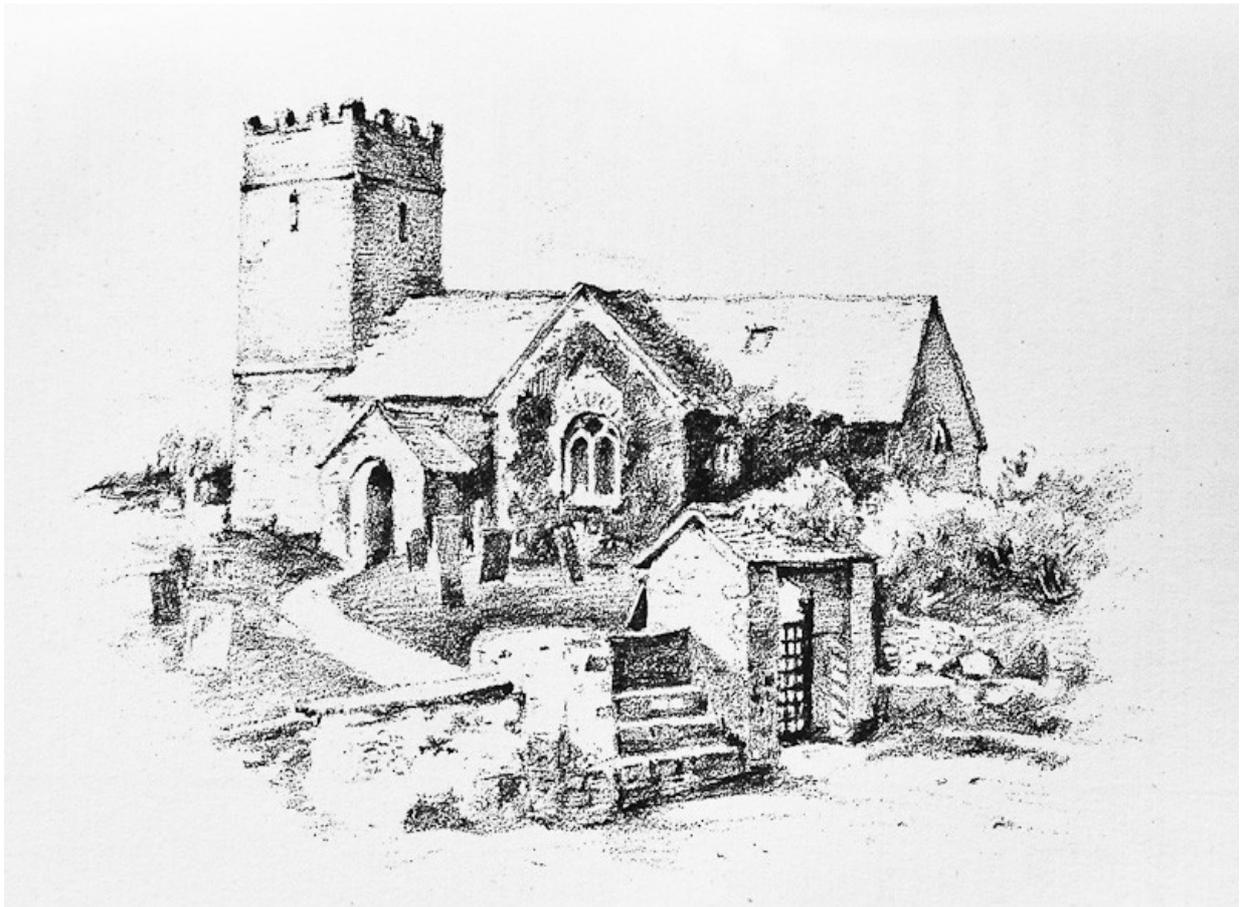


HAWKER AT WELCOMBE

A selection of quotations from

THE LIFE & LETTERS
OF R. S. HAWKER

edited by Charles Edward Byles



~:0:~:0:~::O::~~:0:~:0:~

HAWKER AT WELCOMBE

A memorandum in Hawker's hand states that on the 19th of October 1850 he was transcribed for the curacy of Welcombe, which he continued to serve for the rest of his life. He writes to his brother:- "If I can get a deacon at 20 or 25£ a year, with a title and tuition, I shall take one, meanwhile I serve it myself – hard work – but I would work a great deal harder to get the £93 per year."

Welcombe is in Devonshire, and is divided from Morwenstow and Cornwall by the brook that runs in the bed of the Marsland Valley. The way thither from Morwenstow is by a rough steep lane up and down the valley sides, a difficult road in bad weather, and a stiff pull for man or beast at any time. But the beauty of that wooded vale,

"Broad-cloven through the green of rolling hills,"

banishes all thought of discomfort or of weariness. Every Sunday henceforward Hawker rode the three miles to Welcombe on his pony (or drove when, as they say in Cornwall, he was "gotten up in years)," to hold an afternoon service in the little church. The morning and evening services he performed at Morwenstow. In his riding days he used a military saddle, and, with his ample cloak and fine physique, presented, it is said, something of the appearance of a cavalry officer.

The church at Welcombe, and an ancient well standing near, are dedicated to St. Nectan, a brother of St. Morwenna. The fine old carvings in the church, representing the Fruitful Vine and the Barren Fig Tree, have supplied the designs on the title-page and back of 'Cornish Ballads' and 'Footprints.' On the lower side of the tympanum above the pulpit is an inscription, designed to catch the preacher's eye when he casts it ecstatically heavenward, "Woe unto you if ye preach not the Word of God." A wholesome check to heresy.

"In the northern wall," says Hawker, "there is an entrance named the Devil's door : it was thrown open at every baptism, at the Renunciation, for the escape of the fiend ; while at every other time it was carefully closed." He declined to bury anyone on the ill-omened north side of the churchyard. A more enlightened generation has now arisen, which knows not Hawker, and reckes not at what point of the compass it returns to the ground. But enlightenment is not always accompanied by artistic taste. Mr. Baring-Gould says, "Alas ! here the wrecker has been at work. There were carved bench-ends with curious heads, technically called poppy-heads, but unlike any I have seen elsewhere, unique, I believe. These heads have been cut off, thrown away, and the bench-ends stuck against the screen. The seats are now of deal."

One summer afternoon, at Welcombe, the Vicar found that he had left his watch behind, and he wanted one to time the sermon, in order to be back at Morwenstow for evening service. So, on arriving at the church he made inquiries of the people standing about. But time is of no great import at Welcombe, and no watch was to be had. At last, just as the service was beginning, an old woman hobbled up the aisle and handed to the Vicar a large and ancient timepiece. "Her's only got one hand, your honour," she said, "but yu must just gi' a guess."

Hawker always uses the spelling 'Wellcombe,' that is, the Combe of the Well. This derivation is discarded by Mr. R. Pearse Chope, an authority on the antiquities of the district, who explains the name as meaning 'the Welsh Combe,' i.e., the combe separating England from Wales ; for in the Exon Domesday Book it is spelt 'Walcomba,' and in the Exchequer Book 'Walcome.' On a map of early England in Green's 'History,' Cornwall and

part of Devon appear as ' West Wales,' and the boundary between this and Wessex meets the coast just about where Welcombe is situated.

A popular explanation of the name, current in Morwenstow, has been written out for me as follows :-

"It's supposed to be a odd lot livin' out to Welcombe, an' I'll tell e why. They was rakin' England all auver once, an' they begun on top an' raked down so ver's Hollacombe Gate (the name of the cross [i.e., cross road] that turns into Welcombe), an' then along come a puff o' wind an' blowed the rakins rat away west'erd. ' Aw ! well, git along an' welcome,' they said ; an' that's how Welcombe got it's name, an' its the rakins an' scrapins of all England livin' there ! "

The Welcombe people, it is understood, repudiate the etymology of their Cornish neighbours.

Hawker gives a delightful sketch of Welcombe and its inhabitants under the name of 'Holacombe' in *Footprints of Former Men in Far Cornwall.* (pp.206-208)

ATTENDANCE

To Rev. W. D. Anderson, November, 1850 : "I am quite satisfied with Wellcombe. The attendance far exceeds Morw'w in regularity, and the demeanour is good. I have a very decent Dame's School." (p. 209)

PAROCHIAL SQUABBLES

March 24, 1856 : "At Wellcombe, all smooth. Bartlett, as before, supported me – And I made H. pay old Stanbury's Salary by saying plainly, 'Every Clergyman expects his pay whether he does his duty or not' – an argument so utterly unanswerable, and so well known, that no one replied." (p. 152)

CARROW

To Mrs Watson, December 19, 1858 : "Home once more from Wellcombe, and through such a storm of Hail and Wind and Thunder as I have seldom encountered. Carrow to the Saddleflaps in Water passing through the brook. But she behaved beautifully and from speed I am not wetted to the skin. The Storm came on while we were in Church here this morning, and the Roll of the Thunder mingled with the backrake, as they call it, of the ground Sea. The church was black with gloom, and the pale Faces of the People were in solemn contrast" (p. 311)

To Mrs Watson, December 23, 1860 : "My pony, my dear little Carrow, carried me today thither, that is to Wellcombe and back, fetlock deep in Snow, and without a single slip or blunder. Still I was very thankful when I found myself at home again in safety." (p. 328)

REVEL SUNDAY

To Mrs Watson, June 19, 1859 : "Another Sunday added to the Past - one week nearer to that journey through the pathless air to the far and awful home. This is Wellcombe Revel Sunday. The Doctrine of the Trinity is the Pearl treasured up in the Casket of that simple Country Church. It was founded by Nectan, Brother of Morwenna, about 950 A.D., and the day of its consecration has been celebrated for Nine Centuries of Christian Time on the Trinity Sunday of every Year. So it is something to say, that a lonely and rustic Sanctuary here by the Sea has kept and counted 900 Revel days and this it may be with me the last! " (p. 316)

A BURIAL

To Mrs Watson, March 4, 1860 : "Today I rode through rain to Wellcombe, but the clouds lifted while I was in Church there, and this evening has the smell and look of Spring. I was also yesterday afternoon at Wellcombe to bury twins, Seven months children – a daughter and a Son – one had lived two hours, the other a day and a night, both baptized in emergency by the Surgeon who came to the mother. The entries looked odd in my register book – such dots of human life – the last before them was, 'A corpse cast ashore: name known only in Heaven.'" (p. 321)

THE BREADWINNER

To Mrs Watson, April 15, 1860 : "Today at Nine I went to Wellcombe, had Communion Service only with the Eucharist – no Sermon – home here at Eleven – the total Service and Sermon over at One – at ½ past 2, Evening Prayer and Sermon at Wellcombe again – back to Evening Service and Sermon here – Very much exhausted I am, but I thank God that I can do it all. I have the thought, which no doubt encourages many a poor labouring man, that is, that I am the Breadwinner of the House." (p. 324)

ANOTHER CHILD-MURDER

To Mrs Watson, January 6, 1861 : "A week of anxious misery – The Police backward and forward – letter on letter – the last now enclosed – no inquest – and the remains of the murdered child buried, without Service, by the Sexton alone. But how many things have I to answer and to clear up. You ask me why notice was not given to the Minister of the Parish. It was. Am I not the minister of Wellcombe, where the body was found? If it had not been my parish I could not have interfered. But, being in my own Parish of Wellcombe, the whole fell on me. The Coroner simply refuses to do his duty – the total guilt falls on him. A medical Man would ascertain the Sex of the Child, But without a Coroner's Warrant no medical man can examine the corpse. A Girl is suspected, but except on an inquest no suspected person can be examined. The cause of death was a broken skull, but only by and before a Coroner could any formal evidence be taken. Very Strange. On New Year's Day Coroner's fees were abolished by an Act of Parliament, and a Salary substituted, which the Coroner will receive the same whether the inquests are many or few, and it is predicted here in Cornwall that the Coroner will seldom come in future. O what evil times we have to dwell in! My only redress would be to lay the case before the Secretary of State, who would in all likelihood dismiss the Coroner. Some years ago I should have done it but my spirits and energy are unequal now. He is a lawyer of B-----, once Member for that Borough, and called, from his boisterous habits, Roaring Dick. It is beyond belief. His chief argument is, 'Because the corpse is *so small*, therefore its murder is too trivial for an inquest, and utterly beneath my notice.'" (pp. 331-332)

January 20, 1861 : "A kind of prophecy of thaw rather than an actual one has softened the ground a little to-day under my brave and gentle Carrow's feet. At Wellcombe the mourners filled the seats, as the custom here is always on the Sunday after the funeral. The remains of the poor child were buried by the Sexton alone without Service, and thus the little unit was withdrawn from the great Sum of human life. (p. 332)

DAMNATION

To Rev. W. D. Anderson, May 22, 1859 : "Police called in at Wellcombe, Writing on the Porchwall of Church threatening Damnation (gratis) to all Churchgoers. Letters to the same purport: something makes them wince. A woman's writing. (p. 371)

HUNTERS

To J. G. Godwin, December 29, 1863 : "On Wednesday last a long rush of Red coats swept thro' Wellcombe. Rolle's hounds had brought a Fox from the inland. They came to a check there, and Old Hopper, a burly Farmer whom you saw at the Sexton's was assailed with inquiries from the Hunters if his Parson (R. S. H.) hadn't printed a Book Was it to be had &c.? Queer sort of fame this. If you could have seen old Hopper's Face and heard his fruitless efforts to say after me 'Sangraal!'" (p. 452)

SERMON

In 1864 Hawker writes : "I served both my Churches yesterday, and when the Valentine family came into Wellcombe Church unexpectedly, after being here at Matins, I was able to change my Sermon on the Spot from the Gospel on which I had just preached to them here to the Test of Abraham, the Lesson for Evensong." (p. 133)

THREE FUNERALS

To Mrs Watson, April 24, 1864 : "In the small Parish of Wellcombe I have had 3 funerals since this day week – one a sudden and therefore a happy death – one a child, the third brought from Bideford to rest with Country Relatives in my small peaceful silent ground. I cannot now read the Service as I used to – emotion is apt to overcome me. You will not accuse me of vanity if I tell you that when I buried Mrs. Chope Sir George and Lady Stucley were present and told Mr. Valentine that they never heard the Burial Service read so impressively in all their lives. I think it is because I feel it now in every word.

" But I do pride myself in Wellcombe far more than in this Parish. When I began to serve it many years ago not ten people came to Church and now it is as full every Sunday as it can hold, and their breathless behaviour strikes every Clergyman with surprise." (p. 475)

COLENSO

To J. G. Godwin, 1863 : Thank you for your inclosures. Nothing however can save Oxford. It is becoming more and more and every day a mere husk and shell – pith and marrow gone. I found to my great horror a Sunday or two ago that my little Wilderness of Wellcombe was full of Colenso. The Wardens had attended a Visitation held by Archdeacon Bartholomew and he filled his charge they said with attacks on ' a Bishop who denied the Bible ! ' So I had to preach about their shameful ignorance of chronology in Heaven." (p. 514)

THE LONDON PRESS

To J. G. Godwin, April 20, 1865 : " I have sent off another MS. on the simplicities of Wellcombe to Wills but from his silence I infer rejection. I cannot help it, I am quite unable to copy the slipslop Reporter and Police Style of the London Press. Twenty epithets for a single noun and the vapid tasteless ungrammatical kind of language that wins the favour of Cockaigne. If I may not call a spade a spade I cannot write at all. (p. 514)

LAST SPINNER

To J. G. Godwin, September 24, 1865 : "Your account of the Old Woman of 91 reminds me of my own old people whom I found here and have buried – no such lives now. One Couple had lived in married life 75 years. The Man died at 95, The Woman 93. The Eldest Son decrepit with age tottered along leaning on a Staff at the Funeral. She was the last of the Spinners in my Parish that is Women who spin yarn with a wheel. There is actually not

one left in Morwenstow and in Wellcombe only one and she 80 years old. She is spinning however for me this year again the Wool from my Black Sheep which I always wear. . . . It is an interesting proof of the wisdom of Old times and the weakness of modern knowledge that they are compelled to return to the ways of our Forefathers and their Herbs. In simple old Wellcombe they seldom resort to a Medical Man but those despised 'Old Women,' as they are scornfully termed among the polite, cure all manner of diseases with their Elderflowers and Agrimony. (p. 526)

STORM

To Mrs Watson, March 25, 1866 : "We came out of Church and I went on to Wellcombe – the Storm increasing all the way. I preached there the same Sermon and the people all the time were looking up at the quivering roof of the Old Church expecting it to give way. I returned in terror. The Wellcombe people offered to go with me and to walk two of them at my side. But I refused. Twice my Pony turned back unable to face the Storm and hail and rain." (p. 538)

EASTER BIRDS

To Mrs. Watson, Easter Sunday 1867 : And all Nature around us here is in unison with the glad event we celebrate to-day. The Birds sung in Wellcombe Wood and my Robin was on the accustomed bough. I have thought for years it was the same Bird that greeted me there every Spring. The Woodpeckers building in our Valley have been cooing among the leaves. The Rooks in the Churchyard are busy with their young, and little Polly has been out with food for the hens calling ' cup cup ' with her little voice. And so 'twill be when I am gone, is the thought that arises in the mind, when a Stranger shall occupy these walls and names we know not shall be sounded here. What a brief and shadowy period it is after all this three score years and ten. It is even as a dream when one awaketh." (p. 554)

FENIANS

To Mrs Watson, December 29, 1867 : " Little did I think that the Fenians would be able to harass us here. Yet it is so. Policemen are sent to line and watch our Cliffs and strange vessels are seen off the shore sounding the depths of the Sea. Even Wellcombe is in a state of great excitement about this new terror. And at Bideford an incendiary fire of, it is said, Fenian origin. No corner of the land is free." (p. 561)

DR. TEMPLE

To Mrs. Watson, October 12, 1869 : "You have seen the appointment of Dr. Temple to the See of Exeter – a very Infidel writer, one of the Authors of ' Essays and Reviews ' and one who will be hostile both to High Church and Low Church – to all who believe in the Divinity of Our Blessed Saviour. So from him I have no hope of even forbearance. There is such an outcry against him that they say the Dean and Chapter will dispute the nomination. He will of course take Wellcombe from me and then my ruin is inevitable." (p. 582)

To Mrs. Watson, October 24, 1869 : "There is a great uproar in the Diocese about the New Bishop Dr. Temple. He is assailed on all sides as a Heretic in opinion and as very lax in his Church doings. I need not say that I take no part in these discussions. I shall only be too grateful if he allows me to go on as I have been allowed by the former Bishop, but this I can hardly hope. I hold Wellcombe by no legal authority but only by the Episcopal word as it is called, and as he and Dr. Phillpotts were bitterly opposed to each other I must look to share in the odium attached to the nominees of the late Diocesan." (p. 583)

A FALL OF PLASTER

To J. G. Godwin, October 4, 1871 : "Sunday was a heavy day! Poor Jewel the Sexton at Wellcombe died on Thursday and I fixed to bury him after the Service. But in Church, five minutes after I had begun my Sermon on the Young Man of Nain, a mass of the Roofing about four feet square fell suddenly on the people below. There was a shout screams and a rush. I was calm but thoroughly frightened. Still under the Sounding Board I was safe and I directed every body to keep quiet and they did so. I told them to cross the aisle and leave the dangerous side and then I commenced 'And as I was saying, Brethren" &c &c. But I was personally afraid that more would follow. Luckily it was not the Wood work but only laths and the plaister of years thickened. (p. 593)

A CYCLONE

December 10, 1872 : "I had reached Hollacombe Gate on my way to Wellcombe where and when a Land Cyclone broke over the carriage. With difficulty we reached Wellcombe and there it did indeed rage such a Gale I hardly ever remember. It was very difficult to get the horses to face it going home and over Crimp we thought again and again that the Carriage would turn over. (p. 600)

VISIT TO LONDON

In February 1874 the Vicar decided to go to London for medical advice both for himself and Mrs. Hawker. "On Monday," he writes, "We go hence on our shuddering journey to London. . . No mind can conceive no tongue can tell the terror with which I contemplate this journey, but they say that Pauline's life depends on it and I cannot take the responsibility of refusing to go. . . Rawlins undertakes our house and Parish. Chope will serve Wellcombe. John Olde will manage the Farm. So my Staff is good and reliable." (p. 608)

To J G. Godwin, 28 April, 1874 :

16, Harley Road, South Hampstead. March 12, 1874.

You will be sorry to hear that we go down to-morrow week the 5th May with my poor dear Wife hardly a shade better. I am nearly frenzied with the failure of this bitter and costly effort. My resources too are exhausted and my Normal State of Misery from this cause is deeply increased. Without some succour the results must at no distant time be fatal. Since I wrote the above words I have received a letter from the Churchwarden of St. Matthias to say that after deducting the average amount of the four previous Evening offertories I am to be allowed the Balance ! What bitter meanness ! So that if I had not happened to get an excess and the Offertory had been an average one I should have had nothing ! Well, my Journey has revealed to me the utter narrowness and selfishness of the Ritualist Clergy and the Bigoted restriction to Self of all their efforts. By the Archbishop's Act my Ruin will be accelerated and you will have to grieve, as you will, over the exile and destruction of my house and home. No one could have a daily Service at Wellcombe and Morwenstow. (p. 615)

~ : o : ~ : o : ~ : : O : ~ : o : ~ : o : ~

THE LAST LETTER

The following letter, addressed to his Curate, is the last he ever wrote :

9, Lockyer Street, Plymouth. July 26, 1875.

" DEAR MR. COMBER,

Thank you kindly for all your successful work. The Bishop's demeanour I value most of all. I especially wish you to be without fail at the Wellcombe visitation. As I told you I have reasons for this desire. Present my letters to all – dine there and carry the outlay to me – My small payments Ward will defray – Let him present to the Archdeacon the Offertory Book and relate the circumstances – the truth that one year's Offertory has equalled 3 yrs Church Rates and will enable us to roof the Church nearly. If I get home, which I doubt, don't expect to see anything but a carcass. I am weak to prostration. We shall come home, if we do, without help from Morwenstow, hiring as we come.

With kind regards,

Yours faithfully,

R. S. HAWKER."

Robert Stephen Hawker died in Plymouth on 15th August 1875. His body was not returned to Morwenstow. He was buried in Plymouth Cemetery (plot number G HA 7 5) and his tomb was inscribed with a line from *The Quest of the Sangraal*:

I would not be forgotten in this land.

~ : o : ~ : o : ~ : : O : ~ : o : ~ : o : ~

**THE LIFE AND LETTERS OF R. S. HAWKER
(SOMETIME VICAR OF MORWENSTOW)**

BY HIS SON-IN-LAW C. E. BYLES

John Lane : The Bodley Head

1906

(The illustration of St Nectan's Church, Welcombe, by J. Ley Pethybridge, appears on page 206.)

*This collection was selected and edited for the Hawker Society by Angela Williams,
April 2012.*