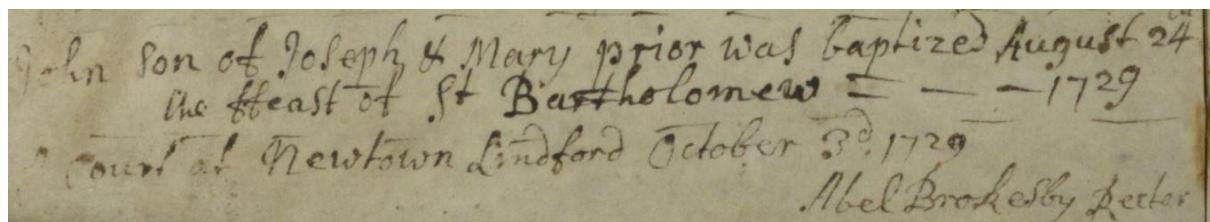


John Prior 1729-1803

Vicar 1783-1803

John Prior's life is well documented. He was born at Swithland in August 1729, the son of Joseph Prior, steward to the Danvers family, and was baptised on the Feast of St Bartholomew. He had one sister, Elisabeth. Prior was educated at Woodhouse and appointed master of the school there at the age of just 15. He served as curate of Woodhouse and Quorn from 1755 to 1763. He must have trained as a priest 'on the job' because his university education didn't start until 1762, when he was admitted as a 'sizar', a poor scholar, to Emmanuel College, Cambridge.



John Prior's baptism in 1729 at St Leonard's Church, Swithland.

John Prior was ordained deacon in June 1759 at Buckden in Huntingdonshire and was priested just before Christmas the same year, also in Buckden, by the Bishop of Lincoln. Buckden, at first sight, seems a strange location for an ordination. It's a village, near St Neot's, right beside the A1. However, its location is key. It was perfectly situated to be one of the 'travelling palaces' of the Bishops of Lincoln as they moved around their vast Diocese, which stretched from the Humber to the Thames at Dorchester. Only remnants of the 15th Century Palace remain today and are used as a Catholic Conference Centre.

Prior's first appointment by the Bishop of Lincoln, in June 1759, was as Curate of Rothley's Gaddesby Chapel and he continued to teach. In 1763, he was appointed Master of Ashby Grammar School. The Hastings family were almost certainly instrumental in his appointment at Ashby and in enabling him to take up a university education. He eventually took his BD (Bachelor of Divinity) degree from Emmanuel College in 1772. Prior, a musician as well as a teacher and cleric, was also patronised by influential Ashby Doctor Thomas Kirkland and his influence is likely to have expedited Prior's appointment by Francis, Earl of Huntingdon, to the living of St Helen's in 1783. At the time, the living was valued at £180 per year. It's clear from the Parish Registers that Prior had already been doing the job of Vicar for at least ten years by the time of his official appointment, even though his official duties at the time were as School Master and Curate. Prior had been instituted as Rector of Willesley in 1780 and also became Vicar of Packington in 1804.

John Prior's appointment as Master of Ashby Grammar School in 1763 gave him sufficient income to marry, in May, Anne Cock of Quorndon. The couple had a son, John (born 1765), and three daughters, Anne (born 1764), Elisabeth (born 1767) and Mary (born 1768). Elisabeth was the only one to marry. John became a priest and, after a spell as curate at St Helen's became perpetual curate of Willesley. Ann Prior senior died in July 1774, leaving her husband with four children under the age of 9, and is buried at St Helen's.

Prior must have been grief stricken. The following year, he threw himself into the huge project of creating a large-scale map of Leicestershire, which was published in 1779. It was the first map of the county to be produced since Elizabethan times and its scale was one inch to the mile. The surveying itself was actually carried out by a former pupil of Prior's, Joseph Whyman of Aston on Trent. Whyman had learnt surveying not from Prior, but from Peter P Burdett, whose map of Derbyshire was published in 1767¹. The map showed market towns, villages, seats, farmhouses, churches and chapels, wind and water mills, coal pits, lime works, turnpike roads, crossroads, boundaries of the hundreds and roman stations as well as woods, forests and parks. In the lower left corner is a plan of the city of Leicester. The map was financed by 264 subscribers, mostly Leicestershire nobles, gentry, clerics and professionals, and was dedicated to Prior's Patron, Francis, Earl of Huntingdon, who was a fellow of the Royal Society and a member of the Society of Antiquarians. The Rev Peter Cowper, Prior's predecessor as vicar of Ashby, was a subscriber.

The map, decorated with Francis Hastings' armorial bearing, was published by Prior in London and in Leicestershire. He included on the map a diagram of his triangulation stations, '*intended for the use of the curious, and for a testimony of the accuracy of this work.*'² His work earned him an award from the Society for the Encouragement of the Arts.

Prior also rebuilt the vicarage, which had fallen into decay, though he continued to live in the school house. He "*left his mark at Ashby not as a great preacher or schoolmaster, but rather as a genial man of liberal interests who had a wide range of scholastic and social accomplishments. He was a 'perfect master' in the theory of music and attained 'to great excellence as a performer', especially on the violin. He was 'an accurate and elegant classical scholar' and at the same time a sound mathematician and 'a person of refined taste and extensive erudition'. It is said that he learned Hebrew when over sixty years of age, sufficiently to enable him to read the Old Testament in the original.*"³

Prior was an accomplished musician and a cultured man, delighting in literature, friendships and domesticity, qualities which caused him to be loved in the town. One story about him was recalled by his friend Dr Kirkland in his notes. Some time after Francis, Earl of Huntingdon, had appointed Prior to St Helen's on Kirkland's recommendation, the Earl told Kirkland, "*Well, doctor, your friend, the vicar, seems to be a poor preacher.*" "*But, my Lord, you should hear him fiddle,*" was the reply.⁴

Sadly, Prior's failing health towards the end of his life impaired his teaching and it is said that shortly before he died there were just three or four pupils remaining at the Grammar School.⁵ In his will he expressed a wish "*to be buried in the North Side of the Vestry of the Church of Ashby de la Zouch with the remains of my late dear wife and desire it may be done*

¹ Leicestershire in 1777. Edited by J D Welding. Published by Leicestershire Libraries and Information Service, 1984. P3.

² John Prior, Map of Leicestershire. (London 1779). BL, Maps, 3260 (7)

³ Levi Fox: A Country Grammar School. University Press, Oxford. 1967. Pp63-64

⁴ W. Scott, *The Story of Ashby-de-la-Zouch* (1907), p.334

⁵ L. Fox, *A Country Grammar School* (1967), p.64



*Rev John Prior's Monument on the
North Wall of St Helen's Church
Photo: Martin Vaughan*

in as private a way as is consistent with decency.”⁶ He provided for his unmarried daughters and requested that either Lord Moira or General Hastings should give his son a living within six months of his death. All his books, musical instruments and music books, except his Harpsichord pianoforte and virginal Harpsichord and vocal music were left to his son. The rest were divided between his daughters, Ann and Mary.⁷

He died on 15th October 1803 at the age of 74. His obituary in the Derby Mercury, dated 10th November, described him thus: “*On Tuesday the 18th ult, in the 75th year of his age, the Rev John Prior, Vicar of Ashby de la Zouch, Master of the Free School there, and Vicar of Packington, Leicestershire. He was a tender parent; a kind master; a sincere friend; and a truly good man: whose death will be long lamented by his family and friends.*”⁸

Julie Starkey
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⁶ The National Archives, Will of Reverend John Prior, PROB 11/1401/203

⁷ The National Archives, Will of Reverend John Prior, PROB 11/1401/203

⁸ Derby Mercury. 10-11-1803. (FMP)