

A Parish Rector in a Time of Conflict and Change

By Mark Wareham, 2nd April 2020



North Barrow church in Somerset

Thomas Connock was born in about 1620 and is my great x 8 grandfather on my mother's maternal line.

Thomas Connock first became a Deacon in the Church in Somerset on 24th December 1643 and he was the Rector of North Barrow in Somerset in by 1653. The official clergy record that started after the Restoration records Thomas being instituted to North Barrow on 4th December 1660.

Thomas married his first wife Damaris in about 1650 but the first record of Thomas was in

the parish books in 1653 and a copy of his handwriting is shown below -

A handwritten signature in cursive script. The first line reads "The Connocke" and the second line reads "Rector 1653". The handwriting is elegant and characteristic of the 17th century.

Thomas served as rector for 53 years until 1706 when he died of natural causes. His wife Damaris had died in 1680 and he married his second wife Joane Jerman in 1686.

Thomas was appointed during the Commonwealth period (1649-1658) when Oliver Cromwell was Lord Protector of the nation. Thomas was however not one of the 'puritans' who were then ejected from the clergy after 1660 following the restoration of the monarchy. With the Act of Uniformity in 1662 the Church of England was re-established with its pre-civil war constitution and many clergy with 'puritan' beliefs found themselves sidelined by the new Book of Common Prayer. They became dissenters and were to be subject to oppression when they formed separate congregations. The official rejection of these groups lasted until the Toleration Act after the Glorious Revolution of 1689 although the power and primacy of the established Church lasted a lot longer. Throughout this time Thomas appears to have remained within the established Church and he must have witnessed great upheavals and changes at a time when religion and regular worship was much more important to daily life and culture than it does today. Indeed it is these very divisions in belief and forms of Christian worship that to a large degree led to the conflict between Parliament and the King in the first place.

Familysearch.org says –

“Many clergy who were thought inadequate by the Puritans were driven from their parishes during the Commonwealth (1649-60) and in 1662 many Puritan ministers suffered the same fate.”

So for Thomas to have been given a ministry in the period of ‘puritan’ dominance but then survive the ‘great ejection’ is interesting and suggests that he was not too ‘high church’ to meet the disapproval of Parliament’s authorities prior to the restoration, but he was also not too ‘puritan’ to accept a return to the traditional order in 1662.

Thomas was appointed during the Commonwealth, or Interregnum, and it may be that he just slipped through the net and avoided the scrutiny of Parliament, but I think that this is unlikely given that the control of the pulpit was so important to the authorities. The pulpit was so important in influencing the views of the people of a parish and with so much evidence from other appointments during this period that Parliament made sure that appropriate people held these positions, it was probably more likely that, like many others, whilst he may have had ‘puritan’ affiliations that he had no wish to leave the Church of England and risk the uncertainties of preaching without the support of the Church and the position and certainties that gave him. That does not mean that his religious convictions were necessarily compromised but he may not have seen the merit in separating from the Church which remained largely protestant even though many ceremonies were catholic in nature. This is guesswork of course and there is no record of his own views or beliefs or what he felt about the real fear of a return to Catholicism that led in 1685 to many ordinary folk from Somerset taking up arms against King James II in favour of the Duke of Monmouth. This led to the defeat of Monmouth at the Battle of Sedemoor and the Bloody Assizes and two men from North Barrow were listed amongst the rebels brought to trial, others may well have escaped. Neither do we know what he felt when King James II fled the country and William of Orange was put on the throne in the Glorious Revolution of 1689, however one can assume that he would not have been displeased at the ultimate success of the protestant cause.

Thomas’ son Thomas (II) studied at St Alban’s Hall (now part of Merton College) in Oxford University between 1681 and 1685. Thomas junior then became rector of the neighbouring parish of Sparkford in 1689. All of this occurred at a time of great change in the country that was to lead to a lasting settlement of Church and state for generations. I think that Thomas II had sons Nicholas (who married Agatha), Samuel (who married Grace), William, Thomas III (who married Patience) and John (who married Margery). All of these probable Connock brothers appear to have been having children at about the same time in the early 18th century in either Sparkford or nearby West Camel. Thomas II served as rector of Sparkford for 40 years until 1729 when he was buried as ‘Thomas Connock, Rector’.

My ancestor Samuel was born in about 1700-10 although a baptism record does not exist because the register does not start until 1729 and Bishops Transcripts are patchy previous to that. Samuel became parish clerk of Sparkford in the mid 18th century and the picture below is of his signature in the parish registers. He had a son, Thomas IV, in 1734 and he died in 1783, recorded in the register as the burial of ‘Samuel Connock, parish clark (sic)’. Samuel’s wife Grace died in 1784 and her name was used for my great x 4 grandmother Grace Connock who was born in Sparkford in 1781.

Samuel Connock Jr
1715

I think that another of Thomas II's sons in about 1715-20, Thomas Connock (III), appears to have settled in nearby West Camel and in 1739 he had a son called John. John had a son in 1761 and again used the name Thomas (number V). Thomas V later settled in Somerton and in 1805 he became a Wesleyan Methodist preacher in the town. This Thomas V is credited with helping to found the Methodist Church in Somerton and so a dissenting strain may have survived through the line from Thomas of the Republic to Thomas in 1800.