

Thomas Garth, Rector of Charlton-on-Otmoor, 1615–1643: Rake or Reformer?

CHRISTINE JACKSON

SUMMARY

In November 1617 the churchwardens of Charlton-on-Otmoor presented a case at the archdeaconry court in Oxford against their new rector, Thomas Garth, for negligent ministry, scandalous behaviour, and sexual misconduct. The outcome of the case is not known, but Garth appears to have taken up residence and installed a wife and family in the parish, remaining as incumbent for a further twenty-five years. It was rare in the post-Reformation period for formal complaints to be made against clergymen, and the fact that the case was pursued so vigorously suggests that there were wider and more deep-seated tensions within the parish and the wider local community. His accidental involvement in a long-standing dispute concerning the lease of the rectory and glebe may have antagonized his parishioners, added to which it is possible that he was seen as an unpalatable force for godly reformation in a long-neglected and religiously conservative parish. This article examines the complaints voiced by Garth's parishioners and locates them within the wider context of early modern parish life and the post-Reformation Church.

In February 1618 a group of Otmoor parishioners braved the doubtless inclement weather and waterlogged local road system and walked or rode to Oxford to make witness statements about the negligent ministry, unseemly behaviour, and rumoured sexual misconduct of their rector, Thomas Garth, M.A.¹ Their summons to the archdeaconry court was the inevitable consequence of a critical report on the rector's performance and morals submitted by the parish's churchwardens, John Kirby and John Pym, the previous autumn. Thomas Garth had been inaugurated as rector of Charlton-on-Otmoor by the Bishop of Oxford, John Bridges, a mere two years earlier, but in that time had clearly antagonized some parishioners and failed to impress or at least secure the support of others.² The charges levelled against him by parish representatives in the archdeaconry court were hard-hitting and ranged from failing to conduct services and perform baptisms, burials, and churching to reports of drunken behaviour and rumoured sexual misconduct. Witnesses from the neighbouring parish of Beckley were summoned to confirm Thomas Garth's neglect of his cure and provide details of his alleged sexual misconduct.³ There is no direct evidence of financial, doctrinal, liturgical, or social conflicts between the rector and his parishioners, although such clashes cannot be discounted.

In the early seventeenth century Charlton-on-Otmoor was a large, isolated rural parish of some two thousand acres, situated mid-way between the county town and diocesan centre of Oxford and the market town and rural deanery centre of Bicester.⁴ The parish embraced the straggling neighbouring hamlets of Murcott and Fencott, as well as the village of Charlton itself, and skirted the northern edge of the boggy floodplain of Otmoor, abutting the county boundary with Buckinghamshire. Travel within the parish, and to and from neighbouring towns and villages, was difficult because of the poor condition of local roads and tracks, which were sometimes impassable during the winter months due to the low-lying nature of the area and its

¹ ORO, Oxford Archdeaconry Papers, Depositions 1616–17, c.118, fols 109v, 110, 110v, 111, 119v, 120v, 120, and 121.

² ORO, Oxford Diocesan Papers, c.264.

³ ORO, Oxford Archdeaconry Papers, Depositions 1616–17, fols 108, 108v, 124v, 125.

⁴ *VCH Oxon*, 6, p. 80.

susceptibility to flooding.⁵ A tentative analysis based on subsidy and hearth tax evidence suggests that the population of the parish rose from about 280 to about 340 between the 1520s and 1660s, with a higher rate of increase occurring in Charlton than in the hamlets of Murcott and Fencott.⁶ The parish register reveals a significant natural increase in population (an excess of about 150 baptisms over burials during the three decades 1600 to 1629) in the three villages in the early seventeenth century.⁷

Agriculture was the major source of income in the parish. All three villages operated a mixed farming economy with cattle, horses, sheep, pigs, and poultry appearing in surviving inventories, together with crops of wheat, barley, beans, and hay.⁸ There was a sprinkling of the tradesmen and craftsmen needed for rural self-sufficiency, including a miller, blacksmith, wheelwright, cooper, weaver, tailor, cordwainer, butcher, and several alehouse and inn-keepers, mostly located in Charlton-on-Otmoor.⁹ They often combined agriculture with their craft or trade. Taxation evidence suggests that leading parishioners were slightly more prosperous in the seventeenth century than in the early sixteenth century, but that there was greater wealth at the top of the social hierarchy in Charlton-on-Otmoor than in Murcott and Fencott.¹⁰ Whilst Charlton saw a rise in its yeomen population during the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, and many seized the opportunity to become freeholders following the sale of land in the parish by Edmund Shillingford in 1622, husbandmen continued to be the predominant occupational group in Murcott and Fencott and copyhold the main form of land tenure.¹¹ Manorial control over the settlements was exerted by courts held by successive lords of the manor of Charlton and, with respect to part of Murcott and Fencott, by the dean and chapter of Westminster, lords of the parent manor of Islip.¹² Manorial control over rights of common on Otmoor was exercised by the lords of the manor of Beckley.¹³ The gentry were conspicuous by their absence in the parish, and the only house of note was the rectory, described as the ‘manor house of the rectory’ in 1634.¹⁴

The parish church of St Mary was built on a ‘domed “island” of cornbrash’ in the centre of Charlton-on-Otmoor and dominated both village and landscape.¹⁵ There was a church in the village from at least the eleventh century, but it was rebuilt during the thirteenth century and substantially extended and expensively embellished in the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries.¹⁶ There were

⁵ John Leland, for example, was forced to change his travel plans c.1540, recording that he would have taken the road from Bicester to Islip ‘yf the waters had not beene up’: L. Toulmin Smith, ed., *The Itinerary of John Leland, 1535–40* (London, 1907), pt 5, 2, p. 110.

⁶ *VCH Oxon*, 6, pp. 358–61. A multiplier of 6.5 has been used to convert the total number of tax payers in the first instalment of the lay subsidy of 1523 (43) and the hearth tax of 1662 (53) to estimated total populations for the two dates.

⁷ ORO, MS DD.PAR.Charlton.on.Otmoor, C.1, Register of Baptisms, Burials and Marriages for St Mary’s Church, Charlton-on-Otmoor, 1568–1701.

⁸ ORO, MS Wills Oxon. See, for example, the inventories of Richard Cooper, 1639, 13/2/3; Nathaniel Kirby, 1643, 298/4/18; Richard Alley alias Leveret, 1649, 1/6/24; William Darling alias Brooks, 1680, 164/1/43.

⁹ ORO, MS Wills Oxon. See, for example, the wills and inventories of John Symonds, 1652, 61/1/36; George Guilder, 1698, 166/3/18; Francis Silverside, 1630, 100/2/35; Edmund Maynard, 1697, 141/2/40; William Deeley, 1624, 17/4/13; William Jarrett, 1628, 136/3/22; John Gurden, 1629, 26/1/7.

¹⁰ *VCH Oxon*, 6, pp. 86, 360–1. In the hearth tax of 1665 Charlton-on-Otmoor boasted 3 houses with 4 hearths (plus the rectory with 6) compared with 1 in Murcott and none in Fencott. M. M. B. Weinstock, ed., *Hearth Tax Returns, Oxfordshire, 1665*, ORS 21 (Oxford, 1940), pp. 194–6.

¹¹ *VCH Oxon*, 6, p. 83. By 1693, for example, John Alley, alias Leveret, formerly of Charlton-on-Otmoor, was described as a gentleman and had moved to Headington: Oriel College Archives, Charlton Deeds, DLL7 (3).

¹² *VCH Oxon*, 6, pp. 82–3, 213.

¹³ Otmoor was a waste of the manor of Beckley and had its own manorial court known as the ‘Moor Court’. The villages of Charlton, Murcott, Fencott, Studley, Beckley, Oddington, and Noke – sometimes known as the seven towns of Otmoor – enjoyed rights of common on the moor and sent representatives to the court. M. G. Hobson and K. L. H. Price, *Otmoor and its Seven Towns* (Oxford, 1961), p. 9.

¹⁴ Queen’s College Archives, Charlton-on-Otmoor, Petitions and Responses, Q6, fol. iv.

¹⁵ *VCH Oxon*, 6, p. 80.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 90–1.

no outlying chapels in Murcott and Fencott in this period. No direct evidence of the parish laity's response to the successive Henrician, Edwardian, and Elizabethan Protestant Reformations or of the religious beliefs and practice prevalent in the community in the early seventeenth century has survived, but some clues can be gleaned from architectural and documentary evidence. St Mary's Church is amongst the few English churches to retain its 'sumptuously carved ... painted and gilded ...' fifteenth- or early sixteenth-century rood-screen. It may at an early date have replaced images of the crucifix and the Virgin Mary, which, together with an image of St John, had been displayed aloft the rood-screen in pre-Reformation days, with evergreen and flower garlands (a Charlton practice recorded in an early nineteenth-century engraving).¹⁷ As with other conservative rural parishes, the successive Protestant Reformations, however slowly and reluctantly implemented, must have seriously disrupted the three villages' traditional cycle of piety and ritual, closely allied with seasonal farming activities, manorial regulation, and the preservation of family and neighbourliness.¹⁸

In the absence of churchwardens' accounts, wills provide the main documentary source for the impact of religious change in the parish, but they need to be handled cautiously when used as indicators of belief, because the religious sentiments expressed are frequently formulaic and may reflect the beliefs of the scribe rather than the testator.¹⁹ Furthermore, whilst shifts in the phrasing of preambles, particularly when they coincide with shifts in mortuary provision, may be indicative of changes in religious belief or practice, they may equally reflect the pragmatic acceptance of legal constraints by an individual or community.²⁰ Examination of the preambles of surviving wills from Charlton-on-Otmoor, Murcott, and Fencott suggests that the successive Protestant Reformations of the sixteenth century were only slowly implemented and absorbed in the parish. As late as 1560, for example, the will of Anne Blag of Murcott bequeathed 'my soule unto all mightie God our ladie Synt Marie with all the whole companie in heaven', a popular Catholic formulation found in earlier wills, such as that of Thomas Priest of Charlton in 1538.²¹ Wills such as the 1597 will of William Phillips of Murcott, which bequeathed 'my soule unto almighty god my creator, Jesus Christ my Redeemer and the holly ghost my sanctifier', and the 1605 will of Richard Cooper of Fencott, which bequeathed 'my soule into the hands of allmightie god my maker savio[u]r and redeemer', appear to be more Protestant in flavour, but, as Eamon Duffy points out, actually utilize ambiguous formulae acceptable to both Protestants and Catholics and may merely be indicative of 'an accommodation to the theologically favoured idiom of a Protestant regime'.²² Both testators followed traditional practice in leaving 2*d.* to the mother church of Oxford, and Cooper additionally left 5*s.* to his parish church for unspecified purposes. By the second decade of the seventeenth century some wills, such as that left by Clement Saunders of Charlton-on-Otmoor in 1613, had acquired a more overtly Protestant tenor, 'hoping and being assured that by the bitter death & passion of Jesus Christ my alone Savio[r] and Redeemer and through faith in his blood

¹⁷ J. Sherwood and Nikolaus Pevsner, *The Buildings of England: Oxfordshire* (Harmondsworth, 1974), p. 530; J. A. Dunkin, *The History and Antiquities of the Hundreds of Bullingdon and Ploughley*, 1 (London, 1823), p. 207.

¹⁸ See, e.g., Keith Wrightson and David Levine, *Poverty and Piety in an English Village: Terling, 1525–1700*, 2nd edn (Oxford, 1995); Eamon Duffy, *The Voices of Morebath: Reformation and Rebellion in an English Village* (New Haven, CT, and London, 2001).

¹⁹ Eamon Duffy, *The Stripping of the Altars: Traditional Religion in England, 1400–1580* (New Haven, CT, and London, 1992), pp. 504–23; Margaret Spufford, *Contrasting Communities: English Villagers in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries* (Cambridge, 1974), pp. 319–44; Claire Cross, 'Wills as evidence of popular piety in the Reformation period: Leeds and Hull, 1520–1640', in David Loades, ed., *The End of Strife: Death, Reconciliation and Repression in Christian Spirituality* (Edinburgh, 1984), pp. 44–57; Caroline Litzenberger, *The English Reformation and the Laity: Gloucestershire, 1540–1580* (Cambridge, 1997), pp. 170–1.

²⁰ Duffy, *Stripping of the Altars*, p. 505.

²¹ ORO, MS Wills Oxon, Will of Anne Blag, 1560, 183.387; Will of Thomas Priest, 1538, 180.237.

²² *Ibid.*, Will of William Philips, 1597, 50/2/30; Will of Richard Cooper, 1605, 11/2/36; Duffy, *Stripping of the Altars*, p. 523.

I am of the Number of them that shall be saved', but none declared a sole reliance upon Christ's merits for salvation.²³

The advowson of the parish of Charlton-on-Otmoor was owned by Sheen Priory before the Dissolution of the Monasteries, but in 1543 was granted by the Crown to the Queen's College, Oxford.²⁴ The value of the living (recorded as £21 9s. 4d. in the *Valor Ecclesiasticus* of 1535) was one of the richest in the Bicester deanery, and the size of the rectory, together with its proximity to Oxford, ensured that it was a desirable living, except when impoverished in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries by the grant of a long and detrimental lease on the rectory, which reserved only one room in the rectory and an annual stipend of £30 for the rector.²⁵ Under the patronage of both Sheen Priory and the Queen's College, the village enjoyed a long run of distinguished rectors, who pursued prestigious careers in the Church or university. These included Thomas Key, a canon of Lincoln, 1467–75, Martin Joyner, a future chancellor of Lincoln Cathedral, 1475–82, James Fitzjames, a canon of St Paul's, 1512–17, William Dennyson, Provost of Queen's College, 1543–59, and Alan Scot, also Provost of Queen's College, 1559–78.²⁶ Garth's immediate predecessor, Henry Airay, 1606–15, a renowned Puritan preacher and college reformer, was appointed Provost of Queen's College in 1599, Vice-Chancellor of Oxford University in 1606, and Prebendary of Canterbury Cathedral in 1609.²⁷ Inevitably, most, if not all, were non-resident and opted to employ a curate to minister to the needs of the parish.²⁸

Thomas Garth was inaugurated as rector of Charlton-on-Otmoor on 20 October 1615.²⁹ Like many members of the Queen's College, he hailed from the north of England (the college had been founded in 1341 to educate men from Cumberland and Westmorland for the priesthood) and was almost certainly grammar-school educated.³⁰ He may have been a member of the upwardly mobile Garth family, which lived in the Penrith area and provided legal services to the Cumberland gentry over several generations.³¹ He matriculated, aged 17, as a commoner of Oxford University in 1594. He was awarded his B.A. on 17 December 1597 and transferred to Hart Hall, where his M.A. was awarded on 8 July 1600.³² Both the Queen's College and Exeter College, which managed Hart Hall, were renowned in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries as 'seminaries for godly ministers'.³³ Garth's career for the following fifteen years remains largely uncharted. It seems unlikely that he spent much of the period undertaking further study at the university, since no further degrees were awarded. It is not known when he was ordained, but it is possible that he spent much of the period working as a curate whilst awaiting preferment to a benefice. He appears to have served briefly as curate at Charlton-on-Otmoor from 1606, but had been replaced by 1608.³⁴ His marital status at the time of his institution is unclear.

²³ ORO, MS Wills Oxon, Will of Clement Saunders, 59/2/24.

²⁴ *VCH Oxon*, 6, p. 88.

²⁵ The rectory of St Nicholas's, Islip, e.g., was valued at only £17 4s. 2d. in 1535: *ibid.*, pp. 88, 215. See below.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 89.

²⁷ C. M. Dent, *Protestant Reformers in Elizabethan Oxford*, (Oxford, 1983), pp. 173–7, 204–5, 214–15; A. J. Hegarty, 'Airay, Henry (1558x60–1616)' *ODNB*. <http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/246> (accessed 2 June 2007).

²⁸ Airay certainly employed a curate, despite his passionate advocacy of a resident godly ministry. Early English Books on Line (hereafter EEBO), Henry Airay, 'The just and necessary apologie of Henry Airay the late reverend provost of Queenes College in Oxford touching his suite in law for the rectories of Charleton' (1920), p. 39. The work was printed posthumously in 1621, with an 'Attestation' annexed by an anonymous 'worthy and judicious friend' (Thomas Wilson): Dent, *Protestant Reformers*, pp. 214–15.

²⁹ ORO, Oxford Diocesan Papers, c. 264.

³⁰ Joseph Foster, ed., *Alumni Oxonienses [1500–1714]*, early series, 2 (Oxford, 1891), p. 551.

³¹ TNA, Chancery Extents for Debts Series, C.141/100/20; prob 11/288.

³² Foster, ed., *Alumni Oxonienses*, p. 551.

³³ Dent, *Protestant Reformers*, pp. 171–80.

³⁴ Entries in the parish register from April 1606 appear to be made in Garth's hand, but by 1608 his place had been taken by Peter Norcutt (1592–1635), who writes and witnesses wills 1608–14. There may have been ill feeling when Garth rather than Norcott was presented to the Charlton living in 1616. Norcott may have been rejected for the living by Queen's College because he had not undergone university training. There is no record of his matriculation at either Oxford or

The ministerial responsibilities of the Stuart clergy were laid down in the Church of England's *Constitutions and Canons Ecclesiasticall* of 1604. They were required to conduct morning and evening services and to catechize the young on Sundays, celebrate holy days, read the litany on Wednesdays and Fridays, offer Holy Communion at least three times a year, and to conduct christenings, marriages, and burials. A high standard of personal conduct was prescribed 'having always in mind that they ought to excel all others in Purity of life, and should be examples to the People to live well and Christianly'.³⁵ The hierarchy of the Church of England maintained control over the clergy and discipline amongst both clergy and laity through regular inspections of all of its parishes.³⁶ The key interrogatees in the visitations were the parish churchwardens, although the clergy were required to report on some matters, including recusancy. The practice of appointing churchwardens dates back to the thirteenth century. There was no property or equivalent qualification for the position, but those elected (usually at an annual parish meeting during the Easter period) needed to be literate and numerate and to have some standing in the community in order to perform the required duties. The duties of churchwardens were onerous and potentially unpopular. They included responsibility for maintaining the church fabric and church accounts, ensuring parishioners attended church and brought children for baptism, reporting incidences of schism, heresy, adultery, whoredom, incest, drunkenness, swearing, non-attendance at church or Communion, and reporting any failure of duty by the priest or church officers.³⁷ As in many parishes, Charlton-on-Otmoor normally changed its churchwardens annually at Easter and drew upon a pool of prominent local families. Care was taken to ensure that the interests of both the village and its hamlets were represented by those elected.

Visitations were normally conducted twice yearly at Easter and Michaelmas by the archdeacon and every three to four years by the bishops of the Oxford diocese. The churchwardens were required to report in person to a specified church and to make their presentments on oath. They were supplied in advance with a book or list of 'visitation articles' specifying the faults to be reported and were liable to prosecution if they neglected their duty.³⁸ There are no presentation records to indicate whether the churchwardens of Charlton-on-Otmoor, John Kirby, a yeoman from Charlton, and John Pym, a husbandman from Fencott, reported Thomas Garth's neglect of his cure in the visitation conducted at Michaelmas 1617, but on 5 November 1617 they presented a case against him in Oxford to Anthony Blinkow, Official of the Archdeaconry Court.³⁹ By this date rumours had been circulating for at least a week (since 'Allhallowtyde') of the sexual misconduct of the rector on a visit to London in Michaelmas term 1617.⁴⁰ The attestations of witnesses summoned to provide evidence against Thomas Garth in the following months have survived but not his *responsa personalia* to the charges levelled against him.

The parish witnesses in February 1618 included four men of substance: Richard Alley, alias Leveret, a yeoman from Charlton-on-Otmoor, Richard Cooper, a prosperous husbandman from Fencott, and William Wyatt and George Guildler, both yeomen from Murcott.⁴¹ All served as churchwarden during the years 1609 to 1620, although only George Guildler appears to have been

Cambridge. Norcott was instituted as vicar of Beckley on 18 Jan. 1619, by the lay patron Edmund Izod, alias Shillingford: ORO, Charlton-on-Otmoor Parish Register; MS Wills Oxon: <http://www.theclergydatabase.org.uk>, Appointment Evidence Record, ID 92654 (accessed 29 May 2008).

³⁵ EEBO, *Constitutions and Canons Ecclesiasticall* (1604), § xiii, xv, xxi, xlv, lx, lxxv.

³⁶ John Spurr, *The Post-Reformation: Religion, Politics and Society in Britain, 1603–1714* (Harlow, 2006), pp. 240–1.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 240.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 241.

³⁹ ORO, Oxford Archdeaconry Papers, Instance Act Book, d.10, fol. 173; MS Wills Oxon, Will of John Kirby, 1642, 39/3/24; Will and Inventory of John Pym, 1637, 51/3/12.

⁴⁰ ORO, Oxford Archdeaconry Papers, Depositions 1616–17, c.118, fol. 111.

⁴¹ ORO, Charlton-on-Otmoor Parish Register; MS Wills Oxon, Will and Inventory of Richard Alley, alias Leveret, 1649, 1/6/24; Will and Inventory of Richard Cooper, Jun., 1639, 13/2/3.

literate.⁴² The other parish witnesses who were either selected or volunteered to provide evidence at the archdeaconry court were John Harris, alehouse keeper, and Thomas Pym, butcher, both of Charlton-on-Otmoor. The group thus included representatives from the two hamlets as well as from Charlton-on-Otmoor itself, but no women. Harris and Pym were seemingly included alongside the more substantial parish representatives because they were able and willing to provide eyewitness evidence of Thomas Garth's unseemly behaviour in the village and to confirm the scurrilous rumour circulating about him. Three witnesses from the neighbouring parish of Beckley were also summoned to appear before the archdeaconry court to provide details of Thomas Garth's alleged sexual misconduct and to confirm the spread of the public fame about his behaviour. Two were men of higher social standing than the Charlton representatives, Thomas Blades, the vicar of Beckley, and Richard Pinson, a gentleman from the hamlet of Studley, whilst the third, John Townsend, was a cordwainer and the hayward for the manorial court of Otmoor.⁴³ Whether Thomas Blades, with or without the assistance of Richard Pinson, encouraged the Charlton parishioners to take action against Thomas Garth is not known.

Richard Alley, alias Leveret, provided the first and most detailed deposition of Thomas Garth's ministerial shortcomings. He gave evidence to the archdeaconry court on 4 February 1618 that

since he became the vicar of Charlton arlat [*sic*] hath beene and is exceeding negligent in the dischargd of his cure here soe that through his absence thence there hath beene noe prayers read in that church for 14 severall sundayes att the least w[i]th[i]n thes last twelveth moneth fyve of w[hi]ch sundayes were since the last terme.

He deposed further that

in Candlemas terme this tyme twelve moneth there was a childe of one of the p[a]r[i]shioners of Charlton to be xpened [*christened*] there uppon a Sunday and there being noe prayers read that day in the church there nor any Minister to xpen [*christen*] the childe, the said childe was then had to an other church to be xpened [*christened*] and the way then being full of waters and scarce passageable diverse of the weemen (as this d[e]ponat did heare them say) were much endaingered.

He also complained that

w[i]th[i]n this last half yeare uppon a sabeth day att morning prayer whilest a psalme was in singing the said Thomas Garth did goe out of the church having his surplisse on to the much admiracon of all or most of the congregacon. And this deponens was then in the Church. And he this deponat did credibly heare say that while the said Garth was then absen from the Church he was seene to goe in the streete att Charlton from howse to howse wth his surplisse uppon him.

Finally he reported that

from about Michaelmas last here hath beene and nowe is a publique and generall reporte and fame amongst the p[a]r[i]shioners of Charlton arlat and frequently talked of by all or most of the best sort of people there that the said Garth did lye in naked bed togeather w[i]th an other mans wyfe as the [a]fersaid Thomas Garth did travayle to London.⁴⁴

Richard Cooper's short deposition, made on 12 February, was brief and discreet, recalling 'IX sundayes w[i]th[i]n this last twelve moneth on which sundayes there were read evening prayers there severall dayes only and noe more' and '2 children xpened [*christened*] out of that p[ar]ishe

⁴² Only George Guilder and John Harris signed their depositions. Thomas Pym initialled his deposition and Richard Alley, alias Leveret, Richard Cooper, and William Wyatt made their mark.

⁴³ ORO, Oxford Archdeaconry Papers, Depositions 1616–17, c.118, fols 108, 108v, 124v, 125.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, fols 109v–110.

... for want of his pr[e]sence or abode there'.⁴⁵ William Wyatt recalled on 11 February 'seven Sundayes and one Holyday w[i]th[i]n this last yeare' when 'there hath beene noe prayers att all read in the church of Charlton'. He also vividly recalled the hazardous journey made by one of the families to another parish to get their baby christened, having been present when 'one of w[hi]ch children and the p[a]ter [*sic*] that carayed him were much endaingered through the waters'.⁴⁶

George Guilder and John Harris complained that Garth had been absent from Charlton on eight and six Sundays, respectively, and one holy day. John Harris reported on 4 February that 'in this last yeare diverse weemen of Charlton have beene fayne to travayle to other churches to be churched', in addition to the 'diverse children ... carayed to other p[ari]shes to be xpened [*christened*] for want of Minister at their owne church diverse of them like to miscarry by the way through the bigness of the waters'. George Guilder additionally complained on 12 February that Garth had on occasion been absent when required to bury the dead or church women following childbirth. Both confirmed the report of Garth leaving the church during the singing of the first psalm to search out absent members of the congregation. Harris admitted to being at home with his wife and children when the vicar came to the door to ask who was in the alehouse.⁴⁷

Thomas Pym recounted to the court on 11 February that about midsummer last he and Thomas Garth had played football with William Witham and Thomas Priest, both also Charlton parishioners,

... at w[hi]ch tyme [he said] Mr Garth was overtaken w[i]th drink that he did some tymes reele. And att that tyme one Mumford & Cooper wrastling there w[i]th on[e] other and afterwards lying a long upon the ground on his back the said Mr Garth uppon a wager then offred to be layd did attempt to take him upp where upon the said Cooper caught hold of him that the said Mr Garth fell downe backward and thereby the seeme of his jerkin or gowne was torne.

Both John Harris and Thomas Pym confirmed that

about these last 3 monethes that it hath beene and is generally suspected and very much reported and taulked of w[i]th[i]n the p[ari]she of Charlton arlat that the arlat Thomas Garthe the last Michaelmas terme on this way to London did lye in naked bed together with another man's wyfe.⁴⁸

Circumstantial evidence of the alleged sexual misconduct of Thomas Garth was provided by Thomas Blades and Richard Pinson on 31 January 1618. Pinson's account is brief and factual. He recounted that 'a certain young woeman a mans wife (as she reported herself to be) in Michaelmas terme last travayling with Oxford Waggon towards London upon a morning out of Bekonsfeild in the company of this deponent and divers others and the arlat Thomas Garth', when asked where she, her husband, and Thomas Garth had spent the night, replied that 'they three did lye in on bed the same bed together her husband on the one side of her and the said Garth on the other syde'.⁴⁹ Thomas Blades told the court that his wife, Catherine, together with Richard Pinson and other witnesses had heard Thomas Garth respond that the young woman 'did but jest', but that she had denied this. He also confirmed the circulation of a 'publique fame and common reporte' of the incident in the parishes of Charlton-on-Otmoor and Beckley.⁵⁰ Neither deponent was seemingly able or willing to claim that Garth had actually engaged in sexual activity, presumably because there was no eyewitness evidence, but Blades at the very least sought to establish that his fellow

⁴⁵ Ibid., fols 120r-v.

⁴⁶ Ibid., fols 119v-120.

⁴⁷ Ibid., fols 120v, 121, 110, 110v.

⁴⁸ Ibid., fols 110v-111; 110-11.

⁴⁹ Ibid. fol. 108.

⁵⁰ Ibid. fols 108r-v.

clergyman's reputation was compromised. John Townsend merely confirmed on 18 February 1618 the widespread rumour of Thomas Garth's sexual misconduct and gave evidence that the rector had neglected his ministry over the previous twelve months.⁵¹

There are clearly inconsistencies even in the relatively straightforward evidence presented about Thomas Garth's neglect of his cure. The individual recollections of the number of church services cancelled due to his non-attendance vary in number, but this is not surprising, since it is unlikely that many – if any – of the deponents kept an accurate written record of his absences. Inspection of the surviving baptismal registers of neighbouring churches does not confirm the claims that parishioners were forced to take their babies to be christened in other parishes, but the register for one of the nearest churches, St Swithun's, at Merton, survives only from 1635.⁵² The cancellation of services must have been particularly galling for parishioners from Murcott, who were constrained to walk two miles to Charlton along the medieval 'Church Way', but at least by this date they were no longer required to ford the river Ray, which had been bridged in 1483.⁵³ The most likely explanation for Thomas Garth's failure to conduct services is that he was non-resident, as reported by the witness Richard Cooper. With only one room available for his use in the rectory and the inadequate stipend paid by the lessee of the rectory and glebe, he may have attempted to serve the parish from Oxford.⁵⁴ There is no evidence that he was a pluralist. Although the non-residence of the rector was not a new experience for the parish, perhaps Garth could not or would not pay for a curate to conduct services and provide pastoral care in his absence, as he was required to do under canon law.⁵⁵

Thomas Pym's account of Thomas Garth's drunkenness and unseemly drunken behaviour is not confirmed by the other deponents, but the fact that Pym was an eyewitness, and other named parishioners were present when the incident occurred, suggests that the deposition is factual and reliable. Since no other incidents are reported, it may have been an isolated incident of such behaviour, perhaps resulting from an over-zealous attempt to socialize with villagers. Such behaviour was expressly prohibited by the *Constitutions and Canons Ecclesiasticall* of 1604, which laid down that 'No ecclesiastical person shall at any time, other than for their honest Necessities resort to any Taverns or Alehouses ... [or] give themselves to any base or servile labour, or to drinking, or Riot ...'.⁵⁶

The alleged sexual misconduct of Thomas Garth – probably stretched to incontinence or adultery in the public fame and common report of the incident – poses a more serious problem. It is impossible to determine whether the initial enquiry about Garth's sleeping arrangements in Beaconsfield was mischievous or well founded. It was common for travellers to share beds in inns, but perhaps the arrangements on this occasion were sufficiently unusual to arouse suspicion. It was doubtless more usual for members of the same sex to share a bed, and Pinson suggests that there was some doubt as to whether the man travelling with the woman was actually her husband. The difference in social rank between the parties would also have attracted interest. The potentially bawdy conjunction of a middle-aged clergyman with a young woman of dubious reputation and marital status would not have escaped the notice of beady-eyed fellow travellers seeking amusement on their journey, and the young woman may have played along with them. Regardless of whether Thomas Garth was innocent or guilty of sexual misconduct, his behaviour violated canonical guidance on seemly behaviour and transgressed social expectations of his rank

⁵¹ Ibid. fols 124v-125.

⁵² ORO, Parish Register Transcripts, St Mary's Church, Ambrosden, St Swithun's Church, Merton, and St Andrew's Church, Oddington.

⁵³ C. J. Bond, 'Otmoor', in *The Evolution of the Marshland Landscapes*, Oxford University Department for External Studies (Oxford, 1981), p. 124.

⁵⁴ See p. 56 below.

⁵⁵ *Constitutions and Canons Ecclesiasticall*, § xlvi.

⁵⁶ Ibid., § lxxv.

and vocation, thus placing him visibly at risk of sexual temptation and compromising not only his own reputation, but also that of his fellow clergy.

It is unclear whether Thomas Garth was married at the time the incident occurred, because it has not proved possible thus far to trace a record of his marriage. It seems unlikely that he would have married before he obtained a sufficient living, but he may have married shortly after his institution as rector at Charlton-on-Otmoor. It does not seem unreasonable to posit that he took the decision – or was advised – to marry, in order to satisfy his sexual appetites and safeguard his reputation. The parish record of the baptisms and burials of his children suggests, though not conclusively, that he married after the alleged sexual misconduct at Beaconsfield. He was certainly married by the summer of 1618, since he records the baptism of James, the son of Thomas Garth, in his own parish register on 30 March 1619. The burial of an infant, Thomas Garth, is recorded on 24 February 1620, possibly a stillbirth, since the baptism is not recorded. The baptism of a daughter, Mary, is recorded on 22 February 1622 and of twin children, John and Amy, on 4 January 1625, with the burial of Amy three days later. A problem is posed by the burial of his daughter Susan, age unknown but clearly not an infant, on 20 December 1624. It is tempting to assume that she was born in 1620–1, away from Charlton, and that her baptism is recorded elsewhere, but it is perhaps more likely that she was born in 1618 or earlier in the home parish of Thomas Garth's wife, Mary. The birth of another son, Thomas, is recorded on 13 September 1629. Thomas Garth was clearly living in the village during this period, and, with the exception of a stretch spent in a debtor's prison in 1634 (the parish register is maintained in a different hand from 15 June to 4 December 1634), appears to have remained resident in the parish until December 1642 or the early months of 1643. Seemingly he then abandoned his cure, following the deaths of his wife and teenage daughter.⁵⁷ The death rate amongst Thomas Garth's children appears high, even by contemporary standards, but infant mortality rates in the low-lying and isolated parish exceeded national trends in the seventeenth century.⁵⁸

The outcome of the charges levelled against Thomas Garth in the archdeaconry court in 1618 is not known. It seems likely that the accusation of sexual misconduct was difficult to prove and that Garth was, at most, censured for the neglect of his cure and for unseemly personal conduct. Garth was certainly not without merit in the administration of his cure. The neat and orderly parish registers of the period are maintained in his own hand and in accordance with official prescriptions laid down in the *Constitutions and Canons Ecclesiasticall* of 1604, concerning the recording of baptisms, burials, and marriages and the preservation of such records in both parish and diocese.⁵⁹ Both Garth and the churchwardens witnessed the accuracy of the record maintained in the parish register at the foot of each page. The annual dispatch of the register transcript to the bishop's office is also noted.⁶⁰ The fact that Thomas Garth remained in post until late 1642 or early 1643, and that Richard Alley, alias Leveret, Richard Cooper, William Wyatt, and George Guilder served as churchwardens in later years suggests that both minister and parish, whether by common agreement or force of necessity, put the case behind them. However, the appointment of Richard Alley, alias Leveret, and Richard Cooper as churchwardens at Easter 1619 and William Wyatt in 1620 may indicate that Thomas Garth's critics exercised influence in the parish in the years following the presentment.

⁵⁷ Thomas Garth's wife, Mary, was buried on 6 Feb. 1641. His daughter Mary, aged 18, was buried on 20 Oct. 1642. The last entry in the parish register in Garth's hand is made in Dec. 1642. There is then a gap until Oct. 1643: ORO, Charlton-on-Otmoor Parish Register. Garth's disappearance and apparent failure to submit his resignation may reflect not only his personal tragedy, but also the arrival of the Civil War in the Oxford area, when the university town and diocesan centre was adopted as the headquarters of the Royalist party. The fate of Garth thereafter remains unclear.

⁵⁸ The Cambridge Population Group estimates that c.25 per cent of children died before the age of 10 in seventeenth-century England, with over half of the deaths occurring in the first year of life: E. A. Wrigley, R. S. Davies, J. E. Oeppen, and R. S. Schofield, eds, *English Population History from Family Reconstitution, 1580–1837* (Cambridge, 1999), pp. 217–22.

⁵⁹ *Constitutions and Canons Ecclesiasticall*, § lxx.

⁶⁰ ORO, Charlton-on-Otmoor Parish Register.

It seems likely that there was rather more to the dispute than meets the eye. Although churchwardens were invited twice a year to report their minister for a wide range of administrative, pastoral, liturgical, doctrinal, and moral offences on pain of prosecution, few did.⁶¹ Indeed, by the early seventeenth century the number of complaints had declined, as the quality and discipline of ministers improved, following the late Elizabethan drive to create a graduate ministry.⁶² Formal complaints were rare, especially against rectors and vicars, and, except when made in pursuit of personal feuds, usually focused upon neglect of the cure. The fact that action was taken in this case suggests that there were wider and more deep-seated tensions within the parish, and that these may have seeped out into neighbouring Otmoor parishes. It is notable that Richard Cooper, George Guilder, and William Wyatt, the representatives from Murcott and Fencott, focus exclusively on Thomas Garth's inadequate performance of his ministry, leaving the Charlton parishioners to report his inappropriate behaviour and the rumour of his sexual misconduct. The split may reflect the isolation of Murcott and Fencott within the parish and the reluctance of men of substance to repeat second-hand and unsubstantiated gossip, but it cannot be discounted that the main thrust of the campaign against Thomas Garth was personal and driven by a group of hostile parishioners from Charlton-on-Otmoor.

Anticlericalism remained a problem for the post-Reformation Church. Evidence from visitation and church court records indicates that clergymen continued to be bombarded with insults and slander. They were commonly denounced as liars, cheats, drunkards, and adulterers by their parishioners and insulted with epithets such as knave, jackanape, and dog, or variations on the same.⁶³ Contemporaries openly acknowledged the contempt borne by the clergy. The poet-clergyman George Herbert explains that

The Countrey Parson knows well, that both for the generall ignominy which is cast upon the profession, and much more for those rules which out of his choysesst judgment hee hath resolved to observe ... he must be despised; because this hath been the portion of God his master, and of Gods Saints his Brethren, and this is foretold, that it shall be so still, until things be no more.⁶⁴

Herbert, like others, attributed the contempt to a widespread reluctance to accept moral correction. This may have become more of an issue from the later sixteenth century, with the rise of Puritanism and the drive amongst both graduate clergy and rural and urban elites for the 'Reformation of Manners'.⁶⁵ Class distinctions sometimes aggravated the problem, especially when university-educated clergymen, drawn from the ranks of the parish gentry or yeomanry, exhibited social aspirations or required deference from their parishioners. In Thomas Garth's case, social differences and a commitment to encouraging godly behaviour may have been aggravated by the rector's choleric temperament and the stubborn or wilful behaviour of some of his upwardly mobile parishioners. Thomas Blades, the vicar of Beckley, recounted in his deposition to the archdeaconry court that he had in the previous six months heard Thomas Garth speak 'in angry and malicious sorte' of his parishioners, calling one of his churchwardens, John Kirby, a 'bankrou[p]kt fellow', and asserting he would make them bow before him.⁶⁶ Yet, as Garth's own experience demonstrates,

⁶¹ Christopher Haigh, 'Anticlericalism and Clericalism, 1580–1640', in Nigel Aston and Matthew Cragoe, eds, *Anticlericalism in Britain, 1500–1914* (Stroud, 2000), pp. 24–6. There was no legal redress against critical presentments at visitations. The *Constitutions and Canons Ecclesiasticall*, § cxv, enforced the presumption that nothing was done '... therein of Malice but for the discharge of their Consciences'.

⁶² Haigh, *Anticlericalism*, p. 23.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, pp. 20–1.

⁶⁴ George Herbert, 'A Priest to the Temple or The Countrey Parson His Character and Rule of Holy Life' (London, 1652), <http://anglicanhistory.org/herbert/parson3.html> (accessed 14 June 2008).

⁶⁵ See, e.g., Martin Ingram, 'Reformation of manners in early modern England', in Paul Griffiths, Adam Fox, and Steve Hindle, eds, *The Experience of Authority in Early Modern England* (Basingstoke, 1996), pp. 47–88.

⁶⁶ ORO, Oxford Archdeaconry Papers, Depositions 1616–17, c.118, fol. 108v.

clergymen gained little if any credit by fraternizing with their parishioners in the alehouse. Such behaviour horrified the godly and was derided by more worldly parishioners.

Economic factors, particularly the poverty of the clergy and their efficiency in maximizing glebe and tithe income often caused friction in post-Reformation parishes. Indigence lost ministers the respect of some parishioners and also encouraged – in some cases, necessitated – financial acuity. Glebe and tithes remained a frequent cause of dispute in the period, because some parishioners resented both the reduction in their own income and the fact that the clergy acquired additional income without labour on their own part.⁶⁷ The friction between Thomas Garth and his parishioners in Charlton-on-Otmoor was at the very least exacerbated, and perhaps spawned, by the controversy surrounding the lease of both rectory and glebe granted to William Izod, alias Shillingford, a local landowner, in 1568 for a period of eighty-one years, by the Provost of Queen's College, Alan Scot, whilst serving as a non-resident rector of the living.⁶⁸ The lease reserved only one room in the rectory and an annual stipend of £30 for the rector, or £20 if he did not serve the cure himself, and the lessee was constrained to employ a curate. The glebe, land given by parishioners over the centuries to support the parish priest, and either farmed by the priest himself or leased for income, was a substantial asset in Charlton-on-Otmoor. A survey of the glebe, instigated by Thomas Garth in 1634, recorded sixty-six acres of land in arable strips spread across the village's four open fields and a close in the north field used as pasture.⁶⁹ The rector or lay impropiator was entitled to collect both great tithes (on corn, hay, and wool) and small tithes (on livestock, non-cereal crops, and other produce) from the whole parish, except the forty-four acres in Fencott and Murcott that belonged to the dean and chapter of Westminster.⁷⁰ This would have brought in a significant additional income, whether collected in kind or as a fixed money payment. It seems probable that both the rectory and glebe were sublet to parishioners. In 1634 Thomas Garth accused Allen Roberts, a husbandman from Fencott, of neglecting to maintain the property, claiming not only that the house was decayed, but also that 'the outhouses [were] quite ruined, the gardens layde open and other edifices ... demolished'.⁷¹

Garth's predecessor, Henry Airay, Provost of Queen's College, accepted inauguration as rector of Charlton-on-Otmoor in 1606 solely in an attempt to free the parish from the detrimental lease of the rectory and glebe, claiming in his 'just and necessary apologie' that it brought in only one-fifth of the estimated value of the living to the rector and precluded the employment of 'any fit Minister' to instruct parishioners. He complained further that before and during the ministry of John Shepherd, rector of Charlton-on-Otmoor from 1581 to 1605, the glebe had been exchanged and alienated by the first lessee, William Izod, alias Shillingford, to the disadvantage of the rectory.⁷² Despite receiving legal advice that there was a strong case for declaring the lease invalid, Airay's expensive legal struggle of 1609–15 proved in vain. The suit, initially launched defensively by the then lessee, John Alcock, passed through both the Exchequer and Chancery Courts before a judgement in the King's Bench finally upheld the lease.⁷³ Airay resigned the

⁶⁷ Haigh, 'Anticlericalism', pp. 31–3, notes a large increase in tithe litigation in church courts in the early seventeenth century and suggests that it marked the growing enthusiasm of both lay and clerical tithe owners to assert parish tithe rights. There was a suit over small tithes in Charlton-on-Otmoor in 1581: ORO, Oxford Diocesan Papers, d.15f.

⁶⁸ Airay, 'The just and necessary apologie', p. 6.

⁶⁹ *VCH Oxon*, 6, p. 84.

⁷⁰ Spurr, *Post-Reformation*, p. 236; *VCH Oxon*, 6, p. 89.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 89–90.

⁷² Airay, 'The just and necessary apologie', p. 7.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, pp. 33–4, 'Attestation', p. 11. Articles in the *VCH* and *ODNB* incorrectly claim that Airey won the suit. He in fact lost it on technicalities, the most important being that the provost and fellows of Queen's College were deemed to have usurped the right of patronage to the rectory when they appointed Alan Scot as rector, because the right had been vested in trustees appointed by the college. *VCH Oxon*, 6, p. 89. <http://oxfordwww.oxforddnb.com/articles/0/246-article.html?back> (accessed 2 June 2007).

benefice in favour of a living at Bletchington and died a year later.⁷⁴ Garth's position cannot have been easy in the years following his institution in 1615. Deprived of adequate accommodation and poorly rewarded financially for his ministry, he may also have faced resentment or contempt as a graduate of Queen's College and the perceived protégé of the provost and former rector who had sought unsuccessfully to overturn the lease. There may also have been fresh controversy about the glebe, as a group of parishioners moved to enclose further land in the parish during this period. The new enclosures in the north field were completed by 1622.⁷⁵

Two decades after his institution Thomas Garth remained excluded from 'any p[ar]te of the manor howse [of the rectory] except two upper chambers & the cocke loft over' and deprived of 'any commodities porcons or oblacons app[er]tayning to ye sayde rectorie excepte the £20 rent and £10 p[ay]ment for curate's wages' agreed by Alan Scot.⁷⁶ By this date Garth's financial situation appears to have been parlous. He petitioned both the King, Charles I (during a visit to Woodstock) and the Archbishop of Canterbury, William Laud, in 1536, seeking a larger share of the income of the rectory (which he claimed had risen from £80 per annum to £230 per annum since the terms of the lease had been negotiated) and arbitration of the dispute by the heads of a number of the Oxford colleges. Garth claimed to have been 'most grievously molysted, impoverished & indebted by the lessees', named in his petitions as Nicholas Roberts, Esq. (and later by his widow), William Haniwell the Elder, Edward Shirle, Nicholas Boate, William Bradley, John Dickinson, and others. In 1634 he had been imprisoned for debt, caused he claimed by being required to pay taxes which should have been paid by the lessees.⁷⁷ Both the King and the Archbishop responded sympathetically to his petition but enjoyed no success in resolving the situation. Indeed, the referees appointed by William Laud to investigate and settle the matter reported that they had attempted to negotiate an increase in stipend and the use of the rectory, but that the lessees had refused. Laud's final resort was to write to the bishop of Oxford in 1638, hoping that he would 'take this poore man's case into his consideracon to see if by any means he can give him some relief'.⁷⁸

Last, but not least, there is the possibility of doctrinal and liturgical conflict between Thomas Garth and his parishioners. In *The Foundation of Christian Religion gathered into sixe principles*, written about 1590, the Puritan preacher William Perkins observed that even in the final decade of the sixteenth century most of the common people were papist at heart, associating the 'old religion' with a golden economic past, when 'all things were cheap', but resigned pragmatically to accept that 'it is safer to doe in religion as most doe'.⁷⁹ Nearly three decades later it is possible that some villagers from Charlton-on-Otmoor, Murcott, and Fencott, long deprived of the preaching ministry of a graduate clergyman, had not advanced much further along the road to Protestantism. Under the circumstances, it does not seem unreasonable to speculate that there may have been a clash of religious cultures between Thomas Garth and some of his parishioners. The inauguration of an Oxford-educated minister, charged with promoting understanding of Protestant doctrine, and especially the introduction of a weekly Sunday sermon following Morning Prayer, may not have been universally welcomed. Educated in the Puritan environment of the Queen's College in late sixteenth-century Oxford, Thomas Garth may have possessed excessively academic Calvinist views on doctrine and moral conduct for the more ill-educated and religiously conservative members of his rural congregation, and displayed excessive zeal in propounding them and expounding

⁷⁴ <http://oxfordwww.oxforddnb.com/articles/0/246-article.html?back> (accessed 2 June 2007).

⁷⁵ *VCH Oxon*, 6, p. 84. The enclosures for pasture suggest a greater investment in animal husbandry during the period.

⁷⁶ Queen's College Archives, Charlton-on-Otmoor, Petitions and Responses, Q.7, 8.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

⁷⁹ William Perkins, *The Foundation of Christian Religion gathered into sixe principles* ([London], 1627), sigs A3–A4, quoted in Duffy, *The Stripping of the Altars*, p. 591.

biblical texts to support them.⁸⁰ The Queen's College's reported refusal to support John Shepherd in his legal suit to reverse the rectory's detrimental lease, on the grounds that Shepherd was 'eyther *Potentia* or *actu* no preacher', and that they would finance a suit only for a qualified preacher, together with Airay's claim in his 'just and necessary apologie' that parishioners lacked adequate instruction, because the living, hampered by the detrimental lease, was insufficient to employ 'any fit minister', provide some support for this argument, as does the parish's acquisition of a new pulpit in 1616, only months after Garth's arrival.⁸¹

In this context, Richard Alley, George Guilder, and John Harris's complaint that Thomas Garth left the church during a service to investigate the non-attendance of some of his parishioners, while seemingly indicative of bizarre or, at the very least, exhibitionist behaviour, suggests that he was active – perhaps too active for some parishioners – in tackling absenteeism amongst his flock. He clearly suspected, probably with some justification, that a number of his parishioners preferred to work, stay at home, or gather at the local alehouse rather than attend church services.⁸² Although this may have been the result of a long-standing laxness about church attendance which predated his arrival, or an indication of pre-existing religious divisions within the parish, it may also have represented a passive protest against a newfangled preaching ministry. It is also possible that Garth had offended local sensibilities by neglecting his pastoral responsibilities and by refusing to turn a blind eye to the use of ritual actions, such as crossing and bowing during services, or to traditional parish practices, such as decorating the church with seasonal greenery or perambulating the parish boundaries at Rogationtide.⁸³

The difficulties encountered in interpreting this short episode in Charlton-on-Otmoor's ecclesiastical history are frustrating, but they do not detract from its importance as an example of the Church of England's ongoing problems with the ministry and conduct of the clergy in the post-Reformation period and of the friction that sometimes erupted between clergy and laity, particularly in rural parishes. Although Thomas Garth was clearly negligent in his cure and careless of his reputation, the extent of his ministerial, pastoral, financial, and personal failings are difficult to determine; they need to be examined within the context of the potential problems he faced in taking a preaching ministry to the religiously conservative parish of Charlton-on-Otmoor and installing a wife and young children in an isolated and inward-looking rural community. These were doubtless exacerbated by the inadequate accommodation and niggardly income allocated to him by the lessees of the rectory and glebe, and by the ongoing difficulties surrounding the controversial and long-running lease. The clergyman's vocation was not an easy one in this period. Ministers in the post-Reformation Church struggled to reconcile the pastoral needs of parishioners who sought spiritual comfort in church and prayer meetings with those who preferred the liquid consolations of the alehouse, and were more frequently resented for performing their cure conscientiously than negligently.⁸⁴ It is noteworthy that the relative geographical isolation of the parish of Charlton-on-Otmoor and the limited educational opportunities available to its parishioners (only two of the deponents in 1618 were able to sign their names) did not deter representatives of the local community from presenting and pursuing their grievances against Thomas Garth in the archdeaconry court in Oxford according to canonical practice. The

⁸⁰ J. R. Magrath, *The Queen's College* (Oxford, 1921), pp. 79–81; S. G. Hamilton, *Hertford College* (London, 1903), pp. 21–3.

⁸¹ The anonymous author of the 'Attestation' annexed to Airay's 'just and necessary apologie' further emphasizes the religious and political dangers of not providing parishes with adequate instruction: Airay, 'The just and necessary apologie', pp. 18–19; Anon., *Attestation*, pp. 2, 9–10.

⁸² Harris admitted that he was with his family in his home at the alehouse at the time: Oxford Archdeaconry Papers, Depositions 1616–17, c.118, fol. 110.

⁸³ See, e.g., Ronald Hutton, *The Rise and Fall of Merry England: the Ritual Year 1400–1700* (Oxford, 1994), pp. 154–99; Keith Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic: Studies in Popular Beliefs in Sixteenth and Seventeenth Century England* (London, 1971), pp. 71–5, for evidence of the continuation of such practices and the conflict sometimes aroused.

⁸⁴ Haigh, 'Anticlericalism', p. 27.

willingness of men and women from the parish to challenge authority persisted in later centuries and was perhaps facilitated by the early emergence of yeomen freeholders and the lack of elite supervision in the community. Methodism and the Baptist movement flourished in the villages from the eighteenth century, and parishioners famously opposed the enclosure of Otmoor by local landowners and clergymen from 1788 and played a leading role in the notorious Otmoor enclosure riots of the 1830s. Restored not only to the rectory and glebe, but to a higher rank in the social pecking order, Thomas Garth's successors opted to ally with the very landowning classes that had pursued personal profit at the expense of establishing a Protestant preaching ministry in the parish in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.