

A Wiltshire Personality

WILLIAM DANIELL

“Bishop of Warminster Common”

By Katharine Bunyan

In the early nineteenth century it was popular for missionaries to go to darkest Africa. One devout self-appointed preacher decided instead to devote his energies to darkest Warminster.

The area known as Warminster Common was at that time quite as wretched and depraved as any African community. In fact its notoriety was said to be a by-word as far away as Devon. The cottages were mere one-room hovels. The floors were bare earth and the beds made simply of brushwood cut from the Common. Animals and family shared the same room. Immortality, vice and crime were rampant. Decent people were frightened to go there. No woman giving her address as Warminster Common could hope to find a respectable domestic post.

The state of the people was wretched. Drainage and sanitation were almost non-existent and typhus in consequence carried off an average of twenty-eight inhabitants a month. Other diseases were also rife.

William Daniell started his activities in 1813. In the course of the next 40 years, working almost single-handed, he transformed the area in a decent reasonably law-abiding community with a chapel, school and adequate drainage system.

He was a remarkable man. All this was achieved in his spare time – he earned his living at various different jobs during the day. In addition he found time to write a History of Warminster Common and various other publications.

Daniell was converted to Methodism at the age of 17. His family and friends of the established church promptly disowned him. Feeling against Methodism was so strong he nearly lost his job as well. Nevertheless he decided henceforth to trust in the Lord for all things, and his faith was to be justified.

He became interested in the Common through joining a society that had just been formed of pious people for the purpose of distributing Bibles there. Daniell was equally appalled by the social conditions and by the fact that nothing was done for the spiritual needs of the people. He started holding services for the people himself as they had no church to go to and were almost totally ignored by the clergy of the town. In 1827 he had collected sufficient congregation and funds to start building a chapel in what is now called Chapel Street. He was to be the sole unpaid Minister for more than twenty years.

There were six services a week. The earliest being at 6 a.m. on Sunday mornings. Daniell often preached for two hours at a time. Congregations were often as many as 250. He also visited assiduously in the Common and was always being called out to the sick and the dying. All this on top of a full day's work.

He instituted quarterly children's meetings which were attended by over 300 children. The children would first walk in a circle round the Common, then have tea and fruit cake. Finally they would "enjoy recitations and religious addresses". They evidently did enjoy them too as demand for tickets was usually greater than places available.

Out of a population of 1,450 he eventually claimed 500 chapel members. Considering the ignorance and criminal tendencies of the place this is a remarkable achievement. Nevertheless he was reviled and persecuted for it by the clergy of the Church of England although they took virtually no interest in the Common themselves for many years. It was continually held against him that he had never been formally ordained.

As well as the moral tone of the Common, Daniell raised the physical conditions by putting through a satisfactory drainage scheme and water supply in a most practical manner. He was appointed to various public posts in Warminster and the Common such as Surveyor of Highways, Overseer of the Parish, and Registrar.

Daniell's own character comes clearly and rather amusingly through his "History of Warminster Common" (not to be confused, by the way, with the "History of Warminster: which by coincidence was written by a Church of England clergyman also called Daniell some years later).

In some way he was ahead of his time. He had enlightened views on health, advocating exercise and a sensible diet. He also practiced (very successfully, according to him) some unorthodox method of healing by "electricity".

He had radical views on the plight of the poor particularly through the enclosure system. "Have the poor no rights to be held sacred? And this mode of disinheriting them without the power of appealing at all likely to make them peaceable and virtuous?"

On the other hand he could be bigoted where theatres, Sunday newspapers and drink were concerned. He enjoyed reporting a remarkably large number of instances where wrongdoers and frivolous people met sudden ends after ignoring his admonitions!

Despite his energy and faith, Daniell had the Victorian love of the morbid to an exaggerated degree. His idea of recreation was walking in the churchyard "for pensive edification" and he lists with relish the number of deaths that occur. From the age of 40 onwards he hourly expected death (for no real reason), but in fact lived to be over 70. He was very fond of what he called "improving deaths," i.e. ministering to the dying.

Despite his strict views and morbid outlook he was obviously kindhearted and must have been popular. He attracted large congregations and his work for the welfare of the people there earned him the nickname "Bishop of Warminster Common."

(Original source not recorded)
