

Whilton Local History Society

Our November meeting was: "**An evening with Randolph Skipwith, Victorian Rector of Whilton.**" We were visited by Roger Toone in the guise of the Rector, who told us his opinions of Whilton and his experiences here. As the 18th child of a baronet he had a privileged upbringing, being educated at Rugby and Cambridge. He brought new impetus and fresh ideas to the community of Whilton.

On being questioned he gave us his opinion of the old church he found here. It had been altered in the 18th century and was not to Randolph's taste. He disapproved of the choir galleries, the high-backed pews and the position of the old font. It was he who organized the enlargement and complete refurbishment of St Andrew's, so that the church we know today is mostly the result of his alterations and stands as his memorial in Whilton.

He described his friendship with the musical Dyer family, who provided teaching at the school and training of Whilton children in music and performance. The Rector and his family joined concerts given in the schoolroom. At one concert in 1877 father and son, James and William Dyer gave a pianoforte duet, playing the overture to "Figaro" by Mozart and followed it later in the programme with a piano and violin duet of Mozart's Sonata No. 4. The Rector's wife and her brother also performed as singers.

Randolph's introduction of Penny Readings enabled local people to have experience of public speaking and literature. Randolph himself particularly liked brass band music and used every opportunity to have a band to accompany processions and events, such as dancing on the Rectory lawn. In the 1860s he arranged elaborate weekday holidays to celebrate harvest in Whilton. These involved days of preparations by the whole population, making floral decorations for the church and road, practising singing and preparing food and a refreshment tent in Wadd Close. Visiting clergy joined Randolph in their robes to process from school to church to tent, accompanied by a brass band, which later enabled dancing in the lighted tent. This was "*kept up with spirit until ten o'clock when the band struck up "God save the Queen", and all dispersed quietly homewards, delighted with their holiday.*"

He encouraged villagers to save "for a rainy day" through the Friendly Society he started. The members enjoyed good dinners and toasting "Her Majesty", although the very poorest may not have enjoyed such jollity. His fellow Guardian of the Poor said "his geniality was expressed in his countenance" and that he was kind to the paupers who had to approach him.

We met Randolph in his heyday in 1881 after the church restoration, but he was still to have another 15 years as Rector here, as he retired in 1898.