

## **JOHN EYRE. Rector 1659-1696.**

Few seventeenth century village parsons are more than names in a list, but unusually we can gain an insight into the personality of Rev John Eyre, who was Rector of East Farndon for over thirty years in that tumultuous century. It so happened that he was a friend of the Isham family of Lamport and that the 17-year old Thomas Isham was made by his father to keep a diary through 1672 and 1673, in Latin, as a way of acquiring proficiency in the language. In this way many trivial incidents have been recorded and these make John Eyre come to life for us.

The volumes of "Northamptonshire and Rutland Clergy 1500-1900" record that John Eyre was 'intruded' into the incumbency of East Farndon in 1659. What this seems to mean is that times were changing. During the Interregnum, following the execution of Charles I in 1649 and before the restoration of the monarchy with Charles II in 1660, the Church of England was very different from what it had been previously. Bishops had been abolished and the Book of Common Prayer banned. A much looser organisation came into being, with a good deal of variation between parishes. Generally clergy were expected to follow the new line and those who supported the old episcopalian regime had to fume quietly in the background. So when John Eyre became Rector, it is most likely that his views were thought to be more in keeping with the Cromwellian philosophy than those of his predecessor. New appointees to a parish were assessed by a Commission of 'Triers' to test their suitability.

After the Restoration, the old style of worship was very soon reinstated and in 1662, all clergy were required to adhere to the pre-Interregnum system, with

bishops and the Book of Common Prayer, in a slightly revised form. Many clergy were forced to leave their livings because they were unwilling to subscribe to this ruling. But John Eyre remained at Farndon. So either he was, all along, a covert supporter of the pre-1649 church, whose time had now come, or he was, like the Vicar of Bray in the song, willing to go along with whatever helped his career, and agree to whatever was currently required.

By 1672, John Eyre had been Rector for thirteen years. And this is the time when he begins to make his appearances in Thomas Isham's diary. He calls on the Ishams on many occasions, often staying for a meal and even staying overnight. Clearly, he must have been considered as being on the same social footing as this distinguished Northamptonshire family. He may well have been a younger son of a landed family. Signs soon emerge that Rev Eyre has a fiery temper.

*"March 7th, 1672. Mr Eyre spent the night with us, and had an altercation with Dr Curtius. The next day he made a scotch pudding".*

Presumably the altercation and the making of a pudding are not related events! Here we see a man very much at home, causing a disturbance but also rolling up his sleeves in the kitchen. Could a scotch pudding be a haggis?

*"May 8th, 1672. Mr Eyre came and thanked father profusely for the puppy."*

Evidently, John Eyre is not all bluster. He and his friends took a keen interest in current affairs, as is shown by numerous entries.

*"June 13th, 1672. Mr Eyre returned from Northampton and told us he had heard that Holland was almost crushed by the consummate skill and energy of the King*

*of France and that four envoys had come to our king from the Dutch to discuss peace proposals."*

News had to be gleaned from wherever one could get it, though there was no guarantee of reliability.

We learn something of Eyre's family and of his inquisitive and extrovert character in this next entry.

*"June 18th, 1672. Messrs Wright, Eyre and Wase dined with us. Mr Eyre asked Mrs Vaughan to speak into the trumpet. Not only was he delighted with its resonance, but the echo resounded from the new building and gave back the voices in a wonderful way and brought back audible words. Mr Eyre said that he is going to Cambridge next week to the Commencement, where he hopes to meet his son, who is an incepting Master of Arts."*

The 'new building' shows that the architect John Webb had completed his work at Lamport Hall less than twenty years earlier. The 'trumpet' may be a vamping horn, which acted as a sort of loudspeaker which would amplify the choir or the Rector's voice in the church. There is still one to be seen in the church at Harrington and the horn from Braybrooke is now in Harborough Museum.

An amusing diary entry from the following month shows Eyre's fondness for good food, even to the extent of overdoing things.

*"July 11th 1672. Mr Eyre senior went to Harborough with his son...John Chapman went with him part of the way with them, and Mr Eyre senior said to him that he had eaten too big a breakfast at Lamport and feared for his appetite, lest he should not be able to consume as much venison as he wished; when he was about a mile from Harborough he dismounted, to whet his appetite by walking, I imagine."*

The dominant impression left by the entries referring to John Eyre is of someone who was frequently involved in an argument, and heatedly at that. These two days in August illustrate this most forcibly.

*"August 11th, 1672. William Smith came and spoke his mind about Mr Eyre, calling him a litigious ass and saying that Eyre had never forgiven him for cutting his acquaintance."*

*August 12th 1672. Mr Eyre called with his son... At dinner Mr Eyre assaulted old Mr Holmes, for not having erected a tombstone to Mr Brearley although he was a trustee of the will. Mr Holmes replied that he knew nothing of the matter and that it was no business of his anyway, but he would inform Mr Archer who was executor. Nevertheless Mr Eyre persisted in his rage until Mr Richardson advised him to postpone the altercation to another time. But Eyre was in such a blazing anger that he broke into a torrent of open abuse and insult, and after dinner immediately left the dining-room and would not put in an appearance again."*

When the younger John Eyre gets married, the diary entry implies that the financial side of the match was what was reported most keenly:

*"November 28th, 1672. Mr Bainbridge came here with Eyre, who told us that his son John Eyre has got married in London to a woman with a dowry of fifteen hundred pounds."*

In 1673, the diary records eight visits by John Eyre to the Ishams' home. The entries are quite brief and, surprisingly in view of what has gone before, there are no 'altercations'. The entries, where any detail is given about conversations that took place, are chiefly news with a mix of gossip and current affairs. Not all the information is correct! Both the items in the next entry proved to be wrong,

though we learn that Nell Gwyn was a topic of interest even to the Rector of East Farndon.

*“May 6th, 1673. Mr Eyre called and told us that the son of Lord Montagu has married a granddaughter of the Countess of Northumberland, and that the Earl of Newport has married Nell Gwyn.”*

During the summer of 1673, the main topic of concern is the war against the Dutch. Then in September, there is the last mention of John Eyre before the diary comes to an end. Presumably Thomas's Latin had progressed sufficiently for him to be allowed to finish his task.

*“September 27th, 1673. Mr Eyre came back from London. He told us that his daughter has had a child and brought ‘The Gazette’, where we read that the Emperor has married the Duchess of Innsbruck.”*

So we now know that Rev Eyre has a daughter and that he is a grandfather by now, though whether this is the first grandchild is not clear.

Here ends our insight into this clergyman of the fiery temperament. Despite his outbursts, he clearly had a wide social circle. How did he behave towards his parishioners in East Farndon, during the thirty-odd years they were in his care? How much time did he actually spend with them, rather than his more exalted friends at Lamport Hall and elsewhere?

Sadly, we may never know the answer to these questions, but at least the diary enables us to use our imaginations.

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February 2021

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Sources: “Northamptonshire and Rutland Clergy 1500-1900”, 16 vols. 1938-52, Northants Record Society.

“The Diary of Thomas Isham”, with translations from the Latin by Norman Marlow, Gregg International Publishers, 1971.

These books are all in Market Harborough library.



The Vamping Horn from Braybrooke now in Harborough Museum