

Richard Bingham

By Reverend John R

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RICHARD BINGHAM. Saint or Sinner? In his article the Reverend John Capper endeavours to assess this very complex cleric.

This pen and ink drawing by Rear Admiral Pafford was taken from the only known picture of Bingham which is too faded to reproduce.

His first ten years at Holy Trinity, Gosport, were obscure; his last ten years were even more insignificant. In between there spanned half a Century of aggressive action in the affairs of the Church and the Borough which earned him fame and infamy, locally and nationally. In his own day he had many supporters and adversaries even now it is difficult to form a balanced unbiassed appraisal of this involved cleric.

Appropriately he was born on All Fools Day 1765. When Richard was 14, the family moved to Gosport on the appointment of his father, the Rev. Isaac Moody Bingham to the living of Holy Trinity. He was educated at Winchester College, then graduated at New College, Oxford. He subsequently obtained a further degree in Civil Law.

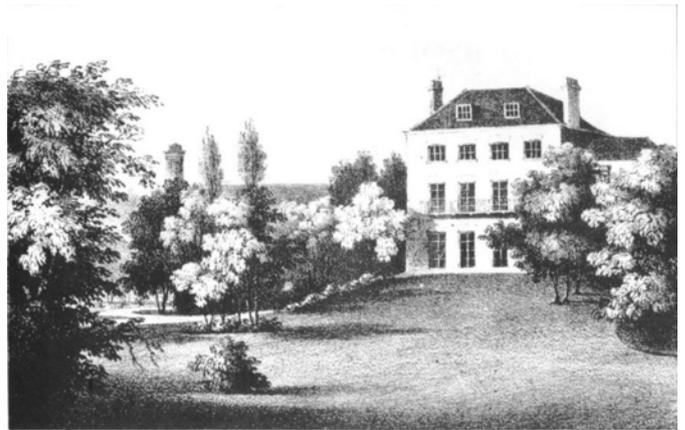
His interest in law helps explain his notoriety. In 1788, he married Lydia Mary Anne, the eldest daughter of Rear Admiral Sir Charles Douglas. But Sir Charles had declared in his will that Lydia would not receive anything from his

estate if she married Richard, or any other son, of John Moody Bingham. Since Richard's father was Isaac not John, he brought an action to have this clause in the will set aside. The House of Lords held that the intention of Sir Charles was perfectly clear, and dismissed the claim.

Richard Bingham was licensed as perpetual Curate of Holy Trinity on the 16th August 1792. In these early years he was overshadowed by his father who continued to minister in the church and took precedence over his son at vestry meetings. The father died in 1807 'Beloved, Honoured and Lamented by all who knew the Goodness and Integrity of his Heart', as the memorial plaque still proclaims in the church.

Richard must have been a wealthy man, even before his father died, although his stipend was only £100 a year. He was also a great builder. In 1795 he persuaded Bishop Brown low North, who was lord of the manor of Gosport, to grant him that part of his demesne lands which stretched from the chapel wall to the waterside. He raised by subscription £480 towards the building of his vicarage on this site, and spent a further £5,500 of his own money on its completion. The house itself (the present vicarage) comprises five storeys, built of peat-cooked bricks from Colden Common.

The Bingham only enjoyed their new home for a couple of years. The Board of Ordnance required it as a residence for the Commandant of the Royal Engineers. Richard did not acquiesce in the requirements of the Defence Bill without a fight and confronted the Board in the Court of the King's Bench. He claimed to have won his case, but straightway entered into agreement with the Army. He sold his interest in the land for £15,000 and leased the house for £100 a year, thus making a considerable profit on his outlay.



At once he began the construction of a new dwelling as a vicarage. This house was at the east end of the church and remained the vicarage until 1858. (After Bingham's death, Stanley House as it was renamed, became the home of Mr. Benjamin Nicholson head of the famous firm of yacht builders and father of Charles Nicholson Gosport's first Honorary Freeman. Better known to many residents in later years as The Hall Guest House it finished up as temporary

offices for the Borough Engineer's Department, and was demolished a few years ago.) There were supposed to have been underground tunnels which Bingham used for smuggling and to avoid his creditors. They were more probably wine cellars or drainage channels.

In the early 19th century, Bingham's influence in Gosport was very considerable. The Bishop, as lord of the manor and Borough of Gosport, appointed him as his bailiff. The duties involved collecting the lord's rent and revenue, summoning the Juries and Homage to attend the court leet and court baron, and attending this court himself. A possible reason for Bingham's appointment was that the collection of Quit Rents due to the Bishop had been neglected, and thus lost to him. However, the Jury and Homage assembled at these courts claimed that it was their privilege to choose the bailiff. So in 1800 they chose Robert Forbes, and proceedings in the nature of Quo Warranto were begun to decide the issue. This was a writ by which the king called upon any person to show by what authority he claimed to be entitled to an official position. Initially the case went against Bingham, but as the records of the court leet and court baron recorded him as being bailiff of Gosport from 1803 till 1850 when the court book ends, there must have been some kind of judgment in his favour.



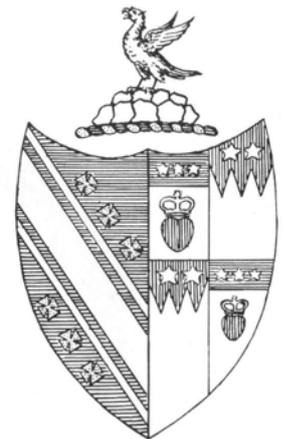
He was not so fortunate in his next legal case. The Vestry Book of Holy Trinity Church, 1730 - 1825, records the annual vestry held every year during this period except for 1814. In that year Bingham spent Easter in the county gaol at Winchester, serving a six months sentence. In 1813, being a magistrate of Hampshire of twelve years standing, he was convicted at the Winchester Summer Assizes of having illegally obtained a licence for a public-house, when no such public house was in existence, and of having stated in the conveyance of such house a false consideration of the same, with intent to defraud the revenue by evading an additional stamp duty of £10.

The circumstances indicate that Bingham had owned the Revolutionaire and the Audacious public-houses in Beach

Street until they were pulled down in 1803 to improve the defences. The prosecution alleged that he used his position as a Licensing Justice to traffic in the sale of a Licence, and that he defrauded the Government of stamp duty by not disclosing the full amount paid in a property transaction.

In 1810 he was supposed to have bought two houses for £700 and sold them to a James Cooper for £2,200 on the understanding that the licences of the Revolutionaire and the Audacious were transferred to this property. Furthermore, he caused the sum of £1,900 to be inserted in the conveyance, thus evading £10 stamp duty. At the trial Bingham denied the charges and claimed that two of his fellow magistrates conspired against him, since they were brewers, and the granting of the licences was against their interests.

No sooner was he back in his vicarage at Gosport than further legal problems claimed his attention. The trouble was that David Compigne, also a lawyer, refused to pay his annual pew rent. The annual vestry had been accustomed to levying a rate on the pews occupied in the church - usually a shilling in the pound - and this was the main source of income for the upkeep of the fabric of the church. The Court of Arches declared that there was no legal method of making and levying rates for the repairs, support and incidental expenses of the church, so an Act of Parliament in 1825 made provision for its perpetual maintenance and support.



At this time the population of the parish, conterminous with the town of Gosport, was just under 7,000. The notoriety of Bingham's legal disputes unfortunately overshadows the busy routine of his conscientious work as a parish priest. For over 20 years his son Richard assisted him as a Curate. There were three full services in the church every Sunday, and another service with a sermon on Wednesday evening. The records indicate packed congregations. A contemporary described him as a fluent and lucid expounder of scriptural doctrines.

Bingham played a large part in the development of what is now the Newtown area of the Borough. In the 19th Century it was called Bingham Town and some of the streets were named after his sons - Joseph, Henry, John and Charles. He also added to the Peachy almshouses in Cross Street and regularly assisted the poor of the Borough with gifts in kind and money.

Bingham held other clerical appointments outside Gosport. From 1796 he was vicar of Hale Magna in Lincolnshire, and from 1807 he was a Canon of Chichester, occupying the prebendary stall of Bargham. But it was at Gosport that he spent most of his time and his money.

By 1847 he claimed he was utterly unable to pay the £600 costs of a case against him in the High Court of Chancery referring to the charity almshouses. He remained at Holy Trinity until his death on the 24th July 1858, at the advanced age of 94. For a priest to serve 66 years without a break in one parish must be a national record.

During his last decade in the parish he was so prostrated by bodily illness that he was unable to discharge many of the public functions of his office. The last service he conducted in the church was six years before his death. By some apparently unaccountable error he gave the blessing about half way through the Communion Service and the congregation dispersed in confusion.

The Bingham family motto was 'Spes mea Christus' - Christ, my hope. Richard's evident Christian conviction and concern for the affairs of the church and the Borough were of tremendous significance in the rapidly developing Gosport of the early 19th Century. His calm exterior betrayed a fighting spirit for any cause he considered important. His failure was his lack of money and humility which prevented him from resigning the living of the Holy Trinity when his advancing age and infirmity demanded it.