



The Old Parsonage at Broughton Gifford now a Private Nursing Home

The Old Parsonage

If you are a genealogist and have traced your ancestors back centuries as a straight line family tree, that is amazing and congratulations. But did you miss anything on the way? I don't mean cousins etc. many times removed, but did a picture emerge of the places where your ancestors lived, worked and died? If it did, then even better; you are a family historian!

Perhaps it is now timely to give some thought to how the information came to be recorded. Elizabeth I started it with her order in 1538 that all parishes make and keep registers of baptisms, marriages and burials, so for 300 years parish priests, curates and clerks did this work until 1837, when Civil Registration and censuses began. Even after that date parish registers were still maintained by incumbents, and we have to thank those people for what we have, and also the modern day volunteers who are transcribing them into digital form for our ease of use.

Therefore the role of the parish priest in village life must not be underestimated. He lived in what was probably the 2nd most important house there, and in Victorian times even bigger and better houses were built for parsonage use, so that the social status of the incumbent could be enhanced. A team of servants was needed, both for inside and outside the house. Four reception rooms were quite usual, so that parish business could be done without the meeting of family and parishioners.

But in the 1960s, economic and other pressures and factors meant that parishes began to be amalgamated and the fine old parsonages were sold off, no longer considered desirable or suitable. In the opinion of many, this diminished both village and Church life. For family historians the Rectory or Vicarage was a place where ancestors would have visited to make arrangements for the rites of passage, baptisms, confirmation, marriage and finally a funeral. As a child, my Mother was sent round to the Vicarage more than once with bundles of clothing which she and her brother had outgrown, to be passed on to other families in need. Charity shops and recycling? The Parson and Mrs. Parson did all that from their village focal point! Maybe an ancestor was employed by the parson or even lived in as a maid or housekeeper. Was the young, bright-eyed boy surreptitiously hanging around one of the back entrances,

hoping to catch a glimpse of a pretty maid, one of those in your family tree? Garden parties at the Vicarage were popular and held in many places until quite recent times. Now parish business is not done in the incumbent's small home but in the church itself (if it is still open) or in another, secular building. All this means that the significance of that large and rather grand house, usually within a few hundred yards of the church is now lost. The CofE directs that when sold, former parsonages shall be renamed, disconnecting it with its ecclesiastical past. Thus the rectory or vicarage becomes The Grange or named "House" after the village in which it is situated, or even just "The Old House"!

A growing danger is that former parsonages will be sold on to developers who will demolish them and use the usually largish plots of land for erecting several smaller houses. This country does need more houses, but must we destroy our heritage of fine domestic architecture in order to provide them? It will be necessary for everyone in every community to watch out and try to prevent the destruction in this way of our local, social and family histories