

This is the Forty Sixth of an occasional series of articles by David Stone about incidents in the history of Swanton Morley and its church

The Rev. Edward Henry Evans-Lombe
Oh no, not another article about an obscure rector!

Well yes, and no. The Rev. Edward Henry Evans-Lombe was indeed the rector of Swanton Morley from 1863 to 1895, but I am not going to list his clerical appointments and monumental inscriptions. Instead, I am going to start by talking about his conflict with the agricultural workers unions and with the Primitive Methodist Church.

He was the third son of the Rev. Henry Evans and his wife Sophia, and he was baptised in Smallburgh (which is a few miles south of North Walsham) on 21 Nov 1819. His father, Henry Evans, was for many years rector of Lyng, and they lived in Lyng Rectory, but in 1862 he inherited the vast Lombe estates and in order to do so he had to change his surname from Evans to Lombe. He and Sophia then moved into the recently built Bylaugh Hall. The next generation, namely Henry E. Evans the oldest son, Thomas R. Evans the second son, and Edward H. Evans the above third son also changed their surname to "Lombe", but they later seemed to prefer to use the name "Evans-Lombe". When their father died in Oct 1878, aged 78, Henry the eldest son inherited the estates and moved from Great Melton Hall to Bylaugh Hall.

The Rev. Edward Henry Evans married Mary-Ellen Fenwick in July 1852 when he was curate of Eriswell in Suffolk, and they had a daughter called Ellen Sophia who was born in about 1856. He became rector of Swanton Morley in 1863, but Mary died in Oct 1878 and she is buried in the graveyard here. He married Mary Isabella Fox in 1887.

This was a time when the Established Church came increasingly into conflict both with the Nonconformist chapels and with the emerging influence of the agricultural unions. In Swanton Morley this opposition mainly concentrated on a man called George Rix, who was born in the village of Bylaugh in 1827. He initially worked as a farm labourer, but he soon showed himself to be an able scholar and later on he proved to be a successful entrepreneur, setting himself up with a donkey and cart and selling all manner of foodstuffs, including fish, around the villages. But in the late 1840s, when work started on Bylaugh Hall, he and his wife had to leave Bylaugh and they moved to a small cottage near Elsing Church. It was there that he first became involved with the Primitive Methodist Church, built a small chapel and opened a Sunday school. It was not long before he moved to Swanton Morley where he set up a grocer's shop. He was seen as a natural leader by the local farm labourers and at their request he called a meeting in the sand pit (which was the usual meeting place for the village). This was attended by a large number of people, and after the meeting 80 members enrolled in the new union. You can see the influence of the chapel from the fact that seven of the eight officers of the new union were chapel members.

Unfortunately for Rix, those present also included some of the local landowners, farmers, and clergy, and they were outraged. The outcome was that someone bought his shop above his head and he had to leave, although by Oct 1875 he had bought another shop near the Angel Inn. Furthermore the rich people would no longer buy his fish so his hawking business failed. The Church also got involved and the rector (Rev. E.H. Evans-Lombe) ruled that the annual Parish Charity should be withheld from union members. This covered things like the annual distribution of cloth and calico to the needy. The union sent a delegation to see him, but they were ordered off the premises, so they decided upon more direct action.



A Meeting in the Swanton Morley Sand Pit

George Rix is probably the man in the sash

At the next Vestry (a formal meeting in the church) members of the union and the chapel attended in strength and proposed Rix as one of the churchwardens, but the rector refused to put the motion and left the meeting. In his absence Rix was duly elected which put the Church authorities in a quandary and there was much lobbying behind the scenes. Eventually, Rix agreed to waive his rights for twelve months. But the issue arose again the next year and there were again two candidates, George Rix and Mr Mack the rector's candidate. Now the rector did his best to prevent it coming to a vote. But he exceeded his authority by demanding £5 for 'expenses' and threatening to declare Mack the winner if this sum was not paid within ten minutes. Anyway, the sum was paid and the ballot was held. Now, at that time there was a system of multiple votes in operation which gave up to five additional votes to those with most property and, the result was that although 77 people voted for Rix and only 74 for Mack, the outcome was 124 votes for Mack and still just 77 for Rix. However, Rix went to the County Court to get the £5 refunded as being illegal and the rector was given a severe dressing down by the judge, for the partisan way in which he had chaired the Vestry. For a man in his position this must have been humiliating.

In parallel with the growth of the unions was the growth of Primitive Methodism. Robert Key the "Apostle of the Norfolk Villages" founded the Mattishall Circuit in 1831, and when it changed its headquarters from Mattishall to Dereham in 1845, there were twelve members listed in Swanton Morley. By 1900 there were twenty-nine members. The present chapel in Greengate was built in 1869 to seat 168 people.

I shall carry on with this story next time.