

THE LIFE AND TIMES OF BISHOP EDWARD COPLESTON

At some point around 1772 **Revd. John Bradford Copleston** purchased the advowson of Offwell Church. For the next 181 years, between 1773 and 1954, members of the Copleston family served continuously as Rectors of the parish. This remarkable span was probably only equalled in Devon by the Southcomb family, who were Rectors at Rose Ash from 1675 to around 1930. From 1773 onwards, the history of Offwell is dominated by the Coplestons as they reinvigorated the life of the parish. Moreover, as the manor faded into insignificance, the family gradually accumulated property and land here, and thus they acquired the dual role of chief landowner and Rector.

The Coplestons were an ancient and formidable clerical dynasty whose members included several Bishops. (See Family Tree)

They were among the wealthier gentry families in Devon, drawing some of their wealth from the tin-mining industry. In the lay subsidy of 1522/3 (which assessed the personal wealth of those worth £40 a year or more) John Copplestone, merchant, ranked third in the county.

John Bradford Copleston was born at Tedburn St. Mary on 8th July 1749, the youngest of Edward and Anne Copleston's children.

Their mother died when John was four, and their father, who was about 50 when John was born, died in July 1767.

John was sent to Merton College, Oxford, graduating with a BA in 1771. He probably acquired the advowson of Offwell about this time, and he appointed his brother-in-law, John Vye, to hold the fort as Rector while he completed his training. He succeeded his brother-in-law in September 1773, having in effect appointed himself, and remained Rector for the next 27 years. In November 1773 John Bradford married Margaret Gay, the daughter of Revd. Nicholas Gay, the cousin of the poet and playwright, John Gay (*The Beggar's Opera*). In 1800 John Bradford resigned in favour of his eldest son Edward, who would later become **Bishop Edward Copleston**.

BISHOP COPLESTON'S EARLY LIFE



Edward Copleston was born in Offwell on 2nd February 1776, the eldest son of John Bradford and Margaret Copleston. He was educated at home by his father until the age of 15 and his happy childhood memories were described in a letter dated 22nd November 1825 to his friend John Duncan:

“Natural history is the food of my vacation hours, and I shall take your precious volume with me when I next go to saunter and ramble in my Offwell woods. It would do my heart good to have you one day to join me in those rambles over the scenes of my infancy ...”

At the age of fifteen in 1791 he won a scholarship to Corpus Christi College, Oxford, and there won prizes for his Latin and English essays. At the age of nineteen he was invited by the provost and fellows of Oriel College to fill a vacant close fellowship for which none of the other candidates was considered good enough. From 1797 he was a college tutor, commanded a company of the Oxford volunteers (a volunteer force formed in Great Britain during the French Revolutionary and Napoleonic wars) and gained a reputation as a great walker. Diary entries 1798 and 1799:

“Walked from Oxford to Offwell with my brother ... to Marlborough in one day.” “Walked from Oxford to Ufton, the first 22 miles in 5 hours.... Robbed by two mounted highwaymen, on my return to Oxford... between Uxbridge and Beaconsfield.”

This is possibly the last well authenticated instance of robbery on the London road by mounted highwaymen.

His work within the university and his college was outstanding. As college dean he warmly supported his provost, Dr. Eveleigh, and others, in the introduction of the new examination statute of 1800, which radically revised the university’s teaching structure. Upon his election as provost of Oriel in 1814 he endeavoured, successfully, to make it the most outstanding college in Oxford. For many years over half the awards and honours granted by the university were won by Oriel men. Copleston never married, although there was a tradition in his family that he had been engaged to Miss Eveleigh, daughter of the Oriel provost, who died before they could be married.



Edward was ordained priest in the summer of 1800 and immediately returned home to Offwell where he preached his first sermon on 20th July 1800 aged 24.

In 'Reminiscence of Oriel College' mention is made of Bishop Copleston's voice:

"The richness and melody of Copleston's voice surpassed any instrument. No-one who had only heard him take his part in the Communion Service could ever forget the tone. It penetrated everybody, entered into the soul, and carrying with it much of the man himself, made the least thing he said adhere to the memory and be easily produceable."

It was at this point, in 1800, that his father resigned the Rectory and handed it over to Edward. At the same time Edward became Vicar of St. Mary the Virgin, Oxford, and he would most certainly have needed to employ a curate to carry out his duties at Offwell.

In 1802 Edward became Professor of Poetry at Oxford and he also held several other important posts at Oriel College and Oxford University, where he was one of a small and influential group of liberal churchmen known as the Noetics (moderate free thinkers and reformers within the Church of England). It was probably his work at Oxford that prompted him to resign as Rector of Offwell after only four years, and in April, 1804, Edward's father, John Bradford Copleston, (who still held the advowson) appointed Edward's younger brother, John Gaius Copleston, as Rector. John Gaius would remain the much loved Rector of Offwell for thirty-seven years, until 1841.

BISHOP OF LLANDAFF & DEAN OF ST. PAUL'S

On 30th November 1827 Edward writes the following letter to his father from Oriel College:

*"My dear Father,
... I am just arrived in Oxford and find waiting me a letter from Lord Goderich, offering the Bishopric of Llandaff and the deanery of St. Paul's, an offer which, notwithstanding the mixed emotions it raises of awe and apprehension, yet cannot be declined...
Your dutiful and affectionate son, E.C."*

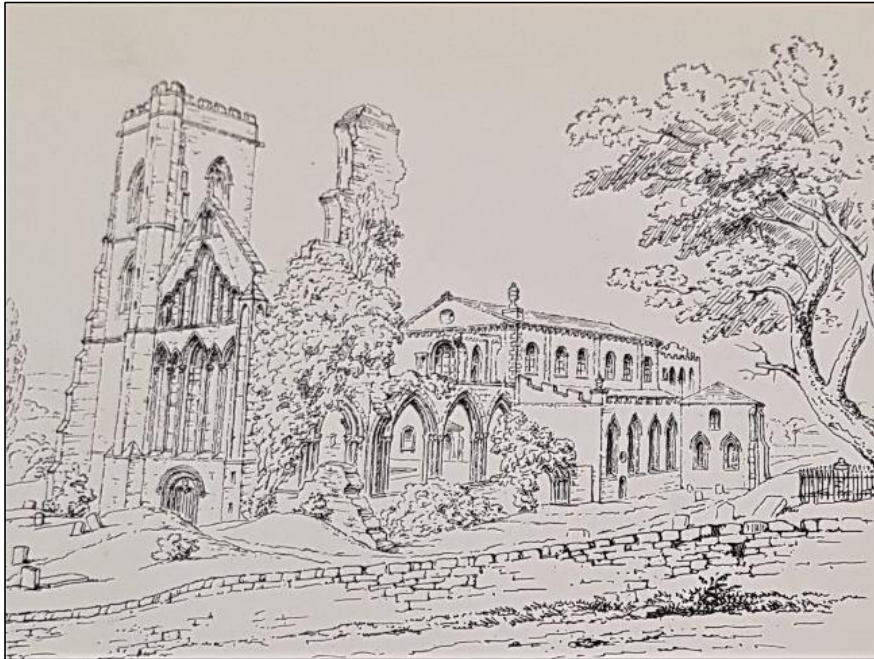
Edward was consecrated Bishop on 13th January 1828, having given up the posts of Provost of Oriel and Dean of Chester. He retained the senior post of Dean of St. Paul's Cathedral throughout the time he was Bishop until his death and this would have involved a great deal of work, with many duties to perform - in the City of London as well as at Llandaff. His diaries and letters, (the latter written between 1828 and 1849, the year of his death) show that he was constantly in Offwell visiting his beloved parents, siblings, nieces and nephews.

Diary entry 9th November 1828:

"My father and his grandson served the church in the morning. My brother read prayers and I preached in the afternoon. This remarkable union of three generations in my native place made a strong impression upon us all, and upon the whole parish. Only two individuals of the congregation were there, whom my father found at his coming to Offwell in 1774."

Copleston's first visit to his new diocese took place in the summer of 1828, nearly eight months after his consecration. It was a pattern he was to follow subsequently. Copleston spent the winter, spring and early summer in residence at St. Paul's, mid-summer at Offwell and the period from early August until November in his diocese.

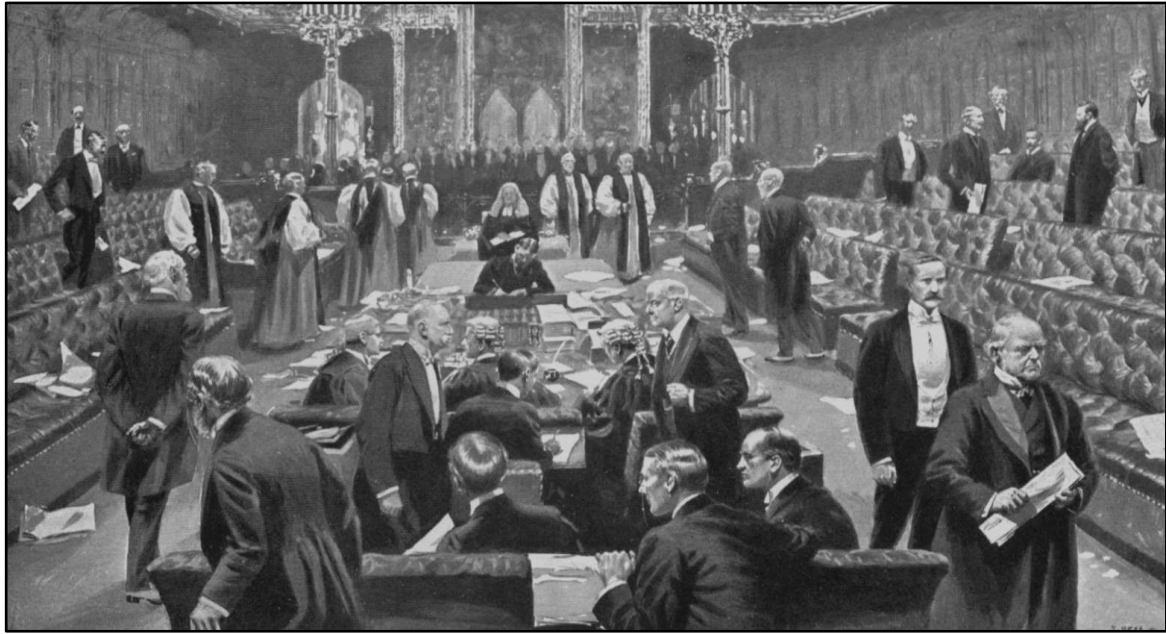
He found the diocese in a neglected state, in spite of the work of his predecessors. A large number of its inhabitants were Nonconformists, and had been lost to the Church over the previous half-century. The best livings were held by absentees who appeared indifferent about whom they employed to run their parishes on their behalf. The cathedral was in a state of neglect and the arch-deacon, who was its titular head, was an elderly absentee. Many parish churches were also in a state of decay.



In a letter to his friend, John Duncan, on 24th November 1829 he writes:

“The churches are many of them in a state of squalid neglect – the ancient character suffered to be lost, and a mean sort of patchwork substituted for decayed mullions and windows. In one particular I have been inexorably severe – the destruction of ivy and other vegetation in towers and the walls of churches. There are quite ruins enough in Monmouthshire to serve for young ladies’ sketch books, without making a building destined for religious service subservient to such a purpose. Besides this objection I hold it to be a gross and palpable error in taste to cherish ivy (which is the emblem of neglect and decay) in places which ought, by their aspect, to excite other associations.”

The difficulties facing Copleston were numerous. The most obvious being that Copleston himself held two ecclesiastical offices, both as bishop of a diocese and as dean of a Cathedral. It meant that the time he could spend on his diocese was limited. In addition, he was also a parliamentary peer, and was expected to take his part in the debates and committees of the House of Lords.



There were further difficulties facing him. The diocese was extremely poor and curates ill-paid. Huge populations were being created in areas where the Church had no effective presence whatsoever and the work of church extension was slow and demanding. Another major issue was the bilingual nature of his diocese. By the time of his elevation various Welsh pressure groups hoped to ensure that Welsh-speaking clergymen were appointed to Welsh-speaking parishes. Within a few years they were demanding Welsh-speaking bishops.

In a letter to Bruce Knight, Dean of Llandaff, 16th September 1830 he writes:

“Can you devise any sort of provision for the poor ex-curate of Lantillio. He has a wife and six young children. He has not a shilling of his own – and I believe he is involved in debt. They represent to me the hardship of being turned out in the middle of winter without a home or even shelter. I have authorised Mr. Lewis to give him some money for immediate use – but it is impossible for me, who have withdrawn his licence, to recommend him to another curacy. I may yield to the solicitations of others founded upon humanity – and if a small Welsh curacy could be found, I would not refuse to license him – altho’ I fear his habit of drinking is inveterate and almost incurable.”

Until his death in 1845 **William Bruce Knight** acted as Copleston’s vicar general in the diocese of Llandaff. This meant that he undertook much of the diocese day-to-day administration and it also meant that they were in frequent correspondence. Copleston’s pleasure in finding an able administrator soon turned into the joy of friendship and it is quite clear that the two men were on terms of close affection.

Copleston disliked London and his home there. He frequently mentioned the noise, dirt and grimness of his environment, as compared with Offwell in particular. He always retained a house in his own diocese and at first this was Llansantffraid, where the Monmouthshire hills reminded him of his native Devon. In 1835 he moved to Llandough Castle and finally Hardwick House, at Chepstow.

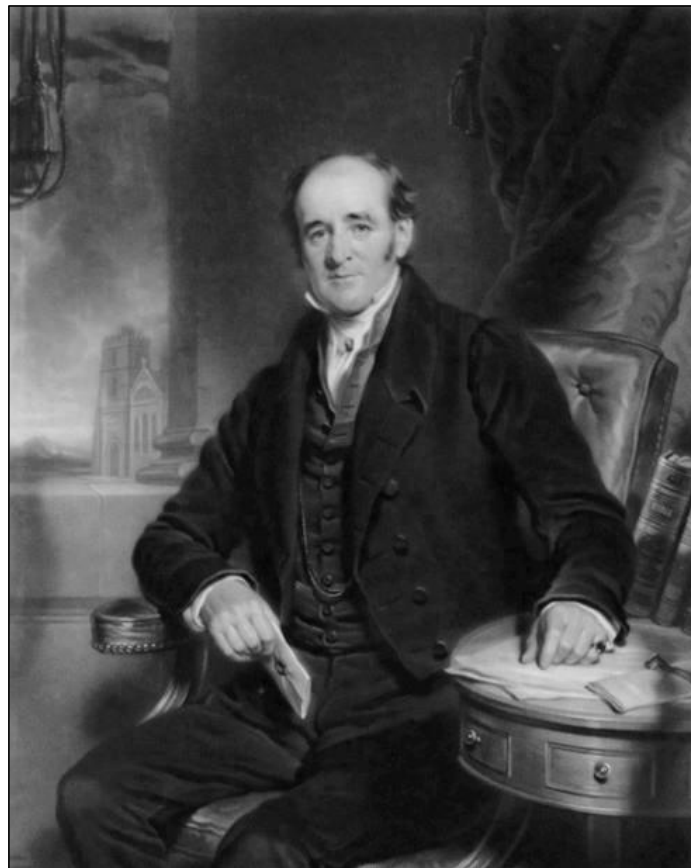
He had a passionate love of altering houses and gardens and in all these places Copleston took the part of a good landowner, just as he had always been in Offwell.

In a letter to Bruce Knight, 5th August 1830, he writes:

“I have spent nearly four weeks most delightfully in Devonshire, where I have three stations, Offwell, Sidmouth and Exeter. At the latter I left my Father and Mother both in good health and spirits. At the first, my native place, the works that I had ordered are nearly completed and to my eye are very beautiful, a village school and a pump, both designed by Blore, and a Pillar which supports a Dial. I should rejoice in any opportunity of showing you that place.”

On hearing of Bruce Knight’s death in August 1845 he writes:

“I have been so long expecting this sad event that the tidings just received... did not shock, although they deeply affected me – and will continue to oppress me with sorrow for some time. I never felt so thoroughly the loss of a friend before – a friend who rendered me such valuable service – and yet seemed to think he was entitled to no return.”



BISHOP COPLESTON’S DECLINING HEALTH

Copleston’s letters refer continually to his state of health and his last years were often accompanied by an internal disorder which left him prostrate for days on end.

In 1831 the Lords, dominated by Tories, (of which Copleston was one) defeated the Reform Bill and there followed riots and serious disturbance around the country, including Bristol where the riots were some of the worst seen in England in the 19th Century.

In Copleston’s memoirs he writes:

“...dreadful riots at Bristol... destruction of the mansion house, the customs house, the excise, the bishop’s palace, the gaols and 50 private houses... The only precaution I have taken is to have a round hat and a brown great coat in readiness should it be expedient to escape at the back of the house over the fields.”



A cholera outbreak and the Merthyr Rising in South Wales also took place in 1831; the latter a violent climax to many years of simmering unrest among the large working class population of Merthyr Tydfil. There is little wonder, therefore, that the heavy burden of responsibility in both his Diocese and the House of Lords took its toll on his health.

In 1837 Copleston writes to J.M. Traherne (a friend from Oriel) from the Bishop's residence in Hardwick:

“This has been by far the most dismal year of my life. After two months severe indisposition in May and June, I came here perfectly well early in August – hoping to enjoy my new residence, to see yourself and many other friends here, and to engage in all the duties of my Diocese – but on the 12th of August a return of that impracticable dyspeptic malady, which poisons life, and unfits me for all duties and all pleasures, came on. I struggle in vain against it, and had the benefit of the daily attendance of Mr. Watkins, a very sensible and skilful medical man of Chepstow.

The disorder wore off in about two months – but was succeeded by one of another kind – a large abscess in the back of my neck – extremely painful, and slow in arriving at maturity. About a week ago it became safe to use the lancet, and then an immense discharge of matter gave me relief. I have now a seton inserted, which will prevent the accumulation by a continual drain. It has weakened and relaxed me. I still live the life of an invalid, and am preparing for my migration to St. Paul's in December.”

In August 1839 he suggested that death itself would have been welcome, such was his distress. These attacks often drove him to Offwell, where his health always improved, and some have written that the ‘malady’ was psychosomatic in origin. By 1841, according to one of his letters, the infirmities of old age were creeping upon him, so that walking and riding had ceased to be a relaxation. Yet he was to survive for another eight years, dying at Hardwick, his diocesan home, on Sunday 14th October 1849, at the age of seventy-three, after an illness of some weeks during which *‘the shadows of approaching night continue to fall deeper and deeper.’* He had lived for his final few years almost entirely in his diocese, his two nieces keeping house for him.

Bishop Copleston was buried in the sanctuary of the Lady Chapel at Llandaff Cathedral, the last person to be buried within its walls

