

and there to make pastime for the commodity of the church, which thing our Vicar now denyeth to be used without his licence'. Vincent Tuke tried to persuade the villagers to erect their Maypole outside the Bull Inn, but the churchyard had always been the scene of May Day revels, Church Ales and other activities at which money was collected 'for the commodity of the church'. Traditional revels, and perhaps an annual fair, connected with Saint Siric probably continued long after pilgrimage had ceased.

Tuke probably also disapproved of the pedlars who often came in such numbers on Sundays and Feast Days that the churchyard took on the appearance of a busy market: 'divers things, and goods, and rushes, are exposed there for sale, and horses stand over the bodies of the dead there buried and defile the graves, to the great dishonour and manifest hindrance of divine worship, on account of the clamour of those who stand about'.

Tuke's flock was not beyond reproach either: 'Richard King and John Singleton did quarrel in the churchyard and struck one another with their fists. Hewstis Hatfield is a customary sleeper in the church with a cap upon his head in time of common prayer'. Tuke appears to have caused complications right to the end, as he is reported to have been buried in August and to have made his will in October of the same year, 1592. His burial is the first recorded in the earliest surviving register. The controversial vicar left his cassock to his mother Alice 'to make her a blacke gowne', and his family would have need of such economies, as he also left a pile of debts.

Queen Elizabeth did not use the old Palace at Sonning and in 1583 arranged a survey of the riverside estate, for the purpose of splitting it up to rent out. Edmund Dunche and Robert Hammonde were the surveyors and inefficiently confused their compass points. When, however, it is realised that their north point is actually west, details of the survey fall into place.

The Inner Porter's Lodge was to be let for 5s a year; half the barn, measuring 60 by 27 feet, for 6s 8d; stabling for six horses 'over taxes and repairs' for 2s; the North Garden for 5s; and 'a certain path leading from the town of Sonning to the Borough of Reading ... worth two shillings'. The path could well have been an extension of today's Pearson Road, running directly past the Gatehouse, between the South Garden and Weare Plot, along the top of the Warren — where there is to this day a well-defined path — and on along the river. It was along this path that lonely little Isabella wandered some two hundred years before.

Tuke's successor, William Whitelock, had inherited the family estate, Beeches near Wokingham, shortly before coming to Sonning. Ever beset by estate and family worries, he was also 'miserably tormented with the stone for twelve years before his death', seven of them spent at Sonning. The winter of 1593-4, just after he took up his duties, brought illness and bereavement to the village. Twenty villagers died between October and March: two from each of the Hewitt, Assendon and Cruse families, three of the White family, and in February Thomas Varnes, his wife Alice and their children Thomas, Joane and Elizabeth all died.

It was not only bad news that William Whitelock entered in the register. We read of

twelve 'poor widows of Sonning, Woodley and Earley ... which have Myse Payne's benevolence' of £48 a year for the remainder of their lives. Whitelock purchased a new parish register for 20s on 1 November 1598 and three months later his own name was entered in the burials. After such long discomfort, he was no doubt glad to leave a Sonning about to enter the 17th century.

