

JOSEPH LEECH – THE BRISTOL CHURCHGOER

ITINERARY AND NOTES

Long Ashton Churchyard

Today's walk has an historical theme: the life of Joseph Leech and the writings of his journalistic persona, The Church Goer. . It won't be possible to take all the rides in The Churchgoer (daringly by rail, sometimes on his sedate horse John Bunyan,) wrote reviews of all the Anglican churches in Bristol and many in the surrounding countryside from Slimbridge to Hutton. And there is a lot of background information; if you ask questions I shall try to answer - be warned, I mean that.

Leech lived at at least four addresses in Bristol – but he was born in Ireland. However, he was buried here, in 1893. (Can anyone find the grave? I haven't.)

Forty odd years before, the Churchgoer attended a service..A thrifty and honest journalist, he wrote up the account when it was too wet for a man with rheumatism to go further than his own parish church.

Now the Churchgoer (likewise his horse, despite his name, a solid constitutional conservative who respected toll gates) was a carefully crafted fiction, a vaguely Pickwickian figure in a snuff brown coat, carrying a large prayer book. Leech himself was rather more flamboyant, literally and metaphorically a fighting journalist: he took on Handel Cosham in the courts and challenged a local politician to a duel. In the more colourful versions of these stories, he was the last editor to be subject to prosecution for Criminal Libel, and he offered to shoot the committee of the local Tory club. Leech a Tory himself, objected to the blacklisting of tradesmen for their political beliefs – this was, remember, before the secret ballot. Duelling lasted longer in Ireland.

The Churchgoer had his four-poster burned by the playful mob in 1831; Leech, who hadn't reached Bristol in time for the riots, tangled with three burglars. One knocked out his own colleague. Leech as it was delicately expressed "cut his thigh" when he fell into a pile of Schweppe's empties stored in his lodgings cum printing house on Redcliff Street.

Back to the Churchgoer's visit to Long Ashton; a good specimen of his formula. A very sticky panegyric on a Lady Ann Smythe concludes that she died on 9th September 1733 "Go thou and do likewise". Here follows a fine old crusted university anecdote, some comments on the interior of the building and the comfort of the pews. Then a description of the village and its setting, an anecdote of "hanthem singing" forty years ago when the church was a popular Sunday retreat for Bristolians, including the Churchgoer's father. And an account of a

country funeral that may strike us sentimental but does perhaps explain why Leech chose this as family burial place. There is a brief, favourable account of the Vicar's performance and a final anecdote that he had once refused to pray for rain as he hasn't got his hay in.

Now we're going for a walk up through Ashton Court : not just because it's there, but because there are some Leech connections for the coffee break.

Beggar Bush Lane

Beyond the wall is Beggar Bush Lane, where Leech entered local footpath history. On his way to Abbots Leigh church he was disappointed and indignant to find the footpath to the village closed to the public. "This is another of the incidents by which we trace the progress of enlightenment: pleasant 'primrose footpaths' through green fields, and which had existed from almost immemorial time, and were not merely refreshing to the wayfarer, but dear to the villager, are suddenly discontinued; stiles built up, and the pedestrian thrust out on the dusty road, and warned off by boards, threatening all manner of terrible punishments and prosecutions 'according to law' to the trespasser. Trespass! It is only of late that it has become an offence: it was no 'trespass' when for centuries the peasant child hunted the butterfly, and the village maiden plucked the cowslips along its path. And when I hear of late years the poor accused of becoming less respectful, I sometimes think it is the rich that have grown more selfish. I can easily see how these apparently petty matters may particularly affect the city mechanic, who, coming out to enjoy the country air in his old and pleasant haunts, after six days toil in a crowded town, suddenly finds on some Sunday his favourite pathway closed against him, and turns into the next beer house, it may be to grumble in sullen discontent against the great who 'begrudged him,' as he will tell you, 'even that little enjoyment.'"

Leech goes on to pin the blame on three Bridge Commissioners, Liberal agitators, in Bristol "the loudest to talk, the last to feel for the humble", exploiting a clause in the Act which empowered them to "mar the scenery". Whatever the Churchgoer said against the aesthetic impact of the incomplete Suspension Bridge, Leech himself was a director of the company that completed it.

Consider on the next stage of the walk whether you enjoy the woodland and the architecture: at the next halt Leech's contribution to it will be the topic

Leave Ashton Court by the pedestrian gate (or over the wall if you want to provoke a BCC apparatchik by behaving "irresponsibly") on to Abbots Leigh Rd. Valley Rd and cut through Leigh Woods to North Road – Bridge Rd.

Burwalls

Ashton Court was the home of the Smyth clan, that also owned the surrounding land. . Sir John, (Leech called him the gloomy baronet) had plans for part of his estate: a cheap housing estate in Leigh Woods. Cynics say the Suspension Bridge was not completed as a tribute to a dead genius, rather it was the catalyst for a profitable development. Leech helped frustrate the Smyth plan. As usual, the story of a development is complicated but the outcome was a very posh housing estate on part of the site. The rest was preserved to become one of the National Trust's first properties. Leech was a director of the company that did the posh developing.

We can't visit all Leech's Bristol homes: his Redcliff St lodgings, Kingsdown Parade where he and his wife had their first home nor even Canynge Square, which was their second home. Their third and last residence would be hard to miss: Burwalls is so opulent most people assume it was built by a Wills. No, its foundations were not baccy but water: Leech picked the winner when Bristol was trying to set up a clean water supply and defeat King Cholera. As we cross the Suspension Bridge there is a view of St Mary Redcliffe where he married and Rownham Ferry, where the pimple faced Charon (especially in strawberry season) had a more interesting life than his colleague at Gaol Ferry. Beyond the Bridge, : Christchurch Clifton, Leech reported its opening and how difficult it was to attend. After an optional divagation to Canynge Square, the old parish church of St Andrews - since bombed but then appropriated by the page-escorted, lounging, eau de cologne scented fashionable feathery types who crowded out the parishioners.

The next major break for historical refreshment will be in the Centre.

From St Andrews to College Green the A-Z offers a choice of routes. Richmond Rd, the footpath to Gordon Rd, (jink left and right to Wetherell Rd. if, like the speculative builder who named it, you want to honour the memory of the bigoted buffoon who helped trigger the Bristol Riots: the proper ones in 1831), else Meridian Place and the footpath past the old pro-cathedral (Did the Ascendancy Irish Leech, who always kept his brogue care for the "papal aggression"? The Churchgoer was tougher on Dissent.) to the Triangle is quiet and straightforward. To avoid traffic, go round Berkeley Square and down Brandon Hill to Charlotte St / Great George St for St George's Brandon Hill.*

Leech and his puppet did not like classical architecture for churches, sharing the English prejudice for Gothic though he denied being bitten by the Rabies of Pugin. A fine site, admittedly, but the interior more like a dissenting conventicle.

College Green –Centre - - St Stephens.

St Stephens Churchyard

The Churchgoer was moved at St Stephens to revive a member of the congregation nodding off after a heavy dinner of beef and beer with a timely pinch of snuff. His view was that the parishioners were “an easy, self solacing, self-comforting set of people, who cultivate a sort of home made doctrine – if it were not deeply mischievous I should call it namby-pamby – that ‘God is too good, too merciful to condemn any poor sinner to eternal suffering’ an amiable mode of self delusion that the preacher attacked with sincerity and a pure and cultivated taste, though his voice wasn’t strong enough.

Leech himself was fond of the church, or at least of the St Stephens Ringers, more or less the Merchant Venturers in fancy dress; one of their rituals commemorates Good Queen Bess and, I vaguely recall, includes a stuffed fox. Leech claimed membership because his business had its water supply in the parish.

Before our final dispersal, I’ll take you to Leech’s office: the old cliché “editor’s sanctum” may have come alive today.

Footpath next to churchyard and L on St Stephens St. The Bristol Times offices are on the right hand side.

Information was culled from

Alan Sutton’s introduction to his selection *Rural Rides of the Bristol Churchgoer*

Other selections from the *Churchgoer* Articles

Annals of Bristol Vol III John Latimer

And, of course, the internet especially about St Stephens Ringers

Otherwise the opinions in this article are my own and the Ramblers’ Association deserves neither blame nor credit for them.

Peter Gould

** My digital planchette has received a Wetherell Blog “Young rioters these days! Do they get dead drunk on looted liquor then deep fried in molten lead? Declining standards! I blame the Welfare State and Europe (“Murder face” Castlereagh needed a manbag in Vienna) and those closet Manchester Lefties on the Daily Mail and renegade Gladstone and wimpy Wobby Peel (Police with truncheons and top hats! Corn Law Reform! Forsooth!) and that fenian fornicator JFK and the Celts generally and the so-called MCC and Amerindian Whig halfcaste Churchill who was a damned liberal Home Sec and the pinko pro-papist Iron Duke and . . . Whoops, my breeches have slipped down again in mid speech. I’m having a lucid interval.”*