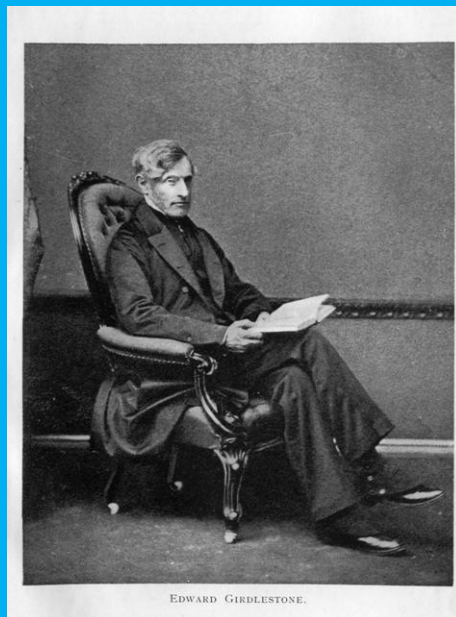


**EDWARD GIRDLESTONE**

**“THE AGRICULTURAL LABOURER’S FRIEND”**

**VICAR OF ST ANDREWS, HALBERTON 1862 TO 1872**

---



EDWARD GIRDLESTONE.

This booklet has been written by a member of the Halberton History Group.

Whilst every effort has been made to ensure the accuracy of the information supplied herein, the Halberton History Group cannot be held responsible for any errors or omissions. Unless otherwise indicated, opinions expressed herein are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the collective view of the Halberton History Group.

**©Copyright Notice**

Permission to reproduce this document in whole or in part is granted for personal and educational use only.

Commercial copying, hiring, lending is prohibited.

Selling without prior written consent is prohibited.

In all cases this ©notice must remain intact.

[Historygroup@halberton.org](mailto:Historygroup@halberton.org)

April 2020



### **PROLOGUE**

In 1862 the newly appointed vicar of Halberton, 57-year old Canon Edward Girdlestone, stepped down off the carriage and for the first time put his feet onto the soil of his new parish.

It had been a tiring journey from Gloucestershire and he paused to look at the picturesque scenery around him. Red stone and cob-walled cottages, left unpainted in their native warm red-brown, or whitened, with roofs of thatch, slate, or tile, contrasted strongly with the greenery of their own little gardens and the meadows, pastures, orchards and hills all around.

Girdlestone spoke quietly to his wife before extending his hand towards the welcoming party; "London, Lancashire, Bristol, Gloucestershire ... and now Halberton in Devon. I wonder what The Good Lord has in store for me here?"

## 1. EDWARD'S ANCESTORS

Six generations before Edward his ancestor Richard Girdlestone<sup>1</sup>, churchwarden in the village of Thornage (a few miles inland from Blakeney Point, Norfolk), had worked as a linen weaver. His descendants had continued to live in the same area at the nearby villages of Letheringsett, Kelling and Baconsthorpe.

Edward's family tree abounds with high achievers; half of his uncles and great uncles held degrees from Caius College Cambridge (the fourth oldest College in the University of Cambridge<sup>2</sup>). One of his great uncles became a surgeon, one of his uncles became a magistrate; two others became rectors (one of whom was a published author).

Edward's grandfather obtained his BA degree from Caius in 1742, became curate of Scarning (Norfolk), and in 1746 was presented to the living of Baconsthorpe with Bodham.

Edward's father, Samuel Rainbow Girdlestone, was born at Baconsthorpe in 1766. At the age of 22 he obtained his degree at Wadham College, Oxford, became a chancery barrister in London and had married Caroline Roberts Powell<sup>3</sup> six years later. Edward's eldest brother, Samuel (1795-1848) was a barrister (QC) in London and was famed as a shrewd lawyer and a lucid speaker. His other brother Charles (1797-1881), was educated at Balliol College Oxford, became a lecturer in Logic and Theology, held the livings of Sedgely, Alderley and Kingswinford and was a writer and pioneer in church building.

On 10<sup>th</sup> June 1822 Edward matriculated at Balliol and in 1823 was admitted a scholar of his college. He became B.A in Classics (1826) and in 1828 was ordained to the curacy of St Mary's Deane (now located in Bolton in Lancashire).

Given his family background it is no surprise at all that Edward had chosen to enter the Church.

## 2. LIFE, INTERRUPTED

Edward had been born in St Pancras (in Middlesex as it was then) and grew up in the finer parts of London, those areas populated by lawyers and other senior professionals of the time. When he was eight years old the stable passage of his upbringing came to a shuddering halt.

On Tuesday 5<sup>th</sup> April 1814 a notice was published in The London Gazette. "By Order of the Court for Relief of Insolvent Debtors; the petition of Samuel (Rainbow) Girdlestone, late of Lincoln's Inn, barrister, and now a prisoner in Fleet prison, in the City of London, will be heard on the 29<sup>th</sup> day of April instant, at the Guildhall in the City of Westminster, at the hour of nine in the morning".

The list of the one hundred and five creditors of "the said Samuel Girdlestone" covered more than two columns of The Gazette and included (amongst others) gentlemen, a knight, bankers, trustees, timber and slate merchants, stonemasons, publicans, grocers, wine merchants, booksellers... and a newsman of Holborn. Samuel Girdlestone's creditors were located all over the country including (to

---

<sup>1</sup> 1571-1628

<sup>2</sup> Caius was first founded by the Rector of Terrington St Clement in Norfolk, in 1348.

<sup>3</sup> Caroline was born in 1770. She died in 1825. Samuel remarried to Amelia Troward in 1827. He died in 1836

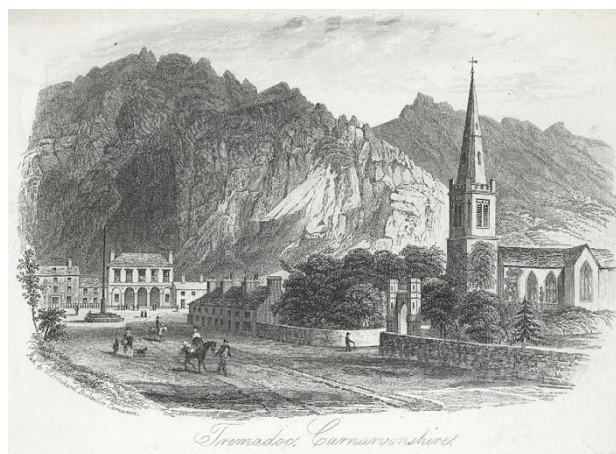
name but a few); in London, Middlesex, Surrey, Cambridgeshire, Lincolnshire, Norfolk, Merionethshire and Caernarvonshire.

Edward's father's insolvency was the consequence of a disastrous investment in a scheme designed to improve the lives of workers in Caernarvonshire.

William Alexander Madocks had an ambition to open up this remote area of North Wales and to raise its prosperity by developing a planned town (Tremadog), improving road links and by introducing manufacture. He promoted the building of Turnpike Roads and to avoid a long detour or the dangerous crossing of the estuary of the River Glaslyn he devised a scheme to build a great Embankment across it. In the autumn of 1811 the Embankment, which had taken longer and cost more to build than anticipated, was completed. In February 1812 disaster struck when high tides and a storm breached it. Madocks' agent and supporters held the creditors at bay and repaired and strengthened the whole embankment, which was open again by 1814, but the embankment repairs had left the finances of Madocks and his investors, Samuel Rainbow Girdlestone amongst them, in ruins.



*William Alexander Madocks(1773-1828)*



*Tremadoc, Caernarvonshire*

Whilst languishing in the terrible conditions in Fleet Prison in 1814 Samuel must have felt it was a fortunate coincidence of timing that “An Act for the Relief of Insolvent Debtors in England” had been introduced in 1813. The Act created a new Court whereby those imprisoned for debt could apply to be released by reaching an agreement with their creditors (unless they were in trade or guilty of fraudulent or other dishonest behaviour). The agreement was designed to ensure a fair distribution of their present and future assets. Samuel was released from Fleet Prison on May 3<sup>rd</sup> 1814, with Philip Hurd (a Solicitor of the Inner-Temple, London), appointed as the assignee.

Samuel returned to work and “on his return to the Law Courts the Lord Chancellor and the Bar stood up as a mark of their sympathy and respect” <sup>4</sup>

One can only imagine the impact of these events on the family in general and the young Edward Girdlestone in particular; his father had been bankrupted by an investment in a philanthropic scheme.

### **3. ON TO DEANE (BOLTON) LANCASHIRE**

Edward’s move from London to the north of England was prompted by William Hulton, who engaged Edward to be the private tutor for his eldest son. Edward also tutored other private pupils at this time, during which he continued to study, and he obtained his MA in 1829 following his ordainment to St Mary’s Deane in the previous year.

Edward must surely have heard of the controversial and outspoken William Hulton before he took up the post of tutor. Hulton had been High Sherriff of Lancashire since 1811 and had quickly gained a reputation “as a man who could be relied upon to deal severely with working class people arguing for political reform”<sup>5</sup>.

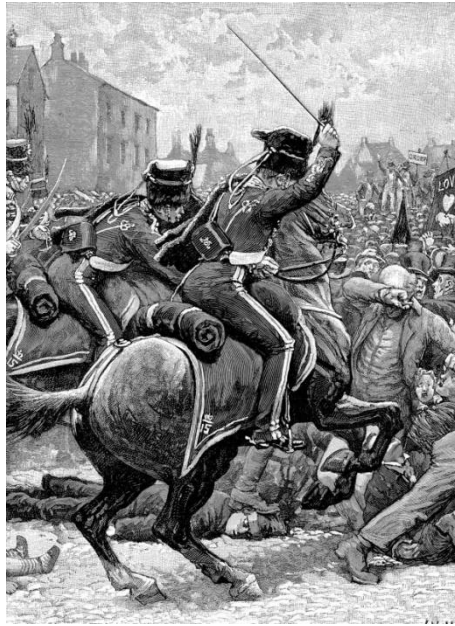
In 1819 Hulton was appointed as chairman of a special committee set up to deal with the social unrest that was taking place in the new industrial towns and on August 16<sup>th</sup> of that year a very large crowd, estimated at over 60,000 people, assembled in St Peter’s Field, Manchester, to listen to a political reformer (Henry Hunt). Hulton concluded the town was in great danger, read the Riot Act and called in the 400 Yeomanry and 600 Hussars that he had already placed on standby to arrest Hunt and the other leaders of the demonstration. What followed became known as the Peterloo Massacre, in which at least eleven people were killed and almost seven hundred injured<sup>6</sup>. Hulton was severely criticised for his handling of the situation but remained unrepentant, declaring August 16<sup>th</sup> “the proudest day of my life” and he carried on developing his business interest in coal mining and railways. According to some he was deeply hurt by the way that people blamed him for the massacre and he continued to play a role in public life, coming to the forefront of the National School movement in Bolton district.

---

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.salthousehistory.co.uk/girdlestones.html#>

<sup>5</sup> <http://spartacus-educational.com/PRhulton.htm>

<sup>6</sup> Estimates of the number of casualties and injured vary, but are always high.



*The Peterloo Massacre, 1819*

In 1830 Edward was nominated by The Lord Chancellor and instituted as vicar of Deane when the previous incumbent resigned the living.

Like Hulton, Edward had an interest in both religious education and raising funds to pay for schools, although they did come at it from rather different angles; in 1839 Hulton is quoted as saying "The real effect of mere intellectual education is to substitute crimes of fraud for crimes of force" whereas Edward said during his later years; "I prefer denominational schools to undenominational schools, but better the latter than no schools at all".

Edward was extremely successful in helping to establish schools in Deane. By 1842 the parish had three Sunday schools (539 children), three day schools (376 children) and appeals for financial support had attracted Royal attention; "February 26th, 1842. Her Majesty the Queen... has been most graciously pleased to cause the munificent donation of £20 to be forwarded to the Rev. Edward Girdlestone towards the liquidation of the debt incurred by the establishment of several new Sunday schools and daily schools in the district attached to the parish of Deane."

In 1851 Edward delivered a sermon at the opening of a new Day School for Girls. In one of the passages he expressed his opinion about the appropriate position of religious education in the formal teaching of children:

*"Ye, then, of the labouring classes, suffer a word of exhortation from one, who, though personally almost a stranger to you, has, nevertheless, for more than twenty years, in the Day as well as in the Sabbath-school, worked amongst and taught the children of the class to which yourselves belong. Believe me, then, the sort of education for which I have been pleading, whether you regard this world or the world to come, is the most valuable inheritance which you can purchase for your children. I do not undervalue Sunday-schools. Several hours every Sunday, for the last twenty, years have been spent by me in a Sunday school, And I thank God that He has not denied His blessing to the work. But I have, nevertheless, no hesitation in saying that I consider Sunday-schools only supplementary; and,*

*if they be put in the place of that regular and well-organized intellectual cultivation and religious and moral training which the Daily-school can alone supply—if, for instance, your wealthier neighbours are induced to think that they have done quite enough when they have provided you a room and funds for Sabbath teaching—that by sending them there you have done all that is required of you in behalf of your children—the Sunday school, instead of a supplementary good, becomes, I have no hesitation in saying it, a positive evil”.*

Whilst at Deane, Edward preached a series of four sermons on the life and death of “George Marsh, the Martyr of Deane” which were later published as a book.

George Marsh, a protestant, was a farmer's son, born in Deane in 1515. When Edward VI became King in 1547, Marsh was appointed as a preaching minister. Mary I became Queen in 1553 and she sought to re-establish Roman Catholicism. Marsh became victim to her persecution of the reformers. Edward described what happened;

*“George Marsh was now repeatedly examined before the Earl of Derby and his Popish counsellors at Lathom; and afterwards at Chester, before Dr. Cotes, the bishop of that place and a most bigoted and persecuting Papist”.<sup>7</sup>*

Marsh refused to deny his beliefs, was tried, convicted, and burnt at the stake on April 24, 1555.

In one of his four sermons Edward delivered this evangelistic passage:

*“Yes, brethren, he who once in this very pulpit, a living man, spoke to your forefathers by example, by faith, by the passages of his life just read to you, by his own words recorded by the historian and this evening recited by me, by his own prayer which shall presently be offered with you, though dead, speaketh to you this night. He speaketh to you on a very important subject, a subject without great attention to which you cannot possibly be prepared either to live the life which he lived, or, if called upon, to die the death which he died. He speaketh to you about prayer...”*

By 1854, when he left Deane, the beliefs and preaching style of the Reverend Edward Girdlestone were firmly in place. He was an evangelical and uncompromising protestant who believed that the clergy could and should improve the lives and education of poor people. He had successfully delivered those improvements through his huge personal energy, his network of contacts and his organisational abilities.

---

<sup>7</sup> Other sermons and writings by Edward Girdlestone leave no doubt at all that he stood firmly against the Romanisation of the Anglican Church.



#### 4. EDWARD GIRDLESTONE, THE FAMILY MAN

In 1832 Edward married Mary, the daughter of Joseph Ridgeway of Wallsuches in Deane Parish, Lancashire.

It was Edward's involvement with the education of children that had brought them together.

Mary's father was a wealthy parishioner who had been elected to be a Trustee of the Deane school along with his brother (and business partner) Thomas. The brothers were the second generation family owners of a bleach factory at Horwich in Bolton<sup>8</sup>. Joseph and Thomas Ridgeway were benevolent employers, forming a building club to help their employees buy or rent their own homes. Those houses became (and still are) known as the "club houses".

In 1834 Edward and Mary's first child, Caroline Mary, was born at Deane. She was followed by a further ten children (seven boys and three girls), all born in that parish before 1850.

*Caroline Mary* (1834-1921) remained a spinster and lived for most of her life with her parents before moving to Godalming, Surrey to join her brother, Frederick (see below).

*Frances Anne* (1835- 1836) died at the age of four months.

*Emily Ann* (b. 1837) married John Frere Langford (Vicar of Bere Regis in Dorset) in 1873.

*Charles Edward Ridgway* (1839-1889) went to Pembroke College, Oxford, joined the Indian Civil Service, married in Paris and died in Florence, Italy.

*Henry* (1842-1865) was lost at sea on a voyage home from China.

*Francis Brooke* (1843-1926) joined the Indian Navy before becoming General Manager of Bristol Docks. He died in Oxfordshire.

*Frederick Kennedy Wilson* (1844-1922) was educated at Oxford University, trained as a lawyer and became a Head of House at Charterhouse School, Godalming (Surrey). He was a Mayor of Godalming and was Executrix of the Will of his sister Caroline. He died in Teignmouth, Devon.

*Arthur* (1845 – 1846) died at the age of five months.

*Alfred William* (b. 1847) was living with his parents in 1851 but has proved impossible to trace in later records.

*Mariden* (1848-1932) wed Henry Dalzell Nourse, a barrister, in 1871. She was widowed in 1897 and continued to live "on her own means" in Bristol.

*Archibald Ainsworth* (1850-1919) became a bank accountant and lived in Cheshire.

---

<sup>8</sup> The bleach works continued to operate until 1933

## **5. AND SO TO HALBERTON**

In 1854 Lord Cranworth, the Lord Chancellor, appointed Girdlestone canon residentiary of Bristol Cathedral, where he became a prominent preacher.

Edward moved on to hold a succession of livings in the gift of the dean and chapter of Bristol. At St Leonard, Bristol, which he held from 1855 to 1858, he was an active founder of schools, and he reformed the parish charities.

He then moved to the prosperous rural parish of Wapley-with-Codrington, Gloucestershire (1858–62), before becoming vicar of Halberton in 1862.

On the face of it Edward's appointment to Halberton was not a miss-match.

He was evangelical and staunchly anti-Catholic so he was likely to be an appealing figure to the Anglican community in the parish.

Perhaps the hope was also that his evangelical style and personal energy might even be able to persuade some of the local non-conformists back to the Anglican fold. Halberton, like most of the other Culm and Exe Valley communities, has a long history of supporting non-conformism. Membership of local Baptist, Quaker, Presbyterian and other groups grew rapidly in the two valleys following the 1662 Act of Uniformity and by 1676 it has been estimated that about one-third of the parishioners living in Uffculme (for example) were dissenters.

It is not too difficult to understand the attraction of people like George Fox, founder of the Quakers, who wrote in 1653; "Let no man be prisoned for his tithes ... let no man be put to death for cattle, for money or any outward thing ... let all fines and amercements be given to the poor people, blind and lame, and cripples be provided for in the nation".

### **Edward Girdlestone's 1864 census of Halberton**

Two years after his arrival in Halberton, Edward carried out a detailed census of the parish. The task he had set himself was daunting but he pressed on until it was completed, handwriting the results on sixteen pages of a large book, each page 13 inches by 8 1/4 inches.

In total he recorded 363 dwellings and gave each dwelling a separate number. He made a mistake in the sequence, recording two separate dwellings as one (#336). Judging from the contents of the transcript he didn't realise his error until he had reached dwelling number 361. He must have been mightily annoyed when he discovered his mistake and equally irritated that crossing out and rewriting thirty two dwelling numbers would ruin the look of his meticulous record. He solved his problem, at least visually, by missing out a number in the sequence (#362). Thus his census records 363 dwellings in total, with two dwellings numbered 336 and no number 362.

For each dwelling he recorded the total number of people living in that dwelling, the name of the main adult occupant(s), the religious faith of the named people, details of the employment of the principal occupant, the number of children living at home, the age of the eldest and youngest child, the number of servants, apprentices and other occupants and the name of the house (if it had one) and the locality. On one line he recorded the names of the two occupants then added "not his wife"

and on several others he recorded people as being “dissenters” and “regular communicants” at the parish church.

By the time his census was complete Edward had visited every household and talked to the occupants, whatever their religious faith and social standing.

Edward was a highly educated man and his letters to The Times (see next section) show clearly that he was a man who used facts to back up his arguments. It is therefore likely that one of his main purposes in taking the census was to arm himself with a set of facts about his parish that he could draw upon as and when he required them.

About two years after his appointment to Halberton, probably while pondering on what he had seen, heard and recorded during his travels, Edward made an informed decision. He would tackle one problem in his parish head on – improving the status and condition of the agricultural labourers.

No.	Name	Age	Sex	Occupation	No. of children at home	No. of children at school	No. of children in the parish	Name of Locality, House No.
218.	Snell Wm & Mary	5	L.		3	13-4	—	Towards Brithenbottom
219.	Biggs Wm & Sar.	6	L. for G. Linn.		4	12-1	—	" (Cheer's Lane)
220.	Coles M. & M.	7	Dairy		5	19-8	—	" (Brymery)
221.	Widgera, Isaac &	3	L. on Line		1	10	—	" (Plymirees)
222.	Cross Robt. & Jane	3	L.		1	—	—	" ( " )
223.	Northam Robt & Sar.	4	L. for O. Northam		2	28-1	—	" ( " )
224.	Togor Wm & Jane	5	Thatcher		—	—	—	" (Bewy Lane)
"	Wm & Sar. Togor	1	Thatcher		1	—	—	"
<b>Brithenbottom</b>								
225.	Lock M. & M.	5	Dairy		3	14-8	—	"
226.	Whetton M. & M.	6			1	1	—	" (Clogs)
227.	Whetton J. & M.	6	Carpenter		4	6-7-2	—	"
228.	Cook Robt & Char.	6	L.		4	12-4	—	"
229.	Salter Edw. & Sar.	3	L. for Kiplake		1	28-1	—	"
230.	Clunthly J. & Jane	7	Blacksmith		5	9-1	—	"
231.	Whetton J. & Mary	7	L.		5	6-7-2	—	"
231a.	Russell M. & M.				—	—	—	"

Part of a page from the Girdlestone census of Halberton, 1864<sup>9</sup>

<sup>9</sup> A full transcript of the census in Excel or PDF format is available at [www.halbertonhistorygroup](http://www.halbertonhistorygroup)

## 6. THE AGRICULTURAL LABOURER'S FRIEND

The Industrial Revolution brought with it massive social upheaval. As the wealth of the new industrialists grew they began to undermine the long standing authority of the landed gentry. Philanthropic industrialists (George Cadbury, John Rylands, and Titus Salt to name but three) pioneered new ways of providing for the welfare of those that worked for them; better housing, education for workers children, care of widows and orphans, civic infrastructure building and so on. The agricultural labouring classes flooded into the new industrial towns of the north of England, creating labour shortages in the surrounding rural areas which in turn forced the farmers to increase wages in order to try and retain their labour force.

But Devon was relatively untouched by the modern industrial revolution; indeed it can be argued that in some ways the County suffered, rather than benefited, from it.

The history of cloth production in the county is a prime example. By the mid 1300's most of the small towns and many villages in Devon were centres of a cloth industry. During Tudor times Devon became one of the leading counties in the whole country for the production of kersey, a coarse woollen cloth. By about 1600 the manufacture of serge (a high quality woven wool fabric) was introduced which eventually replaced kersey production and many Devon clothiers and merchants made huge personal fortunes from it.

Two hundred years before the nineteenth century philanthropic industrialists the newly enriched in Devon had made charitable donations and legacies. Evidence of their philanthropy can be seen in the old village schools or on boards hung on the interior walls of almost every church in the County.

The effect on the wool trade on the economy of Devon towns was enormous but a long decline in cloth production in Devon began in the early 1700's when fashion changed and competition started to emerge in the form of finer fabrics manufactured in places like Norwich. An almost fatal blow to most of the Devon cloth industry came in the form of competition from the northern industrial towns that emerged later in the same century.

Thus when Edward arrived in Halberton he came to a small farming parish in what was still a largely rural County. His life in London, Lancashire and Bristol and in a prosperous rural community in Gloucestershire was scant preparation for what he was about to experience. His proactive approach to improving social conditions for the poor soon brought him into conflict with some sections of the Devon community.

During the first year following Edward's arrival in Halberton his relationship with the local community remained good. In October 1863 he was invited to chair the eighteenth anniversary celebrations of the Halberton Farmer's Club and both he and the 6,000 word address he gave to that meeting were well received.

"Gentlemen, —I now rise to give what maybe called the toast of the evening - "Success to Agriculture, and the Halberton Farmers' Club (applause)"..." I find that there seems to be, and I hope there ever may be, what I may call a sort of natural alliance between Agriculture and the Church— (hear, hear)"... "Now my object on the present occasion is to show you that a good education is capital for the farmer and that it is the most valuable kind of capital that he could possibly possess..."

During his address he said this; "...as a mere matter of self-interest, it is of the greatest possible importance that farmers should do their utmost to improve the status and condition of their labourers—(applause). Depend upon it, my friends; this matter is of the greatest importance to you, and I shall not be stepping out of my way by inviting you all to sympathise with your labourers in their trials, in their illnesses, in their afflictions—(cheers)".

Edward's appeals to the farmers to treat their workers well were undoubtedly based on his initial observations of agricultural labourers living and working conditions as he travelled around his own parish and others nearby. This description of Halberton was written in 1880 by Francis George Heath in 'Peasant Life in the West of England':

"The general sanitary condition of the village was very bad. Picturesque as they were externally, many of the peasant's cottages were unfit for the housing of pigs. Pools of stagnant water stood in different parts of the parish, many of the ditches of which were offensively odorous. Not infrequently heaps of manures were thrown up just under dwelling-house windows. The whole village was badly drained, open sewers ran through it, frequently trickling down from the cottages into the village brook, from which cattle slaked their thirst and the villagers and their children often drank! From such a practice ensued the natural result disease and death".

Edward had also discovered that, with very few exceptions, the living conditions of the agricultural labourers at Halberton were replicated across the whole of North Devon and that the employment conditions of those labourers were primitive.

Heath notes "as a Christian minister, he could not remain unmoved at what he saw and heard" but Edward's attempts to secure better working conditions for the labourers by delivering a 6,000 word verbal essay and having a quiet word in the ears of the local farmers came to nought. He decided to change tack and reproached them directly from the pulpit of the church, telling them that they were treating their human labourers with less consideration than their cattle.

Heath continues; "the sermon in which he made this home-thrust raised a terrible storm in the parish. The farmers were highly indignant at the conduct of the Vicar, and from that moment made open war upon him".

Undeterred by the fierce local opposition, Edward Girdlestone wrote many letters to The Times and other journals, giving his views of the wages and conditions of the agricultural labourers; here is an extract from one of them (The Times, 1866);

*"Labourers' wages are 8 or 9 shillings a week, with two or one and a half quarts of cider daily, valued at 2s per week, but much over-valued. Carters and shepherds get 1s. a week more, or else a cottage rent free. The labourer has no privileges whatever. He rents his potato-ground at a high rate. Though fuel is said to be given to him, he really pays its full value by grubbing-up for it in old hedges in after-hours. In wet weather or in sickness his wages entirely cease. The cottages as a rule are not fit to house pigs in. The labourer breakfasts on hot water poured on bread and flavoured with onions; he dines on bread and hard cheese at 2d a pound, with cider very washy and sour, and sups on potatoes or cabbage greased with a tiny bit of fat bacon. He seldom more than sees or smells butcher's meat. He*

*is long-lived, but in the prime of life 'crippled up', i.e. disabled by rheumatism, the result of wet clothes, poor living, and sour cider".*

Heath describes what happened following the publication of the letters; "The effect produced by (the) letter(s) was remarkable. The Canon was overwhelmed with letters from all parts of England and Ireland, and with newspapers also from different parts of the country, containing letters and comments on the subject of the condition of the Devonshire peasantry. The private letters contained offers, from farmers and others residing in England and Ireland, of good wages, with the certainty of comfortable homes, for such of the men in Canon Girdlestone's district as would accept them. Some of these correspondents remitted money to pay the whole expense connected with the proposed removal of the men whom they wanted. Others remitted money with the stipulation that a part of it should be returned out of the wages of the labourers, in such a manner as they could afford to repay it. Then there were sums of money received by the Canon from philanthropic persons, who placed them entirely at his disposal. This money he determined to lay out in partly paying the expenses of removing labourers when it happened that places were offered without any remittances being sent to pay the cost of travelling, and other items. Having obtained the means of securing his object of removing the miserably-paid peasants of Devonshire to places where they would be better remunerated, better housed, and better treated in every way, Canon Girdlestone set himself manfully to work to organise a regular system of migration".

That system of migration commenced in October 1866. In another letter to The Times (September 1867) Edward wrote that he had "sent no less than ninety labourers from the neighbourhood of Halberton to other parts of the country. Of those, thirty are married and with families, almost all are doing well, and still in their own vocation as agricultural labourers are in their new homes earning; the married men from 12s to £1 a week, with a cottage and garden rent, together in some cases with fuel and other privileges..."

The Times devoted a leader to the subject;

"We congratulate Mr. Girdlestone on his success. He has struck the root of the unhappy condition of the Agricultural Labourer. The great mass of such labourers do not even know, have never really considered, that in other parts of the country, quite within their reach, they could nearly double their wages. It is, in fact, in these days, seldom necessary to go as far as Lancashire, Yorkshire, or even Ireland. There are places almost within sight of each other in the same or adjoining counties, where the rate of wages differs by two or three shillings week. A man might almost walk from one to the other and at once better his own position, and that of all whom leaves behind. Yet he has probably never thought of it, and, unless he is roused, he will be content to remain all his life in the place where he was born, and no better off than his father before him. The truth is the miserable fare of the labourer itself condemns him to this sluggish stagnation. A man who has existed up to the age of twenty or thirty on his share of 7s a week is not likely to have much enterprise left in him. So it must be the business of the clergy, and of the gentry too, to make him understand that the world is bigger than his parish. Perhaps some agencies might be established in country towns to assist in directing such interchange of labour, but we are disposed to rely more on the natural influence of better knowledge among the labourers themselves. Wherever there is a railway there is probably a rise in wages in its neighbourhood, and few places are quite out of reach a railway. If the clergy would but rouse the idea in the minds of the agricultural poor that they could often better their

position by moving to some more active district, they would gradually work out this revolution for themselves".

Some of the local farmers stepped up their campaign against Edward. In June 1866 the correspondence section of the Western Times included a short article (attributed to "Argus"), concerning the state of the Church owned Glebe cottages<sup>10</sup> in Halberton. Using the approach of 'let him who is without sin cast the first stone' the writer described the state of the cottages; "except the mud cabins of Ireland we doubt if anything more wretched can be found in this part of Devon in the way of human habitation. (... Had the Canon ever seen them)... We fancy not, or he would have surely taken the beam as it were from his own eye by pulling down and rebuilding these dwellings before commencing a crusade against the farmers on behalf of the labourers. (There followed a long description of the dilapidated state of the cottages)... Such is a description, by no means exaggerated, of cottages owned by one who denounced the farmers and landowners of Halberton for caring less for their workers than their cattle".

By 1867 the conflict was being referred to in the press as "The Halberton Strife"

When the annual tithe dinner took place the farmers pre-arranged that when the Vicar's health was proposed they would reverse their empty glasses and refuse to participate. A confrontation was avoided because someone had informed Edward of their intention beforehand and he left the dining room before the allotted time arrived.

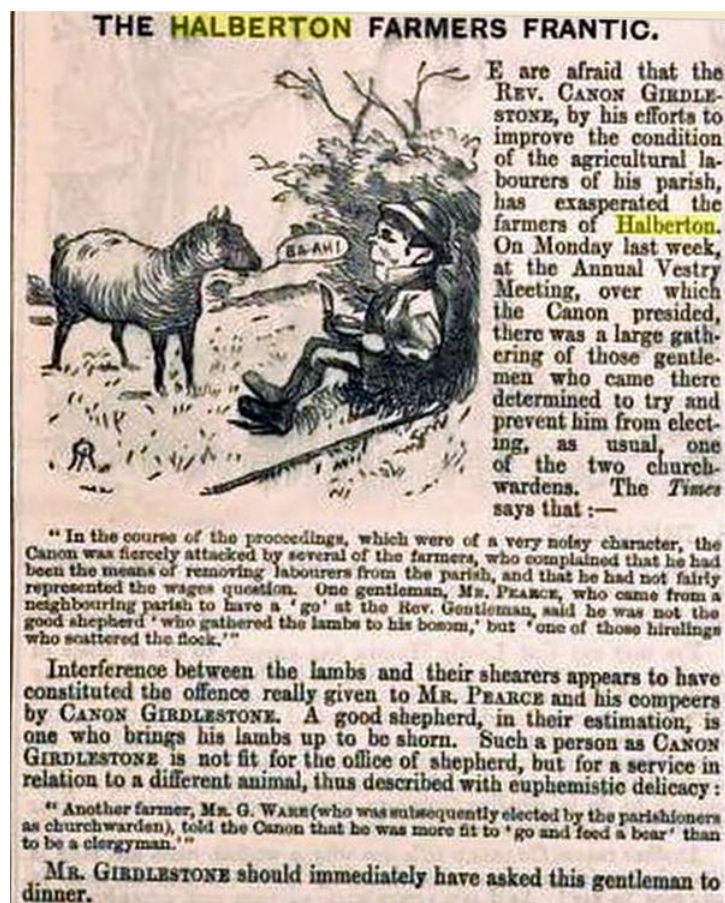
They attempted to create a disturbance in the church during the distribution of charity bread and the police had to be called in. A complaint was made against the Vicar, heard at the Quarter Sessions at Exeter, but the case was dismissed.

The parish Vestry Committee<sup>11</sup> was dominated by the farming community and in April 1867, in an attempt to deprive the Vicar of his voice in the affairs of the parish, the committee claimed the right to appoint both of the Churchwardens. Punch magazine had a field day and the case ended up being considered by the Court of Queen's Bench, where judgment was given against the Vestry in June 1868.

---

<sup>10</sup> Glebe is an area of agricultural land owned by the church, which was assigned to support the parish priest. The labourers who worked on those lands were housed in glebe cottages.

<sup>11</sup> The vestry was a committee for governing the local civil and church affairs for a parish. For many centuries they were the sole civil government of rural areas.



*Punch Magazine 4<sup>th</sup> May 1867*

In 1867 Edward responded to a letter from Thomas Pearce of Uplowman, chair of the May 1867 Great Tithe Dinner, saying; "I am not, as on Easter Monday you assumed, fond of excitement. I am fond of peace and quiet, but not if it must be purchased at the expense of duty... I nether have, nor ever have had, any but the most friendly feelings towards the farmers of this parish; I have quarrelled with none of them. Some of them have taken offence at me simply because I have done my duty; some have abused me in language scarcely fit to be repeated; have circulated the grossest falsehoods concerning me; and when they meet me or my family, pass by without the slightest notice. But I bear them no resentment whatsoever, even for this. I am quite ready to forget all this, as if it never happened".

Some of the farmers continued their campaign; they threatened to desert the church, stop the playing of the organ, ringing of the bells, singing of the choir and to withdraw their children from the church schools. Several farmers did leave the church and approached the Wesleyan chapel in the village but the minister of the chapel sided with Edward and told them to return to their own church. They refused and instead remained at home on Sundays.

On 14<sup>th</sup> March 1868, in recognition of the service he had rendered, Edward was presented with a Silver Epergne inscribed; "Presented to the Rev. Edward Girdlestone, Canon of Bristol & Vicar of Halberton, by the Labourers & Working men of Halberton, in remembrance of his successful efforts



to raise their wages". The money for the memorial was raised by subscription from two thousand agricultural workers, nine hundred of whom did not dare give their name.

"The mode of testifying their sentiments is strictly English, and, like most strictly English things, may be just a little grotesque; but the sentiments themselves were genuine and show that in Halberton at least English labourers can feel gratitude in its rarest form, gratitude for guidance, and to the man who usually experiences it least, the parson, who, being bound to guide, is usually detested for guiding"<sup>12</sup>.

The migration scheme continued and in yet another letter to The Times (April 1872) Edward wrote;

"Since I first began this movement I have sent from this District nearly 300 men, many of them with families, to places with good wages chiefly in the north of England".

---

<sup>12</sup> The Spectator 21.3.1868

## 7. 1872 to 1884

In 1872 Edward Girdlestone resigned Halberton and accepted the Vicarage of Olveston in Gloucestershire.

Before he took up his new post he addressed the unexpectedly large number of people attending a dinner following his final tithe audit. The report on the proceedings describes his speech: "He could confidently say that whatever he had done in the parish he had done it, in his own opinion, as much for the farmer as the labourer and in leaving the place he had not one single feeling of ill-will to any person either dead or living. He had over and over again expressed himself anxious to shake hands with anybody who had quarrelled with him in any way because of what he had said or done; and he had also said he was anxious to express his sorrow that he should have done so, and who could do more than that? (Applause)"

The Western Morning News of 26.3.1872 wrote this of him; "The removal of Canon Girdlestone from the diocese of Exeter is much to be regretted. We can ill afford to lose from the County outspoken and vigorous men who will not hesitate to expose abuses in the face of popular clamour and dogged opposition. But it is not to be wondered at if the Canon grew tired at last of the estrangement which had so long prevailed between the more influential of his parishioners and himself, even though conscious that he was in the right. Probably no man has done more to elevate the agricultural labourers of England than the rector of Halberton..."

Although critical of strikes he continued to champion the rights of the poor, agricultural workers in particular, and was proud to be known as "the Agricultural Labourers' Friend".

Edwards's desire to place the labourers in a more independent position led him to campaign at a national level <sup>13</sup> for the establishment of agricultural trade unions and he was a supporter of the first National Agricultural Workers' Union, founded in 1872 by Joseph Arch. That Union was dissolved in 1896 (largely as a result of the agricultural depression from 1870 to 1900) but it paved the way for the much stronger National Union that emerged in 1906.

Having given evidence before the Royal Commission on the Housing of the Poor he was invited to stay at Sandringham to preach before the Prince of Wales and the Royal Commission. The trials of the long journey to and from Norfolk led to his death of pyoemia (blood poisoning), at the age of 80, at Canons House, Bristol on 4<sup>th</sup> December 1884. His wife Mary died in 1891 at Godalming in Surrey.

---

<sup>13</sup> at the British Association meeting in 1868

## **EPILOGUE**

In 1868 The Spectator made this comment in an article about him;

“The clergy, of all men, may soften the incidents of the inevitable change, may soothe the bitterness which always arises between classes who have begun the contest for wages, and place themselves in their true position as bridges across the deepest chasm in English society, the chasm which divides the agricultural labourer from the wheat he grows”.

In 1977 P J Perry published an article in the Journal of Religious History; “Edward Girdlestone 1805-84; a forgotten Evangelical”.

The title of that article is unfortunate but probably true; Canon Edward Girdlestone, for ten years the Vicar of Halberton, is not a name that will leap to the lips of many people when asked to name a great social reformer of the nineteenth century.

## **Appendix**

### **Main sources**

#### **Edward's family background:**

Ancestors

<http://www.salthousehistory.co.uk/girdlestones.html#>

William Madocks

[https://tremadog.org.uk/tremadog\\_1.php](https://tremadog.org.uk/tremadog_1.php)

Samuel Rainbow Girdlestone insolvency

London Gazette 5.4.1814 and 11.7.1814

1813 Debtors Act

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Insolvent\\_Debtors\\_\(England\)\\_Act\\_1813](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Insolvent_Debtors_(England)_Act_1813)

#### **Edward's education and early career**

William Hulton

<http://spartacus-educational.com/PRhulton.htm>

Peterloo

<http://www.peterloomassacre.org/history.html>

Deane

<http://www.deanechurch.co.uk/index.php>

Census etc records

<https://www.ancestry.co.uk/>

#### **The Agricultural Labourer's Friend**

Devon W.G.Hoskins

The full text of 'Peasant Life in the West of England' by Francis George Heath (1880) is available online at:

<https://ia600204.us.archive.org/7/items/peasantlifeinwes00heatuoft/peasantlifeinwes00heatuoft.pdf>

Western Times (various articles, in particular 16 October 1863 and 05 April 1867)

The Spectator 21<sup>st</sup> March 1868

An enormous file of newspaper and other articles concerning Canon Edward Girdlestone, collected by the daughter of the Rev. Tester for her dissertation, now held by the Halberton History Group.