

Vicars, prebends and other terms

Here's an attempt to define some of the terms used in some of the documents about the History of St James's, Gretton. It should be remembered that words are slippery things that change both with context and over time.

Canons – this has lots of meanings in different contexts, but for our purposes a canon was a cleric, living with other clerics and forming the Chapter, i.e. the senior administrative body of a 'collegiate' church or cathedral. Technically these are secular canons (although they were/are ordained and had rules to follow), as 'Canons Regular' adopted Monastic Rules. The head canon in a chapter was the Dean, elected by the other canons and confirmed by the Bishop. The Bishop was responsible for the entire diocese (from the Latin for jurisdiction) or See (Latin *sedes* = seat), but would have his throne or seat in the cathedral (*cathedra* is Latin for throne). More formally, however, the Bishop was a 'visitor' there and not directly part of the cathedral administration. He took counsel from the chapter and was able to demand reviews of the chapter and cathedral through his 'visitations.' In much of Europe, chapters elected bishops, but in England they have pretty much always been appointed by the Archbishops of Canterbury and York. That's not to say that Lincoln's chapter didn't tell the Archbishops, quite firmly, who they preferred as their bishop, or that, pre-Reformation, the pope didn't get involved.

Clerk – this simply means an ordained priest (from which we get the words cleric and clergy). It later came to mean anybody who records or writes, but for most of the medieval period, education and literacy was largely limited to those ordained or in the monasteries – so medieval clerks at court or in parliament were also nearly always clergy.

Curate – responsible for the [cure](#), i.e. care, of souls, and originally often the Parish priest, appointed either ‘Perpetual’ or ‘Temporary’ to officiate mass and other services within one or more parishes, and usually on a stipend paid by whoever had rectoral rights (ie the person or institution who received income from church lands, or, post Reformation, lands acquired from the church). While in much of Europe this role developed into the modern parish priest (eg curé in French), curate in English gradually came to mean an assistant or trainee.

Glebe – an area of land usually either owned by the parish church for the support of the parish priest, or at least put aside to support the parish priest. Gretton had glebe lands, reflected in Glebe Cottage on Station Road. Gretton’s glebe lands also get mentioned in the Enclosures Act of 1837.

Parson – although used earlier as another term for priest, parson became the post-Reformation general term for an Anglican parish priest. The term reached its peak in C18 (eg the diaries of [James Woodforde, a ‘country parson’](#)), and was later replaced as a general term by ‘Vicar’ (but see below for the older meaning of vicar) or, in some churches, Minister. The [parson’s nose](#) is something different again.

Prebend - an income (usually from land) put aside to provide for (usually) a canon in a cathedral or collegiate church. The Lincoln Prebendary Canon of Gretton had revenue from church-owned lands held in Gretton, and these lands were gifted by the king, who was the original Lord of the Manor. Although prebendary canons had responsibilities in the parish, they were also responsible for the administration of the cathedral and, possibly, other tasks assigned by the church or monarchy. At the cathedral, the prebendary canon would put some of their income into a communal fund for the canons’ duties, but in order to provide for the cure of souls in the parish, he might either live in the village or employ a vicar (see

vicar) or curate (see curate) to stand in for him locally. Essentially a prebendary had rectoral rights (see rector) assigned to them all the time he was a canon. As we will see in the history of Lincoln and Gretton, the relationship between cathedral, parish, bishop and canons was often strained or, indeed, broken, and sometimes over-ruled by the pope. Some canons had several prebends and rectoral positions elsewhere, giving them significant income and secular influence. Over time the formal link between the prebend income and the prebendary canon, and therefore the vicar, became less direct.

Rector – Following the dissolution of English monasteries during the Reformation, church lands were sold by the Crown, and with them the rectorship, i.e. rights and responsibilities to collect the tithes, present a nominated parish priest to the bishop and to pay for that priest out of (a portion of) those tithes. Rectors were also responsible for at least part of the upkeep of the parish church. These new landowners could be individuals (such as a local land-owner) or institutions (for example university colleges), and the rectorship was bought, sold or inherited with the land. Rectors might therefore be ordained priests, and indeed parish priests, granted the role and income by the landowner. Or they might be simply a local landowner in whose gift the 'benefice' lay. Either way, lay and ordained rectors often employed a vicar or curate to do the religious duties for them. Some vicars made enough money that they were able to buy their own rectoral rights (and pass them on down the family), and some rectorships were awarded by university colleges to Fellows, usually for life. But often the rectoral rights were owned by a family and used to provide lifelong income and employment for friends and relatives (hence Jane Austen's rich heroes are often able to provide a living and vicarage to the heroine's nicer friends).

Tithe – from the Old English *teofa* (teothe) meaning one tenth. All householders (with some exceptions) were obliged to

pay one-tenth of their goods or income to the church each year, originally in kind (in which case the produce might be stored in tithe barns) but over time in money, an arrangement made law in 1836. Gretton's tithe barn was rebuilt following a fire in 1985, and for Gretton, tithes largely disappeared with the enclosures in 1837 (we'll have some other pages linked to St James's website soon on the enclosures and how they played out in Gretton). However, tithes [remained in place in other parts of England until 1936](#). Tithes were traditionally split between the 'great tithe' for the rector (in our case a prebendary canon) and the 'small tithe' (for the vicar) with glebe income down to local arrangements (the vicar or rector would often farm the glebe themselves).

Vicar – originally meant simply a substitute (as in the word vicarious) and referred to priests (including curates) who stood in for absent clergy within a parish or cathedral. Vicars might be perpetual (for life) and might either receive a portion of the tithes (the small tithes) or a stipend, and/or sometimes income from the glebe. From the mid-Victorian period, vicar gradually became the generic term for a parish priest, replacing parson. More tea?