

John Henry Napper Nevill, Vicar of Stoke Gabriel 1881-1915
An Eventful Life of Leadership & Conflict*

Born in Dungannon, County Tyrone, John Henry Napper Nevill (1848-1915) was the youngest son of William Nevill, a medical doctor, and maternal grandson of the Very Rev'd John William Keating, the Dean of Christ Church Cathedral and St Patricks, Dublin. He enrolled as a student of medicine at Trinity College, the Royal College of Surgeons, and the Meath Hospital, Dublin but discontinued his studies without obtaining any formal scientific or medical qualification. At some later period, he studied chemistry but again obtained no qualification. He graduated with a BA degree in divinity in 1868 and entered holy orders, qualifying as deacon in 1870 and as priest in 1871. He published two books: "The Biology of Daily Life" in 1890, in which he describes himself as a sometime student of medicine, and "Our Earliest Brothers" in 1901.

Rev'd Nevill served as curate in a number of parishes, beginning at Killyman, County Armagh (1870-73). He then came to England and continued to serve his curacy in Beccles, Suffolk (1873-75), Teddington, Middlesex (1875-76), Southampton, Hampshire (1876-79) and finally



John Henry Napper Nevill

St Matthias, Torquay (1879-81). It was while he was at St Matthias, lodging in Tormorham, Newton Abbott, that he befriended the then Stoke Gabriel parish vicar, Robert Bowden, and took the services at Waddeton Court chapel as locum tenens. On Vicar Bowden's resignation in 1881, Rev'd Nevill was inducted into the vicarage of Stoke Gabriel at the age of 33, taking the services at both the parish church of St Mary and St Gabriel (recently re-dedicated from the single dedication of St Gabriel) and the chapel of St Michael at Waddeton Court (*UK Clergy List for 1897*). Known also as Parson Nevill (and preferring the use of Napper to his other forenames), he

was the vicar and incumbent of the parish from 1881 to 1915 and preached not only at the parish church and Waddeton chapel but at other parish churches around the Dart Valley.

A tall and reputedly handsome man, there is a local tradition that the spinsters of the area were much attracted to him. One such lady, Miss Durant of Sharpham House, reportedly installed a special window to enable her to gaze across the Dart in his direction. However, it was to no avail as Vicar Nevill married the widow, Emma Burleigh Dawson (nee Purnell, 1846-1920) at St George's Church, Hanover Square, London on Thursday 26th April 1888 (*The Belfast Newsletter, Marriage Notices, 30th April 1888*). She had borne seven children from her previous marriage, the youngest two of whom came to live with them at Rosemont, Stoke Gabriel (1891 Census). She also bore a son from her marriage to Vicar Nevill, Cecil William Nevill (1892-1951). By the end of the 19th century, Vicar Nevill and his wife had moved into the newly built vicarage (also called the parsonage at the time), a mortgage for £350 having been secured on glebe land in 1894 to provide for its cost (1901 Census; and Devon Heritage Centre 1981 A/PB3).



Cecil William Nevill

Vicar Nevill's incumbency of 34 years overlapped with the end of the Victorian era, a period when the British Empire extended over one fifth of the earth's surface and the industrial revolution had made dramatic strides in the country's economic development. While greater prosperity was achieved for property owners, the working classes suffered from poor housing

and long working hours, and poverty, filth and disease flourished, especially in the cities. Life expectancy at birth had increased significantly but there was still a high mortality rate. Key events during the period of his incumbency included the increasing momentum for women's suffrage, the Boer wars, the end of the great reign of Queen Victoria, the sinking of the Titanic and the start of the Great War.

Although he attended at least one meeting of the recently created Labour Party (*Totnes Weekly Times*, 20th December 1908), Vicar Nevill was a liberal politician and an active member of the Paignton Liberals. He was particularly antagonistic toward the early 20th century Conservative policy on corn which would have resulted in an increase in tithed income for himself but at the expense of increased taxation of people's food (*Torquay Times and South Devon Advertiser*, 20th December 1907). He was actively involved in many parish institutions, clubs and societies. He would help the local Council School in its celebration of national events, such as Empire Day (*Dartmouth and South Hams Chronicle*, 27th May 1904), and regularly supported the local Working Men's Institute. He was also a member of the Stoke Gabriel and Duncannon Regatta Committee, which was established in 1898 (*Dartmouth and South Hams Chronicle*, 30th September 1898; and *Western Morning News*, 13th August, 1900).

The last vicar to lead the parish in both ecclesiastical and secular affairs, Vicar Nevill dutifully represented their interests but his incumbency was characterised by conflict and controversy as revealed by this historical record of his time in office.

1. Induction of Vicar Nevill to the Living of Stoke Gabriel (1881)

On the afternoon of Tuesday 11th October 1881, before a large assembly of clergy and parishioners, and ladies and gentlemen of the neighbourhood, Vicar Nevill was inducted into the vicarage of Stoke Gabriel. At the end of the service, there was a ceremonial locking and opening of the church door, following which Vicar Nevill proceeded to toll one of the bells to signify that he had taken possession of the living (*Western Morning News*, 13th October 1881).

2. Parish Vestry (1881-1915)

The vestry was the organisational institution for managing the affairs of the parish and was chaired by the vicar of the parish and attended by its ratepayers. It met several times a year with an annual meeting on Easter Monday to elect the churchwardens for the ensuing year and receive their accounts, also to elect the secular offices of parish guardian (formerly overseer of the poor) and the surveyors of the highways (also referred to as waywardens). Meetings of the vestry were held in the Old School House.

The remit of the vestry embraced both ecclesiastical and secular affairs but, following the Local Government Act of 1894, the responsibility for the management of secular affairs was transferred to the newly constituted Parish Council. The parish vicar and the annually elected churchwardens continued to have responsibility for the ecclesiastical affairs of the parish and the church fabric, and the parish vestry continued to meet annually but with a narrower remit. Vicar Bowden had previously overseen extensive works of repair and refurbishment to the parish church and the building was generally in a good condition at the time of Vicar Nevill's succession. Vicar Nevill attended his last vestry meeting in April 1915 (*Vestry Minutes, Easter Monday, 1881-1915, Devon Heritage Centre, 1981A PV1*).

Under the chairmanship of Vicar Nevill, the parish vestry took decisions on various matters including the following:

- Repairs and improvements to the Church House Inn
- Introduction of new PCC fees and parish rate
- Laying of piped water supply to the village
- Clearance of hedge drains and installation of a piped drainage system
- Road widening and repairs, and installation of directional signage
- Renewal of old church heating apparatus
- Erection of Churchward tower clock & bell replacement
- Installation of Churchward memorial window and brass plaque

3. Church Choir (1881-1915)

Under the direction of a succession of choir leaders, namely Mr T M Brimblecombe, Miss Marion Roberts and Miss Hanchett-Parker, the (all-male) church choir led the singing at services on Sundays and during the week at both the parish church and Waddeton Court chapel. Funeral services were often choral and festivals that occurred on weekdays were celebrated on that day, rather than the nearest Sunday. Harvest Festival, for example, took place on a weekday and was celebrated by a service of choral evensong in addition to a morning service (*Totnes Weekly Times*, 18th October 1884 and 8th October 1898). There were also choral festivals, one launching the recently re-established Moreton and Totnes Deanery Choral Association and taking place in October 1898 at Totnes before a fully seated and standing congregation. With orchestral accompaniment, over 150 choir members took part, of which Stoke Gabriel contributed 17 voices (*Totnes Weekly Times*, 29th October 1898). The commitment of the choir was much appreciated by Vicar Nevill and his thanks were recorded at the annual vestry meeting (*Vestry Minutes*, Easter Monday, 1906). On several occasions, Vicar Nevill and his wife would put on an evening of entertainment for the choir and other members of the church (*Totnes Weekly Times*, 7th January 1899 and 9th January 1904).

Around the turn of the century, the vicar established a tradition of annual choir outings to local resorts such as Dawlish, Exeter and Exmouth. Of particular interest is the variety of transportation that was used to and from the resorts. It included a boat, train, large break, steamer, motor and char-a-banc. The motor, which was used in the trip to Exeter, was most telling. It took 4.5 hours on the outward journey and 3 hours for the return journey, which (assuming that there was no break in the journey) gives an average speed of about 6-8 miles per hour (*Totnes Weekly Times*, 5th October 1895, 27th July 1907, 8th August 1908 and 14th August 1909).

The church choir shared a warm and respectful relationship with the vicar. Among the many floral tributes at his funeral in 1915 was one from the choir, which was given as a “token of admiration and esteem” (*Exeter and Plymouth Gazette*, 3rd September 1915).

4. Temperance & Vegetarianism

Vicar Nevill was one of the founding members of the Totnes Deanery Branch of the Church of England Temperance Society (*Exeter and Plymouth Gazette*, 9th May 1884). Having abstained from alcohol for eight years, he addressed the inaugural meeting in 1884 and moved the resolution:

“That this meeting, recognising the widespread sin of intemperance to be the fruitful source of poverty, crime and irreligion, agrees to exert itself for the suppression of drunkenness and for the removal of the evils which lead to intemperance.”

Vicar Nevill was actively involved in the Temperance Movement, which held annual demonstrations in Torquay and made representations to Parliament, especially in support of the Sunday closing of licensed premises (*Western Times*, 13th November 1880; *Taunton Courier and Western Advertiser*, 9th July 1890; *Torquay Times and South Devon Advertiser*, 19th May 1899). While the movement had only limited success with Sunday closing, it was a major cause for wider social reform.

A certain irony exists between Vicar Nevill’s position on temperance and his trustee ownership (together with the churchwardens) of the Church House Inn. In 1883, a year after his installation, a meeting of the vestry was called (*Vestry Minutes*, 13th September 1883, *Devon Heritage Centre*, 1981A PV1), at which the sole topic for discussion was:

“To consider the propriety of raising money to repair and improve the Church House Inn or selling the property.”

Almost certainly, it was Vicar Nevill who proposed the topic for discussion but it did not find favour. The vestry decided to proceed with the repairs and Vicar Nevill seemed to be able to live with the outcome, notwithstanding the potential charge of hypocrisy. After all, there were other vicars in parallel situations and many bishops, archdeacons and canons with shares in brewery companies (although whether they were of the same temperance mindset is another matter) (*Torquay Times and South Devon Advertiser*, 19th May 1899).

Vicar Nevill was also a vegetarian and for many years was President of the Devon and Exeter Vegetarian Society, which actively promoted the adoption of a “non-flesh diet.” In his annual address in 1896, he referred to “the great moral movements of the time, namely the Temperance Reformation, the Prevention of Cruelty to Children, the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, and the Abolition of Vivisection, or the anatomical experiments on still living animals” (*Western Times*, 3rd and 4th March 1896). He was a committed social reformer and lived out his life true to his beliefs and principles.

5. Death and Exhumation of the Vicar’s Housekeeper (1886-1887)

Shortly after his arrival in Stoke Gabriel, Vicar Nevill employed Mrs Selina Lever as his housekeeper and her husband, Henry, as his groom and gardener. He had met them both in 1876 during his curacy in Southampton. In September 1886, Selina Lever had become ill and by November had become bedridden. She died on 18th January 1887, aged 46.

At this period in history, our understanding of human biology was very limited. There was also some dissatisfaction with contemporary medical therapies and many looked to alternative treatments, such as homeopathy. Vicar Nevill embraced the treatment as part of an holistic approach to people’s well-being, as evidenced by his book (*The Biology of Daily Life*, Kegan, Paul, Trubner, Trench & Co, Ludgate Hill, 1890). However, the book contains several fundamental misconceptions, not least of which is his belief that the white blood cells of the immune system – the leukocytes – were a product of cultivating *Saccharomyces cerevisiae*, so-called brewer’s or baker’s yeast, and the origin of many human diseases. Vicar Nevill

possessed a hatred of drugs and advocated a vegetarian diet and distilled water, additionally abstaining from bread unless it was made from sawdust. The book was intended as a serious contribution to human biology but one reviewer of the day regarded it as “very funny” (*British Medical Journal*, 24th May 1890, page 1201).

Although the book was published several years after the death of his housekeeper, it provides a helpful insight into Vicar Nevill’s mindset towards her treatment at the relevant time. The book mentions a Mr Joseph Wallace of London, whom Vicar Nevill held in high regard as a pioneer in the field of homeopathy and under whom he studied for several years. It was thus Vicar Nevill’s recommendation that Selina Lever should be seen by Mr Wallace notwithstanding that he had no medical qualification. Mr Wallace visited her in November 1886 and prescribed patent medicines Nos. 2 and 3. Vicar Nevill agreed to prepare and administer the prescribed medicines. He believed they did her a great deal of good in prolonging life, but at no time was a medical doctor consulted.

On the 21st January 1887, the Registrar was notified of Selina Lever’s death, incorrectly attributed to liver cirrhosis (a tentative diagnosis made several years previously), and he issued the death certificate. However, the Registrar was concerned at the absence of a medical opinion and, on reflection, informed the Coroner who considered that no certificate should have been issued. The Registrar sought its immediate return and Vicar Nevill duly complied but buried the body the next day regardless. No summons not to proceed with the burial had been issued but Vicar Nevill had been fully aware of the Registrar’s concerns.

The Coroner ordered an inquiry and issued an order to the vicar and churchwardens to exhume the body for identification and post mortem examination. The hearings took place before a jury which included Mr H Studdy JP of Waddeton Court and, as foreman, Rear-Admiral Hawkins JP. The hearings took place on 27th and 29th January at the Church House Inn and on 7th February 1887 at the Old School Room, the last of which was attended by some 50 villagers.

At the first hearing, Vicar Nevill challenged the Coroner to justify the exhumation order and withheld consent for its implementation without sufficient cause and licence from the Bishop. Entirely confident in his position, the Coroner, together with the jury and churchwardens, proceeded to the churchyard to exhume the body. After a lengthy exchange of views at the churchyard gates and again at the grave side, the coffin was brought to the surface and transported to a cottage opposite the Church House Inn for the jury to view the body and for the husband, Henry Lever, to provide formal identification.

At the second hearing, the parish medical officer, Dr Currie, testified that he had attended the deceased in April 1884 when she was suffering from an acute liver attack probably caused by alcohol but had not seen her since. Vicar Nevill testified that a medical doctor had not been required for her subsequent illness. Several nurses (including one Elizabeth Jane Durant of Sharpham), who had administered care to the deceased, also gave evidence that a medical doctor had not been required because it would not have affected the outcome and, in any event, they were acting under Vicar Nevill’s advice. Under examination, the homeopathic practitioner, Mr Wallace, refused to disclose the content of the homeopathic medicine, saying that he charges 100 guineas for it and was not prepared to make it freely available.

The post mortem results were available at the final hearing and indicated that Selina Lever had died from natural causes, namely chronic kidney disease (Bright's disease) and not liver cirrhosis. They also indicated that her demise had not been caused or hastened by the treatment she had received at the hands of Vicar Nevill. The jury accordingly reached their decision that death was from natural causes. They added however that Vicar Nevill was not without blame since he should have called for a medical doctor. The nurses were also censured for not suggesting this to him.

The Coroner reprimanded Vicar Nevill for his lack of cooperation in having the body exhumed and hoped that he would learn from the experience. Vicar Nevill replied that he had acted with a strict sense of duty and would do the same again under similar circumstances (*Exeter and Plymouth Gazette*, 28th and 31st January 1887; *Western Times*, 11th February 1887; and *Torquay Times and South Devon Advertiser*, 11th February 1887).

Before the jury had given its decision, Vicar Nevill published a notice in several newspapers that "A Special Act of Reparation to Almighty God" will be made for the "Desecration of the Churchyard and Violation of the Grave of the Faithful Departed" at the three usual services on Wednesday 2nd February, the Festival of Candlemas, and that people's prayers for the church were sought (*Morning Post*, 1st and 2nd February 1887). At the service of Evensong, Vicar Nevill delivered a sermon, taking as his text, Ezekiel, 37: 12-14, which describes the time when God opens the graves of the deceased and brings their bodies to life in the land of Israel. Vicar Nevill used the occasion to justify his position that the enforced exhumation of the body of Selina Lever was a "terrible desecration" of holy ground and that, as far as he was concerned, his conscience was clear as he had done his utmost to prevent it (*Western Morning News*, 3rd February 1887).

After the inquest, a newspaper report opined that "had the Vicar called in a medical doctor, whose daily business is the treatment of disease, both the disinterment and inquest would have been avoided." Several people wrote in reply, defending Vicar Nevill's actions. One reply in particular was written by Mr H Studdy of Waddeton Court (*Exeter and Plymouth Gazette*, 14th February 1887), who had been a member of the jury. While acknowledging that calling in a medical man would have been the prudent course of action, he went on to assert that:

"I say that never was a man more unjustly charged and censured, together with the nurse, for doing their utmost to ease the death-bed of a dying servant, than the Vicar of Stoke Gabriel. The suspected cause of death, anticipated with eagerness, has failed the founders of the scandal; but the cruel charge of attempting to poison, directly or indirectly, will hang round the Vicar's neck to his dying day."

Nonetheless, Vicar Nevill showed a surprising level of arrogance and disrespect towards the inquest proceedings and their necessity. Selina Lever was re-buried in the churchyard. Her grave is on the west side of the churchyard, grave number 799.

6. Vicar Nevill's Wedding Day (1888)

To the supposed disappointment of many local spinsters, Vicar Nevill married the widow, Emma Burleigh Dawson, in London, 1888. Even though he was far from home, he did not forget his parishioners and in celebration of his marriage generously "gave orders that every adult in the parish, without exception, should be invited to a public supper on the evening of

the wedding day.” He covered the cost of the supper and a tea which was held the next day for the younger members of the parish. The village was bedecked with flags, the bells were rung and there was dancing in the evening on both occasions. There were speeches in praise of the vicar and loud cheers in his favour. Just about the whole population of the parish attended one or the other event. (*Totnes Weekly Times*, 5th May 1888)

7. Childhood Vaccination (1892-96)

As a result of legislation during the Victorian period, especially the Act of 1853, it had become compulsory to vaccinate children within three months of birth. Childhood mortality from small pox and other infections, such as typhoid and cholera, was high and in fact, during the 1830’s in Stoke Gabriel, many people had died from cholera. There was much resistance to compulsory vaccination from politically active campaigners who considered that it targeted working-class infants. Campaigners were often religious dissenters who opposed vivisection, and supported temperance, vegetarianism and alternative medicine. Vicar Nevill was a member of this group.

In 1892, Vicar Nevill’s wife gave birth to a son, Cecil, who was obliged to be vaccinated. Vicar Nevill refused and in 1893 was summoned to appear before Paignton Petty Sessions (*Torquay Times and South Devon Advertiser*, 2nd June 1893) where he contended that:

“having made a study of vaccination (medically, historically and statistically) for many years, that this inoculation is always detrimental to the health and, is often dangerous to the life of an infant”.

Vicar Nevill was fined £2 13s 6d, “the highest fine ever paid in England” for this offence. However, he still refused to have his son vaccinated and was summoned to appear before the court again (*Dartmouth and South Hams Chronicle*, 8th May 1896) where he said that:

“...he used to believe in vaccination, but now regarded it as a foul and dangerous disease. He had buried two children in Stoke Gabriel who had died from the effects of vaccination. His own child was in a particularly dangerous position. He had never eaten cow meat, ... and he could not have him vaccinated because he would run the risk of his life.”

“... three years ago ... he visited the vaccination station at Stoke Gabriel and was horrified and astonished at the brutal way in which vaccination there was carried out.”

Dr Donald A Fraser was the medical practitioner for Stoke Gabriel and he held a special certificate for the performance of vaccination. He objected to Vicar Nevill’s characterisation of him and his work, as a result of which Vicar Nevill was forced to publish an unreserved retraction and apology (*Western Times*, 22nd and 23rd May 1896). Dr Fraser and Vicar Nevill had crossed paths before. At the inquest to the death of Vicar Nevill’s housekeeper, Dr Fraser had assisted in the post-mortem examination and had testified on the matter at the proceedings (*Totnes Weekly Times*, 12th February 1887).

The court made an Order against Vicar Nevill and nothing more is reported but it appears unlikely that his son was vaccinated.

8. Recovery of Tithed Payments (1900)

As vicar of the parish, which included Waddeton, Vicar Nevill was entitled to receive tithed payments from all householders. Mr Henry Studdy, the owner of Waddeton Court and member of the jury in the inquest to Selina Lever's death, had not paid his tithe-rent charge of £18 3s. Vicar Nevill brought an action for its recovery in Paignton County Court. Mr Studdy entered no defence and an order for distraint was made in the vicar's favour (*Torquay Times and South Devon Advertiser*, 23rd Mar 1900).

The withholding of tithed payments was not an uncommon occurrence across the land at this time. Vicars and rectors had to resort to the courts to secure their dues, if only to ensure that others did not follow suit. The reason why Henry Studdy did not pay them is unknown but it is telling that he entered no defence to the action.

9. Golden Jubilee and Death of Queen Victoria (1887 & 1901)

On 20th June 1887, Queen Victoria celebrated her Golden Jubilee and the occasion was marked in Stoke Gabriel with much joy. Flags were flown throughout the village and a special service was held at 11.00 am, after which about 200 people sat down to a meal in the barn of Mr Austin. A short choral service was held in the afternoon for 300 children who then adjourned to a field of Admiral Dawkins for tea and sports. The day was concluded with dancing until 10.00 pm (*Western Morning News*, 1st July 1887).

On Tuesday 22nd January 1901, Queen Victoria died at Osborne House, Isle of Wight. She was 81 years old and had reigned for 63 years. The news reached Stoke Gabriel the next day and came as a shock to many who had not known any other monarch.

Vicar Nevill led the parish in its mourning of the Queen's passing, as reflected in the solemn setting and tone of the Sunday services (*Totnes Weekly Times*, 2nd February 1901). A fully choral memorial service took place at 3.00 pm on Saturday 2nd February 1901, the same day as the Queen's funeral in Windsor. The surpliced choir processed with the vicar as he read the opening sentences of the "impressive" burial service, at the end of which a muffled peal was rung. The church "was crowded to its utmost capacity" and "will long live in the memory of those present" (*Totnes Weekly Times*, 9th February 1901).

10. Waddeton Court Chapel & the Studdy Family (1904-1906)

A substantial country estate within the parish of Stoke Gabriel, Waddeton Court was the mediaeval seat of the Lord of the Manor of Waddeton. It had its own chapel, which was founded in 1213 (<https://historicensland.org.uk/listing/the-list/list-entry/1108503>) but it fell into disrepair and was rebuilt by Henry Bradridge Studdy in 1868 as a memorial to his father-in-law, the Rev'd Robert Holdsworth, vicar of Dartmouth and Brixham (*Beatrix Cresswell, Notes on Devon Churches, 1904, Devon Heritage Centre, s726.5/DEV/CRE; and J J Alexander, Devon and Cornwall Notes & Queries, Vol XVII, page 314*). By the late 19th century, the estate had passed into the ownership of his son, also called Henry Studdy, the same Henry Studdy who sat on the jury to the inquest into the death of Selina Lever almost two decades earlier and who had more recently been the subject of a court order to pay his tithe-rent charge. Two of his sons were Colonel Robert Wright Studdy, who on his father's death in 1905 inherited the estate, and Mr Thomas Edward Studdy, who resided at Mazonet in Stoke Gabriel village. Both were active in church affairs, attending vestry meetings throughout Vicar Nevill's period in office.

It was the custom at the time for the church choir to hold weekly practices at Waddeton Court chapel, rather than the parish church, apparently due to the protracted works required on the church organ. But in May 1904 the choir practice was the trigger for a bitter legal dispute that was widely reported in newspapers across the country. Due to some unspecified “friction” between Vicar Nevill and Mrs Edith Mary Studdy (the wife of Colonel Studdy), the Studdys decided in May 1904 that the chapel would no longer be used for choir practices. A letter was written by Mrs Studdy to the vicar that:

“...there will not be a choir practice here on Wednesdays and that only the inhabitants of this hamlet are asked to help in the singing.”

Vicar Nevill continued to officiate at chapel services but by Michaelmas 1904 he had been excluded completely from the estate.

Vicar Nevill brought an action in the Chancery Courts against Mr Henry Studdy, Colonel Studdy and Mrs Edith Mary Studdy. Vicar Nevill claimed that he had the right to the possession and control of the chapel for the performance of divine service and the celebration of the sacraments according to Church of England. The action came before the court in March 1906, which took evidence from all the parties and also Mr Thomas Edward Studdy of Mazonet, who gave evidence in support of the family’s defence. The court decided that the chapel was not a public building but a private oratory attached to the estate and that the vicar had no right to officiate there except with the consent of the owner. Vicar Nevill did not take the case to appeal (*Torquay Times and South Devon Advertiser*, 2nd March 1906; *Western Times*, 2nd March 1906; and *Western Morning News*, 1st and 3rd March, 1906).

Being resident in the village, Mr Thomas Edward Studdy and his family attended Sunday morning services of Matins at the parish church but, according to local tradition, used to walk out before Vicar Nevill delivered his sermon. Why they chose to do this, and whether it was connected to the court action, is unknown. On one occasion, however, they chose to stay, which prompted Vicar Nevill to demand that they should depart immediately before he would continue. They duly obliged.

Notwithstanding the occasional friction and conflict between the Studdys and the vicar, the Studdy family continued to be active in parish and church affairs and also attended the funeral service for Vicar Nevill in 1915 (*Exeter and Plymouth Gazette*, 3rd September 1915).

11. Mystery of the Murdered Vicar of Stoke Gabriel

At the court hearing in March 1906, Vicar Nevill was cross-examined on the history of the chapel. He said that the original chapel had been built in about 1300 and, to much laughter in court, that “one of the knights of old erected the chapel by way of atonement for killing the then vicar” (*Torquay Times and South Devon Advertiser*, 2nd March 1906). In 1904, Beatrix Cresswell also reported that the original chapel had been built “by one of the Fishacre family to expiate the crime of murdering a Vicar of Stoke Gabriel” (*Beatrix Cresswell, Notes on Devon Churches*, 1904, *Devon Heritage Centre*, s726.5/DEV/CRE). The Fishacres (*Fysacre*) were the Lords of the Manor of Waddeton in the 13th and 14th century (*Hingeston-Randolph F.C., The Register of John Grandisson*, page 1535). But Cresswell also noted that this was “another version of the story already told at Morleigh”, thus doubting its authenticity.

The murder of the parish vicar must have occurred before the chapel was founded in the early 13th century since its founding was to appease divine wrath for the crime. However, the parish church itself is 13th century (<https://britishlistedbuildings.co.uk/101108497-church-of-st-gabriel-and-st-mary-stoke-gabriel#.XPuKTi2ZNeM>) and, until the church had been built, there would have been no parish vicar. Before the church, there was a chapel within the existing churchyard that may have been late 11th or early 12th century, but it would probably have been served by itinerant clergy from the mother church of St John the Baptist, Paignton, all of which suggests (but does not prove) that there was no parish vicar at the relevant time. Unhelpfully, the Bishops of Exeter did not start to record their activities until the middle of the 13th century and the absence of any contemporary records obviates a definitive conclusion. Though the tradition is unlikely, it remains a mystery!

Vicar Nevill made no mention of two other alleged murders of a Stoke Gabriel parish vicar that predated his incumbency. Either he did not know about them or they were not relevant to the issue before the court. Whatever the reason, they have no substance as discussed in a footnote below.

12. The Fishermen and Duncannon Footpath

The licensed fishermen of Stoke Gabriel, which numbered around 10 at the turn of the century, were the recipients of much support from Vicar Nevill. Each year, the parish elected two parishioners to represent its interests on the Dart District Fishery Board and for many years Vicar Nevill was one of the two elected (*Totnes Weekly Times*, 10th December 1887). When the interests of the fishermen appeared to conflict with a proposed provisional order of the Dart Conservators' Board to protect salmon stocks, Vicar Nevill stepped forward to defend their livelihood. He wrote to the local newspaper with his objections (*Western Morning News*, 22nd April 1914) but was accused of being factually misleading (*Western Morning News*, 28th April 1914).

The village schoolmaster, Mr George Papworth, was also elected to the Dart District Fishery Board (*Totnes Weekly Times*, 10th December 1887). But in October 1895 he fell to his death, aged 39, from a cliff on the banks of the River Dart while picking horse chestnuts. Having left no provision for his widow and four young children, Vicar Nevill launched an appeal on their behalf to raise funds (*Western Morning News*, 28th October 1895; and *Totnes Weekly Times*, 2nd November 1895), which was widely supported (*Totnes Weekly Times*, 14th December 1895).

In 1912, a new owner of Duncannon House, Mr C Ring, erected a gateway across the footpath that passed over his field to a river beach and locked it, thus impeding the use of the path by members of the public. The footpath had been used by generations of fishermen and also by people using the Duncannon Ferry to travel to and from Ashprington and beyond. The villagers considered the footpath to be a public right of way and it had probably been used for centuries not only by the fishermen but also by peasants and artisans from the other side of the river, bringing their produce and wares to the ancient market at Paignton.

With little hesitation, the fishermen turned to Vicar Nevill for help. He obtained a saw and, in front of the angry owner, set about the destruction of the gates, leaving it in pieces on the ground. The action was greeted with loud cheers from the fishermen who marched back into the village carrying flags and singing the national anthem. The gate was not repaired and Mr

Ring took no further action (*Exeter and Plymouth Gazette*, 31st May 1912 & *Western Daily Mercury*, 4th June 1912). The saw was kept by the Bonstow family of Duncannon and the footpath remains a right of way to this day.

At the time, it was the Parish Council, and not the Vestry nor Vicar Nevill, who had responsibility for the management of the parish highways and footpaths. But it was seemingly of no concern to the vicar! He saw himself as a champion of the working class, reflected in his enduring support for the fishermen and the local Working Men's Institute.

13. The Great War (1914)

In November 1914, Vicar Nevill presided at a recruitment meeting at which several speakers successfully appealed to local men to join the armed services to bring about victory (*Totnes Times*, 5th December 1914). Among others, his only son, Cecil William Nevill, signed up and, following the death of his father, served overseas with the Devonshire regiment.

14. Naval Bank Failure (1914)

In August 1914, the Naval Bank, which had branches in the area, suspended its operations and filed for bankruptcy. Vicar Nevill was quick to lend his support to the innocent victims who had been adversely affected. He pledged to withhold any rate payment required to cover the deficit of the failed bank and to put the money aside to provide some relief for them (*Western Morning News*, 10th September 1914). The ensuing investigations into the bank's failure continued for several years.

15. Death of Vicar Nevill (1915)

Vicar Nevill died in the afternoon of the 26th August 1915, aged 68 years. On the day of his funeral, flags were flown at half-mast and the deceased was carried from the vicarage to the church in two relays of villagers, namely Messrs J H Collings, T H Collings, J Skedgel, W E Ball, H Narracott, S Luscombe, E Bonstow, S Collings, E Hannaford-Hill, A Hannaford-Hill, A Baker and G S Hill. The cortege was headed by the two churchwardens, Messrs J J Baker and R N Matthews, carrying their wands. The church was crowded and contained many floral tributes (*Exeter and Plymouth Gazette*, 3rd September 1915; and *Western Times*, 3rd September 1915). He was buried in the churchyard, Grave 857.

Five years later, his wife died after a long illness. A hearse carried her body from Exeter to the parish church where it was met by Vicar Leatherdale and a full choir (*Western Times*, 19th March 1920). She was buried with her husband and in 1951 they were joined by their son.

A principled social reformer not afraid to court controversy, Vicar Nevill was popular with his parishioners and the working men in particular. He saw himself as their champion and was kind and generous towards them and they loved him in return. He had strong views and would use hyperbole to make a point, rarely allowing for the possibility that he might be wrong. His self-confidence on some issues, especially in the medical field, belied his qualifications and experience and he could be quite disrespectful to those in authority. He had an ambivalent attitude to the landed gentry with whom he could sometimes be difficult and argumentative.

* With sincere gratitude to Norman the Verger for several stories relating to Vicar Nevill and his time in office in Stoke Gabriel.

Footnote to Para 11: Two Further Murder Mysteries of a Stoke Gabriel Vicar

Two other alleged murders of a parish vicar of Stoke Gabriel have been reported, having similar facts but different timeframes.

In 1884, the local historian, Edward Windeatt, mentioned at the re-opening of Stoke Gabriel Baptist Chapel that “there was a historic tale of the time of Queen Mary to the effect that the villagers of Stoke hung their vicar at the top of the church tower” (*Totnes Weekly Times*, 11th October 1884). Shortly after the conclusion to the trial between the Studdys and Vicar Nevill over the use of Waddeton chapel, Edward Windeatt raised the subject again:

“There is also a tradition that the Vicar of Stoke Gabriel was hanged from his Church Tower in Mary’s reign, and it is said that if a quarrel takes place between any of the Stoke Gabriel men and those of Cornworthy on the opposite side of the Dart, the Cornworthy men will taunt the Stoke Gabriel men with “who hung their vicar from his own Church Tower”

Edward Windeatt invited readers to say if there was any foundation for the tradition but appeared to get no response. (*Devon and Cornwall Notes & Queries*, Vol VI, page 102; and <https://www.genuki.org.uk/big/eng/DEV/StokeGabriel/Windeatt1910b>)

In 2010, Mike Holgate recorded in his book (*Along the River Dart*, The History Press, 2010, Gloucestershire, page 44) that:

“...the parishioners are said to have hanged their vicar from the church tower during the reign of Queen Anne.”

The registers of the Bishops of Exeter (James Turberville and Jonathan Trelawney) during the reigns of Queen Mary and Queen Anne reveal that there is only one parish vicar in each reign to whom the alleged facts could apply. They are Thomas Cowte (1536-1556) during the reign of Queen Mary and William Stephens (1672-1705) during the reign of Queen Anne. But the Registers also indicate that both vicars did not die from anything other than natural causes. If there was any substance to either story, there would be surviving ecclesiastical and criminal records of the incident and the need for the re-consecration of the church. No such records exist (cf. St Petroc’s Church, South Brent and the murder of the Reverend John Hay in 1436).

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