

WILLIAM KIRKPATRICK RILAND BEDFORD (1826-1905)

Rector of Sutton Coldfield for forty two years, William Kirkpatrick Riland Bedford made a name for himself as an antiquarian, an expert on heraldry and an enthusiast for archery and cricket. The eldest son of, William Riland Bedford who had married Grace Campbell of Dumfries, he was born at the rectory in Sutton Coldfield on 12 July 1826; though he died and was cremated in London, his ashes were placed in the family vault at Holy Trinity Church.

William Kirkpatrick Riland Bedford was born into a clerical family that was comfortably-off and well-connected. His family had long filled the incumbency in Sutton Coldfield, and owned a large amount of property across the town. The rectory – sadly demolished in 1936 – was a thirteen-bedroom house built in the early eighteenth century and situated in its own parkland (now Rectory Park). One of his aunts on his father's side was married to Charles Parry, who knew Samuel Taylor Coleridge and William Wordsworth. Charles Kirkpatrick Sharpe, one of his uncles on his mother's side, was a noted antiquarian and artist and friend of Sir Walter Scott, and another, Matthew Sharpe, was an army officer and subsequently the liberally-minded Whig MP for Dumfries.

William Kirkpatrick Riland Bedford began his formal education at Sutton Coldfield Free Grammar School; later known as Bishop Vesey's Grammar School, it was in the 1830s a very small establishment under the direction of Charles Barker, perhaps known more for his passion for hunting rather than for his passion for educating. With his uncle, the incumbent rector Richard Williamson serving as a tutor, Riland Bedford managed to win a scholarship to the elite Westminster School in London. Here his days were occupied principally with the study of Latin and Greek. Riland Bedford became an undergraduate at Brasenose College, Oxford, serving as secretary of the Oxford Union and securing his degree in 1847. Some of the Brasenose friendships he formed proved to be life-long – for example, with William Alexander and Arthur Purey-Cust, who became, respectively Bishop of Armagh and Dean of York. By the time he claimed his M.A. in 1852, Riland Bedford had been installed as rector in Sutton Coldfield for two years. Ordained at Lichfield Cathedral in 1849, he had served a brief apprenticeship as curate in Southwell in Nottinghamshire before succeeding Richard Williamson as Sutton's rector.¹

¹ For Williamson's obit. see *Cambridge Evening Press*, 16 September 1865.

With the course of his life now charted, Riland Bedford married; Amy Houson, daughter of a Southwell gentleman, became his wife in September 1851 and together they became the parents of seven sons and three daughters.

A Victorian rector did more than preach, christen, marry and bury people. Riland Bedford played a full part in local affairs. The success of a bazaar held in Sutton Park in July 1854, in which a band played and aristocratic ladies from the Hartopp, Holbeche and Webster families presided over stalls, in raising many hundreds of pounds for local church building was attributed to his 'indefatigable exertions'.² Riland Bedford was particularly concerned that a church be built for those 'inconveniently remote from the parish church and in close proximity to the Roman Catholic college of Oscott'.³ Riland Bedford also gave lectures 'in a most clear and lucid style' on English history and particularly on his great interest of archery.⁴ Local jurisdiction was in the hands of men like Riland Bedford – who served as a magistrate, a guardian of the poor and, between 1850 and 1854, warden of Sutton Coldfield. He was also a director of the Birmingham, Erdington and Sutton Coldfield Railway Company; after rival plans were put forward, a railway line eventually opened in 1862.⁵

For six years after his appointment Riland Bedford worked assiduously in Sutton Coldfield, but at that point ill health led to him being granted leave of absence. His sabbatical lasted for thirteen years, and was spent principally in London and Edinburgh. It is not clear what ailed him, but he did undergo treatment, including at the hands of James Syme, Professor of Surgery at Edinburgh University. Riland Bedford's health was robust enough for him to undertake research and writing in these years, and soon after leaving Sutton Coldfield he published the first of his many books, a 'handsome and learned' catalogue of the arms of English bishops under the title *The Blaze of Episcopacy* (1858).⁶ He became a regular contributor to the *Gentleman's Magazine* - a long-running monthly periodical specializing in historical and antiquarian topics - and, more occasionally, also published pieces in *Woman's World*. From 1866 until its demise three years later Riland Bedford edited the *Atlas*; founded in 1826, this weekly newspaper was known for book, music and theatre criticism and for advocacy of temperance. It re-emerged as the *Public Schools Chronicle*, also edited for a time by Riland Bedford. *Etchings, with Photographs*

² *Wolverhampton Chronicle*, 2 August 1854.

³ *Aris's Birmingham Gazette*, 23 May 1853.

⁴ *Staffordshire Advertiser*, 15 November 1856.

⁵ For the full story see R. Lea, *Steaming up to Sutton* (Sutton Coldfield, 1984), pp. 5-19.

⁶ *London Evening Standard*, 30 July 1897.

from Original Drawings, Poetical and Prose Fragments (1869) also appeared at this time; a memorial volume to his uncle the artist Charles Kirkpatrick Sharpe, who had died in 1851, it was limited to 150 copies but warmly welcomed as 'highly piquant and readable, full of lively epigrams and fragrant scandal.'⁷

Whilst his uncle Matthew Sharpe was a Whig politician, Riland Bedford's political sympathies lay firmly with the Tories. At election times in North Warwickshire he joined Conservative committees, and in between attended Conservative dinners. He was a close friend of George Ward Hunt, who served as Chancellor of the Exchequer in Disraeli's administration of 1868 (and reputedly left his red box at home on budget day). He also knew well Sir Edmund Leechmere, who represented a number of constituencies in Worcestershire. An issue which particularly concerned Riland Bedford was the game laws, which regulated the killing of wild animals. Though these had been modified, he made clear, in a speech in October 1869, abolition was the most effective way of dealing with poaching.

Though he resumed his duties as rector of Sutton Coldfield in 1869, Riland Bedford spent the winters abroad – mostly in Malta but also in Gibraltar and the south of France. He believed that the benign climate of these places aided the health of his wife Amy, but he solidified his links by accepting official positions – he became, for example, chaplain to the Bishop of Gibraltar. He employed a curate and an assistant curate in Sutton Coldfield to assist with the carrying out of his duties and to enable him to pursue his other interests.

Riland Bedford became a Freemason whilst an undergraduate, and played a prominent role in their affairs for the rest of his life. He became the master of the Apollo University Lodge in Oxford, and Provincial Grand Master of Warwickshire and Staffordshire. Another title that he doubtless relished was conferred in 1861 - Grand Chaplain of England. At Riland Bedford's prompting the Freemasons of Warwickshire made a substantial donation to the restoration of the monument in St. Mary's Church in Warwick of Sir William Wilson, the architect of a number of notable seventeenth century buildings in Sutton Coldfield, including Moat House, and it was claimed a pupil of Sir Christopher Wren.

Archery had been practised in the parkland around the rectory by earlier generations of his family, and Riland Bedford took to it with enthusiasm.

⁷ *Edinburgh Evening Courant*, 10 December 1866.

Declaring the activity to be ‘a very healthy and agreeable amusement’, he helped with the formation of clubs, such as the Woodmen of Arden in Meriden.⁸ In the summer months cricket was also regularly played in the park. Riland Bedford had developed an interest in cricket at Oxford. In July 1847 he founded Sutton Coldfield Cricket Club and in July 1856 the Free Foresters, a fluid group of cricketers who also had an interest in archery. His eldest son later played for Warwickshire.⁹

The other great pleasure of Riland Bedford’s life was antiquarian research and writing. He books included *The Regulations of the Old Hospital of the Knights of St. John at Valetta* (1882), *Records of the Woodmen of Arden from 1785* (1885), *Three Hundred Years of a Family Living* (1889), *Malta and the Knights Hospitallers* (1894), *Annals of the Free Foresters from 1856 to the Present Day* (1895), *Outcomes of Old Oxford* (1899) and *Malta and the Knights Hospitallers* (1905). These books are hardly read today. Riland Bedford’s most enduring publication was his *History of Sutton Coldfield* (1891). It was said that ‘there are few homes in the royal borough where a copy is not to be found’, and it is still consulted by local historians today.

In 1890 Amy died and two years later Riland Bedford retired as rector of Sutton Coldfield. He spent much time in the next few years in London, but in 1898 became vicar of Walmley; for the next three years Riland Bedford, now in his early seventies, preached twice every Sunday. He also married a second time – to Margaret Browne. His final years were spent in London. He had a great love for the city, and lived in Earl’s Court. Riland Bedford died at his house in Fordwych Road, Cricklewood in January 1905.¹⁰ He left an estate valued at £18,281 13s. 6d. His second wife received £500 and the income from a trust fund worth £1500 and his children were the other beneficiaries. At the time of death his eldest son William Campbell Riland Bedford was rector of Sutton Coldfield; but when he left in 1907, this dynasty of rectors came to an end.

STEPHEN ROBERTS

AUSTRALIAN NATIONAL UNIVERSITY

⁸ *Aris’s Birmingham Gazette*, 19 December 1853.

⁹ See S. Roberts *Birmingham 1889: One Year in a Victorian City* (Birmingham, 2017), p. 30.

¹⁰ For obituary see *Sutton Coldfield News*, 20 January 1905.