



The Hundred Parishes

Introduction to a famous local person . . .

CONRAD NOEL (1869 - 1942)

Conrad Noel was vicar of Thaxted for more than 30 years. He brought life and controversy to the town through his outspoken political views and his enthusiastic encouragement of music and traditional rural customs.

Noel was born in Kew and as a boy was "incarcerated in two public schools", as he later wrote. He went as a student to Cambridge but only stayed for one year in which time he acquired the Socialist beliefs that shaped the whole of his subsequent career.

His early career was chequered; he was initially refused ordination because of his political beliefs and in 1906, with Reverend Percy Widdrington and others, formed the Church Socialist League. In 1911 he was a founding member of the British Socialist Party but left it in 1918 to found the Catholic Crusade. He was also a member of the Independent Labour Party.

In 1910 Noel was appointed by the Countess of Warwick to the living of Thaxted, remaining its vicar until his death in 1942. In this rather remote corner of Essex, Noel preached his own version of Socialism and the Anglo-Catholic gospel.

Despite his patron's hope that he would use Thaxted as a base from which to propagate their shared socialist beliefs to a countrywide audience, Noel remained stubbornly faithful to and diligent in his work for the people of his parish, refusing her wishes that he should preach the gospel at large by "careering up and down the country giving Socialist lectures" as he later described it. For Noel the parish was always the focal point of the priest's work, though his Catholic Crusade did carry his ideas to a wider public.

A major event in Noel's life for which he is well-remembered was the "Battle of the Flags". As he later wrote, in Thaxted "we date everything from before or after the Battle of the Flags". Towards the end of the First World War he displayed in Thaxted Church the Sinn Fein flag, the Red Flag and the flag of St George, each of which was provocative and anti-establishment. Noel looked upon the Union Jack as the emblem of Britain's "cruel exploitation" of the peoples of its Empire. With the rise of post-war Irish and labour troubles feelings polarised, and in 1921 a "battle" broke out, bringing Thaxted and its "Red Vicar" national notoriety. Cambridge students journeyed to Thaxted and ceremoniously pulled down the flags. Fighting broke out inside the Church and there were other disturbances. Questions were asked in Parliament and Noel was accused of sedition. Eventually, a Church of England consistory court was convened and Noel complied with its order to remove the flags.

Noel was a man of enormous charisma, energy and talent, all of which he brought to bear in making Thaxted a centre of religious, political and cultural activity, the last in particular for the English Arts and Crafts movement.

His insistence that Christianity was about beauty and ritual attracted well-known artists and musicians to Thaxted, which became a place where folk traditions were encouraged. Noel was a strong influence on Gustav Holst during the years that the composer lived in Thaxted. Under the influence of Noel and his wife Miriam, musical festivals, folkloric gatherings, maypole and Morris dancing all became part of local life. The Noels were experts in these traditions and encouraged everyone to be part of these activities.

A folk revival was happening across Europe in the 1920s and 1930s, and the Morris Ring, the national organisation, was founded at a meeting in the town in 1934. English Morris Dancing still sees Thaxted as its home and the town boasts the country's oldest continuous existing 'side'.

When Noel died in July 1942, he was buried in the churchyard, close to the high altar inside the church. Inside, he is remembered by a bronze head in the crossing, facing the high altar. His tombstone carries the words "He loved justice and hated oppression".

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