

ALFRED WILSON. Rector 1872-1894.

The Victorians left very few of our parish churches untouched. So many were rebuilt, restored or embellished by them. Many new churches were built. There were often rectors and vicars, those more wealthy or more enterprising than the rest, who were the instigators of these projects. They may also have put resources into other projects in their community, such as schools or village halls. A typical example of this support for his church and parishioners was Alfred Wilson, Rector of East Farndon from 1872 to 1894.

Alfred had plenty of examples to follow. His family family provided at least three people who may have pointed the way; firstly, his grandfather William (c 1734-1821). William had been a successful silk merchant in London and decided to use his wealth to become a country gentleman. In 1799 he bought the manor of Over Worton in Oxfordshire and as Lord of the Manor used his wealth to rebuild the village. A Topographical Dictionary of 1840 recorded that the Hall, the Rectory, the Grange and all the houses in the village "have been rebuilt by the proprietor within the last thirty years". A second influence was his father, also William. He became a clergyman and while curate at Over Worton he had the medieval church demolished and a new one built. It was completed in 1844. Thus the entire village had been rebuilt by the two Williams. A third relative who gave Alfred an example to follow was Daniel Wilson, a more distant relation who joined Alfred's family by marrying Alfred's aunt Ann. Daniel served as curate at Over Worton but eventually attained a more elevated status, when he became Bishop of Calcutta. He was a wealthy man and a builder like the two Williams. He was responsible for the building of the cathedral in Calcutta (now Kolkata), which was consecrated in 1848. He contributed £20,000 to the building costs, an enormous sum in those times. Daniel and his cousin Joseph were the founders of the Lord's Day Observance Society.

Alfred Wilson, one of a huge family of fourteen children, was born in Walthamstow, London, in 1822, when his father was vicar there. In 1841, at the age of 18 he was admitted to Wadham College, Oxford, but changed the following year to Queen's College, Cambridge. He was awarded his B.A. in 1846 and an M.A. in 1849. Like his father and Bishop Daniel he was an evangelical of the 'low church' persuasion, as opposed to the Oxford Movement or Tractarians. His first position was as curate in Scaldwell in Northamptonshire in 1845. Then he moved in 1848 to become vicar of the church of his birthplace, Walthamstow, where his father had earlier held the same position.

From here he went to Sedgbrook in Lincolnshire (1851-63) and then to the historic church of Holy Trinity, Coventry, in 1864. In 1872, for health reasons, he took part in an exchange of livings with Rev. Francis Beaumont, Rector of East Farndon since 1868. Wilson thereby broke a connection between East Farndon church and its patrons, St. John's College, Oxford, in that every Rector since 1696 had previously attended that college. He must have thought, with some justification, that life as Rector of East Farndon would be quieter and less stressful than staying in the centre of Coventry.

Throughout his life he had the example of his energetic relatives, building churches and local community facilities. Perhaps his health prevented quite such a dynamic approach and it is clear from what he said later that he had hoped to have a quiet time in East Farndon. Certainly the local paper hardly mentions him in the first few years of his incumbency.

However, within a few years he had started to follow in the Wilson family footsteps with some church restoration. There is a long report in the *Northampton Mercury* of 13th May 1879, entitled 'Re-opening of the Church'. The report continues, "When the present rector, the Rev. A. W. Wilson succeeded to the incumbency, about six years since, he found the sacred edifice in a very dilapidated

condition, and, having set to work, the restoration of the chancel was effected about three years since...A new roof was placed over the chancel, the walls were re-plastered, the sedilia was (sic) restored...a handsomely-painted east window was provided by private subscription". The work which had just been completed was the restoration of the nave. The woodwork of the roof was renewed, as were the pews. There was a new pulpit and the walls had been replastered. The stonework had been cleaned, the aisle floors re-tiled and a new holy table provided. "Externally," the report continued, "the appearance of the church has been greatly improved by the erection of a stone porch in the place of the old one, which was composed of brick." It went on to say that the work was expected to cost about £900, of which £700 had been raised, leaving a £200 deficit at that time.



The pulpit given by Rev Wilson is still in use today

The re-opening was in the form of a service, attended by clergy from many neighbouring parishes (28 are named) and with an address by the Dean of Peterborough. Afterwards the Rector provided a luncheon for the clergy in the nearby schoolroom. It is in this part of the *Mercury's* report that we come nearest to getting a glimpse of Alfred Wilson. He responds to a toast and his words are closely reported. He came to East Farndon "with the intention of being quiet, but he found the church in a most miserable state...He had received very little assistance from the parish, but on the other hand, they had let him alone (laughter)." "A friend had told him that he ought never to have more than three on a committee. He had three on his restoration committee at first; one left him, and then another, until he stood alone". However, the report says, he didn't think anyone in the parish would not be pleased with the result. Were his parishioners unwilling to help? Or was Alfred Wilson a hard man to work with?

Normal calm was then restored, with events such as in January 1880, when Rev. Wilson is said to have 'preached a very impressive sermon' at a funeral. Then at the end of the year, 'on Thursday before Christmas' his wife Mary makes her appearance in the traditional role of the Rector's wife when she 'gave presents of money to the poor widows and others, with tea and sugar'. This may well have been an annual event which the *Advertiser* had not recorded before. No doubt the same is true of the school and Sunday school annual treat reported in August 1889, which took place on the Rectory lawns. "The children marched from the school to the Rectory singing one of their hymns". There were games and a tea. Then "three cheers for the Rector, who gave the tea".

In January 1883 Rev. Wilson and Rev. Jerwood of Little Bowden preached and a collection was made on behalf of the Curates' Augmentation Society. That this organisation was necessary is a clear indication that many curates were very poorly paid.

In October 1888, the *Harborough Advertiser* reported that East Farndon had “a new club-room”. Thanks to the Rev. Wilson, a house had been built in the village and “alongside and under same roof” is the club-room. There was a good supply of literature and only a nominal charge for membership. The report commented that the room would “no doubt help to relieve the monotony of village life in winter”. A year later at the A.G.M., it was reported that there were 52 members. In December 1890 an entertainment was held in the school-room to raise funds for what is now called “the Reading Room and Working Men’s Club”. It is likely that Rev. Wilson saw the club as a more wholesome rival to the two village pubs. Similar fund-raising events were held in subsequent years.

It seems, however, that the Rector’s efforts to offer an alcohol-free social space were not attracting the number of users hoped for. “Wake up, Farndon,” exclaimed the *Advertiser*, “do not let your reading-room be ‘starved’ to death!” And in February 1892 the paper commented, “The Reading-room and Club was provided by the kindness of the Rector and it is a great pity this kindness is not appreciated by those it was intended for.” The following month it records people’s “apparent indifference”. Some work was done to enhance the room in 1893, as a report records the re-opening of the reading-room and library, with the hope that “a better attendance will be registered”. There was some success as an increased attendance is reported in January 1894. “A great deal of time and money has been spent on it by the worthy rector.” Whether the reading-room continued to function after the Rector’s death is not clear. The house, of which the room formed a part, was bought in 1913 by the Guardians of the Market Harborough Union Workhouse as a children’s home, a purpose which it served for over thirty years.

During 1894 the illness which was to bring Alfred Wilson’s death seems to have put him out of action. The sermons at the Harvest services were given by Archdeacon Hardy of Malta, who was actually the Rector’s son-in-law. The *Advertiser* then on 9th October reported Alfred Wilson’s death. The cause of his death was “a formation at the base of his throat making respiration very difficult”.



The plaque in the church in memory of Alfred Wilson

The Rector's funeral sermon was also given by his son-in-law and his body was taken to the family vault at Over Worton. The *Advertiser's* final tribute is worth quoting, as it includes a list of his work and gifts to the village. "During his residency in Farndon Mr Wilson restored the chancel of the parish church nearly at his own expense; in 1878-9, at infinite trouble and expense, he raised funds to restore the body of the church, giving as his especial gifts the beautiful carved oak pulpit, brass lectern, carved oak reading desk and chair, communion table and credence table, ormolu candlesticks and book-rest on the altar, new organ, books for the choir, etc. He also defrayed the cost of enlarging the school, and was originator of the scheme for building a school-house and placing a clock in the tower in commemoration of the Queen's Jubilee". It fails to mention the house with the Reading-room, another of his initiatives.

Alfred Wilson died at the age of 72, after twenty-years in East Farndon, during which time he had followed in the footsteps of his father and grandfather with his building and restoration projects within the community. He clearly felt he must do what he could, despite "having the intention of being quiet".

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February 2021