predecessor, both of which record undifferentiated barns and other outhouses of 7 bays in total.
3 At the rate stated in the terrier, the value of the hay would have been 1s. 9d.
threescore or fourscore years past, the Rectors successively without interruption have yearly had the profits of Reedam’. This fulfils the basic requirements of tithe rights, that is, they had been collected continuously since ‘before the memory of man’.

The inscription on Manton’s tombstone reads:

Here lies Robert Manton who was rector of this church near 18 years
He died the 11th day of January, 1723, aged 76
He was clothed with humility
And had the ornament of a meek and quiet spirit;
Of whom the world was not worthy.5

This inscription would suggest that he was not a man to pursue legal action and the lack of evidence for any dispute at Leicester would seem to indicate that he had sent his statement with the glebe terrier to Lincoln simply to seek a legal opinion. He may also have been suggesting that there may be problems in the future. There is no evidence that he pursued the matter further at Leicester in the ecclesiastical courts. The matter may have been temporarily settled by arbitration or through a lawyer. As Professor Oldham points out the problem was finally solved by the Enclosure Act of 1765, when the incumbent was awarded around 200 acres of average land in lieu of tithe.
