

Bishop Samuel Wilberforce and His Memorial

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Life, Character and Work

Samuel Wilberforce, briefly Bishop of Winchester from 1869 to 1873, was one of the major Church personalities of the mid-Victorian period. He espoused the emollient 'middle way' during the conflict between Evangelicals¹ and High Church Tractarians² which threatened to irreparably damage the Church of England.

Samuel Wilberforce was the fifth child and third son of William Wilberforce, philanthropist, MP and campaigner against the slave trade. Ironically for someone who would be the epitome of High Church Anglicanism, he was raised as an Evangelical within the Clapham Sect which his father had founded. Samuel was born on 7 September 1805 and privately educated, entering Oriel College, Oxford in 1823 and became a member of the debating society which developed into the Oxford Union.

He was ordained in 1828 and, in 1830, appointed by Charles Sumner, Bishop of Winchester (1827-69), to the parish of St. Mary's, Brighthelmston, Isle of Wight. Sumner, whose mother was a first cousin of William Wilberforce, was a life-long influence and sponsor of Samuel who later succeeded him in 1869. [Portrait of Bishop Wilberforce by Julia Margaret Cameron, 1871].



He proved a model parochial churchman at Brighthelmston and became a leading cleric in the Isle of Wight. His reputation grew through the 1830s. It was in part acquired as a wide-ranging author, whose output included stories for the young, a life of his father William,

¹ Evangelicals were the Protestant wing of the Church who emphasized the authority of the Bible and held Jesus Christ as their Saviour as being central to their worship and belief. (David Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain; A History from the 1730s to the 1980s* (London: Routledge, 1993).

² The Tractarians were so-called because, led by John Henry Newman, they produced ninety *Tracts for the Times*, which promoted the concept of a Reformed Catholic Church of England. (Barry Turner, *The Victorian Parson* (Stroud: Amberley, 2015), 63.

an edition of his father's correspondence, and a history of the Episcopal church in the USA. It was, however, chiefly acquired through his frequent and accomplished appearances in pulpits and on platforms.

His talents were recognised in the diocese of Winchester by his appointment as Archdeacon of Surrey in 1839 which included suburbs of south London. In 1841 Samuel was appointed chaplain to Prince Albert, having come to royal attention through his speech at an anti-slavery meeting. He was appointed Bishop of Oxford in 1845 on the recommendation of Sir Robert Peel, despite taking up the post of Dean of Westminster earlier that year.

As a young clergyman, he developed a respect for church order which underpinned his views throughout his life. He never ceased to be a staunch defender of orthodoxy and described himself politically as a "very high Tory". He was involved in several controversies and his commitment to orthodoxy aroused strong feelings among those of the Evangelical wing of the church.

There were four Wilberforce brothers, of whom three were deeply involved in the intense debate about the Catholic nature of the Church of England. Robert, Samuel and Henry were all ordained in the Church of England after graduating from Oriel College. Robert and Henry were deeply involved in the Oxford Movement, whose members were known as Tractarians. The Oxford Movement was an influential and controversial group of High Church Anglicans who sought to return many Catholic beliefs and rituals from before the English Reformation to the Church of England.

Robert was close to John Henry Newman, who converted to Catholicism in 1845 and later became a Cardinal in 1879. Robert converted to the Catholic church in 1854 after long and anguished consideration. The youngest brother Henry converted earlier in 1850 after a stormy career in Hampshire and Kent in which he enraged Evangelicals by precipitately introducing what were seen as Catholic practices. The oldest brother, William, was received in 1863. Samuel, throughout this period, tried endlessly to counsel his brothers to stay within the Church, especially Henry.³ Ironically, Wilberforce later distanced himself from the Oxford Movement and the series of conversions to Roman Catholicism among his family and close friends caused him

³ David Newsome, *The Parting of Friends* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1993), 298. [Reprint of 1966 book].

great personal distress. On the eve of his appointment to Winchester in 1869, his daughter Ella and her husband also converted to the Catholic Church.

He suffered greater and longer-lasting personal distress by the death of his wife, Emily in 1841. They had married in 1828 and theirs had been a tender and devoted relationship.

He had an instinct towards moderation and compromise wherever possible, for example in seeking to accommodate new practices within the church which did not cause further conflict. In similar vein, he strongly opposed the disestablishment of the Church of Ireland but, when the House of Commons voted for it, he advised that no objection should be made to it in the House of Lords. His attempts at moderation and changes of mind led him to be tagged first as Sly Sam⁴ and later as Soapy Sam.⁵

It is claimed that Benjamin Disraeli called Wilberforce 'saponaceous', but this is not included in Robert Blake's biography. Wilberforce and Disraeli were in regular close contact until Disraeli failed to nominate Samuel to the vacant bishopric of London in 1868. Their friendship ended and Wilberforce turned against Disraeli who had put forward the evangelical candidates favoured by Queen Victoria.⁶ Disraeli, who lost office in late 1868, included a thinly disguised Wilberforce as "The Bishop" (and John Henry Newman as "Cardinal Grandison") in his best-selling novel, *Lothair*, published in 1870.⁷

Samuel's appointment as Bishop of Oxford in 1845 brought him to national prominence.⁸ Much of his subsequent reputation rests on the work he did in consolidating the jurisdiction of this recently enlarged bishopric, in which he displayed energy and force of personality. He travelled incessantly and his constant presence throughout the diocese was notable. He regarded the ordination of new priests as one of his most important responsibilities and increased the number of livings in the diocese from fourteen to ninety-five in his twenty-four years in Oxford.⁹ In 1854 Samuel founded a theological college at Cuddesdon, as the Oxford Diocesan

⁴ Arthur Burns, "Samuel Wilberforce", *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, 2009 (online): 5.

⁵ Burns, "Samuel Wilberforce", 7.

⁶ Robert Blake, *Disraeli* (New York: St Martin's Press, 1967), 510-11.

⁷ Blake, *Disraeli*, 517.

⁸ Burns, *Samuel Wilberforce*, 6.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 5.

Seminary, to train graduates from Oxford and Cambridge.¹⁰ It still operates as Ripon College, Cuddesdon.

His energy was equally evident from the scale of his correspondence. His son estimated that he completed an average of 6340 letters a year and, on one occasion, he was found simultaneously dictating four letters to four separate secretaries, while himself writing a fifth.

Throughout his period as Bishop of Oxford, he was an important figure in national debates on ecclesiastical issues. He was principally motivated by three objectives: preservation of the connection between church and state and of the Christian character of the nation; strengthening the church's capacity for independent action and self-determination; and resistance to the challenges to orthodoxy from liberal churchmen and new scientific theories.¹¹

He was a friend of William Gladstone, with whom he had background and beliefs in common. Both came from evangelical backgrounds yet became high churchmen. It was Gladstone, as Prime Minister from 1868 to 1874, who proposed Wilberforce to be Bishop of Winchester in 1869.¹² This friendship would not have endeared him to Disraeli, whom he also antagonised, by opposing legislation in the House of Lords which would have allowed Jews to enter Parliament, without having to swear a Christian oath.

His stance as a defender of orthodoxy in the 1860s moderated the earlier hostility of his evangelical critics, so by the time of his appointment as Bishop of Winchester in 1869, he was a figure of undoubted stature in the church and more widely. He became as immersed in diocesan affairs as he had been at Oxford, as well as serving on a commission on ritual appointed in 1867 and being appointed president of a committee charged with revising the New Testament.¹³ These demands strained his health: he suffered two heart attacks during 1870 and 1871. His energy had clearly not deserted him, however, and he was riding to meet Gladstone when he suffered a riding accident

¹⁰ Newsome, *Parting*, 335.

¹¹ Burns, *Samuel Wilberforce*, 8.

¹² Newsome, *Parting*, 411.

¹³ Burns, *Samuel Wilberforce*, 9-10.

near Abinger in Surrey. He died almost immediately on 19 July 1873 and was buried next to his wife at Lavington.

Despite his outstanding qualities and contribution to the Church, Wilberforce remains best known for his intervention in the debate held at Oxford in 1860 on Darwin's theory of evolution (see separate panel). Newsome says he was a man of 'unassailable greatness' who has largely been remembered for his faults. Wilberforce sought to assert the dignity of episcopal office and played a major role in transforming diocesan organisation which impacted well beyond Oxford and Winchester. Wilberforce, like his Catholic convert close friend Henry Manning, had 'irresistible charm of manner, allied to a real and heartfelt tenderness and affection in their relations with their fellows, qualities which enabled them to gain an enduring influence over individuals and a mighty reputation for ecclesiastical statesmanship.'¹⁴

The Wilberforce Memorial

'The Most Florid Monument In Our Cathedral'

The memorial or cenotaph to Bishop Samuel Wilberforce was contentious from the outset. It is not Wilberforce's tomb. He is buried at Lavington, near Petworth in West Sussex, close to his family home. The Winchester historian George Blore referred to it as 'the most florid monument in our cathedral'.¹⁵ Others have been less kind.

A committee was formed at the close of Wilberforce's funeral at Lavington in July 1873 and proposed a national memorial to him. The committee grew to 100 strong and involved peers, church leaders and MPs. In December 1873, the Dean of Winchester, John Bramston, chaired a meeting to discuss a memorial to Bishop Wilberforce in the Cathedral, after which an appeal for public subscriptions was launched.

To design the memorial, the committee chose George Gilbert Scott, the leading architect of his day and widely associated with church building and restoration. In the Cathedral, he was also responsible for the 1875 wooden quire screen which is dedicated to Bishop Wilberforce (north wing) and Dean Garnier (south wing).

¹⁴ Newsome, *Partings*, 412-13.

¹⁵ G. H. Blore, *Monuments of Winchester Cathedral*, 3rd edition (Farnborough: Saint Michael's Abbey Press, 1983), 21.



Scott was appointed by January 1875. In that year there was much correspondence which indicates the committee was often at loggerheads with Dean Bramston.¹⁶ It was the Dean who insisted the memorial should be placed in the south transept, where he held it would be less obtrusive than protruding into the south presbytery aisle, which was the alternative.¹⁷

By 1875 less than half the sum needed had been subscribed and there was talk, much to Scott's dismay, about retrenching on the decoration of the memorial. The completed memorial dates from 1878. Scott was the architect, and the sculptor of the effigy was H.H. Armstead, who had worked with Scott on the Albert Memorial in London. Other aspects of the memorial, including the supporting angels, were sculpted by the firm of Farmer and Brindley, of London.¹⁸

¹⁶ The MP for North Hampshire Melville Portal wrote in exasperation to Lord Henry Scott with 'Oh, the Dean' and described him as 'dishonest' and 'shuffling' about his resistance to the memorial plans. [Philip Barrett, "Georgian and Victorian Restorations and Repairs". In John Crook (ed.), *Winchester Cathedral 1093-1993* (Chichester, Phillimore, 1993), 321.

¹⁷ There was correspondence in 1877 from the Mayor of Winchester, the Warden of Winchester College and others questioning whether a large Gothic monument should be in a Norman transept; the Dean held firm.

¹⁸ Barrett, *Restorations*, 320.

The design is modelled on the memorial to Archbishop Walter de Gray in York Minster (right), which is of Purbeck marble and dates from 1140-50.



The Wilberforce memorial is highly decorated with what John Crook has described as ‘charming examples of Victorian sculpture’.¹⁹ It has remained controversial: many consider that its location in the south transept, placing neo-Gothic amid Norman architecture, does neither it, nor the south transept, any favours. It has even been categorised as a ‘most notable example of Victorian Bad Taste’ whose effect on the appearance of the south transept is ‘ruinous’.²⁰

The ostentatious memorial was designed by Scott to be viewed from all sides. There are twenty angels included in the monument; six support the effigy, there is a single angel looking inwards over the effigy at each of the four corners, and two looking outwards. In addition, there are two praying angels at the head of the effigy. At the four corners are representations of the four archangels, starting at the south-west corner and working clockwise, Uriel (SW) holding a skull, Michael (NW) holding a sword, Raphael (NE) who carries a rod in his right hand and might originally have had a fish in his left hand, but that hand is now damaged, and Gabriel (SE) shown next to a pot of lilies, one of the emblems of the Virgin Mary. Four virtues are also represented at the four corners, Prudence (SW), Fortitude (NW), Justice (NE), and Faith (SE).²¹

- The effigy’s alabaster came from Derbyshire, one of the principal sources in this country, on a slab of Belgian marble.
- The six kneeling angels supporting it are of alabaster and the floor they are kneeling on is of brecciated marble (small pieces of marble pressed together).
- The ornate neo-Gothic canopy is of alabaster, enriched with scaling like Queen Eleanor’s memorial in Westminster Abbey.
- The base, the lions, the corner piers and the four virtues figures at the corners are of limestone.

¹⁹ John Crook, *Winchester Cathedral* (Andover: Pitkin Unichrome, 1971), 74.

²⁰ Raymond Burt, *The Glories of Winchester Cathedral* (London: Winchester Publications, 1948), NP.

²¹ Julie Adams, “Forget Me Not – House of Remembrance”, *Record Extra*, May 2021: 16-17.

- The supporting columns are twisted shafts of red cork marble, and shafts of green marble from Greece.

The Latin inscription around the marble slab at the base of the effigy translates as 'Samuel Wilberforce, lately Bishop of Winchester, previously Bishop of Oxford, born on the first day of the month of September in the year 1805. Died in the faith of Christ on the nineteenth day of the month of July 1873'. The reference to his birth on September 1st is curious. All sources have it as September 7th.

Wilberforce's fatal accident happened on the Abinger Roughs, an area of grass and woodland above Abinger Hammer in Surrey. His family erected a granite memorial (right) on the spot where he fell.



Stephen Jones

The 1860 Oxford debate over evolution

Since the beginning of the twentieth century, Samuel Wilberforce has been characterised as a smug cleric who rejected science. This reputation arose after a debate over Charles Darwin's book *On the Origin of Species* in which his theory of evolution was discussed. The focal event was a meeting of the British Association for the Advancement of Science, of which Bishop Wilberforce was a vice-president, held in Oxford on 30 June 1860. Before the meeting, Wilberforce had reviewed Darwin's book and dismissed it as bad science with distressing implications for theology. It seems, however, that Darwin thought the review to be 'uncommonly clever'.²²

During the debate, Wilberforce asked the audience flippantly if any of them could trace their descent from an ape. Thomas Huxley, a scientist and supporter of Darwin, responded hotly that such ancestry was preferable to descent from a man of high intellect and influence 'who yet employs those faculties for the mere purpose of

²² Burns, "Samuel Wilberforce", 9.

introducing ridicule into a grave scientific discussion'.²³ At the time, this exchange caused no great stir and Wilberforce and his supporters thought he had bested Huxley in the exchange, but history would be revised.

There was no transcript of the exchange and it was not until 1898, some 38 years later, that a reminiscence of the spat was published in *Macmillan's Magazine*, which included a claim that some ladies had fainted as a result of it.²⁴ After this time, the long-dead bishop's unfortunate witticism became the central driver of his latter-day reputation, although A.N. Wilson considers that 'posterity has been unjust' to Wilberforce²⁵ by placing so much emphasis on this one event and overlooking his importance to national and ecclesiastical life.

The importance of the 1860 debate was far greater than the very brief Wilberforce-Huxley clash as it gave Darwin a serious hearing of his theory, put the Church on the defensive and elevated Huxley's status as a scientist. For Simon Heffer, it was 'the end of the medieval world, whose ideas were so often rooted in blind faith, and the start of the modern, whose ideas were so often rooted in rationalism'.²⁶ Others took it less seriously with one analysis of Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* claiming that the battle between the Red and White Knights was the controversy between Huxley (Red) and Wilberforce (White).²⁷

Tom Watson

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Wilberforce Memorial, Winchester Cathedral: Photograph by Jacqueline Banerjee, undated, <https://victorianweb.org/sculpture/armstead/10.html>.

Walter de Gray Memorial, York Minster: Photograph by Andrew Rabbott, 2013. Used under Creative Commons Attributions-Share Alike Unported 3.0 licence.

Samuel Wilberforce memorial cross, Abinger Roughts: <https://www.surreyhills.org/surrey-hills-60/the-wilberforce-memorial/> (undated).

²³ J. V. Jensen, "Return to the Wilberforce-Huxley Debate", *British Journal for the History of Science*, 21 (1988): 168.

²⁴ Simon Heffer, *High Minds – The Victorians and the Birth of Modern Britain* (London: Random House, 2013), 218.

²⁵ A. N. Wilson, *The Victorians* (London: Arrow Books, 2003), 377.

²⁶ Heffer, *High Minds*, 377.

²⁷ Wilson, *Victorians*, 327.