

THE ROLE OF THE RURAL DEAN

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ORIGIN OF THE OFFICE

The history of the office of dean rural, like that of the office of the archdeacon, is shrouded in the mists of ancient Church history. It is however clear that since the rural dean, by whatever name he was called, stood in a relationship to the parochial clergy beyond the immediate episcopal environment, the history of the rural dean's office is directly related to the development of the parochial system. The development of this system is vastly different in the various corners of Christendom, and the appearance of the dean rural, or his equivalent, varies by nearly four centuries from place to place.

In the Eastern Church the archipresbyter, also known as the protopresbyter, first made his appearance in the fourth century. St Jerome, in the West, referred to an archipresbyter in 378.¹ The term 'dean' or 'decanus' was first used in the reign of Charlemagne and clearly meant the senior presbyter. At first there was no distinction between the urban and the rural dean. The dean usually had ten clergy under his control. The dean who lived at the monastic house of the bishop was the precursor of the cathedral dean. The urban dean had the charge of ten clergy in and about the city at the centre of the diocese. Rural deans were perceived as the leaders of a missionary area. Thus they were often 'deans of Christianity', a title still extant today in one diocese in England.

EARLY PERIOD

The duties of the rural deans were set out first by Isodore, the Bishop of Seville, in a letter, which was later incorporated into the Canons of Toledo in 633. Clearly, country churches are the subject of the duties assigned. On the continent the deans rural were established by the sixth century, for it was by then that the parochial system was in place.² It is not always recognised that in England the parochial system developed more slowly than on the continent. The ancient concept of the diocese as the centre of mission — very strong in the Celtic tradition — carried over into the Augustinian Church in England. Churches were built but parochial boundaries, and anything resembling the freehold, did not exist for a considerable period of time. The Saxon Church, besides establishing the cathedrals as the focus of diocesan ecclesiastical life, developed secular colleges or collegiate churches, managed by a chapter of secular clergy, in contrast to the monastic minsters. The collegiate churches were mirror images of the monasteries. The dean of this secular establishment was comparable to the archipresbyter or decanus of the Eastern church and thus may rightfully be called the earliest dean rural. The growth in power and influence of the monasteries tended to obscure the role and authority of the dean rural because so many of the churches in the area around each monastery came gradually under the control and authority of the abbot and the religious chapter.³ This left only the remoter areas to

¹ A canon of the Council of Carthage (398) indicates that an archipresbyter is more important than an archdeacon.

² Canon 6 of the Council of Chalcedon specifies: 'no man is to be ordained at large, neither presbyter, nor deacon, nor indeed any one who is in the ecclesiastical order; but whoever is ordained must be appointed particularly to some charge in a church or city, or in the country, or in a martyr's or monastery.' Canon 8 rules: 'Let the clergy of the poorhouses, monasteries, and martyries, remain under the authority of the Bishop in each city, according to the tradition of the Holy Fathers; and let them not through self will withdraw themselves from the rule of their own bishop.' The canons of the first four Ecumenical Councils indicate that a parochial system existed, but very much under the control of the bishop of the diocese.

³ There can be no doubt that the monastic movement inhibited the development of the parochial system in England, whereas on the continent the system was more effectively in place before the monasteries extended their influence and control.

the pastoral ministry of the secular clergy, who stood in need of a dean rural to keep them in order and represent them to the bishop: and the bishop to them. It is not without significance that the role of the rural dean was enhanced at the same time as the parochial system became consolidated, and the monasteries began to diminish in influence. Although the parochial system in England, which placed each blade of grass within the boundaries of a parish, was started by Theodore of Tarsus, Archbishop of Canterbury, in the seventh century, it did not reach its completion until the reign of Edward III. The reign of Henry VIII saw further modifications when the monasteries were closed and their lands, abbeys, and the churches under their control were drawn more completely into the parochial system. The English dean rural is thus very much an officer of the late medieval Church.

THE MEDIEVAL PERIOD

In England the chapter of clergy met monthly, presided over by the rural dean. There were also quarterly meetings which the clergy were bound to attend by oath taken before the dean within one year after becoming possessed of their livings. The oath enforced due reverence and obedience to the dean, as head of the chapter, and promised a participation in the expenses incurred in supporting the church-discipline of the deanery. Archbishop Stratford enacted in 1342 that the chapter meetings and synods and courts of bishops, archdeacons and other ordinaries should be held in more eminent places in the deaneries where victuals might be purchased by all. This was to circumvent the increased cost of hospitality to one person, especially the rural dean.

The business of the meetings was the 'advancement of religion and the interests of the church, and the detection and suppression of vice, within the sphere of their influence and rule'. The deans themselves were to wear the close cope. This was the fore-runner of the modern cassock. The chapter meetings were occasions for the proclamation of decrees and statutes and general information which would today be promulgated by post. One of the duties of the chapter meeting was to keep track of the excommunicated and to apprise the clergy of what misdemeanours they could absolve — the grosser sins required episcopal absolution. The rural dean had to report to the bishop the presbyters who dared to give absolution in cases which should have been reserved for the episcopal ordinary.⁴ We are not told how the rural dean discovered what went on in the confessional!

The dean in the latter part of the middle ages became a mirror image, though on a smaller scale, of the archdeacon, even to the extent of having his own consistory court. On the continent he gradually supplanted the archdeacon, who finally disappeared altogether. The principal reason for this appears to be a result of the edicts of the Council of Trent and subsequent synods, which sought to amend the discipline of the parochial clergy.

THE POST-REFORMATION PERIOD

Although on the continent the rural dean gradually supplanted the archdeacon, in England the opposite occurred. The archdeacon remained and became gradually more powerful, probably because of the larger size of the dioceses and the fact that bishops were very often also important figures in the state system and consequently less frequently in their dioceses. The office of rural dean became less important and went into decline.⁵ Attempts were made in the reign of Queen Anne to strengthen the

⁴ Synodical Constitutions of the Bishop of Arras 1375.

⁵ The Reformation in England also had its effect upon the office. In order to establish the Elizabethan settlement the Crown had to resort to civil authority to discipline the clergy and the parishes. This undermined the authority and the role of the rural dean, and indeed even of the archdeacon and the diocesan bishop. (See W. P. M. Kennedy, *Elizabethan Episcopal Administration*.)

role of the rural dean, but for the most part the implication of the documentation of that period was that many deaneries did not even have deans in place.⁶ However, the office of dean rural was still extant in the Exeter diocese in 1730, and an Archdeacon of Cornwall, John Sheepshank, claimed in 1832 that in Cornwall the rural deans had been elected annually since pre-Reformation times, though in most other dioceses the office had ceased to exist other than as a historic anachronism. The office of rural dean was revived in 1836 when specific tasks were given to the dean rural by Act of Parliament.⁷ By these statutes Sir Robert Phillimore wrote: ‘the duties of the rural dean are now clearly those of inspection and report only, they are ancillary to and not conflicting with those of the archdeacon.’ The oath of the rural deans of Cornwall in the diocese of Exeter in use in 1836, demonstrates the task of the office: ‘I swear that I will well and truly execute the office of a dean rural within my deanery, for the year ensuing: I shall diligently, in the year, visit all churches and chapels within my deanery, and also all parsonages and vicarage-houses; I shall make true presentments of such defects as I shall find therein, and also the defects of books, ornaments, and other utensils and furniture, belonging to each church or chapel: I shall also by myself or my deputy, faithfully execute, or cause to be executed all such processes and mandates as shall be sent to me from the ordinary, and make true returns of the same — so help me God.’

THE DUTIES OF THE MODERN RURAL DEAN

The modern rural dean, whether he or she is appointed by the bishop after an election or simply by selection, is always licensed or commissioned by the bishop. The duties of the rural dean are governed by Canon C23 and are:

1. To inform the Bishop, usually through the Archdeacon, of any matter concerning the church in the deanery, which ought to be brought to his notice, and in particular to give immediate notice of matters concerning the clergy. The rural dean should report to the Bishop whenever there is sickness or any other pastoral distress with the clergy and their families.
2. To notify the Archdeacon of all cases of need within the parishes arising out of lack of pastoral care, or inadequate pastoral cover.
3. To call together the clergy, who have a moral obligation to attend their Chapter, and act as chairman at chapter meetings, which must take place at least once a quarter.
4. To act as clerical chairman of the deanery synod and give leadership to the synod in co-operation with the lay-chairman.
5. To annually visit and report upon each church in the deanery, except in the year when the Archdeacon officially visits the parishes.
6. To supervise the pastoral and worship provisions within any vacant parish in co-operation with the churchwardens, acting as their temporary parish priest during the interregnum.
7. To submit a report annually to the Bishop on the state of the deanery and its parishes.⁸

Such a list clearly places a pastoral, yet monitoring, emphasis upon the rural dean's work. In many respects this is not unlike the medieval dean who had to order

⁶ The writer of the *Origines Anglicanae* wrote in 1710: ‘Though the name and function are in some parts of England and Wales continued to this day yet the shock, which the Reformation gave to the power of the clergy, and the authority of the canon law so effectually blasted the offices and authority of deans rural, that from that time they [sic] begun to wither, and are now shrunk up into a little compass; and have retained so little of their ancient power, that it is hard to say what they were.’

⁷ Ecclesiastical Commissioners Act 1836 (6 & 7 Will 4 c 77).

⁸ These are set out in the Licence of the Diocese of Truro. Each diocese will have its own instrument.

the moral behaviour of the clergy. It is however clear that the bishop, and indirectly the archdeacon, is the person ultimately responsible for discipline and the pastoral care of the clergy and that, after using the best endeavour to advise on how to resolve a problem, or minister to the need, the rural dean's duty is one of reporting. The bishop is of course the real pastoral minister and should be informed of any need for care or ministry. The rural dean has a pastoral care of the churchwardens and the parishes in the deanery especially when the incumbent or priest in charge is not fulfilling his or her role in the parish.

The duties of the rural dean as the chairman of the chapter of clergy is the most ancient part of the office. The modern chapter is largely a meeting to communicate news and information and to plan deanery events and programmes. It also provides a forum for opinions and ideas.

The rural dean's role in the deanery synod is largely that of leadership. Whatever the future of the deanery synod, this leadership role within the deanery will continue.

On behalf of the archdeacon the rural dean inspects the furnishing and ornaments of the churches annually, unless the archdeacon is conducting an inspection or visitation in the deanery in any particular year. The fabric is of course inspected by the architect or surveyor as part of the quinquennial cycle. The rural dean would thus only report to the archdeacon any matter concerning the fabric which needed urgent attention or which was thought to be of sufficient importance. Although there is no provision for the rural dean in the Care of Churches and Ecclesiastical Jurisdiction Measure 1991 it is obvious that if the archdeacon is to learn of any breach within the faculty jurisdiction⁹ it is the rural dean who will have to draw it to his attention. The Parochial Registers and Records Measure 1978 requires a regular inspection and report by the archdeacon on the registers retained in the parish church safe or chest.¹⁰ This should be delegated by the archdeacon to the rural dean as the dean does inspect the church and its ornaments and records once a year. The archdeacon would of course make a special visit to see the registers if the rural dean should report anything untoward.

The rural dean is the minister in charge of all ministry in vacant parishes in the deanery. He or she has to work with the churchwardens in planning the rota of services, the pastoral cover for emergencies and in making provision for baptisms, marriages and funerals. It is during a vacancy that the rural dean acquires most of his or her knowledge about the parish and its officers. As a representative of the bishop the rural dean is involved in the pastoral planning of the deanery.

The art of being a good rural dean will depend in large measure upon how he or she fulfils the duty of reporting to the bishop or the archdeacon on the parishes and in particular the clergy of the deanery. The key perhaps lies in an acknowledgement that the bishop is ultimately responsible for the pastoral care of the clergy and indeed the parishioners.

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⁹ See eg the Care of Churches and Ecclesiastical Jurisdiction Measure 1991, ss 13(9), 20.

¹⁰ See the Parochial Registers and Records Measure 1978, s 9 (substituted by the Church of England (Miscellaneous Provisions) Measure 1992, s 4, Sch 1, para 5).