

**FAIRFORD HISTORY**

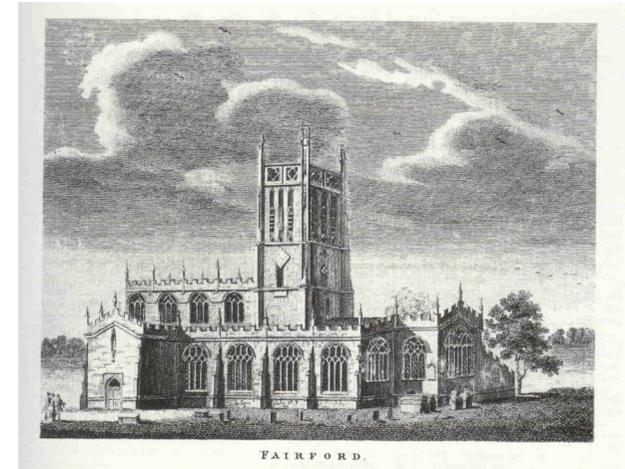


**SOCIETY**

## **SEARCHING FOR THOMAS**

**The Life of Thomas Morton, Curate of Fairford  
1851 to 1879**

**by Chris Hobson**



The front cover portrait of the Reverend Thomas Morton is from a painting belonging to St Mary's Church, Fairford and now in the care of the Fairford History Society.

The portrait was painted by Samuel Vines (1796-1892) of Fairford who, as well as being an ironmonger, was a talented amateur artist.

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## Searching for Thomas

### The life of Thomas Morton, Curate of Fairford 1851 to 1879

I first came across the name Thomas Morton when transcribing a volume of the Fairford parish registers for the latter half of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century. From May 1851 Thomas Morton appears with increasing frequency as the curate in charge of many of the parish's baptisms, marriages and funerals, taking on much of the more routine duties of the then vicar, the Reverend Francis William Rice, later the 5<sup>th</sup> Baron Dynevor.

Despite still having many more months of transcribing of the parish registers ahead, curiosity got the better of me and I decided to see what else I could find out about Thomas Morton, a man who had devoted much of his working life to the people of Fairford.

An easy way to start the search was to utilise my Ancestry.co.uk online subscription and search for Thomas in the censuses from 1841 to 1901. As usual, this was not as straightforward as one might have thought! In the 1881 census alone there are 458 Thomas Mortons resident in the United Kingdom. However, by adding 'Fairford' as a place of residence to the search this reduced the results to just two entries: 1861 and 1871. This was a good starting point as it told me that Thomas Morton was the Curate of Fairford living in London Street and was born in St Helens, Lancashire in 1806. His wife Elizabeth was also listed and she had been born in Stow-on-the-Wold in 1813. Also listed with them in 1861 was their son Joseph, a scholar (almost certainly at Farmor's School) aged 12 who had been born in Southcoates, Yorkshire in 1849. It is by no means uncommon for the age of the same individual to vary slightly from census to census (sometimes more than slightly!) but Thomas and Elizabeth's ages were remarkably consistent throughout every census they appeared in. Although resident in London Street, it seems that the Mortons did not live in the vicarage as they appear several pages away from the Rice family in the 1871 census enumerator's book.

Using the information from the 1861 and 1871 censuses it was then a simple matter to find the correct Thomas Morton in the remaining census records throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> Century simply by adding his year of birth to the search. This showed Thomas as a Minister living alone in Fleet Lane, Parr near St Helens in 1841 and in Holderness Road, Southcoates, Hull in 1851 as the Curate of Drypool. By 1851 he was married to Elizabeth and had two children, Thomas Lewis aged four and Joseph aged two, both born in Hull. As already discovered the family was living in London Street, Fairford in both the 1861 and 1871 censuses but in 1881 both Thomas and Elizabeth are recorded as living at the 'College' in South Cerney. In the 1891 census only Elizabeth is still living at '12 The College' in South Cerney possibly indicating that Thomas may have died sometime in the intervening years since 1881.<sup>(1)</sup>

The information provided by the census proved to be highly illuminating yet at the same time it demonstrated the limitations of census information. Although the census data indicated Thomas's age, birthplace and movements from Lancashire to Yorkshire and then to Gloucestershire, it has to be remembered that the census at best provides only a snapshot every ten years with no indication of what happened during the intervening period. This was to become obvious using the next piece of information, also gained from Ancestry.

The 1881 census entry for Thomas gave his profession as a licensed preacher of the Diocese of Gloucester and included the phrase 'M A Cantab' indicating that he had obtained a degree at Cambridge University. Ancestry provides online access to the alumni registers of both Oxford and Cambridge universities and, although detail is often sparse, they are very useful collections of information on thousands of learned individuals from the 13<sup>th</sup> to the 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. Cambridge University Alumni shows that Thomas Morton was admitted as a sizar to Corpus Christi College on 21 January 1834 at the age of 28.<sup>(2)</sup> A sizar was a student of limited economic means who, having passed an entrance exam, usually paid a lower rate of university fees and may even have been granted free lodgings by the university. At 28 he would have been about 10 years older than most of his fellow undergraduates. He was granted his Bachelor's degree in 1838 and was ordained as a deacon by the Bishop of Chester in the same year and became an ordained priest the following year. The Cambridge University Alumni lists Thomas's appointments

starting with the curacy of St Andrew's, Plymouth from 1842 to 1843; curacy of The Hoe, Plymouth from 1844 to 1845; curacy of Drypool, Hull from 1847 to 1851; and curacy of Fairford from 1851 to 1879. Despite the gap between 1845 and 1847 this information added some clarity about Thomas's career during the 1840s; information that had not been revealed by the census.

Armed with this new information the search widened considerably. One of the (very few) advantages of being a librarian is that I have access to several newspaper databases including The Times Digital Archive which provides access to all articles in The Times from 1785 to 1985. Another very useful database is the British Library's extensive newspaper archive that includes a selection of both national and regional newspapers dating from the early 17<sup>th</sup> Century to 1900. Within a few minutes I had found mention of Thomas Morton in nine newspapers dating from 1844 to 1854. Unfortunately, there was only one item relating to his time in Plymouth but it was a very useful piece of information as it announced his marriage in Plymouth on 4 March 1845 to Miss Elizabeth Knight of Oxford Street, London.<sup>(3)</sup> The Knight family may have either moved to London following Elizabeth's birth in Gloucestershire in 1813 or perhaps continued to live in Stow-on-the-Wold but had a town house in the City.

The earliest newspaper mention shows that Thomas received an MA degree from Corpus Christi College on 23 May 1844.<sup>(4)</sup> The quaintly-named Hull Packet and East Riding Times for 5 June 1846 announced that Thomas had been appointed to the perpetual Curacy of St Peter's church in Drypool in the city and also refers to him as having been Chaplain of the Thames Church Mission. A search of the Internet resulted in finding an article about the Thames Church Mission Society which was a missionary organisation the aim of which was "...to endeavour to rescue seamen, steamboat-men, fishermen, and bargemen, serving in the Thames, from neglect of God and from sin, by providing a sailing church, a chaplain, lay agents, and boatmen, moving from one position to another, and having the means of performing divine worship on board".<sup>(5)</sup> This appointment presumably fills the gap that I had noted in the Cambridge University Alumni entry for Thomas.

Thomas and Elizabeth's two sons were born during his time in Hull. However, a less happy occurrence was reported in the Hull Packet in

January 1849 which stated "A few days ago, some thieves entered an unoccupied house in Drypool, belonging to the Rev. Thomas Morton, vicar, and stole five house bells, eight brass door knobs, four window blinds, a brass tap, and several other fixtures".<sup>(6)</sup> Hull, like many other large industrial towns in England in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, was suffering from a population explosion and this brought the usual social pressures that accompany a sudden increase in population density. In fact Thomas was one of the men who organised a public meeting in December 1849 to bring to the attention of the Mayor of Hull the "... injury to the health, morals and social condition which results to the labouring and indigent classes from the defective arrangements and over-crowding of their dwellings".<sup>(7)</sup>

Another problem that Thomas had to contend with was the enforced purchase of part of Drypool churchyard by the Hull Dock Company which wanted the land to expand their facilities at the growing port. Thomas placed an advertisement in the newspaper in March 1850<sup>(8)</sup> asking relatives to provide information about family graves which were due to be removed. Documents listed on The National Archives website<sup>(9)</sup> indicate that 2,068 square yards of the burial ground was being purchased by the Hull Dock Company as early as August 1847 for the sum of £1,800. Other legal documents dated 1850 relate to the removal of bodies, gravestones and even a family vault from the graveyard!

Thomas and his family probably left Drypool in April 1851 as a news item in the Hull Packet of the 25<sup>th</sup> of that month makes mention of a testimonial, a gold chronometer to the value of £25, given to Thomas upon his departure for Fairford. The chronometer was inscribed "Presented to the Rev. Thos. Morton, MA, by his friends and parishioners of Drypool and Southcoates".<sup>(10)</sup> Thomas would have used this timepiece at Fairford and would probably have had it serviced at either Honeybone's or Beale's watchmaker's shops in the town.

When Thomas and his family arrived in Fairford the Reverend Francis William Rice had already been Vicar of St Mary's for almost a quarter of a century. Judging by the entries in the parish register, Reverend Rice seems to have made extensive use of curates to perform the services of baptisms, marriages and burials. Most of his curates only seemed to stay for a short period although Thomas's predecessor, the Reverend Mark Nicholson, had been at Fairford for six years before moving on to become the vicar of Hanslope in Buckinghamshire.

Thomas Morton performed his first service at Fairford on 4 May 1851 when he officiated at the marriage of Henry Simpson, a labourer, and Ann Law. He performed his last service at Fairford on 22 May 1879 at another wedding when James Jordan, also a labourer, and Jane Meason were married.<sup>(11)</sup> For 29 years Thomas Morton and his wife Elizabeth were an integral and very important part of Fairford life. The couple are mentioned briefly in Sarah Thomas's diary when, for example, she writes on 10 February 1865 "Mr Moreton (sic) called yesterday and invited himself to tea next week".<sup>(12)</sup>

The 1881 census lists Thomas and Elizabeth living at the "College" in South Cerney. A quick Internet search identifies this as Edwards College which was founded in 1834 through money left by the will of Ann Edwards whose name is also commemorated by the primary school in South Cerney. The money was used to build a row of 12 almshouses on a piece of land given by the lord of the manor. The building was designed in the Tudor Gothic style by J P St Aubyn and is today a Grade II listed building. The College was originally founded to provide accommodation for the widows and orphans of clergymen but this rule must have been relaxed to allow Thomas and Elizabeth to live there together along with their domestic servant. Twelve ladies are listed as residents of the College in the 1889 Kelly's Directory of Gloucestershire.<sup>(13)</sup>

With the knowledge that Thomas and Elizabeth had retired to South Cerney a family trek to the churchyard there resulted in the eventual discovery of Thomas and Elizabeth's graves, marked by simple ridged body stones which were badly covered in moss at the time of our visit. The inscriptions recorded Thomas's date of death as 19 January 1888 at the age of 82 while Elizabeth died on 29 July 1892 at the age of 78. Next to their graves was another of very similar design commemorating Frances Knight who died on 9 January 1888 aged 71, just ten days before Thomas's death. This name was familiar to me as the 1871 Fairford census shows Frances Knight, an unmarried lady, then aged 54, boarding with the Mortons in London Street in Fairford. Like Elizabeth, Frances was born in Stow-on-the-Wold but was living in Lower Slaughter in 1841 and 1851 with her mother Elizabeth who had been born in Temple Guiting in about 1790. It seems highly likely that Frances was Elizabeth's younger sister, although this has yet to be confirmed.



Thomas Morton is buried in South Cerney churchyard between his wife Elizabeth and her sister Frances  
Photo © Chris Hobson

The obituary in the Wiltshire and Gloucestershire Standard offers a glowing tribute to Thomas and includes many laudatory comments on his character but gives very little factual information about his life. A comment from Fairford's then vicar, the Reverend A S Loxley, stated that "Half the parish, I should say, have been baptized by him, and he has married and buried more than one generation".<sup>(14)</sup> This is no exaggeration, in fact it is a gross underestimate of Thomas Morton's work in Fairford during his long curacy. From May 1851 to February 1879 a total of 982 baptisms took place in St Mary's church with Thomas performing 746 or 76% of them. The statistics for burials and marriages are only slightly less impressive with Thomas performing 517 of the 710 burial services (74%) and 176 of the 240 marriage services (73%) during that time. He took on more and more of Reverend Rice's duties especially after Rice was elevated to the Peerage as Lord Dynevor in 1869 which required his frequent absences from Fairford. Another reason for Thomas substituting for his vicar may have been that Francis Rice apparently did not enjoy the best of health. For example Rice did not perform any burials for the last seven years of his life; possibly he found the strain of outdoor services too much, especially at his advanced age?

Of the many services that Thomas performed, several stand out such as the burial of Alexander Iles, the founder of The Retreat asylum, on 11 January 1856 and Georgiana Raymond Barker, daughter of John Raymond Barker, who was buried on 16 January 1878. What must have been a particularly poignant service took place on 29 July 1868 when Francis Carnegie Rice, the 10 year-old son of Fairford's vicar, was buried having died of typhoid fever. During the 1860s and 1870s, possibly at the instigation of Reverend Rice or Thomas himself, it became a frequent occurrence for several children of the same family to be baptised together, usually including a newly-born child with several older siblings. On 8 December 1869 Thomas single-handedly baptised 13 children including four belonging to Isaac and Margaret Rose and six belonging to William and Elizabeth Wakefield. The Wakefield's children ranged from Sarah who had been born a few days prior to the service, to Susan who was aged 14. Although Thomas conducted many weddings at Fairford, it seemed that Reverend Rice or visiting clergy (such as Reverend Henry Raymond Barker of Daglingworth) tended to conduct most of the 'society' weddings while Thomas was left to do the rest.



Edwards College in Silver Street, South Cerney was built in 1834 as a result of a bequest from Ann Edwards.

The Mortons lived here from 1879 until their deaths

Photo © Nicholas Hobson

Thomas was still performing regular services at St Mary's in his 70s but in 1874 he was assisted by an additional curate when Edward Maynard arrived and who was replaced by John Merry in 1878. Between them these two curates performed nearly 80 baptisms, marriages and funerals from 1874 to 1879 thereby relieving Thomas of some of the burden.

After Thomas's retirement he and Elizabeth enjoyed almost nine years in the comfort of Edwards College before his death in 1888. A report on Thomas's funeral at All Hallows church in South Cerney states that he was buried on 25 January 1888 and that his service, conducted by Canon Peter Medd, was attended by a large number of Fairford citizens including Alexander Iles and Dr Daniel Iles of The Retreat, together with several clergymen.<sup>(15)</sup>

As for Thomas and Elizabeth's children, Joseph may have been influenced by his father's tales of ministering to sailors on the River Thames as he went to sea and eventually became a captain with the Union-Castle Steamship Company and ended his career as Marine Superintendent at Southampton. He is listed in Kelly's 1898 Hampshire Directory as living at 8 Shirley Road, Freemantle, close to Southampton's Western Docks. Joseph died on 25 April 1915 and in his death announcement in The Times his home address is given as 28A St Charles Square, North Kensington, London.<sup>(16)</sup> According to the Manitoba Historical Society's website<sup>(17)</sup>, Joseph's elder brother Thomas was born on 10 June 1846 and was educated at the Edward VI College in Gloucester. He emigrated to Canada in 1873 and farmed at Gladstone, Manitoba before becoming a grain dealer in Winnipeg. He served on the Manitoba Legislative Assembly from 1888 to 1903 and died on 24 February 1914.

Through a bit of 'detective work' and access to some very useful information resources Thomas Morton is now no longer simply a name in the parish registers. The information discovered during this search has given us a glimpse of the man behind the name but there is still much to discover; this isn't the end of the journey, it's just the beginning...

Chris Hobson  
2010

## REFERENCES

1. Census of England, Wales, Scotland, Channel Islands and Isle of Man records for 1841, 1851, 1861, 1871, 1881, 1891, 1901 available via Ancestry.co.uk at: <http://www.ancestry.co.uk/> Census information is also available from several other commercial online services.
2. *Cambridge University Alumni 1261-1900 via Ancestry* online database derived from *Alumni Cantabrigienses*. London: Cambridge University Press, 1922-1954
3. *John Bull*, 15 March 1845, page 172
4. *The Times*, 24<sup>th</sup> May 1844, page 6
5. *Church work amongst sailors in 64 home ports as set forth by the Lower House of the Convocation of Canterbury, and adopted by it February 15<sup>th</sup> 1875*. Published by W Wells Gardner, London, 1875. Available at: <http://bit.ly/dC3213>
6. *The Hull Packet and East Riding Times*, 12 January 1849
7. *The Hull Packet and East Riding Times*, 28 December 1849
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10. *The Hull Packet and East Riding Times*, 25 April 1851
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12. *The secret diary of Sarah Thomas: life in a Cotswold town 1860-1865* edited by June Lewis-Jones. Stroud: Nonsuch Publishing, 2007
13. *Kelly's Directory of Gloucestershire 1889*, available at: <http://bit.ly/cZdYqC>
14. *Wiltshire and Gloucestershire Standard*, 21 January 1888
15. *Wiltshire and Gloucestershire Standard*, 28 January 1888
16. *The Times*, 27 April 1915
17. Manitoba Historical Society website at: <http://bit.ly/bzdAj3>

## Fairford History Society Publications

Commander Charles Haultain, RN, KH (1787-1845)  
FHS Occasional Paper 1

The Honeybones of Fairford  
Occasional Paper 2

Valentine Strong – Cotswold stonemason  
Occasional Paper 3

Richard Green, Schoolmaster (1713-1767)  
Occasional Paper 4

A Christmas Railway Story  
Occasional Paper 5

Fairford's War Memorial and Roll of Honour  
Monograph 1

RAF Fairford, 1944  
Monograph 2

The Raymond-Barkers of Fairford Park  
Monograph 3

The Oldisworths of Fairford  
Monograph 4

The Tracys of Toddington and Fairford  
Monograph 5

Fairford residents' oral history CDs/taped interviews are also available.

Fairford Flyer - published in January and July

Fairford Now and Then

St Mary's Church Fairford Tomb Trail

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