

Account of Purley on Thames

The Religious Census of 1851

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by Jean Debney

On 30 Mar 1851 the population census of England and Wales recorded more information about each person than in any previous census[1] and, on the same day, the only religious census was also taken. The latter was to investigate how many of the population attended a religious establishment, was there an increase in Catholicism, what was the provision and attendance between the established church and its rivals and, also, was there sufficient provision in towns - which were seen as “abodes of the godless”? i.e. “bums on seats” - for those who might wish to attend.

It was originally intended, as in Ireland, to include a question about everyone’s religious affiliation but this caused such an uproar it was dropped. There was also strong opposition nationally to any religious census by Samuel Wilberforce, Bishop of Oxford, whose brother had recently become Catholic. In the end the questions were so vague and confusing that the answers were and are almost impossible to interpret. When it received the go-ahead, he gave the clergy the option of not filling in their returns which left many local enumerators with the additional task of compiling answers on the blank forms as best they could.

Wilberforce’s influence probably accounts for the high number of forms in Berkshire signed by the enumerator.[2] The report, which appeared some years later, left many anomalies. Congregations may have been larger than usual as it was Mothering Sunday and an unknown number may have attended more than one service and were therefore counted two or even three times. Some totals are suspiciously rounded and some may have been inflated to boost a church or chapel’s importance in the community.

Berkshire had 448 returns which included 203 from Anglican churches. They were followed by 122 Methodists (69 Wesleyan, 52 Primitive and 1 Calvinistic), 7 Quakers, 6 Catholic, 2 Mormon (Newbury and Reading), 1 Brethren and several others such as mortuary and hospital chapels.

In the 1820s there was an evangelistic campaign by the Primitive Methodists across Berkshire. By 1851 they had chapels, etc. in 53 places and, together with the Wesleyan (75) and Calvinistic (1) Methodists, were second only to the Church of England. Next came the Congregational/Independents (34), Catholics (6), Quakers (4) and Mormons (2), plus a few miscellaneous places.

Berkshire had 192 Sunday Schools. These included the Bethesda Countess of Huntingdon’s Chapel where the signatory, John Dance of Theale, the chapel deacon, seized the opportunity to complain “There would be more Sunday scholars were it not for the National School[3] denying them the privilege of their tuition on the week days.”

The overall results suggest that at least a third of the population did not attend any religious establishment. Some may have had a very good reason for this but there was thought to be a degree of religious indifference especially amongst the urban working classes. Attendance by all classes in the established church was highest in rural areas where employment and housing was important to the labourers.

This is the entry for Purley with those of the adjacent parishes of Pangbourne and Sulham for comparison.

PURLEY - ST MARY'S PARISH CHURCH. [TNA Ref: HO 107/226/44]

An ancient parish church. Endowed tithe £300, glebe £50.

Free sittings 60. other sittings 36.

On 30 March:

morning general congregation 60; Sunday scholars 25; afternoon general congregation 22; Sunday scholars 19.

Average attendance during 12 months:

morning general congregation 55; Sunday scholars 20; afternoon general congregation 25 Sunday scholars 20.

Signed Richard Palmer, Minister, Purley Rectory, Reading. 30 March 1851

SULHAM - ST NICHOLAS'S PARISH CHURCH [TNA: HO 129/126/38]

An ancient parish church. When consecrated - before 1800 but partly restored 1838. Endowed tithe net £147, glebe £38, fees 10s. Free sittings 110.

On 30 March:

morning general congregation 54; Sunday scholars 35; afternoon general congregation 55; Sunday scholars 35.

Signed John Wilder, Rector, Sulham near Reading [undated]

And, with less detail, John BUTLER, the Enumerator signed the following undated returns:

PANGBOURNE - PARISH CHURCH [TNA Ref: HO 129/126/45]

Endowed tithe about £500, glebe £5. Free sittings 100; other sittings 300.

On 30 March:

morning general congregation 200; afternoon general congregation 100.

PANGBOURNE - INDEPENDENT CHAPEL [TNA Ref: HO 129/126/46]

Erected previous to 1815. A separate building used exclusively for worship. Free sittings 100; other sittings 100.

On 30 March:

morning general congregation 50; evening general congregation 200.

SOURCES

Kate Tiller (ed), 'Berkshire Religious Census 1851', Berkshire Record Society, Vol.14, 2010.

Kate Tiller, 'Berkshire People in the 1851 religious census', Berkshire Family Historian, vol.31 (Mar 2008), 8-11.

The original returns are at The National Archives (HO 129/120; 129/122-131; 129/116; 129/155). Microfilm copies are in the Berkshire Record Office.

NOTES

[1]: Census returns 1801-1831 were numerical only & 1841 had bare details of individuals.

[2]: Purley and Sulham were signed by the rectors but Pangbourne was not

[3]: Under the control of the Established Church of England.

