

REFORMATION or DEFORMATION?

Victorian Dissent in Bodicote

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The early Victorian period was one of fundamental change both socially and religiously. The Industrial Revolution and its accompanying modifications in agriculture, including the acceleration of the enclosure of open fields and commons, led to a fall in the rural population, as people left their villages to seek work in the new industrial towns. Freed from the constraints of their traditional communities, they demanded and gained political reform. Since the reformation the bonding of church and nation was etched into the identity of the 'Englishman as a Protestant'. The political union with Ireland earlier in the century made five million Roman Catholics a large faction of the population of Britain. This, coupled with the subsequent Catholic Emancipation act of 1829, put a strain on the relationship between church and state. Nonconformist communities too, were becoming aggrieved that they should pay rates to support the parish church. The established Church of England was under threat.

In order to shepherd the urban masses back into the fold, the Church of England had to shake off its rigid and rustic system, to one more flexible – directed less to the village and more to the slum. Growing public concern for the religious welfare of the population of industrial towns was also mixed with a desire to counter any revolutionary tendencies that might be developing there – the French Revolution was still fresh in people's minds. There was at this time a significant growth in population, new churches were needed and old ones renovated and enlarged. The idea of mission not only being directed to the heathen overseas, but to those at home too, took root. Money was provided both from state and voluntary sources to build new churches as well as enlarging, restoring and refurbishing existing ones.

This article considers how these sweeping changes affected rural Oxfordshire. It focuses on the small village of Bodicote and seeks to discover what effects the Victorian restoration of its church had on the residents, the clergy and the laity.