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Sir Robert Atkyns the Elder and Lower Swell Church

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SIR ROBERT ATKYNS THE ELDER
AND LOWER SWELL CHURCH

Among the Rawlinson MSS in the Bodleian Library is a letter from Sir Robert Atkyns the elder to the Bishop of Oxford about the unhappy condition of the parish church of Lower Swell.¹ Sir Robert, who was Lord Chief Baron of the Exchequer and later Speaker of the House of Lords,² was the father of the historian of Gloucestershire. He had acquired the manor of Lower Swell in 1659, and in 1671³ he demolished the old manor house that stood, presumably, on the moated site by the main road from Gloucester to Stow-on-the-Wold. In its place he built the house, further away from the road, that was depicted by Kip among the illustrations for the younger Sir Robert's *History*, and most of which survives today. It is known that the elder Sir Robert was living there by 1684;⁴ the letter already mentioned, which is dated 26 August 1683, suggests that he had by then taken up his residence there and was filling his natural place as the leader of the local community.

The condition of the parish church was unhappy both physically and spiritually. Physically, the fabric of the church was not much altered since the early 12th century, except that in the late 15th century the nave roof had been raised, a mean-sized porch added to the south door, and (though it may have been at a different period) a south aisle built. The upkeep of the nave, and perhaps of the south aisle, was the responsibility of the parishioners. The aisle may have been appropriated, as in other churches, to the lords of the manor and thus become their responsibility; this would account for Sir Robert's eagerness to demolish it as a structure past repair. Sir Robert's main worry, however, as far as the building was concerned, was the chancel, which let the weather into the rest of the church. Repair of the chancel was the duty of the rector. In the early 13th century the rector's endowments had been granted to Notley Abbey, in Buckinghamshire, and after the Dissolution had passed to the dean and chapter of Christ Church, Oxford. That college had acquired with the endowments of the rectory not only the right to nominate the vicars who served the cure but also the obligation of maintaining the chancel. The college itself did not collect the tithes and farm the land that formed the

¹ Bodleian Libr. MS. Rawl. D. 399, f. 279.

² *Trans. BGAS*, xxxv, p. 70.

³ Hearth Tax Assessments, PRO, E 179/247/14, m. 23.

⁴ *Trans. BGAS*, xxxv, p. 71.

endowments of the rectory, but leased them, and it was a condition of successive leases that the lessee should maintain the chancel.¹ That was normal practice in such circumstances, but at Lower Swell there was the added difficulty that the lessee did not live in the village, and he sub-let the land and tithes to a local farmer. This made it harder for the parishioners (or anyone else) to ensure that repairs to the chancel were done when needed.

Spiritually the church was no better placed. The vicar received only a small proportion of the income from the endowments originally provided for the parish priest: in the late 17th century the vicar's living was worth only £25 a year.² No clergyman could have been persuaded to take the living with that as his sole means of support, and since 1603 the vicarage of Lower Swell had been held in plurality with the parsonage of Stow-on-the-Wold,³ a mile away. Such an arrangement seems to have worked well enough so long as the incumbent was conscientious, but Benjamin Callow, the vicar of whom Sir Robert complained to the Bishop of Oxford, could not, as will be seen, be so described.

At first sight it seems inappropriate that Sir Robert should address himself to the Bishop of Oxford who, as bishop, was not really concerned, but the bishop at the time, Dr John Fell, was also Dean of Christ Church.⁴

Sir Robert's letter (with the spelling modernized) was as follows:

To the Bishop of Oxford
at his lodgings in
Christ Church

Stow-on-the-Wold

26 August 1683

My Lord,

I waited on you as I passed through Oxford above two months since, and acquainted you with the ill condition of our chancel, for want of repair. The under-tenant (one Brian), though he receives tithe in the parish, yet he comes not to church and feels not the cold air, the wind and wet that blows in upon us. Your lordship promised me to send to your tenant Mr Ashcomb about it and to take care that it be well repaired. We hear nothing from him, the under-tenant will do nothing, and the winter is coming on. We seldom have any communion, and not till we invite our minister (Mr Callow) to afford it us. We have some hasty prayers in the morning every Sunday and a few notes read to us in the afternoon, for Mr Callow is minister too of Stow and is in haste still to ride away from us thither, and it is no wonder if of those few that belong to us some are

¹ Christ Church, Oxford, Treasury, Book of Evidences, ii, pp. 532-3.

² Survey of Church Livings, PRO, C 94/1, f. 29; Atkyns, *Gloucestershire*, p. 706.

³ *Trans. BGAS*, vii, p. 54.

⁴ *DNB*.

Quakers and some Anabaptists, and very few of the rest care for coming to church. We earnestly entreat your care for us, and help us to one that will take pains amongst us and faithfully and diligently watch over those souls for whom our blessed Saviour shed his precious blood, that will catechize our children and servants and visit our ignorant people, that we may have a pious, conscientious minister unto ourselves that may give good example to his flock. And if we may have that favour if not right done, that we may have the approbation of him before he be imposed upon us. We are well content to have a conformable person so he be prudent and moderate, not too rigid and severe in ceremony. We love to have all decent, and to have his work done with love and meekness; and if it please God to bless us with such a minister we shall love him and honour him and he shall not want for encouragement. We are not worthy the honour of your lordship's view, but we wish you would send some that you can trust to take a view of our church; it is miserably out of repair and it is in vain for us to go about it if we must suffer by the chancel. There is in our little church an aisle that is ready to fall, and it is called by the people the knaves' house, and some beggars have heretofore made it their dwelling. It is of no use to us but being ruinous it exposeth us to the weather. We desire leave to take it down, it will save so much charge in repairing. It may help a little to repair our church which has room enough, and I will assure your lordship, before we have done we will put our small church into complete repair. And if your lordship will furnish us with a good minister (I have no one person in my thoughts) I hope we shall have our church duly frequented. However, it shall be the constant endeavour of

your lordship's most faithful servant,

Robert Atkyns.

Sir Robert appears to have had his way about the building, for the aisle had been removed by the end of the century.¹ He also appears to have kept his promise to put the church in good order. It is rather ironical that less than 150 years later the church was much too small for the village² (the number of houses had increased by half), and after some delay a new north aisle was built. It was larger than the original nave, and with a new chancel added it eventually became the new nave, the original nave and chancel (the church Sir Robert had known) becoming the south aisle and south chapel of the enlarged church.³ Without Sir Robert's efforts, however, it is unlikely that the remarkable 12th-century work in the original church would have survived so well as it has.

On the spiritual side less was achieved. The dissenters mentioned by Sir Robert presumably had other reasons for their beliefs than the inadequacy of their parish church, and in 1750 there were still two

¹ Bodleian Libr. MS. Rawl. B. 323, f. 257.

² Gloucester Public Libr., Hockaday Abs. vol. 362.

³ *Trans. BGAS*, vii, p. 50.

families of Baptists and one of Friends in the parish.¹ The vicar, who appears to have been related to a yeoman family in nearby Donnington,² remained in office and took his duties no more seriously. As a result of his continued neglect of the Bishop of Gloucester's monitions to live at Lower Swell and provide a curate for Stow, his living in Stow was sequestered.³ He outlasted Sir Robert, however, and was vicar until his death in 1714.⁴ Soon afterwards the living of Lower Swell was augmented by a gift of £10 a year from Dr Robert South,⁵ a canon of Christ Church,⁶ and after 1714 Lower Swell and Stow were no longer held together in plurality. Even so, it was not until the 19th century that Lower Swell had a vicar of its own living in the parish.⁷

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¹ Gloucester Diocesan Records, vol. 393.

² County Records Office, D 182 (Acc. 735).

³ *Trans. BGAS*, vii, p. 54.

⁴ Gloucester Public Libr., Hockaday Abs. vol. 362.

⁵ Gloucester Diocesan Records, vol. 397.

⁶ *DNB*.

⁷ Gloucester Public Libr., Hockaday Abs. vol. 362.