

## **The day the vicar locked the council out of the church**

In 1905 Rev. Harry Wilson Boustead was appointed Vicar of St Michael's Basingstoke.<sup>1</sup> Prior to that he was the vicar of All Saints and All Hallows, Bristol where the Archdeacon of Bristol described him as 'decided and consistent High Churchman'.<sup>2</sup> Rev. Boustead was an active member of the English Church Union, the pressure group for the Anglo-Catholic wing of the Church of England.<sup>3</sup>

For many years there had been a tradition in Basingstoke that, shortly after a new mayor was appointed, there would be Civic Service in St Michael's Church attended by the Mayor and Corporation and then on another Sunday they would attend the London Street Congregational Church. However, there had not been a Civic Service held since 1902.<sup>4</sup>

In 1906 Herbert Kingdon became Mayor of Basingstoke. He ran the ironmonger's business that was started by his father and was a deacon at the London Street Congregational Church.<sup>5</sup> Shortly after he became mayor he proposed that the Civic Service should be revived that he would like to go to St Michael's first but only on condition that he got an assurance from those who attended St Michael's that they would support him when he paid his official visit to his own church. All the councillors who were churchmen said they would be pleased to go with him to the Congregational Church. Councillor William Cannon said that as a churchwarden at St Michael's he would have no hesitation in attending the Congregational Church when the Mayor wished to go. He was glad that the Mayor intended going to St Michael's first, simply and solely because it was the parish church and the Mayor was the Mayor of the parish.<sup>6</sup> The Civic Service was held at St Michael's on Sunday, 17 November 1906. Revd Boustead gave the sermon.<sup>7</sup>

When it became known that William Cannon would be the next Mayor of Basingstoke, Revd Boustead asked him whether he would be going to a Nonconformist place of worship. As Mayor Cannon subsequently explained to the Council:

I told him I was prepared to go if invited. He said he could not see there was any call for me to do so even though my Nonconformist colleagues in the Council expressed a wish that I would do so. The view I took was that being Mayor of the town, and there being ten Nonconformists to six Churchmen on the Council, and the former having attended me to the parish church, one and all going primarily to ask God's blessing on the work of the ensuing year, if the Nonconformist members then expressed a wish that I as Mayor should attend one of their places of worship for the same purpose, I saw no valid or reasonable ground for refusal.

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<sup>1</sup> *The Times*, November 6, 1905.

<sup>2</sup> *Hants and Berks Gazette*, August 15, 1905.

<sup>3</sup> *Western Daily Press*, February 15, 1905; *Bath Chronicle*, November 30, 1905

<sup>4</sup> *Hants and Berks Gazette*, November 29, 1902.

<sup>5</sup> Roger Ottewill, *Congregationalism in Edwardian Basingstoke*, p.14.

<sup>6</sup> *Hants and Berks Gazette*, November 17, 1906.

<sup>7</sup> *Hants and Berks Gazette*, November 24, 1906.

He said that the vicar told him that he could not receive him officially at the church if he came, 'At that time he did not know what that implied'. In accordance with tradition, the Town Clerk issued invitations for the Civic Service, only to receive the following letter from Revd Boustead dated 14 November 1907:

Dear Sir,

I have your letter of the 12<sup>th</sup> telling me of the intention of the Mayor and Corporation to attend the Parish Church next Sunday, accompanied by the Police, Fire Brigade, Volunteers and Yeomanry.

I regret you decided to come uninvited. I have no wish to see the Mayor at God's House at a mere formal service, for I understand that he intends, if asked, to go to one of the any Nonconformist places of worship on a subsequent Sunday.

To thus degrade God's Church to the level of one of the 350 man-made sects is to my mind a mockery of religion and God's Truth.

As he would not think of going unasked to a Chapel, it appears to me very bad form to force his presence on an unwilling Vicar, who, as successor of a long line of Vicars of Basingstoke, has a claim on the consideration of the Mayor, who succeeds to a comparatively new institution.

Mayor Cannon decided not to proceed with the Civic Service.<sup>8</sup>

Revd Boustead's letter was reprinted with a brief introduction in dozens of provincial newspapers from the *Cornishman* to the *Aberdeen Press and Journal* under various headlines, including 'Strange Situation at Basingstoke'<sup>9</sup>, 'Mockery of Religion'<sup>10</sup>, 'Very Bad Form'<sup>11</sup> and 'Not wanted at Church'.<sup>12</sup> Under the headline, 'Another Clerical Bigot' the *Lancashire Daily Post* commented, 'Surely the depths of bigotry are unplumbed even yet! For the Vicar of Basingstoke appears to have got a little further away from religion than others of his hard and narrow school'.<sup>13</sup> At a meeting of the Derby Liberal Association, a speaker described the action of the vicar of Basingstoke as 'an almost incredible instance of religious intolerance'.<sup>14</sup>

A columnist in the *Morning Leader*, after quoting from the letter said:

I have always had a liking for freaks and oddities. They do so much to relieve the tedium of life, and they provide a welcome touch of variety to the eternal sameness of things ... I am particularly charmed by that allusion to "man-made sects" ... I wonder what the Roman Catholics think of that claim ...[the Pope]... classes you with Primitive Methodists and with Baptists ... if you number the man-made sects as 350 he tots them up to 351, and you belong to one of them ... This must be an appalling view to those who, if they find that the only way of getting to heaven is by going there in company with Primitive Methodists, would seriously consider their position and wonder

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<sup>8</sup> *Hants and Berks Gazette*, November 23, 1907.

<sup>9</sup> *Portsmouth Evening News*, November 25, 1907.

<sup>10</sup> *Nottingham Evening Post*, November 26, 1907.

<sup>11</sup> *Gloucestershire Echo*, November 26, 1907.

<sup>12</sup> *Western Gazette*, November 29, 1907.

<sup>13</sup> *Lancashire Daily Post*, November 27, 1907.

<sup>14</sup> *Derby Daily Telegraph*, November 26, 1907.

whether it was worthwhile going there at all ... I wonder whether the vicar regards Nonconformists as Christians or not. If they are Christians, what harm can there be in a man going into one of those places which the vicar himself describes as a 'place of worship'? And if they are not Christians, how does the vicar place them? Are they heathens, pagans, idolators? Do they squat in their backyards and eat dogs? ... It may be that the vicar sighs for the good old days when there was a short way with Dissenters...<sup>15</sup>

The magazine *John Bull* printed an open letter to Revd Boustead:

I have read your letter to the Mayor of Basingstoke with amazement and disgust ... it proclaims the kind of religion you preach from your pulpit – not as a living, vital message of love from God to Man, or from Man to Man, but as a message of envy, hatred, malice and all uncharitableness ... if you held the keys to heaven, you would shut out everybody not of your own mean and miserable creed, just as you would shut them out of your parish church. Basingstoke must be ashamed of you.<sup>16</sup>

The *Hants and Berks Gazette* printed a number of letters from its readers commenting on the affair. One suggested that the vicar seemed to be treating the parish church as his private parlour to which ordinary citizens, from the Mayor downwards, were not welcome unless personally invited by the vicar. Another reminded the vicar that the Church of England was also a man-made sect, created for his own convenience by Henry the Eighth, 'who, as your readers will know, was not a moral man'.<sup>17</sup> Another correspondent pointed out that, although the chief officer of Basingstoke was first called "Mayor" under the charter granted by Charles the First, the office under a different name dated back at least to 1207, if not earlier. The vicar of Deane waded in by saying that the church was not the property of the priest, but was open to all.<sup>18</sup>

The vicar did, however, have his defenders, notably the Portsmouth branch of the English Church Union. They passed a resolution strongly approving the action Revd Boustead took in declining to receive the Mayor and Corporation of Basingstoke. They did so on the mistaken belief that Mayor Cannon was a Nonconformist and thus made a false analogy with the situation in Portsmouth where the Mayor, Alderman Emmanuel, was Jewish. They denounced the vicar of St Thomas's Church in Portsmouth for allowing the Mayor to attend that church, and criticised another Portsmouth parson for consenting to be the Mayor's chaplain. One of the speakers said that 'one of the Hebrew Rabbies should have been his Chaplain'.<sup>19</sup>

In November 1908 William Cannon was re-elected mayor. Despite what had happened in 1907, he decided that the custom of the Civic Service should continue. Accordingly, on the morning of Sunday, 29 November, 1908, the Mayor and Corporation, wearing their civic robes, accompanied by the borough officials, the sergeants-at-mace, the volunteer fire brigade, and the local police, marched in procession from the Town Hall to St Michael's Church. The *Hants and*

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<sup>15</sup> *Morning Leader*, November 28, 1907.

<sup>16</sup> Reprinted in the *Cornishman*, December 19, 1907.

<sup>17</sup> *Hants and Berks Gazette*, November 30, 1907.

<sup>18</sup> *Hants and Berks Gazette*, December 7, 1907.

<sup>19</sup> *Portsmouth Evening News*, November 29, 1907.

*Berks Gazette* explained that it had been customary for the vicar to walk with the Mayor in the procession to and from the church, but, as might have been expected from the attitude which the Vicar took up when the civic attendance at Church was mooted last year, Dr Boustead did not countenance the parade in any way. On the contrary, it would appear that he took special means to signify his disapproval of it.<sup>20</sup>

The civic procession had always entered the church by the west door, but when they arrived, they found it shut, and the iron gate across it fastened by a new padlock. The procession wheeled round and entered the church by the south door and joined the congregation.<sup>21</sup>

At the council meeting on 10 December 1908, Mayor Cannon said he regarded the actions of Revd Boustead as an insult to the Mayor, the Corporation and the Burgesses of Basingstoke. Herbert Kingdon, the Deputy Mayor, said he thought that the treatment they received from the vicar was a great slight on the town at large:

I think it most uncalled for and certainly most unchristian, and to my mind a man who would so treat the chief magistrate of the borough, and indeed one of his own churchwardens, is not worthy to be called a leader of a great Christian Church.

He said he offered, on behalf of all his Nonconformist colleagues on the council, 'a very hearty and unanimous invitation to attend one of the Free Churches in the town'. Mayor Cannon said he cordially accepted the invitation and should be glad if all the members of the council, the officials, the mace bearers, the fire brigade and the police would accompany him. They arranged that the service would be held at the Congregational Church.<sup>22</sup>

The following year, it appears that Revd Boustead had a change of heart. At a council meeting in November 1909, Frank Hillary, the new Mayor, who, like William Cannon, was described as a 'churchman and a conservative', said he thought everything had been amicably arranged for the attendance of the Corporation at church. He had a letter from Reginald Thompson, the Minister at the London Street Congregational Church, who had been asked to come. Reginald Thompson had stipulated that he should be allowed to take a substantial part in the service and expressed the hope that this might be the beginning of a time when no question would be raised when the Mayor should invite the Council to his church. The Mayor had shown the letter to the vicar, who 'quite fell in with it'.<sup>23</sup>

The Civic Service took place on the morning of Sunday, 28 November 1909. The *Hants and Berks Gazette* said that 'a new feature was introduced into the arrangements by the association of a Free Church minister with the service, this being, we understand, in substitution for a separate attendance of the Mayor and Corporation at a Free Church, as has taken place in some previous years'. The procession from the Town Hall to St Michael's Church was headed by the band of the Mechanics' Institute, followed by the Mayor wearing his scarlet robe

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<sup>20</sup> *Hants and Berks Gazette*, December 5, 1908.

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

<sup>22</sup> *Hants and Berks Gazette*, December 12, 1908.

<sup>23</sup> *Hants and Berks Gazette*, November 4, 1909.

which was the distinctive official garb of the chief Magistrate of Basingstoke. At his right hand was Revd Boustead wearing the robe of a Doctor of Divinity from Oxford University, and at his left hand walked Revd Thompson wearing his gown from London University. They were followed by the aldermen and the councillors with their gowns and cocked hats, the Town Clerk and other officials of the town, including the Sergeants-at-Mace in their green gowns, the volunteer fire brigade, the Basingstoke division of the county police, the Basingstoke troop of the Hampshire Yeomanry, and the G Company of the 4th Hampshire Regiment. Revd Thompson read the lesson and Revd Boustead gave the sermon.

The church was entirely filled and some of those present have since remarked that it was one of the most gratifying services in which the civic body has taken part.<sup>24</sup>

Bob Clarke

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<sup>24</sup> *Hants and Berks Gazette*, December 4, 1909.