

The Hon and Rev

If you enter St Peter's Church, Bekesbourne by the north door, as you ordinarily do on coming up the path from the lych gate, you will see on the wall opposite two stone tablets of white marble on dark grey slate, one above the other. They are fine, opulent-looking tablets which must have been expensive to put up. The lower of the two has the following inscription:

SACRED
TO THE MEMORY OF
THE HON^{BLE} AND REV^D
WILLIAM EDEN M.A.
YOUNGEST SON OF
FREDERICK MORTON
FIRST LORD HENLEY.
RECTOR OF BISHOPSBOURNE.
SENIOR SIX PREACHER
IN CANTERBURY CATHEDRAL.
25 YEARS VICAR OF THIS PARISH
AND RECTOR OF HARBLEDOWN
DIED MAY 4TH 1859
AGED 66 YEARS
ALSO OF HIS WIDOW
ANNA MARIA LADY GREY DE RUTHYN
DAUGHTER OF WILLIAM KELHAM ESQ^{RE}
OF RYTON CUM DUNSMORE
WARWICKSHIRE WIDOW OF
EDWARD 20TH LORD GREY DE RUTHYN
BORN 10TH AUGUST 1792
DIED 23RD OCTOBER 1875

Pompous snobs this Eden family, I hear you say; and you may be right. But wait a minute: what a lot this tablet says about its subject, far more than the usual pious compliments of most memorials.

The Edens were a family of considerable distinction in the late 18th/early 19th century. In particular two sons of Sir Robert Eden, third baronet, of West Auckland, County Durham, made names for themselves in diplomatic and government circles. The older, William, born in 1744, was member of Parliament for Woodstock from 1774 to 1784 and for Heytesbury from 1784 to 1793. He held the offices successively of Under-secretary of State for the North, Chief Secretary for Ireland, Envoy to France, Ambassador to Spain, Ambassador to the Netherlands, Joint Postmaster-General and President of the Board of Trade. He was made a peer of Ireland in 1789 and became first Baron Auckland of Great Britain in 1793. He died in 1814 and was succeeded by his son George, 2nd Baron Auckland, a staunch Whig at the centre of the political scene, who was Governor General of India from 1835 to 1841 and was made Earl of Auckland in 1839.

The second son of Sir Robert Eden, Bart. was the Frederick Morton Eden of our memorial tablet. He was born in 1752 and

like his brother was educated at Eton and Oxford. He became a diplomat representing his country successively in Bavaria, Copenhagen, Dresden, Berlin, Vienna and Madrid. He retired in 1799 on a pension of £2000 a year and was made Baron Henley of Chardstock. Other honours heaped upon him included Privy Councillor in 1794 and GCB in 1815. He married in 1783 Elizabeth, daughter of the Earl of Northington. He died in 1830 and was succeeded as Lord Henley by his oldest surviving son Robert, who was a chancery lawyer and married the daughter of the first Sir Robert Peel, millowner and philanthropist and father of Sir Robert Peel, founder of the police and later Prime Minister.

William Eden, our man, was Frederick Morton's younger son. He was born on 9th November 1792 into this distinguished family. Like his father and uncle he was educated at Eton and Oxford and like so many younger sons of the aristocracy of his day was destined for a career in the church. In 1820 he married Anna Maria, the young widow of the 19th Baron Grey de Ruthyn, the same age as himself, and in the same year was instituted as Vicar of Bekesbourne and, like the Rev John Toke his predecessor, also Rector of Harbledown. There he stayed for twenty five years until in 1846 he resigned on appointment as Rector of Bishopsbourne (with Barham); which had always been a better-paid job! He also became a Six Preacher of Canterbury Cathedral. He died in 1859 at the age of 66 and was buried back in Bekesbourne churchyard. His widow lived on until 1875 when she died aged 83. Their grave is marked in Bekesbourne churchyard by a massive stone cross, now becoming somewhat eroded by the weather, on the higher ground south east of the chancel.

William and Anna Maria had (at least) seven children: William Henley 1821, Elizabeth 1824, Arthur 1825, Frederick Grey 1827, Morton Edward, Robert Charles 1836, and one other daughter. The upper of the two memorial tablets referred to above records the deaths of four of the children in the lifetime of their parents: Elizabeth as an infant, William at school at Eton at the age of 12, Frederick as an army officer serving in India at the age of 28 and Morton drowned in the river Medway at the age of 20. One notes with sadness the uncertainties of life and death in those days when large families were the norm rather than the exception, when death in childhood from infectious or contagious diseases was a common occurrence before the advances of medical science made possible their prevention or cure and when many young people met their death in the "outposts of empire". This tablet of itself is a pertinent social comment on the Victorian age.



The Edens may not have lived all the time in Bekesbourne vicarage. They were not there, for instance, on census day 1841; rather the young curate in his twenties, John Allen, with his wife and two small children are listed. In the East Kent poll book for 18-- William Eden is shown as qualified to vote under Bekesbourne but resident and voting under Harbledown. But they seem to have maintained a considerable establishment at the vicarage; in 1841 there were 2 male and 5 female servants living in, more than the Old Palace (1 male and 2 female) and Cobham Court (3 female). Certainly he seems to have carried out his duties conscientiously, at least in so far as the records of christenings, marriages and burials show, though like many Vicars or Rectors of his day he employed a curate to act for him on many occasions. He himself, as no doubt was required, attended the annual vestry meetings and was a signatory to the registers approving the churchwardens' accounts and the like.

What is interesting is the fact that for some years there lived in rural Bekesbourne one who was connected to the highest in the land; no less than brother-in-law to the Prime Minister and first cousin to the Governor General of India. Were Eden and his wife much in demand socially? Did the drawing rooms of East Kent ring with the gossip of Whitehall? What was said when Peel repealed the Corn Laws? Did the news of India in the letters of Emily Eden, Auckland's sister, to her family at home (some later in 1866 published as *Up the Country*) filter through to Bekesbourne or Harbledown? Was there sympathy at the disaster of the first Afghan war during Auckland's tenure of office in India, when virtually the entire British expeditionary force was annihilated and for which many would hold him responsible? Or perhaps they simply lived the quiet life of a country vicar of those days. Who knows?