

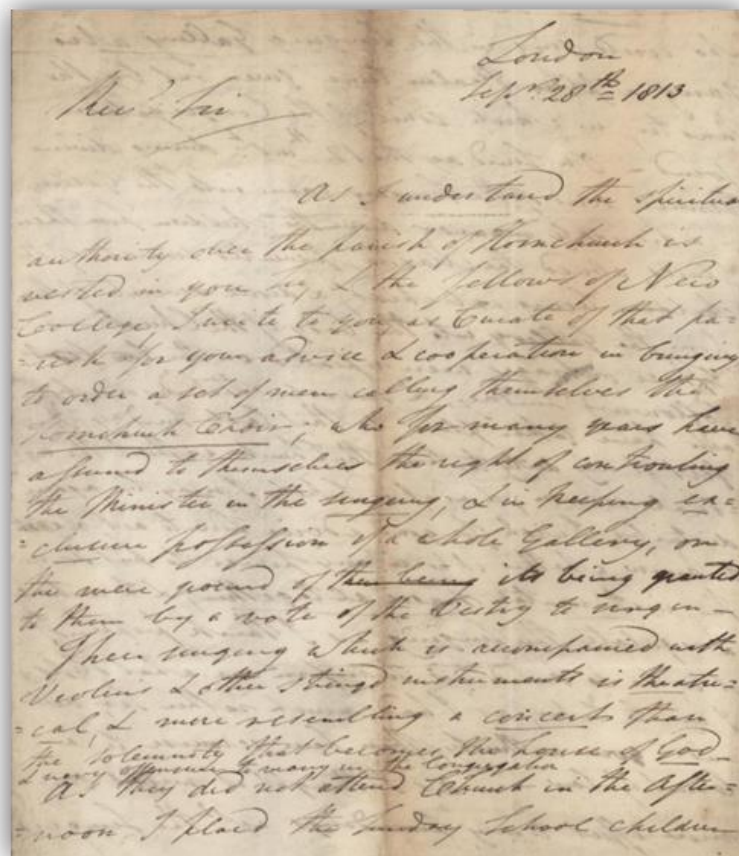
West Gallery Woes: The Hornchurch Dispute of 1813

New College has held the advowson of St Andrew's Hornchurch, in the province of Canterbury, since 1391, and the college archives contain much of relevance to that church's history. One small group of papers (NCA 7825) provides an insight into the 'riot and tumult' occasioned at Hornchurch in 1813 after choir and curate failed yet again to see eye-to-eye on the role of music in the Sunday services the singers locked the Sunday School out of the west gallery, and the curate fled the parish.

By the late eighteenth century many parish churches were sensible of growing friction between the efforts of their West Gallery 'Quires' to attempt ever more complex metrical psalm settings, and the preference of the non-singers in the congregation to be able to appreciate the psalms better, or even join in parts of the liturgy, by having them spoken or sung to simple tunes. At Hornchurch the difficulties were compounded by an ever-growing Sunday School, an obdurate choir, and an insensitive curate who took the services.

The curate was the Reverend Walter Shirley (1769–1859). He hailed from County Mayo, had been ordained by the Bishop of Cork in 1791, and from 1804 held a succession of curacies in Yorkshire and Essex under the lay patronage of Robert Shirley, 7th Earl Ferrers, to whom he was distantly related. He seems never to have stayed in any post for very long, before becoming curate of Hornchurch in 1810. Since the patron of that living was New College, and since the (presumably non-resident) vicar-chaplain for whom the curate deputised was a fellow of New College, it was only a matter of time before Warden Gauntlett was dragged into the misfortunes of the parish.

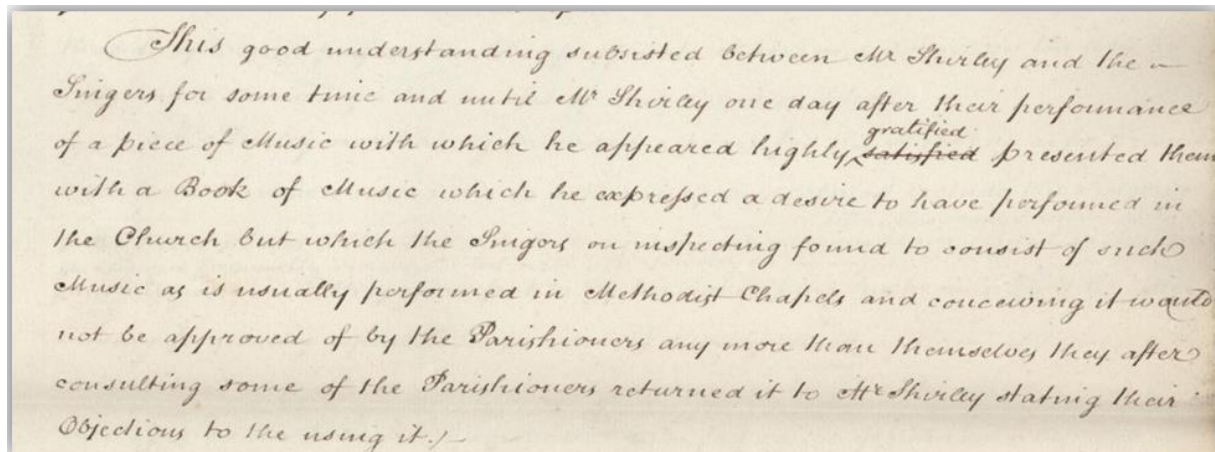
The first inkling of trouble that Gauntlett received was a letter dated 28 September 1813, sent to him by Shirley after he had fled to London.



NCA 7825
New College Archives, Oxford

In that letter Shirley sought help to 'bring to order' the overbearing singers who 'had assumed to themselves the right of controuling the Minister in the singing and in keeping exclusive possession of the whole Gallery'. He complained that the Gallery was stuffed full of musical instruments and that the Choir's music-making on Sundays was 'theatrical and more resembling a concert . . . and very offensive to many of the Congregation'. Since the singers usually attended only the morning and evening services on Sundays, the curate had placed some Sunday School children into the Gallery one Sunday afternoon and had them 'sing a plain Psalm tune . . . in which some of the congregation joined', but this led the following Sunday to some of the singers turning up in the afternoon, marching into the Gallery 'in a disorderly manner' and driving the children out. And again the following week, until the curate could take no more.

Hard on the heels of the Rev. Shirley's plea to Gauntlett came another missive, this time from the churchwarden of Hornchurch, setting out 'the statement of facts' as best he could. The singers do not come out of it very well: after claiming right of ancient custom to 'chant the *Te Deum* and the *Jubilate Deo* and sing the Psalms and Anthems of the day', they rather tarnished their reputation by claiming to have spent £200 on music and instruments (which they regarded as their private property, despite the Vestry minutes noting annual subventions to them), and to have taught themselves 'to become tolerable Proficient in Music'. They also claimed that they had 'always' had the right to sit in the west gallery for the purpose of singing, a claim confirmed by the oldest singer who had sat there for sixty-five years, and his son who had sat there, man and boy, for nearly thirty years. Their claim to exclusive right to the Gallery however claimed to go back only to 1804, when some farm labourers had been allowed to sit there and had damaged the music and instruments, as a result of which Vicar Reynell and the Vestry Meeting had agreed that the singers should have exclusive use of the Gallery and be allowed to 'lock it up for the safety of their property'. (A memorandum of the said Vestry resolution, added to the end of 'the statement of facts', however, makes no mention either of locks or of exclusive use.)



This good understanding subsisted between Mr Shirley and the Singers for some time and until Mr Shirley one day after their performance of a piece of Music with which he appeared highly ^{gratified} ~~satisfied~~ presented them with a Book of Music which he expressed a desire to have performed in the Church but which the Singers on inspecting found to consist of such Music as is usually performed in Methodist Chapels and concluding it would not be approved of by the Parishioners any more than themselves they after consulting some of the Parishioners returned it to Mr Shirley stating their Objections to the using it.

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The 1813 debacle was not the first of the several arguments and misunderstandings between the singers and their curate, for resentment had been building up ever since early 1811 when the Rev. Shirley had failed to persuade the singers to introduce simpler hymn tunes which they discovered to be 'such Music as is usually performed at Methodist Chapels' and regarded as a deliberate slight, and things were soon to take a more serious turn. The 'statement of facts' outlined the events of March 1811, when the Rev. Shirley, anxious to move the ever-expanding Sunday School out of the nave, placed the children in the gallery before the singers arrived for a Sunday morning service. The singers duly did arrive, ejected the children and locked the Gallery door. Shirley 'ordered and assisted in breaking down the door', returned the children to the

Gallery, and—without giving prior notice to the singers who were ready to chant the *Te Deum*—started to read it, whereupon they interrupted him and chanted it. Quite what the rest of the congregation made of all this is not recorded.

The row was patched up, but ill-feeling smouldered afresh as the numbers of Sunday School children grew yet again, and resulted in the showdown of September 1813. For three Sundays battle raged between the curate and the singers who had locked themselves into the gallery while the hapless Sunday School children were marched up the Gallery stairs only to find their entrance barred, and the curate denounced the singers from the pulpit as being ‘full of riot, tumult and intoxication’, before quitting his church in despair.

Warden Gauntlett’s tactful reply to the absconding curate probably did much to persuade him to return to Hornchurch, but Shirley wrecked his chances again by some unwise observations from the pulpit a few days later. By now he seems to have been mentally very disturbed, regarding himself as the personal saviour of the Sunday School and telling the no doubt astonished children, on 10 October, that ‘you have enemies here, who would injure—would illtreat—would massacre you, but leave them to me, Vengeance will be mine, and I will defend you’. The following Sunday he thundered from the pulpit that the singers were ‘guilty of Crimes of the most atrocious and blackest dye. By the advice of judicial authority I shall pursue the execrable, outrageous and infamous Wretches, the cause of the Gospel is injured by such Wicked People’.

Matters could not continue in this vein; the churchwarden wrote to Warden Gauntlett, and advice was sought from the relevant Ecclesiastical Commissary and from Doctors’ Commons. Both learned bodies supported the Rev. Shirley (as they were honour-bound to do, and which a legal test case from another parish would uphold in 1816, that the officiating minister had the right to determine what might be sung and what might be chanted or spoken in a service, provided he gave the choir reasonable notice of his decisions), and also gave the opinion that if any of the singers had acted riotously then they could expect a summons from the local Justice of the Peace. The Vicar-Chaplain of Hornchurch (now) openly supported his curate, and Warden Gauntlett urged all concerned to ‘lay aside their hostility in the face of clear legal guidance, the duty of public worship, and Christian Charity’. But either it was of little avail, or the Rev. Shirley was anxious to be on the move again, for within a year he was off to a curacy in South Mimms, before moving on again in October 1815 to the vicarage of Shirley in Derbyshire, under Earl Ferrers’s patronage again, where at last he seems to have found peace of mind. His son Walter Augustus came up to New College in 1816.

Jennifer Thorp
Archivist