

# A PACK OF IDLE SPARKS

*Letters from Hexham  
on the Church,  
the People,  
Corruption  
and Scandal  
1699 - 1740*

*Edited by Greg Finch*

## 5. Letters from Hexham

1. 2 Feb 1699

Allgood & Carr<sup>192</sup> to Watkinson

[Papers relating to Mr. Ritschel and to Hexham, Bundle 13: NRO SANT/GEN/ECC/3/3/ 2-9]

Sr

Never any parish in this County has been so used & abused by a Minister as this by Mr George Ritschell who is a very Litigious troublesome man & at variance with most of his Parishioners & now as bad as ever, he is rather worse than Parson Walton<sup>193</sup> he pretends to be your deputy here & upon every frivolous matter Showes & threatens the people to make them appeare before the Chancellor of Yorke telling them that (upon his Letter) he can have Citation or Citations when & for what he pleases. Last Sunday he read & published a Citation in this Church in your name agt John Bell & James Watson to appeare before you at Yorke the Ninth of February Instant to be Sworn & admitted unto & Execute the office of Jurors etc or else to Show some good cause & reason (sine racione) why the Sentence of Excommunication should not be decreed agt them for their Contumacy in refuseing to be sworn and execute the said office, & writ to them that you ordered the Citation for them to appeare before you. Sr if he be your Deputy as he said he is wee have a Motion among us, that Respondeat Superior<sup>194</sup> he is about bringing up the Oath ex officio again & the High Commission Court which wee thought had been & thinke is taken away by Act of Parliament, Severall of the Substantiall Parishioners here were about petitioning the Arch Bishop and others the Parliament, about this Matter, but wee thought it Convenient first to acquaint you therewith, one of them that is now Cited is one that severall yeares agoe was Church Warden & Cited with the rest to appeare before you at Yorke which

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<sup>192</sup> Thomas Allgood and John Carr: see ABN.

<sup>193</sup> Almost certainly Revd Thomas Walton, rector of Knarsdale near Alston from 1679-94, who was charged with assault in 1686, escaped from custody at Kirkhaugh in 1690, & found guilty of neglect of duty, fornication, blasphemy and simony at the York consistory court in 1693. J. Hodgson, *History of Northumberland*, Vol III, part II, (1840), p.81, NRO QSB/4, QSO/2, f42r, BIA CP.H.4242.

<sup>194</sup> An employer's legal liability for the actions of an employee, established in English common-law during the seventeenth century.

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they did, & although they could not be Charged with any thing in reason to ground a Citation upon but his owne false Suggestion and upon Examination of the matter he himselfe was guilty of what he charged them with, And had & published an Excommunication agt them here within a day or two the Citation was returnable which wee were informed was irreguler, & all the Satisfaction they had or gott for their journey & Expenses was an absolution, he reported it was to noe end or purpose, For them to medle with him in that Court at this rate he may Excommunicate most of the Parishioners & they shall have noe relief or Remedy unless they Petition the Parliament which wee are very unwilling to do, if it can be otherwise ordered, Sir Edward & Sir William Blackett<sup>195</sup> can & perhaps will give a Character of him, that he is a man of a very unquiett temper, Malitious & much addicted to lyeing wee have transgressed upon your patience with our prolixities for which wee crave your pardon & leave to Subscribe our Selves Sir

Your Humble Servants  
T. Allgood  
Jon. Carr

Hexham Candlemas day 1698

[Cover:]  
The Right Worshipful D<sup>f</sup> Henry Watkinson  
Chancellor of York these present

**2. 6 February 1699**

**Ritschel to Watkinson**

[NRO SANT/GEN/ECC/3/3/ 2-9]

Northumb'd

A Brief Representation of Mr Ritschel of Hexham his grievances. containing Reasons agt Mr Allgoods haveing a new 24ty, & being himselfe one of them, and the occasion of the late differenc etc:

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<sup>195</sup> Sir Edward Blackett of Newby, 2<sup>nd</sup> baronet (1649-1718): Purdue, *The Ship That Came Home, op cit*, pp.77-84, and his younger brother Sir William: ABN.

## Letters from Hexham

Imprimis In the year 1684 he haveing deluded & perswaded a great many here in Town to sign a Scurrillous petition agt me to the Rt Worspll Compa of mercers London (wch diverse of them after retracted when they understood the contents thereof.) being disappointed of his gt design & thereby exasperated.

The year following he sued me in the name of Sr John Fenwick then Ld of the Mannor etc for takeing the lead of the north Quarter of the Church, wch was agreed upon before my father dyed, and a bargain made with the plumber by the Ch Wardens Jurors and 24ty & Mr Allgood being then one of them was present at the bargain and well acquainted with it, wch he after denyd it not being reduced to writeing, but when he perceivd that diverse of them wd swear it, he brought not on that action, yet made me attend wth my wittnesses till the end of the Assizes.

The same year the Ch Wardens sued me at Common Law for six shillings & nine penc arrear of Ch sesse wch one in the Shire left at my house, & wch Shortly after I sent to them the very same mony, but they wd not receive it, & after when I tendred it at a publick meeting, they wd not receive it till they had consulted their Attorney who was Mr Allgood, who if he did not at first advise them to it, yet he did manage that action for them wch upon examination appeard very very vexatious and malitious.

Nor hath he faild ever sinc to give fresh instances of his malice both to myselfe & family thoa he seemd reconcild and all former differences quite forgotten, of wch I could give too many instances.

When I begun to cutt my fathers Epitaph, some haveing informd the Ld of the Mannor that stone belongd to him, who referring it to Mr Allgood & his Steward here to examin that matter & my pretensions to it, thoa they seemd satisfyd with what I alleagd that it was an immemorial burying place belonging to the Ministers of this parish, yet after haveing gott or pretending to have gott a order to discharge the workman he not only threatend to indict all that should be concernd in laying down that Stone, but his passion transported him so farr as to bid the workman deface the inscription, & yet he pretended a gt respect for old Mr Ritschels memory.

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My Brother<sup>196</sup> having gott A presentation from the University of Cambr.e to the Vicaridge of Bywell St Andrew in this County, by vertue of the late Act etc and a Summons for Madam Thornton (A Popish Patronesse & who had given a presentation to another) to appear at Sessions & take the oaths, when the party made Affidavit that he had Summond her & she had declared that she wd never take them, Mr Allgood being then in Court moved in her behalfe, & thoa he was not concernd in that affair, & pretended at that time great kindnesse for my Brother who had never disoblegd him & the Bench had replyd to what he offerd, yet he could not forbear after a while to move again, wch being the nicking point in order to her conviction & the obtaining that liveing, I leave it to any to judge the Syncerity of his gt affection he bears to my family.

Anno 94 He made an enquiry to our Burw [borough] Jury in behalfe of the Ld of the Mannor concerning the fees belonging to the Minister Clerk & Sexton. And the last Northumb'd Assizes A Bill of Indictmt being preferrd agt me for takeing 5s for a marriage fee with a licenc, that Bill being found ignoramus

2d Bill was preferrd & Mr Allgoods late Clerk Robinson sent up to bring down the Hexham Jury Book & attest it wch I suppose Robinson thought an unquestionable evidenc; when he told one he had that (meaning that Book) wch wd do Mr Ritschels businesse, that Book or verdict allowing 1s for a marriage wch is our ordinary fee. and takeing no notice of a marriage fee with A Licenc. But the worthy Gentlemen of that grand Inquest percevieing it to be pure malice, rejected that Book & Jurys Verdict in that Case & found that Bill also ignoramus.

I might here add the hard usage I mett wth Anno 94 abt my sesses Mr Allgood being then A Com.r for the land tax. and the next year I was told he endeavoured the like, but it wd be tedious to repeat all instances of this nature, for such hath been his constant practice these 15 years last past, to misrepresent & endeavour to expose Mr Ritschel to the Censure of the world & by all means possible to make him uneasy.

Our late differences were occasioned partly upon account of the poor & p[ar]tly upon acct of the church.

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<sup>196</sup> Rev. John Ritschel (1662-1705), at Bywell from 1690: NCH VI, p.248.

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Some poor haveing gott Orders of Sessions for so much a week towards their reliefe & maintenanc, these orders wr brought to the Ch Wardens, but they were so obstructed in their proceedings that office became an intollerable burden.

And thoa overseers for the poor wr after appointed according to Law, yet that did not prevent or lessen their trouble, the Q[uarter]r Sessions have been pesterd with repeated complaints orders made upon former orders, & warrants after warr'ts to bind them to their good behaviour for not observeing those orders, & Mr Ritschel misrepresented as if he were to blame.

In Octobr 96 Mr Allgood haveing gott a Justice of the Peac's Warr't to carry the Ch Wardens bodys to jail for not paying Barbara Gibson Widd 2s per week according to an order of Sessions; but their names not being specifyd or expressd, the New Ch Wardens who were shortly after admitted were threatened with it, whereupon to prevent further trouble, I calld a meeting of the Ch Wardens Jurors & 24ty, who laid on a sesse for the poor according to the pish Rate or Schedule made by the sworn 24ly for the Town, But assoon as those ChWardens began to collect it, Mr Allgood sent for them, & threatend them, & took their Schedules from them.

And yet at Middsummer Sessions after he did move for a warr't to bind them to their good behaviour for neglecting to pay her, & I being then in Court informd them how it was, that they were not to blame & thoa the Court was then satisfyd, & there was no order made while I was there; yet a while after they were taken by vertue of A warr't & forcd to go down to NewCastle etc.

Never had men such a troublesome Officer for the Ch Wardens must pay the poor & that out from the Ch sesse; & yet people were told & made believe that they needed not pay their Ch sesse & most in Town for sometime refused to pay it; so that they could not gett mony for necessary uses & the parish so totally lost its credit, that none wd trust them or do any thing for it; unlesse Mr Ritschel would promise to pay them.

Indeed his proceedings in that affair have been so very strange, that one may justly wonder at them & must conclude that there is some extraordinary reason for it,

Wch seems very plain to those who know the whole matter, that Madm Mary Fenwick haveing left £100 to bind poor children apprentices, & Mr Allgood haveing gott that mony into his hands, he

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knows very well what endeavours Mr Ritschel hath used to have it better settled, thoa hitherto to little purpose.

As to the Church: the Slate Roof thereof was grown so ruinous, that in a short time it wd not have been fitt for divine service, the Ch Wardens Jurors & 24ty had been diverse times calld & viewd it; but took no care to prevent its ruins, or rather wd not meddle with it, for that it was supposed to be so very badd that it could not be repaired without takeing down a great part of it, & there was no mony to putt it up again.

A little before winter Anno 96 when it could not be deferrd any longer, I desired the Ch Wardens to sett on workmen at day tale wages to mend it & prevent its falling, which they excused for that they had no mony to pay them & becaus I wd not do it myselve, I perswaded 2 of the 24ty to do it; but they left it to me to pay them & take care of that concern.

After they had finishd that work, wch they did much cheaper & better than was expected to the gt satisfaction of all people, I calld a meeting of the Ch Wardens Jurors & 24ty & gave them a note of the parish debts, & the debate was whether to borrow mony or lay on a sesse to pay them; Jno Bell offerd If any wd joyn with him to be bound for the Town for the one halfe, & those in the Shire after agreed to lay on a 12 fold sesse to pay their halfe, & no doubt but all matters wd have been amicably adjusted, if they had not been obstructed.

For Mr Allgood appears now at last & will have a new 24ty & they will do great things for the Church; & sent me a note (& of late I have receivd other two such notes) to read in the Ch to summon the Inhabitants of this Town & Shire to meet and consult with the Bailif of this Liberty abt choosing 24ty etc which I refused to read & to wch I answer

If Mr Allgood had appeared before the Ch was repaired while it lay so long ruinous & no body durst or wd meddle with it it had lookt great indeed in him, but not to do it till it was repaired & there was no occasion shows some other design.

And I think its plain enough to those who know Mr Allgoods temper, his former proceedings, & duely considering them & our present circumstances, that it is not so much out of love to the Ch as out of peak & design, haveing so fair a prospect to create new

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troubles, as he did Anno 84 & 85 when he gott both the Town & me to great trouble & charge and none but himselfe was gainer by it.

Hexham Feby 6 - 98

[Cover:]

For The Rt Worshipful Henry Watkinson  
Ld Chancellr of York

### 3. 13 February 1699

**Ritschel to Watkinson**

[NRO SANT/GEN/ECC/3/3/ 2-9]

Rt Worspll

I have seen a copy of a letter from Mr Allgood & Jno Carr of this Town to your Worsp wherein they accuse me of very ill things I conceive myself obleged to have that matter examind to clear myselfe of those foul aspertions, & I suppose both his Grace my Ld ArchBp & your Worsp expect it from me, yet I conceive it not improper in the mean time to give a particular answer to their letter.

Imprimis I may begin with their own words & retort them upon themselves And never any Minister in this County has been so used & abused by a magistrate as I have been these 15 years by Mr Thomas Allgood who upon every occasion hath shewd his implacable malice both to myselfe & family, as will appear from a full account of my grievances too tedious here to relate.

2ly They accuse me that I am a very Litigious troublesome man & at varianc with most of my pishioners & rather worse than p[ar]son Walton.....I have lookt over the depositions agt Mr Walton & find diverse grosse enormitys proved agt him, and I do challenge them to prove any of them or any such like things agt me. If I were such an one, as Mr Walton, one may justly wonder that Mr Allgood who these 15 years has so diligently watchd my Calling, and yet hath never been able to compasse his mischeivous designs agt me. Should have had patienc so long and suffer me to pceed to such a height of wickednesse, & not have begun sooner with me.

As to my being a very Litigious troublesome man at varianc with most of my pishioners, I thank god I live very quietly amongst



"Miserable sinners", "a vile crew", and "a pack of idle sparks" – just some of the descriptions of people in 18th century Hexham used by the Northumberland town's clergy. The moral conduct of the people was subject to the church courts, presided over in Hexham by the Reverends George Ritschel and Thomas Andrewes in turn. Their letters to the church authorities in York discuss the misdemeanours of parishioners and clergy, marriages and wills, the constant scramble for money, petty feuds and corruption, the perilous state of the church fabric and many other aspects of church business. This fascinating but little known collection is now published for the first time. Accompanied by other letters, explanatory footnotes, a full introduction, and biographies of the main correspondents and their subjects, this fully indexed book sheds new light on the social history of eighteenth century Northumberland. It will be of great interest to social, family, local historians, and the general reader, and provide new material for researchers for years to come.

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