

Fenton Hort



Fenton Hort was acclaimed by a contemporary as the greatest Anglican theologian of the nineteenth century. A more recent commentator, noting his perhaps over scrupulous scholarship, suggested he was the sort of man who used a microscope where others would have used a telescope. He was also a beloved if barely understood priest in this parish between 1857 and 1871, then as now twinned with Great Wymondley.

He was born in 1828, into a distinguished family in Dublin. His Grandfather was a friend of Swift and became Archbishop of Tuam. Hort himself demonstrated an early academic brilliance and began to translate Homer at the age of 9. At Rugby School, he overlapped with the hugely influential headmaster Thomas Arnold and caught some of his enlightened, kindly and intellectually courageous attitudes.

At Trinity College Cambridge, he studied first Classics and then Natural Sciences. He was already showing the breadth of curiosity, which remained a fundamental part of his character and at this time led him into close friendships with figures as disparate as John Ellerton, the hymn writer and Christian Socialist, and Clerk Maxwell, later Professor of Atomic Physics. In 1852 he became a fellow of Trinity and embarked on 5 years of contented study which laid the bedrock of the phenomenal scholarship in the New Testament and the development of the church and Christian Doctrine.

It was his marriage to Fanny Holland in June 1857 that brought him to St. Ippolyts. Hort was a shy man, who put as much commitment into his pastoral life as his academic one. As a result, he suffered a nervous breakdown. Having read some of his sermons, penned late on every Saturday night, I can see how the pressure brought him to his psychological knees. At least 15 pages of closely argued and perfectly constructed prose drawn out of a deep questing faith and profound knowledge. When he was actually in the parish, he taught, cared and prayed with exciting diligence but his early years here were frequently interrupted by long periods of recuperation. Not wasted time for Hort as he contributed

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both to the geological mapping of the south of England and to the classification of alpine plants.

Many of his endeavours in the parish were as typical of the age as his amateur enthusiasms. He had to face the ire of the church conservatives by introducing hymns to be sung by the whole congregation as he rejoiced in a sermon;

... here the whole hymn is sung with all the many voices as one voice. There is no part of the service in which the union and fellowship are so strongly expressed.

He visited the sick assiduously and was responsible for both the Sunday school and the nDay school in the village.

His thoroughness of scholarship is best exemplified by his notorious commentary on the letter of St James. He began in 1862 and 9 years later completed his observations on the first chapter. His most important scholarly contribution was to complete the most up to date Greek text of the New Testament; a huge intellectual task which took 28 years.

This gentle man was devoted to the open principals of the Church of England being wary of the potential tyrannies of certitude. In a letter to a women contemplating becoming a Roman Catholic because of its dogmatic rigidity and concerned about the Anglican tendency to let people make up their own minds, Hort celebrated the spirit of his own denomination:

I for one, heartily rejoice at it

St.Ippolytes is fortunate to have such a brilliant, wise and inspirational figure among its cohort of previous incumbents.