

Hicks, Haecs, Hocs: Diaries of a Good Bishop

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In the preface to his edition of Manilius, Housman lamented that 'Our own great age of scholarship, begun in 1691 by Bentley's *Epistola ad Millium*, was ended by the successive strokes of doom which consigned Dobree and Elmsley to the grave and Blomfield to the bishopric of Chester.'

Unlike Blomfield, and his own immediate predecessor at Lincoln, Edward-King, Hicks is not favoured with any mention in the *Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*. Nor was he a giant among classical scholars. But thanks to the recent publication of a selection from his diaries*, we can see him as we can see few others of his kind; these glimpses afford welcome (especially in the light of recent turmoils at Lincoln Cathedral) evidence of a good man of versatile virtues, proof that moving from academe to a see need not be a stroke of doom for classical scholars, and refutation of the old adage that nothing improves by translation except a bishop.

There was no controversy over the Dean who welcomed Edward Lee Hicks to his see in June 1910. Though unremarked in Neville's edition, he was none other than Hicks' old Oxford tutor and examiner, E. C. Wickham, fellow-classicist and editor of Horace, whose death Hicks will presently lament, as was his wont, in choice Latin, mindful of Samuel Johnson's instructions that 'Epitaphs should be in Latin, as every thing intended to be universal and permanent should be.' But ecclesiastical as well as secular immoralities were a constant thorn in Hicks' side, thanks in large measure to the astonishing country parsons he encountered in his far-flung jurisdiction, a gallery of characters worthy of the Trollopes (Anthony and Joanna) and Barbara Pym.

Thus, one diary entry laments 'the horrible and shameless immorality of Grimsby,' while in another 'I spoke of the dissolute state of Skegness.' What is it about coastal towns in Lincolnshire? Perhaps the air is all too bracing. 'A horrid case of immorality at Long Bennington and its sequel' is left tantalisingly unresolved—perhaps it is in an unpublished section. In his often delightful prose, Hicks describes a formerly infamous village, 'long, lazy, dirty, drunken, lousy Ludford,' as 'respectable now, but still very Wesleyan, but immoral.'

At North Thoresby, the villagers were 'very immoral,' which is hardly surprising since their old rector (one Bagret) had left two illegitimate daughters in the village.

Those titillated by the current Lincoln scandals will enjoy the affair of the Rev. J. H. Brown, vicar of Sibsey. As recounted to a horrified Hicks by the local Church Warden, a Mr Hand, there was serious concern over what Brown was up to with 'a young girl of 18 he had frequently at the Vicarage, under the pretext of preparing her for Confirmation.' All was revealed when the girl's mother found her diary in which she had recorded 'all that had passed between them; the increasing familiarities; and the grosser passages of April 4, 5, 6.' The father ('a decided Wesleyan') complained, via Mr Hand, to Hicks who thus learned the full story: 'Mr Brown seems to have become more familiar in his handling of his victim, until he had made her submissive to his evil designs. These seem to have culminated in Easter Week, 1918, when gross familiarities took place at the Vicarage.' Hicks procured the resignation of this 'News of the World' randy parson, and provides a pithy finale rather like a Shakespearean stage direction: '*Exit Brown immundissimus*'.

Not all Lincolnshire clergy were like this. But clerical carnalities were not Hicks' only problem. The demon drink bulked large. So much so that Hicks, a staunch Temperance man, travelled to London on November 10, 1910, for a special Committee of Convocation on Inebriate Clergy. The problem also extended to vicars' wives; we once find Hicks at Market Rasen, having a frank talk with the incumbent about his good lady's tipping (Hicks partly records this moment in classical Greek—he frequently slips in Greek and Latin words and phrases, for the respective purposes of brevity, bowdlerisation, and quotation). In 1918, Hicks was inclined to blame part of the drink problem on parliamentary vested interests: 'We are in for a bad time, as regards Liberty, Sobriety, Progress. The Chief Whip is Sir Geo. Younger, the ablest and most influential Brewer in the House: I know not how many more liquor men will not be elected.' A cognate entry will tickle both admirers and detractors of Lady Thatcher. In 1916, Hicks records his view of her native Grantham: 'Dominated by Toryism and by Mowbray's Brewery. The Drink Tory element seems everywhere predominant.' Victorian Values?

But the most intriguing scandal has nothing to do with sex or booze, frustratingly cryptic though the entry is: 'Motor to Holbeach. The story of the sacrilegious game of cards on the Altar, with a corpse for "dummy".' Again, there may be more in the unpublished sections.

One could fill many pages, as does Hicks, with the gorgeous gallery of vicars (and, often, their wives), frequently enlivened by the

Bishop's sparkling style. Here are a few specimens. We meet Hunt: 'His use of incense [Hicks always deplores such Catholic trimmings]. A foolish ill-tempered man.' At Grainthorpe, the vicar is 'a Cambridge honours man [Hicks was from Oxford], having not the least idea of being a pastor, and being parted from his 2nd wife [shades of another current Anglican scandal!].' At Tetford, there is an 'old vicar, a sort of hermit scholar, who lives in his garden. He has all the modern books on Biblical study. I fear the Parish is not wisely or thoroughly handled.' Different men had different hobbies. Hall of Cherry Willingham (Lincolnshire is full of such delightful toponyms) was 'somewhat of an antiquary' (like Hicks himself); he also went in for 'iron work and smith's work.' The aforementioned vicar of Grainthorpe was forever playing Wagner on his gramophone. Again, we are often told less than we would like to know, e.g. Rees of Helpringham, 'a dreadful rotter! What is to be done with him?' Also enigmatic is Ellison at Althorpe: 'half-vitalized.' One rather warms to Houghton of Haxey, though Hicks did not, who 'quietly substituted jiggety hymns for the Magnificat and Te Deum'—an early trendy parson, trying to appeal to 'yooof'? If I had to choose a favourite passage, it might be the following one, both for comic content and what it reveals of Hicks himself: 'Curate Morton restless and disobedient. He has been lay reader in charge of Kangaroo Island or some such place, in Australia, and has come to England full of himself: he needs reducing to his proper dimensions.'

Hicks, though, moved in far wider circles than curious country clergymen. When brought to King George upon his consecration in 1910, it was the Home Secretary of the day who ushered him into the royal presence—Winston Churchill. At Somersby, he was rebuked by the incumbent Lord Tennyson for not pronouncing the word 'knowledge' in the Lincolnshire way, as his father, the poet Tennyson, had insisted; Hicks tactfully replied that he dared not do this in the light of Shaw's satirising of a dialect-speaking parson in *Candida*. When lunching at the country home of H.J. Roby, a Latinist distinguished for his published grammars of that language, he was shown a Latin inscription where Dorothy Wordsworth had copied down William's poetry at his dictation, this entry closing on a point of ascription: 'Old Wordsworth went boeing up and down, but 'twas Dorothy as wrote the poetry.'

At the other end of the social and intellectual scale, Hicks did his best to get and stay in touch with the working class. People unfamiliar with Lincoln tend to think of it as a sleepy cathedral city in what may be the last county of England where life is still lived as it used to be; cf. Hugh Massingberd's delightful but sometimes misleading paean to the county, 'All Flats, Fogs and Fens' in *The Spectator*, Aug. 6, 1994. In

fact, it was, and is, a heavily industrial place, with many factories, a truculent proletariat (Hicks notes the dislike felt by Lincoln girls and women for domestic service) and in recent times a taste for Labour MPs (for years after World War 2, Geoffrey de Freitas was unbeatable) and very left-wing city councils. Hicks frequently addressed the workers of Robey's and Ruston's at their factories, and often spoke up for them elsewhere, but was justifiably alarmed by the rioting and looting in August, 1911, and disconcerted at the heckling of 'a group of Socialists of the SDP type, led by one resentful man,' and by a 'rusty-tempered socialistic workman' encountered on a train to Sleaford.

Hicks was also no stranger to feminism within and without the Church; the movement is far older than nowadays supposed. Indeed, in the most quotable case, he is (newspapers of the period apart) one of the first writers actually to use the term. On September 2, 1914, he was to marry a couple called Ruth Giles and Julius West. We may allow Hicks to tell the story: 'Ruth Giles and her mother and sisters vehement feminists, and desired to omit 'Obey'. The father would not come to the wedding if 'obey' were omitted. They consulted me, and I was puzzled. But in the end it was agreed that I should read the marriage service over them at 8, omitting 'obey', and 'giving way', and other small things (I used the Revised Prayerbook), the Father remaining in our vestry: then at 8.30 he was Epistoller while I celebrated, using the propria of the day *simpliciter*. I feel satisfied that I did right, and saved the family from real difficulty.'

At Oxford, Hicks had taken up a scholarship to read classics at Brasenose in 1861; five years later, he was the first open lay fellow at Corpus Christi. He then went on to specialise in Greek epigraphy under Sir Charles Newton at the British Museum, before ordination in 1870. It was thanks to Oxford and classics that he met his future wife, Agnes Mary Trevelyan Smith, who was living in the household of the Corpus Professor of Latin.

Hicks kept up his classics at Lincoln, bringing with him Evans' *Scripta Minoa*, Macan's Herodotus, and Gilbert Murray's translation of Euripides, gifts from the Classical Association at Manchester where he had been combining academic and ecclesiastical duties. On August 28, 1916, he 'read Vol. IV of the BM inscriptions, with the hope of reviewing it: very interesting to get back into Greek epigraphy!' In 1912, he addressed the Classical Association on 'Hellenism as a Force in History,' adding that 'it seemed to go pretty well.' He once stood in at an Oxford meeting for an ailing Gilbert Murray, and near the end of his own life he underwent electrical shock treatment at the recommendation of Sir Clifford Allbutt, a distinguished historian of ancient medicine. In the last year (1919) of his life, he was reading for

pleasure such things as the 8th Book of Lucan, and must be one of the few people ever to spend a seaside break at Skegness reading the *Epistles* of Horace. Apart from sprinkling his diaries with Greek and Latin words and phrases, he is never short of an actual quotation or tag from (e.g.) Homer, Juvenal, and Virgil. One of his many classical diversions was translating the *Te Deum* into hexameters—should this still exist, it would be worth printing. His classical palate was tickled by staying at a pub in Mablethorpe called ‘The Jolly Bacchus.’ Lincoln, with its Roman associations, was the ideal city for Hicks, and he is frequently to be seen presenting and discussing Roman coins and guiding visitors around the remains. On occasion, his enthusiasm got the better of him. As a Lincolnshire man myself, I would like to believe his claim that Billingborough and Horbling remind one of Greece, but my own recollections of these villages do not tally.

Hicks was a serious but not a solemn man. He would, I think, wish that a little celebration of his diversities might end on a lighthearted note. So, after all this food for thought, it is agreeable to end with some thoughts on food, especially since these lead to a suitable finale of ecclesiastic and lay Lincolnshire culinary tastes. Hicks does not go on about eating in the Epicurean manner of Parson Woodforde back in the 18th century, but we often hear about his enjoyment of endless luncheons, teas, and dinners, specifying his consumption of fish, goat cheese, pearl barley coffee, his tastes running from those of the clubman (‘excellent cigars’) to the schoolboy (‘jammy teas’). Red bricks in a building put him in mind of streaky bacon, while he is at pains to record the first attested discovery of bilberries in Lincolnshire. Hicks would have approved of the current bishop of Lincoln, Robert Hardy, for contributing a recipe for Lemon Freeze to the just-published (1995) *Lincolnshire Cookbook*, a succulent compilation also honoured by the recipe for Orange & Lemon Flan provided by none other than Lady Thatcher.

- * *The Diaries of Edward Lee Hicks, Bishop of Lincoln 1910-1919*, selected and edited by Graham Neville, The Lincoln Record Society, Volume 82, Lincoln, 1993.

**Librarians please note: May issue outside cover,
2nd last line should have read**

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