

# Thomas Robinson: Evangelical Clergyman in Leicester, 1774-1813

*by Gerald T. Rimmington*

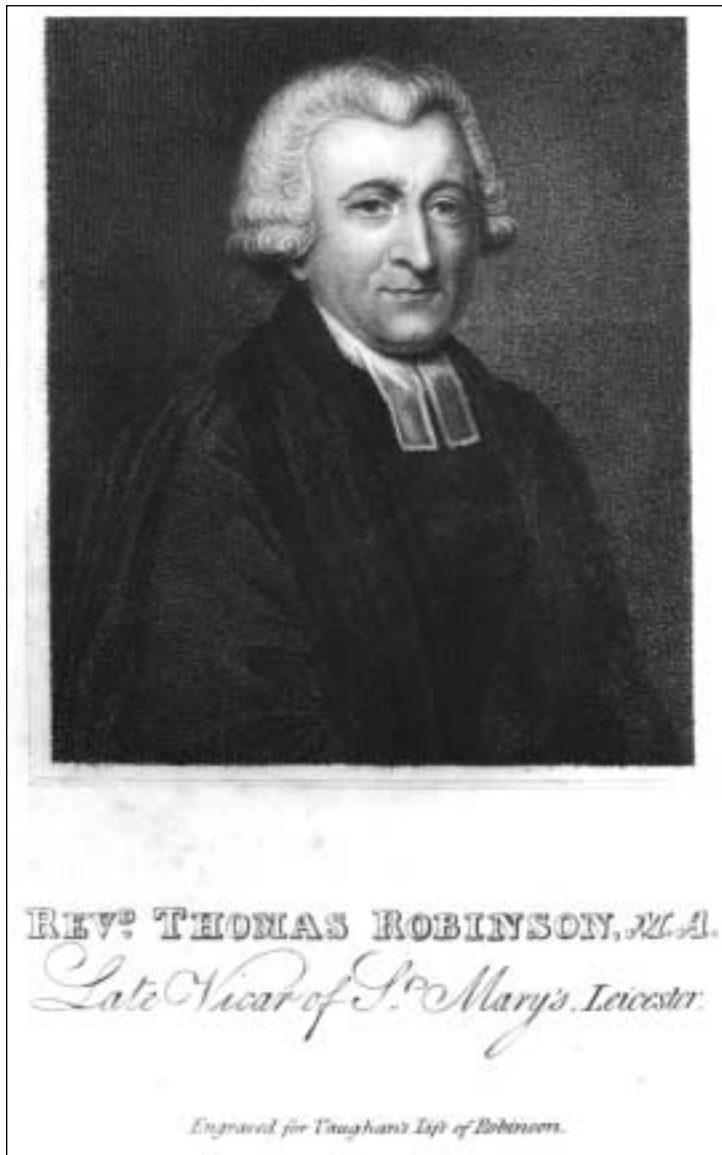
This study examines the life and work of Thomas Robinson, an Evangelical minister in Leicester from 1774 to 1813. From 1778, as vicar of St. Mary-de-Castro, he devoted himself to parish work, preaching and pastoral care, and to the organisation of charity schools, a benevolent society and a 'Female asylum'. He was active in support of the national campaign to abolish slavery, in the development of foreign missions, and in the campaigns to supply Bibles to the poor. He was friendly and sympathetic towards Baptist colleagues such as William Carey and Robert Hall, but was concerned about threats to unbalance the religious and political status quo, and by opposition from dissidents within his own congregation. As a result he failed to encourage political reforms, even those which dealt with the civil rights of Dissenters.

The 'long eighteenth century' from the Act of Toleration to John Keble's Assize sermon in 1833 has been regarded as an age of ignorance and carelessness in religious matters. Even among the aristocracy it is known that there was 'much vague scepticism and avowed scorn of religion'. It was a period in which many clergymen were collectors of multiple benefices, often living side-by-side with the squirarchy in substantial parsonages that resembled, albeit usually on a smaller scale, mansion within parks. It was also, however, the age in which Evangelicalism developed, having its roots in the Wesleyan Evangelical Revival, which affected both Old Dissent and the Church of England. Because they had at first no acknowledged leadership, had difficulty in achieving ordination and preferment, were generally frowned upon by the episcopate, and lacked any cohesive organisation, Evangelicals rarely achieved anything like the 'wildfire' of Methodism. Hylson-Smith argues that Evangelicalism 'began tenuously in the unheralded and often obscure ministries of a few devout and energetic clergymen'.<sup>1</sup> Among them was Thomas Robinson, who arrived in Leicester in 1774, to be a curate at St. Martin's, before embarking upon the incumbency of St. Mary-de-Castro, which he held from 1778 until his death in 1813.

Robinson's ministry in Leicester may be traced mainly through parish registers, his own published sermons, books and pamphlets, and in a biographical sketch written by his friend E.T. Vaughan, the High-Tory vicar of St. Martin's, as well as a tribute by Robert Hall, the noted Baptist preacher.<sup>2</sup> In the light of these sources it is possible to

<sup>1</sup> K. Hylson-Smith, *Evangelicals in the Church of England 1734-1984* (Edinburgh, 1988), 19.

<sup>2</sup> E.T. Vaughan, *Some Account of the Reverend Thomas Robinson* (London, 1816); R. Hall, *The Character of the late Rev. Thomas Robinson* (Speech at the annual meeting of the Leicester Auxiliary Bible Society, April 1813), (London, 1814).



The Revd. Thomas Robinson, M.A., Vicar of the Parish of St. Mary-de-Castro, Leicester 1778-1813

analyse and evaluate Robinson's contribution to the life of his parish, to the town, and to the Church.

Like many other Evangelical clergymen of his time Robinson had been nurtured at Cambridge. Born in Wakefield in 1749 he had shown early promise as a pupil at Wakefield Grammar School. Though he was the son of a hosier, there was insufficient money to send him to university as a 'pensioner', so, armed with a double exhibition of

forty pounds from the school trustees, he became a 'sizar', a servant to wealthier undergraduates, at Trinity College in 1768. He progressed to Scholar in 1771, graduated as 'Seventh Wrangler' in 1772, was awarded a Fellowship in the same year, and won one of the members' prizes for a Latin essay in 1773.<sup>3</sup>

At the end of his first undergraduate year, as a result of his reading, he came to the conclusion that, 'it is not by any imperfect works of man's own righteousness, but by God's mercy through Jesus Christ, that he must be saved'.<sup>4</sup> He also became a member of an informal group, among who were Charles Simeon, William Farrish, John Flavel, and Charles Jarram (each of whom became notable Evangelical clergymen), who were influenced by Henry Venn. Venn had accepted the living of Yelling, a small parish near Cambridge, in 1771, and was able to exercise an Evangelical ministry among students and dons. Simeon stated that 'in this aged minister I found a father, an instructor and a most bright example', a sentiment which Robinson would probably have shared.<sup>5</sup>

Although preferred as vicar of St. Mary's in 1778, Robinson had come to know the parish during the previous four years. He had found himself arriving in Leicester, somewhat precipitously, in 1774. In 1773 he had secured the joint-curacies of Witcham and Wickford in the Isle-of-Ely,<sup>6</sup> where, unlike most other rural clergymen for whom 'double-duty' (i.e. taking more than one service each Sunday) would have been rare, he preached twice on Sundays and once at a mid-week service.<sup>7</sup> Moreover he visited from house to house, and received 'a select company into his house on Sunday evening, to which he delivered a sort of enlarged family lecture'. Many people travelled the ten miles from Cambridge to hear him preach,<sup>8</sup> so many in fact that 'his church was speedily so crowded with hearers, that additional forms were placed in the aisle'. It was not long before he was accused of being 'tinctured with Methodism' and dismissed by the absentee rector of Wickford. Arriving in Leicester he became the curate of St. Martin's, afternoon lecturer at All Saints' and chaplain to the new Leicester infirmary.<sup>9</sup>

Robinson's preferment to St. Mary's, a crown appointment, was a fortunate one. The parish itself, as far as the built-up area was concerned, was fairly compact. Situated on the south-western edge of the town, it consisted of a small area within and just outside the ancient borough walls. Beyond this area were Bromkinthorpe (over the West bridge on the other side of the River Soar) and the South Fields, neither of which came under corporation jurisdiction until 1835. The map of Leicester drawn in 1792 shows houses stretching along the present Oxford Street, with some further buildings along Millstone Land, and along Newarke Street. There were no houses beyond the Infirmary. New Walk, which was laid out in 1785, only began to have houses built along it and parallel with it in the early nineteenth century. Bromkinthorpe remained a pleasant rural area where there were two manor houses, Westcotes and Danet's Hall.<sup>10</sup>

Population in Leicester had increased fairly rapidly in the early eighteenth century. An estimated population of 6,450 in 1712 had increased to 12,784 in 1785. Despite a

<sup>3</sup> J.A. Venn, *Alumni Cantabrigiensis*, Part II (1752-1900), 5, 434.

<sup>4</sup> E.T. Vaughan, *Some Account of the Reverend Thomas Robinson* (London, 1816), 15.

<sup>5</sup> Hylson-Smith, *Evangelicals*, 4.

<sup>6</sup> *Dictionary of National Biography* (hereafter *DNB*), 46 (1897), 52.

<sup>7</sup> F.C. Mather, 'Georgian Churchmanship Reconsidered: some variations in Anglican Public worship 1714-1830', *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 36:2 (April 1985), 269.

<sup>8</sup> Vaughan, *Thomas Robinson*, 40; T. Robinson, 'Memoir' in his *Scripture Characters* (London, 1826), vii.

<sup>9</sup> Vaughan, *Thomas Robinson*, 80.

<sup>10</sup> *Victoria History of the County of Leicester* (hereafter *VCH Leics.*), IV (1958), 369, 372, 375, 383.

long depression in hosiery manufacturing between 1760 and 1790, population continued to increase fairly rapidly to an estimated 14,675 in 1792. By the time of the first official census in 1801, Leicester had a population of just over 17,000, increasing to 23,146 in 1811. St Mary's parish reflected these increases. Estimated population increased from 1,215 in 1712 to 3,090 in 1785 and 3,435 in 1792.<sup>11</sup> The 1811 Census showed that there were then 4,116 people in 672 families. It is significant, however, that only eleven new houses were in St. Mary's, in contrast to fifty-six new houses on the eastern side of Leicester, beyond the ancient core of the town, in St Margaret's parish.

St. Mary's parish was also fairly prosperous. Nichols noted in 1815 that 'the buildings in general are tolerable'.<sup>12</sup> There were also some good Regency-style buildings, but there were also some 'rather dilapidated timbered houses, with upper storeys projecting over the roadway'.<sup>13</sup> The administration of the parish was by a close vestry (as in many other English parishes), established in 1577 by thirteen leading parishioners. Though an oligarchy, vacancies being filled by co-option, it conducted efficiently 'all the affairs of the parish, levying rates, electing the churchwardens, the overseers of the poor and other highways, the parish clerk, and the sexton, and closely controlling expenditure'. The Ruding family, the head of which was lord of the manor of Westcotes, normally supplied one member to represent Bromkinthorpe.<sup>14</sup> Though Robinson dreaded their meetings – he appeared at them only on rare occasions – he was appreciative of their work in supporting the parish church.<sup>15</sup>

St. Mary's was also more spiritually active than most parishes. The previous vicar, John Simmonds, who had been at St. Mary's for thirty-two years, was a saintly man.<sup>16</sup> There was so much dismay at his sudden death that it was said, 'Simmonds is dead, and Charity is no more'.<sup>17</sup> He was described as 'a very pious and exemplary Christian, of great benevolence and humanity; and so liberal a benefactor to the poor, that we believe he closed his accounts quarterly with himself, and gave away the whole surplus of a very genteel income'.<sup>18</sup> Under his leadership a group of laymen had formed themselves into a religious society in 1768 with about twenty members meeting every Tuesday evening at the vestry.<sup>19</sup> When Robinson was appointed, Joseph Weatley, described as 'a respectable manufacturer in Leicester', and, according to his epitaph as 'a steady friend and admirer of the Church of England and early impressed with the Evangelical purity of her Doctrines', endowed a weekly evening lecture 'which the poor might have an opportunity of attending'.<sup>20</sup> Since the lectures took place on Tuesday evenings presumably members of Simmonds' religious society formed the nucleus of the audience.

<sup>11</sup> J. Nichols, *The History and Antiquities of the County of Leicester*, I (2) (1815), 534.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 532.

<sup>13</sup> *VCH Leics.*, IV, 370.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 375.

<sup>15</sup> Vaughan, *Thomas Robinson*, 110.

<sup>16</sup> Nichols, *The History and Antiquities of Leicester*, I (2), 314. Simmonds was also vicar of Enderby for twenty-two years.

<sup>17</sup> *Leicester and Nottingham Journal*, 12 December 1778.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 1 September 1778.

<sup>19</sup> Religious societies were characteristic of Evangelicalism, their origins being in 1678. Anthony Horneck, preacher at the Savoy Chapel, started a group, which met 'for set prayers, the discussion of religious books and the occasional exchange of spiritual experiences'. Later they were organised on a plan detailed by Josiah Woodward. See K. Hylson-Smith, *The Church of England from Elizabeth I to Elizabeth II*, 3 vols. (London, 1997), II, 46.

<sup>20</sup> Robinson, 'Memoir', ix.

Robinson's induction into the life and work of the parish was nevertheless not without difficulty. Evangelical ministers, because of their views about the depravity of human beings in the fallen state, often experienced initial unpleasantness. For instance, when Charles Simeon, the most notable of the Evangelicals, was appointed to Trinity in Cambridge the seat-holders suddenly ceased to attend worship, locking the doors of their pews behind them.<sup>21</sup> For Robinson, this factor was exacerbated by the popularity of his predecessor, Simmonds. There was an initial disagreement with the churchwardens over the music to be employed for the singing of psalms. As the parish clerk supported the new vicar, it resulted, ludicrously, in the announcing of two different psalms at the same time, one sung in the gallery, the other in the body of the church. Not surprisingly, 'the utmost confusion' prevailed'. Subsequently the churchwardens 'closed the doors against their new vicar, and it was with difficulty that they were prevailed upon to open them without the application of force'. When peace was restored the worshippers who were 'very numerous ... settled down into a respectable congregation of attentive hearers'.<sup>22</sup> In the long run the preparation of the parishioners by Simmonds worked to Robinson's advantage.

Robinson's income was reasonable by the standards of the time. He had no private income, nor did he acquire other livings to be held in plurality, as some of his colleagues had done. The living of St. Mary's was a 'discharged vicarage', so he was excused from the customary payment of the 'first fruits' (the sum of the first year's stipend as assessed in 1535) into the Queen Anne's Bounty fund. The income was £221, to which was added £120 as the Leicester Infirmary chaplain. There were also various other small charitable sums. It hardly compared with All Saints', Loughborough, worth £1,886, or St. Margaret's, Leicester (linked with Knighton), worth £440, but it was higher than St. Martin's (£140), where the vicar depended on plural appointments at All Saints' (£148) and St. Leonard's (£40), or the poverty-stricken parish of St. Nicholas' (£85).<sup>23</sup> In mid-Victorian times the sum of £300 marked the lower limit for maintaining a respectable middle-class lifestyle, so with an income of about £350 Robinson, though not wealthy, was moderately prosperous.<sup>24</sup>

The parish of St. Mary's may have been the only opportunity for a man without influence or family connections to obtain a living. In 1789 Robinson was one of fifty clergymen in England describing themselves as Evangelicals. By 1800 he was one of 500.<sup>25</sup> Of this number, many had to wait patiently for a vacancy to occur, and because of prejudice against those of an Evangelical persuasion, many were forced to remain as curates for the whole of their working lives. Richard Cecil, who had become one of the leaders of the Evangelical Revival, though made a priest in 1777, did not achieve preferment as the rector of Bisley until 1786.<sup>26</sup> John Berridge, a Fellow of Clare College, Cambridge, was ordained in 1745 but did not receive a parish until 1755.<sup>27</sup> John Newton, the former slave-ship captain and well-known hymn writer, was ordained in 1764 but had to be content with a curacy in Olney, for which the pay was only £60, until 1779.<sup>28</sup>

<sup>21</sup> Hylson-Smith, *Evangelicals*, 28.

<sup>22</sup> Vaughan, *Thomas Robinson*, 116, 184.

<sup>23</sup> Income figures are for 1831. See White's *Directory of Leicestershire and Rutland* (1846).

<sup>24</sup> A. Haig, *The Victorian Clergy* (London and Sydney, 1984), 304.

<sup>25</sup> Hylson-Smith, *Evangelicals*, 68.

<sup>26</sup> *Alumni Cantabrigiensis*, Part II (4), 547.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, Part I (1), 139.

<sup>28</sup> Hylson-Smith, *Evangelicals*, 39, 42.

Robinson was, therefore, among a distinguished minority who obtained early preferment. Simeon's living in Cambridge came in 1782, before he had graduated and when he was only twenty-three years old, the minimum age for ordination.<sup>29</sup> Henry Ryder, who was to be consecrated as the first Evangelical bishop, and who was ordained in 1800, became the rector of Lutterworth in the following year.<sup>30</sup> Robinson's own appointment came after five years in curacies.

Despite being the only Evangelical incumbent in Leicester, the vicar of St Mary's was not entirely without allies; there were several capable and conscientious colleagues in the town. Thomas Haines, for instance, who initially employed Robinson, and who held St. Martin's and Aylestone in plurality for thirty years, was described as 'an orthodox clergyman who preached very correct sermons with a very pleasing delivery'.<sup>31</sup> His successor, Edward Vaughan, who was chaplain to the unreformed corporation, became a personal friend of Robinson's and, ultimately, his biographer. Thomas Burnaby at St. Margaret's, the third generation of his wealthy family to be preferred to the living, was a faithful incumbent.<sup>32</sup>

Nevertheless Robinson must have felt keenly at times the lack of Evangelical brethren, for he kept in touch with kindred spirits like Romaine, Berridge, Newton, Cecil, and John Venn (son of Henry Venn), maintaining a lively correspondence with each of them.<sup>33</sup> In 1810 he visited Richard Cecil, who was minister at St. John's Chapel in London, and preached for him.<sup>34</sup>

He also developed relationships with William Carey and Robert Hall, successively ministers at Harvey Lane Particular Baptist Chapel. On a practical level Robinson was associated with Hall in the development in 1810 of the Leicester Auxiliary Bible Society (a subsidiary of the British and Foreign Bible Society, founded in 1804). Although some clergy were opposed to the Society on the grounds that the linking of Dissent and Establishment might threaten Anglican ecclesiology,<sup>35</sup> Robinson welcomed it and chaired many of the meetings, because it united men of 'different parties'. It provided an opportunity to show the world that, although they had their differences, they could meet 'with a friendly countenance in peace and love, for the promotion of the same object'. He looked forward to 'dispersing the Scriptures' reach to the utmost bounds of the habitable globe'.<sup>36</sup> Subsequently, after Robinson's death, Robert Hall made reference to the sense of 'freedom from party animosities' that had been fostered by the vicar of St. Mary's.<sup>37</sup>

There was also a theological affinity. Both Anglicans and Nonconformists were in the process of softening the hyper-Calvinism that had been a traditional feature of their belief systems. Among the Particular Baptists and the Congregationalists there had been much doctrinal fermentation. Both Carey and Hall had inherited views about predestination expressed through Robert Hall the Elder, minister at Arnesby from 1753 to 1791, who proclaimed that 'the way to Jesus is graciously laid open for everyone who chooses to come to him'.<sup>38</sup> Like many other Dissenters they were confirmed in this view by the publication of a pamphlet entitled *The gospel worthy of all acceptance* (1786), by the Baptist minister Andrew Fuller, from Kettering. Fuller's

<sup>29</sup> M. Hennell and M. Pollard (eds.), *Charles Simeon 1759-1836* (London, 1959), 25.

<sup>30</sup> Hylson-Smith, *Evangelicals*, 39, 42.

<sup>31</sup> M. Wade-Matthews, *The Monuments of St. Martin's Church, Leicester* (Wymeswold, 1994), 16.

<sup>32</sup> A. T. Patterson, *Radical Leicester: a history of Leicester 1780-1850* (Leicester, 1954), 15.

<sup>33</sup> Vaughan, *Thomas Robinson*, 246.

<sup>34</sup> Robinson, 'Memoir', xi.

<sup>35</sup> Hylson-Smith, *Evangelicals*, 97.

work effected a 'theological and practical revolution in most of the Calvinist Churches'.<sup>39</sup> Robinson's own views were so little different from those of Carey and Hall that like them, he was drawn into enthusiasm not only for the Bible Society, but also for missionary enterprises. The Baptist Missionary Society, for which Carey became the first missionary, was founded in 1892 in Kettering. The Anglican Evangelical Church Missionary Society was formally established a few years later, in 1799, with Robinson's support. He preached the Society's annual sermon in 1808.<sup>40</sup>

To a great extent the interest in mission went hand in hand with a passion for the abolition of slavery. The Church Missionary Society was initially concerned with the settlement of freed slaves in Sierra Leone. Robinson followed avidly the proposed legislation to abolish the slave trade, which was debated and voted upon eleven times before eventually receiving the royal assent in 1807. As a member of the Abolition Society founded in 1787, Robinson arranged a meeting between the Leicestershire clergy and Archdeacon Burnaby, in an effort to engender support for the aims of that Society. At Robinson's insistence a petition was presented to the House of Commons in 1788.<sup>41</sup> A further petition, in 1791, was prevented by Burnaby's disinclination following the outbreak of the French Revolution to take any action that might undermine the political *status quo*. Robinson was reduced for a time 'to an exercise of self-denial ... by renouncing the use of sugar in his tea'.<sup>42</sup>

Robinson's association with Robert Hall invites the question as to why the Baptist preacher was more greatly honoured in Leicester than the Evangelical clergyman. Hall himself, after Robinson's death, described the latter as 'out incomparable friend' and 'an example of the union of the highest endowments of a pastor and preacher'.<sup>43</sup> In more recent years Patterson has described Robinson as 'the only Anglican Clergyman of any real distinction in the town'.<sup>44</sup> Simmons too has acknowledged that at the time the religious life of Leicester was dominated by Hall and Robinson, the latter being a man who 'thought for himself and spoke fearlessly'.<sup>45</sup> Yet it is Hall whose statue stands on De Montfort Square and who has a Baptist Church named after him, while there are no visible memorials to Robinson other than in St. Mary's.

It was, however, Hall who became a national figure, a very eloquent preacher who attracted an intelligent audience, even from London and other towns.<sup>46</sup> It was Hall too who helped in the formation of a Framework-Knitters' Friendly and Relief Society of the Town and County of Leicester, a trade union ingeniously disguised as a friendly society, which offered strike pay as charitable relief.<sup>47</sup> In a town where the relations between Establishment and Dissent were soon to be soured by the church-rate issue,

<sup>36</sup> *Speeches delivered at the Secons Anniversary Meeting of the Leicester Auxiliary Bible Society, 13 April 1812.*

<sup>37</sup> R. Hall, *The Character of the late Rev. Thomas Robinson* (Speech at the annual meeting to the Leicester Auxiliary Bible Society, April 1813) (London, 1814).

<sup>38</sup> A.C. Underwood, *A History of the English Baptists* (London, 1948), 160-64.

<sup>39</sup> G.F. Nuttall, 'Northamptonshire and the Modern Question: a Turning Point in Eighteenth-Century Dissent', *Journal of Theological Studies*, N.S. 16.1 (April 1965), 101-21.

<sup>40</sup> Vaughan, *Thomas Robinson*, 185.

<sup>41</sup> T.Y. Cocks, 'The Archdeacons of Leicester, 1092-1992', *Transactions of the Leicestershire Archaeological and Historical Society*, 67 (1993), 40.

<sup>42</sup> Vaughan, *Thomas Robinson*, 134.

<sup>43</sup> Hall, *Character of the late Rev. Thomas Robinson*.

<sup>44</sup> Patterson, *Radical Leicester*, 16.

<sup>45</sup> J. Simmons, *Leicester Past and Present*. 2 vols. (London, 1974). I, 177.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 178.

<sup>47</sup> Patterson, *Radical Leicester*, 126.

and which, after the reform of the borough council in 1836, was dominated politically by Liberal Nonconformists, the Baptists had become the largest Dissenting denomination by 1851. Robinson, on the other hand lived before the age of reform, and belonged to a beleaguered national Church. He did not always preach popular things; nor was he imbued with democratic ideals. Moreover, he decided early in his career to devote himself to his work in the parish, eschewing the possibility of national office in various organisations which he supported.

To some extent the devotion to parish work may have been dictated by circumstances. Although St. Mary's was neither the largest nor the most poverty-stricken parish, it had its fair share of problems. In a low-lying town with neither a clean water supply nor a proper sewerage system, there was inevitable a high mortality rate, especially among children. As late as 1845 the death rate was as high as 30 per 1,000, a figure exceeded at that time only by Bristol (31/1,000), Manchester (32/1,000), and Liverpool (35/1,000), with most child deaths resulting from diarrhoea, which occurred as often in houses described as 'airy' as in less salubrious ones.<sup>48</sup> This took its toll in Robinson's parish. Parish registers indicate that between 1790 and 1813 there were only two years (1804 and 1805) when burials numbered less than 100. Many infants were baptized and buried in a very few years. John Gill, a gentleman parishioner, and his wife Sarah, lost six children aged between four months and six years between 1794 and 1808, the youngest at four months, the oldest at six years. Robinson himself shared in the bereavements. Between 1780 and 1794 he lost four infant children and his wife, Mary, aged forty-three years. One of his surviving daughters, Anne, who had married James Cort, the iron founder, died in 1807, aged twenty-nine years, preceded by five of her ten children.<sup>49</sup> All of this helped give the vicar a strong sentimental attachment to and preoccupation with the parish.

Robinson busied himself in the parish by caring for parishioners, organizing services, and developing charities. He adopted the practice of visiting parishioners as often as possible, though conversation was somewhat stilted by brevity, accentuated by his habit of sitting with watch in hand to make sure he did not stay too long. Apparently though he could 'read characters quickly and skilfully' so that he could regulate the conversation and 'either by story or remarks ... could hit, without wounding'.<sup>50</sup>

He made great efforts to improve the quality of worship. He believed that music heightened religious experience, and added the use of hymns to the singing of psalms and canticles. He produced his own hymn book, which included material 'extracted from Dr. Watts' hymns', such as 'Come, let us join our cheerful songs', 'When I survey the wondrous cross', and 'Hark the glad sound'. Others were taken from the compositions of John Newton and Charles Wesley. He does not seem to have composed any hymns himself.<sup>51</sup>

On the question of liturgical form, however, he remained conservative, disagreeing entirely with his Dissenting friends, who preferred instead to extemporise. Robinson defended the use of the *Book of Common Prayer* (1662), countering the idea that a set a set formulary rendered services 'cold and unavailing?' by suggesting that the liturgy was 'modelled after the example of the apostolic and primitive times' and that 'the wisdom

<sup>48</sup> M. Elliott, *Victorian Leicester* (London and Chichester, 1979), 86-87.

<sup>49</sup> Memorial inscription, St. Mary's Church, Leicester.

<sup>50</sup> Vaughan, *Thomas Robinson*, 156, 162-63.

<sup>51</sup> T. Robinson, *A Collection of Psalms and Hymns from Various Authors chiefly designed for the use of Public Worship*, 6<sup>th</sup> edition (Leicester, 1803).



and sobriety of the Church of England have been admirably evinced by avoiding ostentation and superstition on the one hand, and a contempt of all order and form on the other'.<sup>52</sup> The important thing, he emphasised, was how the liturgy was employed.

Like all Evangelical ministers Robinson was particularly concerned with biblical preaching, but even though he lived before the advent of nineteenth-century higher criticism, he could not accept the conservative stance of many other Evangelicals. Simeon for instance contended that it was enough 'to bring out of Scripture what is there, and not to thrust in what I think might be there', for that would have meant contradicting himself from one week to the next.<sup>53</sup> While other Evangelical preachers were little interested in complex doctrinal issues or debates, preferring instead to limit themselves, like Simeon, to simple biblical exegesis, Robinson realised that it was important to hold and to express an over-arching consistency of doctrine that encompassed both scripture and tradition.<sup>54</sup> When Francis Stone, the rector of Cold Norton in Essex, declared his disbelief in the godhead and the atonement, he was able to counter it. In a sermon addressed to the Leicester archdeaconry he advised them to 'guard against the fatal error of placing the least reliance on the righteousness of man'. Stressing justification through faith, he affirmed that, 'Jesus Christ, both God and Man, suffered death upon the Cross for our redemption'.<sup>55</sup>

Robinson's success as a preacher and an officiant at services may be inferred from the complaints about lack of accommodation at St. Mary's. This resulted in the addition of 'some raised seats and a small gallery' in 1789, and, in 1798, in the erection of a capacious gallery to seat a thousand people.<sup>56</sup>

He was equally successful encouraging and organising charitable works. Whereas his immediate predecessor, Simmonds, had freely given his own money to relieve the poor, Robinson, being without a private income, had to harness the resources of the parish more effectively. Fortunately he seems to have excelled in management and committee work. As Vaughan observed: 'he could plan and he could execute; could scold and could command; could direct and could appear to be directed'.<sup>57</sup> He turned his attention to education, to alleviating poverty, and to the training of girls for domestic service.

Probably influenced by his Evangelical mentor, Henry Venn, who in 1770 in a ministry in Huddersfield, had opened classes for catechising and reading, Robinson became passionately concerned about provision of education for the poor, he was probably present at a town meeting held in 1785, which turned into a 'concerted and apparently inter-sectarian effort', to introduce Sunday schools into Leicester.<sup>58</sup> He was certainly among those who, a few years later, were instrumental in developing parish Sunday schools under the superintendence of the incumbents for the promotion of literacy. Vaughan notes that the St. Mary's Sunday schools 'contained many children,

<sup>52</sup> T. Robinson, *A serious call to a constant and devout attendance on the stated services of the Church of England* (London, 1803), 5-10.

<sup>53</sup> Pollard and Hennell (eds.), *Charles Simeon*, 34.

<sup>54</sup> T. Robinson, *Prophecies of the Messiah* (London, 1825), vi.

<sup>55</sup> Robinson, *Serious attention to personal holiness and soundness of doctrine* (London, 1808).

<sup>56</sup> W. Pemberton, 'The Parochial Inspections of Andrew Burnaby, D.D., Archdeacon of Leicester in the years 1793 to 1797', *Transactions of the Leicestershire Archaeological and Historical Society* 63 (1989), 63.

<sup>57</sup> Vaughan, *Thomas Robinson*, 243.

<sup>58</sup> P.B. Cliff, *The Rise and Development of the Sunday School Movement in England, 1780-1980* (Redhill, 1986), 23.

received liberal support from the vicar and the congregation', and were diligently instructed and inspected.<sup>59</sup>

Robinson knew, however, that the Sunday school was insufficient to meet the educational needs of his parish. All it could do was offer the rudiments of literacy to children who worked for the rest of the week in paid employment. There was a need for day schools. Even in 1814, a year after his death, it was calculated that all the charitable foundations in the town provided full-time schooling for less than 500 children.<sup>60</sup> So in 1780, even before the initiation of the Sunday schools, he had rented a room and appointed a schoolmaster to teach fifty poor children in a day school. By the following year the children were being clothed 'in the most frugal manner, every Easter'. Plans were made for a new building to contain separate schools for boys and girls, which opened in 1785 and 1786.

The St. Mary's schools offered a very limited education, designed 'not to teach them what is unsuitable to their situation, or to take them out of their proper sphere'. Robinson and his influential parishioners would have shared the views of John Randolph, the Bishop of Oxford, who, in preaching the S.P.C.K. sermon in 1802 stated that 'we are merely to give them an entrance into a life of daily labour, well fortified with the principle of duty' and warned against enticing the children of the poor 'into a way of life of no benefit to the publick and ensnaring to themselves'.<sup>61</sup> Apart from the catechism, which was taught to all children, the boys were confined to reading, writing, and arithmetic, the girls to reading and sewing. Despite its very elementary nature, however, it was an important step forward in advancing literacy among the poor.

To achieve his educational aims Robinson asked for voluntary loans, which were soon refunded from the proceeds of subscriptions and collections at special services.<sup>62</sup> Vaughan summed up his friend's efforts by stating that 'of the various schools of charitable instruction in Leicester Mr. Robinson was the acknowledged parent'.<sup>63</sup>

Robinson was also necessarily involved in poor relief, which was organised on a parochial basis. There had been a workhouse in his parish since 1722, the intention had been that the institution should replace out-relief. Yet his predecessors had found it impossible ideal to maintain; out-relief was certainly being given in 1749, though it was never sufficient.<sup>64</sup> So he formed a benevolent society in 1786, which provided for the services of a visitor who distributed alms according to need, and was 'charged to admonish, instruct and promote by all means the spiritual welfare of the person relieved'.<sup>65</sup>

In addition there was the founding in 1800 of a 'Female Asylum', close to the vicarage in the Newarke, for the training of girls for domestic service, preference being given to orphans. Robinson was able to arrange for the three years of training and for the living expenses to be free. It is significant that this and other charities, which he founded, continued for many years after Robinson's death.<sup>66</sup>

<sup>59</sup> Vaughan, *Thomas Robinson*, 240.

<sup>60</sup> J. Simmons, *Leicester Past and Present*, 2 vols. (London, 1974), II, 174.

<sup>61</sup> D. McClatchey, *Oxfordshire Clergy 1777-1869* (Oxford, 1960), 140.

<sup>62</sup> T. Lloyd, *A sermon preached in the Parish Church of St. Mary, Leicester on Easter Day, April 8, 1787, for the benefit of the Charity School* (London, 1787). The appendix contains 'an Account of the Rise and present State of the Charity School'; LLRRO DE 3263/31.

<sup>63</sup> Vaughan, *Thomas Robinson*, 238.

<sup>64</sup> *VCH Leics.*, IV, 188.

<sup>65</sup> Vaughan, *Thomas Robinson*, 241.

<sup>66</sup> *Annual Report of the Female Asylum, The Newarke, Leicester* (1884).

Robinson's preoccupation with his parish clearly reduced the extent of what he was able to do outside it, thus limiting public recognition. However, even some of the things he did and said within his parish were called into question. Whereas the Baptist preacher Robert Hall had no apparent opposition among his followers, this same could not be said of Robinson who, encountered dissent within his own congregation despite the fact that he was said by contemporaries to have 'preached immortal truth with a most extraordinary simplicity, perspicuity, and energy, in a stile adapted to all capacities, equally removed from vulgarity and affected refinement'<sup>67</sup> in model sermons that were 'orderly, full of matter, close to the point, and correct in argument sentiment, and diction'.<sup>68</sup> The Reverend Thomas Ludlam, for instance, the son of a Leicester physician, who became confrater of Wyggeston's Hospital in 1760 and rector of Foston in 1791, but who was nevertheless resident in St. Mary's parish, became adversely critical. He had seemed to be friendly and helpful to the vicar in his earlier days, but opposition grew over the years. He developed a dislike of the Calvinistic writers of his day, which extended even to the mild-Calvinism of Evangelicals like Robinson.<sup>69</sup> By 1797, after he had known Robinson for two decades, his enmity had been declared, his opposition taking the form of a series of ten metaphysical essays, which were delivered to the vicar over a period of time.<sup>70</sup>

More serious than Ludlam's opposition were the incursions of unorthodox antinomian Dissenters on the fringes of Methodism. Vaughan notes that 'the late William Huntington's doctrines and writings became known to some of his people'.<sup>71</sup> Huntington had been an eccentric Enthusiast 'who signed himself S.S. (Sinner Saved), and preached a strict predestinarian doctrine that had its outcome in antinomianism'.<sup>72</sup> Huntington's doctrine spread rapidly among Robinson's congregation, about twenty families leaving his church as a result.<sup>73</sup>

Robinson's increasingly conservative stance, both politically and religiously, also counted against him as his ministry developed. Among the clergy he was by no means alone. During the political crisis of the 1780s, when the North government sought to increase taxation in the face of a trebling national debt, most Anglican sermons became more conservative and authoritarian, stressing in particular the divine authority of government and the duty of obligation.<sup>74</sup> As has been succinctly observed: 'Theories of sacral royalism and high views of episcopacy and tradition looked more attractive in an age of revolutions'.<sup>75</sup>

In facing the threat of possible French invasion in 1795, Robinson gave unqualified support to the royal proclamation declaring a general fast. 'Pious princes have normally taken the lead, and demanded the concurrence of all their subjects', he stated, therefore

<sup>67</sup> R. Hall, *The Character of the late Rev. Thomas Robinson*.

<sup>68</sup> P. Hall, *A Memoir of the Rev. Thomas Robinson, M.A.* (London, 1837), xxxii ff.

<sup>69</sup> *Alumni Cantabrigiensis*, Part I, 3, 116; *DNB* 24, 254. Hylson-Smith, *Evangelicals*, 12, notes that the Calvinist-Arminian divide cut right across the Methodist-Evangelical distinction, and concluded that 'Evangelicals may best be regarded as moderate Calvinists'.

<sup>70</sup> Vaughan, *Thomas Robinson*, 205.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, 188.

<sup>72</sup> R. Davies and G. Rupp (eds.), *A History of the Methodist Church in Great Britain*. 4 vols. I (London, 1965), 298-99.

<sup>73</sup> Vaughan, *Thomas Robinson*, 188. The *Leicester Directory* (1816) indicates that there were two congregations of Huntingtonians, in Bond Street and St. Peter's Lane. By 1846 White's *Directory* indicates that there was only one congregation, with a chapel that had accommodation for 800 worshippers, in Free School Lane.

<sup>74</sup> R. Hole, *Pulpits, politics and public order in England 1760-1832* (Cambridge, 1989), 124.

<sup>75</sup> Walsh et al., *Church of England c.1689-c.1833*, 34.

the people should ‘discharge honourably the duties of our station’.<sup>76</sup> He became chaplain to the Loyal Leicester Volunteer Infantry, deploring the necessity for taking up arms, but declaring forthrightly that those ‘who will not tamely surrender property, liberty, and life, must be ready ... to resist the proud, rapacious and violent Invader’. The corps had been raised ‘not to oppress or injure any, but to afford equal opportunity to all who are disposed to “lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and honesty”’.<sup>77</sup> Politically Robinson was anxious to preserve the *status quo*, for fear of insurrection. He had no qualms about seeking the redress of grievances in a peaceable manner, which he naively thought was possible without the reform of parliament, but he was resolutely opposed to civil disorder, which he believed to be contrary to the spirit of Christianity. While some Evangelicals stood on the divide between Establishment and Dissent and could be justifiably accused of being ‘democratically inclined’, few were more decided and energetic in resisting ‘disloyalty, discontent and Jacobinism’ than Robinson.<sup>78</sup>

Robinson’s resistance to change even went so far as to oppose the rescinding of the Test and Corporation Acts, the legislation that had denied political rights to Dissenters. His Dissenting friends clearly thought that he would support them on this issue, even inviting him to a meeting for the drawing up of a petition to parliament. He listened politely, but refused to give his support. He regretted the situation that had arisen since the passing of the Toleration Act 1689, which was commonly thought to have absolved parishioners from compulsory church attendance. It had certainly placed the Church of England on the same footing as the Dissenting chapels in competing for the souls of the people, some of whom had taken the opportunity of opting out of corporate worship altogether.<sup>79</sup> The result had been a ‘perceived deterioration in the nation’s moral health’.<sup>80</sup>

This had been exemplified in his own parish, where the churchwardens, advised by Robinson, informed the bishop of Lincoln in 1788 that ‘there are persons ... who lie under a common frame of fornication and of other grievous offences’, that there were ‘many common swearers and drunkards’, and that there were ‘many of our parishioners who absent themselves from the service’.<sup>81</sup> It was as if he was looking back to a ‘golden age’ without Dissent, rather than looking forward to a new age when it would be important to seek *rapprochement* with Nonconformity. There was none of the vision that would later be displayed by men like Thomas Arnold, who believed that the Church would only become truly national by including within it those of the Dissenting traditions.<sup>82</sup> On the other hand, beleaguered as he was by the Huntingtonians, Robinson sensed that if equality were once extended to all Dissenters there would be a greater tendency to heresy at the fringes and increased demands for disestablishment. So he accused the Dissenters of wanting money and power rather than ‘the means of serving God more acceptably, or of preaching his gospel more extensively’.<sup>83</sup> By telling his Dissenting friends, in effect, that he accepted their

<sup>76</sup> T. Robinson, *A Serious Exhortation to the Inhabitants of Great Britain with reference to the approaching Fast* (Leicester, 1795).

<sup>77</sup> T. Robinson, *Address to the Loyal Leicester Volunteer Infantry in the parish of St. Martin, Leicester, Oct. 19, 1795* (Leicester, 1795).

<sup>78</sup> Vaughan, *Thomas Robinson*, 156, 162-63.

<sup>79</sup> Walsh *et al.*, *Church of England c. 1689-c.1833*, 16.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

<sup>81</sup> Quoted in Vaughan, *Thomas Robinson*, 112-113.

<sup>82</sup> N. Hans, *Comparative Education* (London, 3<sup>rd</sup> edn., 1958), 138.

<sup>83</sup> Hole, *Pulpits, politics and public order*, 51; Vaughan, *Thomas Robinson*, 127-28.

Christian witness only on sufferance, Robinson probably forfeited some goodwill, as well as the likelihood that he would not attain the same high regard in Leicester as Robert Hall.

Yet Robinson's ministry as the lone Evangelical incumbent in the town was a very significant and successful one. He brought to his parish a remarkable capacity for biblical and doctrinal preaching, a concern for greater commitment by parishioners to Christian faith and practice in the Anglican tradition, and a great compassion combined with organisation ability that brought forth an abundance of good works, benefiting the poor in his lifetime and for many years beyond it. Though he was fairly typical of those Evangelical clergymen who concentrated on parish work, in Leicester he was unique. His son, Dr Thomas Robinson, Master of the Temple, credited his father with having produced 'a mighty revolution in the religious and moral condition of the people committed to his charge', a fitting epitaph indeed.<sup>84</sup>

#### *Personal Details*

Dr. Gerald T. Rimmington, 7 Beechings Close, Countesthorpe, Leicester LE8 5PA, was Professor of Education, Mount Allison University, Canada, until 1981, when he resigned to enter the full-time Anglican ministry. He retired as Rector of Barwell in 1995. He is now an Honorary Visiting Fellow in the Centre for the History of Religious and Political Pluralism at the University of Leicester.

<sup>84</sup> Thomas Robinson, D.D. Master of the Temple, Preface to *Sermon preached on Tuesday, Nov. 27, 1849, in aid of the recent restoration of the Parish Church of St. Mary's, Leicester*