

At the Court of George III

A TURBULENT RECTOR

By 'BEORCHAM'

UNLESS you are familiar with the long list of Berkhamsted rectors, it is doubtful whether the name of Charles de Guiffardière will mean anything to you.

He was rector from 1798 until his death on New Year's Day, 1810. As he was also rector of Stoke Newington and had a house near St. James's Palace, it is unlikely that he spent the major part of his time here. However, in contrast to what seems to have been an unremarkable ministry in Berkhamsted, his earlier career in the Royal Household was full of interest. He was French reader to Queen Caroline, gave lessons to the princesses, and was much esteemed by George III.

CHARACTER SKETCH

Charles de Guiffardière died without knowing that one of the most famous and readable of English diarists wrote pages and pages about him, always referring to him as Mr. Turbulent. His

identity would not be known but for a footnote in *The Diary of Fanny Burney*, which explains that he was a clergyman named Charles de Guiffardière.

It is doubtful whether anyone had ever linked him with Berkhamsted until Canon Robert Brown picked up the book some time ago and realised that he was reading a very good character sketch of one of his eighty or so predecessors as rector of Berkhamsted. Canon Brown kindly passed on the information to me, and I congratulate him on having a sharp eye and a good memory.

First, a few words about Fanny Burney. Born in 1752, she moved in brilliant musical and literary circles and wrote several novels. Today she is best remembered for her *Diary and Letters*, which first appeared in seven volumes between 1842 and 1846. Some of the most interesting pages date from 1786,

when she was appointed second mistress of the robes to Queen Caroline at £200 a year. Especially moving is her account of George III's mental breakdown.

BY COACH TO WINDSOR

The first reference to de Guiffardière, dated January 20th, 1787, tells us that the two royal servants shared a coach for the three-and-a-half hours' journey from London to Windsor. Fanny Burney found it 'rather awkward' and 'by no means desirable' to spend so much time with a person so little known to her. Mr. Turbulent apparently earned his pseudonym there and then; he persistently involved her in tedious conversations on morality and religion, subjects she had no desire to discuss with him.

It was with relief that Fanny Burney left the coach. Later, she attended the Queen, who asked if the journey had been pleasant and remarked that nobody conversed better than Mr. Turbulent. Fanny assented 'but faintly', and the Queen, who again praised Mr. Turbulent highly, 'seemed quite disappointed at the coldness of my concurrence'.

BAD IMPRESSION

'Good there must be', she wrote, 'in a man so honoured, who for many years has been tried in his present trying situation, of teacher to the elder princesses, and occasionally to her Majesty herself. I resolved, therefore, to suspend the judgment which was inclining on the evil side, and to wait undecided till further opportunity gave me fairer reasons for fixing my opinions'.

Nevertheless, Fanny arranged not to travel with him in future. Naturally, Mr. Turbulent was extremely provoked. 'What an impression must this make upon the Queen!' he said.

Then, suddenly, he knelt down before Fanny and cried: 'Your slave I am content to be! Your slave I am ready to live and die!'

Frightened by his vehemence, Fanny begged Mr. Turbulent to rise and be a little less rhapsodic. Finally, 'content with his sublimity, he arose'.

After this ridiculous scene, ill-feeling and suspicion gradually evaporated. Fanny Burney paid Mr. Turbulent a somewhat back-handed compliment by saying that he was a great favourite with the Royal family, 'who doubtless found, in his courage and his rodomontading, a novelty extremely amusing to them, or they would not fail to bring about a change'.

HIGH SPIRITS

In June 1788, when Mr. Turbulent and his wife had their own house at Windsor, he went to the Castle only at stated hours. Fanny Burney commented: 'He gave me many serious thanks for the time passed with me, spoke in flourishing terms of its contrast to former times. . . . His behaviour altogether was very well—here and there a little eccentric, but, in the main, merely good-humoured and high-spirited'.

Later, when she was ill, he 'won now all my good will by a visit in this my sinking and altered state, in which, with very unaffected friendliness, he counselled and exhorted me to resign my office, in order to secure my recovery. He related to me, also, his own most afflictive story—his mortifications, disappointments, and ill-treatment; and perhaps my concern for his injuries contributed to his complete restoration in my goodwill'.

ACTING THE PART

These snippets, I fear, convey little of the grace and charm of Fanny Burney's *Diary*; it is well worth reading, and I recommend the selection published in one volume in *Everyman's Library*.

Continued on page 11

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BEORCHAM from page 7

It would be wrong to think of a former rector as a rather farcical character. He was very, very French in temperament, naturally high-spirited, and having to read French plays and stories to the royal children he no doubt acted the parts and sometimes carried the play-acting a little too far, as when he knelt before Fanny Burney in dedication.

A more serious and business-like side of his character is revealed by some very matter-of-fact statements recorded in an accounts book when he succeeded John Jeffries as rector of Berkhamsted in November 1798.

THE RECTOR'S WINE

Moving into the old, rambling rectory (William Cowper's birthplace), with thatched barns, stables, laundry and brewhouse, he paid £66 7s. 6d. for fixtures and some furniture. He was entitled to £27 'for dilapidations on the barn, stables and outhouses, but none for the house, it being in tolerable condition', and in lieu of money he took over wines to the value of £27 that had been left in Dr. Jeffries' cellar.

de Guaffardièrre continues: 'H.R.H. the Prince of Wales, patron of the living, who presented me to it *unask'd*, meant to better my condition by offering it to me'. But his expenses, on taking possession, exceeded the income of the living for two years, 'the greatest part of which arose from fees for a dispensation, M.A. degree, presentation fees, etc.'

On finding that the tithes amounted only to £178, de Guaffardièrre advised

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landowners of an increase of sixpence per acre. All readily accepted the increase with the exception of the Duke of Bridgewater, who 'demurr'd and refus'd paying 2s. per acre for the two Coldharbour farms.

The tithes collected on November 5th, 1800, 'according to the new arrangement', amounted to £217, an increase of £40.

No turbulence, then, was caused by Mr. Turbulent's request for increased tithes. But having another parish in his

care, and his own house in Cleveland Row, St. James's, he probably left much of the parochial work in Berkhamsted to Mr. Thackeray, his curate, whose salary of £40 per annum was augmented by £20 from fees and the Easter offering.

Mr. Turbulent was in his 70th year when he died in his London home in 1810; his successor, John Crofts, destroyed the old rectory which, not many years earlier, had been 'in tolerable condition'.