1. Precocious Prodigy

Retrospect opens with a defiant statement: 'I belong to the middle-class and to the soundest part of it, namely, that which from time immemorial has lived and worked in the country'. But Henson had never lived or worked in the country and his consciousness of 'class' grew from a 'chip' on his shoulder to a disfiguring carbuncle in his psyche. True, his ancestry was rural stock, first resting in the Anglo-Saxon village of Porlock in Somerset then, from the late eighteenth century, in Morebath, near Tiverton in North Devon. His great-grandfather and grandfather farmed the land at Loxton Farm in Morebath, a parish known now for the records that were kept during turbulent Reformation times from 1529 to 1574. Each was well known in the village of approximately two hundred inhabitants and both served as churchwardens in the parish church of St George.

Henson's father, Thomas, was born in Morebath in 1812 and had no intention of adapting to a life of farming drudgery. When he was in his late teens he quarrelled with his father and left home for London to find work and seek his fortune. There are numerous descriptions of his occupations: 'warehouseman', 'outfitter', and the 1871 census records him deriving his income from 'property'. He was clearly successful in various businesses as he was able to retire in 1865, aged fifty-three, and buy Vale Villa, a large modern house with a landscaped garden and fruit trees in Broadstairs in Kent. He knew how to use or manipulate people to assist him financially and breathe wealth into a number of flourishing business enterprises. But he borrowed money he was incapable of repaying and sank into substantial debt.

Thomas had married Mary Ann Holloway at St Pancras Chapel on 17 January 1839. She died young without issue. The 1851 Census records him living in St Pancras in a house owned by Mary Ann Fear (b. 1806) and her daughters Martha Tyler and Mary Ann. Thomas Henson married Martha Tyler Fear at St Alphage's Church,

Greenwich on 31 August 1852. He was forty, his new wife twenty-two. They lived at various addresses in London and Kent. There were eight children of the union, six boys and two girls. The girls never married and the remaining children were childless.

Herbert Hensley Henson, the sixth child and fourth boy, was born on 8 November 1863. He inherited the name Hensley from an aunt, Emma Hensley Long. His mother died in January 1870 when he was six. He held on to an idealistic view of her, claiming 'with her died our happiness'. While she lived the detrimental changes in her husband's religious practices were camouflaged. For some time Thomas, long bearded and patriarchal in looks, trawled places of worship in London to hear evangelical and revivalist preachers. He fell under the spell of the Revd Baptist Noel, a mesmeric Evangelical preacher whose fervour and eloquence at the unconsecrated St John's Chapel, Bedford Row, attracted crowds to hear his God-fearing and Calvinistic message. Noel's influence was increased when his secession from the Church of England was announced dramatically by his public re-baptism by immersion in the neighbouring Baptist Chapel on 9 August 1849. His secession had been preceded by the violent controversy on baptismal regeneration aroused by the refusal of the Bishop of Exeter, Henry Phillpotts, to institute the Revd G.C. Gorham to the Living of Brampford Speke on the grounds of his doctrinal unsoundness with respect to that specific doctrine of the Church of England. It is odd that the same incident which drove some Anglican clergy, including Henry Manning, into the Roman Catholic, 'Popish', Communion, drove others into denominational nonconformity. Though Thomas Henson remained nominally a member of the Church of England he did not allow his four younger children to be baptised.

Thomas Henson was unable to bring up his large family without help. For a time Herbert and his brother Arthur were sent to live in the house of the long-serving Congregational minister, Augustus Frederick Bennett, a mild scholarly man whom they liked but with a wife they hated. Thomas Henson even gave land to the Congregationalists to build a chapel. In the Henson household the father ruled, imposing the strictest puritanical discipline which became narrower and darker. Thomas abandoned Congregationalism and transferred his allegiance to the Christian or Plymouth Brethren where he became a rigorous disciple. The Brethren was formed in the mid-1820s and attracted an educated membership with a somewhat aristocratic veneer. Ironically, business-men like Thomas joined where they found a brotherly love and support, similar to free-masonry. Their beliefs and structure were a world-denying pietism with the Bible as their supreme rule; an interest in prophecy and the Second Coming; believer's baptism; weekly breaking of bread; no set liturgy; no ordained ministry though many full-time

evangelists; a congregational polity with no co-ordinating organization. They spread steadily. The pietism and prophecy of the Brotherhood intensified Thomas Henson's bleak outlook on the world and increased a feeling of urgency to be prepared for the Second Coming. Is it any wonder that the darkness at home become all-pervading? In view of their father's contempt for the wickedness of the world, life at home for the children was purgatory. They were not to be tarnished by attending the schools where corruption was rife. The undercurrents in Herbert's early life were never completely expunged.

In 1873 childhood misery and deprivation were unexpectedly relieved and, to an extent, transformed when his father married Emma Theodore Parker, thirty years his junior: the widow of a German Lutheran pastor in Stuttgart. She herself was a devout Lutheran. There is no record of a 'legal' marriage as the Brethren disapproved of legal ceremonies. An immediate positive outcome, with lasting results, was Henson's access to his father's library where his religious interests had led him to accumulate a large collection of theological and philosophical books. Herbert immersed himself in the books so that by the age of fourteen this prodigious boy had read as deeply in divinity as many men taking holy orders. He was attracted to the Old Testament like iron filings to a magnet and, with a retentive memory, was able to recite all one hundred and fifty psalms by heart. The markedly pessimistic tone of Edward Gibbon's proclaimed work of literature and history *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (1776-89) in six volumes stuck in his mind. There was an abundance of seventeenth, eighteenth, even nineteenth-century authors, including John Milton (*Paradise Lost*, 1667, was a favourite) and John Bunyan's *Pilgrims' Progress* (1678). Foxe's *Book of Martyrs* (1563) by the sixteenth century martyrologist, appealed for extolling the heroism and endurance of the Protestant martyrs of Mary's reign, all victims of 'Papist' tyranny. The English theologian William Paley's *Evidences of Christianity* (1802) also appealed for its presentation of facts and its pellucid style. The effectiveness of satire entered Herbert's thinking through Thomas Fuller, notably *Andronicus* (1659) directed at Oliver Cromwell. The works of Archbishop Robert Leighton (1611-84) and Edmund Spenser (1552-99) were well-thumbed. William Cowper was much quoted in Henson's published work. The conversion to Christianity of John Newton (1725-1807) who became an Anglican Divine appealed, even though theologically he was a pronounced Calvinist. Herbert was drawn to Bishop Gilbert Burnet of Salisbury (1643-1715), a Reformation historian, Whig in politics and latitudinarian in theology, who had the confidence of William of Orange and Mary. Perhaps the most lasting influence was the English moral philosopher and theologian, Joseph Butler (1692-1752). The

young admirer recognised his hero's grasp of principle and sustained reasoning and above all his contribution to the deistic controversy stressing the role of conscience in *Fifteen Sermons* (1726) and *The Analogy of Religion* (1736). Butler was Bishop of Durham from 1750 to 1752. Henson's step-mother introduced him to the works of Walter Scott (1771-1832). Translations of Greek historians and philosophers, such as Thucydides, Pericles and Aeschylus, were special. Henson made an observation about his childhood which shows self-knowledge: 'I was oddly external to my own environment, and insensibly formed the habit of detached observation, and even critical appraisement'.

Henson grew bolder at home, including acts of rebellion against his father. He walked over to the Roman Catholic Church of St Augustine in Ramsgate, finding its 'sombre dignity' attractive and its stillness 'mysterious and other-worldly. It suggested a religion 'wonderfully unlike that which offended me so much in my Protestant home'. These clandestine visits came to an abrupt halt when a nosy neighbour reported them to his father who had a hatred of 'papists'. When Henson went abroad for the first time he stayed in Munich with his stepmother's sister who had married a devout Roman Catholic. He says, 'The spectacle of Roman religion as it was disclosed in the Rhineland and in Bavaria both attracted and repelled me', but verses written in his notebooks at the time suggest more the former than the latter. When he heard of a Mission in Ramsgate led by a layman, Captain Field, he went to hear him.

> I was not converted, but I was considerably impressed and predisposed to respond to the appeal for Confirmation candidates which was about that time made in the parish church of Broadstairs. But Confirmation implied Baptism, and I was not baptized. My own insistence, strongly supported by my step-mother, overcame my father's reluctance, and he took advantage of a holiday which we spent in the rural parish of Minster-in-Thanet to arrange for my Baptism in the glorious parish church. The Vicar at that time was an excellent Evangelical clergyman named Gell. I had no godparents, but answered for myself; and I well remember how the Vicar walked with me after the service, and the earnestness with which he urged on me the significance of my baptismal vows. Thus insistently was the problem of baptism forced on my mind, and it made a deep impression.
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> When I returned to Broadstairs after my baptism, I was accepted by the Rector as a candidate for Confirmation. About this time my family left Broadstairs and went to reside in a comfortable house not far from Pegwell Bay, near enough to Ramsgate to admit of attendance at Christ Church, where an

> Evangelical ministry was available. I was left behind at Broadstairs, as a boarder in the school which I had been attending as a day boy. Thus, my preparation for the Laying on of Hands in Confirmation was in some sense bisected and incoherent. It began with private instruction by the Rector of Broadstairs, a kind and devout "High Churchman" named Carr, and it was completed on very different lines by an ardent Evangelical curate in Ramsgate named Fry. I retain a clear and pleasant memory of my interviews with the Rector of Broadstairs, who instructed me alone in his study. Our interviews took the character of informal and somewhat discursive discussions rather than regular lessons. I was inquisitive, audacious, and insistent; he was patient and conciliatory. The Confirmation lessons at Ramsgate neither interested nor impressed me. I endured them as a necessary preliminary to my Confirmation, but gained nothing from it, mentally or spiritually. In due course I was confirmed by the Bishop Suffragan of Dover, Edward Parry, and my first Communion was made at a numerously attended Evening Celebration at Christ Church. I was not edified, and have always disliked Evening Communions.

When he was fourteen his stepmother, after a lengthy period of trying, successfully persuaded her husband that Henson should attend Broadstairs Collegiate School. He went there on 18 November 1877 but there were few benefits. Apart from learning Latin and Greek, any formal education was too late. However, Henson's mind was opened in a new direction when the French school teacher, D'Aubine, heard that Henson's aim was to be a preacher. He gave him the life of Jacques Benigne Bossuet (1627-1704) known for his pulpit oratory. He had preached before Louis IV, and delivered the funeral oration for Henrietta Maria. The grand, impressive and purposeful French baroque style of preaching fascinated Henson.

At school Henson remained separate from other pupils with few friends. The masters were out of their depth with him, but entrusted this eloquent youth with the position of head of school. Rather than join other boys in sporting activities he buried himself in reading and writing essays or sermons. One episode brought his school life to an abrupt end. When he recalled it half a century later a symbolic aspect to it is evident.

> There had been some trouble in the dormitory, and as head of the school, I was required to state the facts. I did so truthfully, but, of course, refused to name the culprits. The Head Master in face of the assembled school, declined to accept my statement as true, and there was a scene, in which I delivered myself with more passion than respect. That same night I wrote to the exasperated pedagogue

> a scathing letter of farewell, and entrusted it for delivery to one of my friends, and then proceeded to climb the playground wall, and walk a distance of five or six miles to my new home at Pegwell Bay, which I reached in the early hours of the following day, to the amazement of my family, and the considerable indignation of my father.

Henson's disturbed, unusual and loveless upbringing was reflected in some Lenten Addresses given at St Mary's Hospital, Ilford, on *Discipline and Law* (1898). A whiff of snobbery is detected as his unfortunate class-consciousness was already well developed. He spoke of the 'Law of the Family'. The congregation would be unaware that with the text 'Honour thy father and thy mother' the preacher was speaking about his own experience.

> But there are practical difficulties. Parents may be unworthy of love; their authority may be abused; they may demand what conscience cannot yield. What then, is the Christian duty? How shall he be loyal both to the family and to the faith? Undoubtedly the conditions of modern life have tended to largely increase these difficulties. The break-down of the rigidity, which a few generations ago fixed the social position of men in the class in which they were born, has built up between many parents and their children the novel and irrelevant barrier of social difference. The rapidity with which educational facilities have been extended has worked in the same direction. These are real difficulties. It is harder to be on terms of dutiful deference to one's parents when they belong to a lower social stratum than that to which we have been raised, when their interests and sympathies belong to another sphere than our own. We observe much shocking contempt of parents by young people whose imagined superiority has been painfully gained for them by the labours and sacrifices of those whom they yet despise.

What was sixteen year old Herbert to do in 1879? He had to break-out of the family prison in which he felt captive. Someone suggested that he might secure an educational position through a well-known educational agency as an usher at Brigg Grammar School in Lincolnshire. He needed no persuading! The school was founded in 1669 where boys were 'taught the Lattine, Greeke and Hebrew languadges, to write alsoe, and Arethmaticke'. Henson attended the parish church of Brigg which was High Church. 'I was attracted by its genuine congregational character, but this did not affect my inherited dislike of all Ritualism.' Henson informed Head Master Flower, a graduate of Lincoln College, Oxford, of his intention to seek ordination. Earlier he used the word 'preacher'. Flower explained

that Henson could do so at a comparatively modest expenditure by matriculating as an 'unattached student'. Henson was given all the academic help he needed to secure success meeting the essential standards of required Greek and Latin.

There was a hurdle. Henson needed money, which meant returning to Pegwell Bay with a begging bowl. He must have felt like Oliver Twist approaching a fearsome Bumble! By now his father was heavily in debt with three children still at home. His step-mother believed in his ability and thought he had a genuine vocation. His father was not easily or quickly persuaded but eventually agreed on the condition that his son must live cheaply and earn part of his keep. Any financial assistance would not extend beyond the three years studying for a degree. In October 1881 Henson matriculated at Oxford as an 'unattached student', known to undergraduates as a 'tosher'. He was advised to read for the new honours school of Modern History. For his special study he turned to the medieval period, rather than the Reformation which had dominated his life, and this led to the earlier period which witnessed the conversion of Constantine, and the organization of the undivided Church as an integral part of the Imperial system. 'I was carried to the still earlier time when the Canon of Scripture, the Catholic creed, the Liturgies, and the Episcopal polity had gradually acquired their historic position as essential constituents of organised Christianity.' Tutors prevented him splashing about in the historical ocean by placing him in a small pool where he was guided to study the Middle Ages with a special subject, the life of the English saint and martyr Thomas Becket, Archbishop of Canterbury from 1162 to 1170.

Henson found the cheapest lodgings at Cowley and hid himself away, deep in his books. Every penny counted and was counted! He was cut off or rather cut himself off from the natural rhythm of university life, which broadens minds by a range of non-academic activities. He had no special friends. All this built up another 'chip' on his shoulder. In his second year he attended the Historical Seminar. The pulpit of the University Church of St Mary the Virgin attracted some of the best preachers of the day and Henson crammed himself into the gallery to hear them. His mind was all over the place. He admitted: 'My purpose to be ordained to the Christian ministry, which from my childhood had been rather an assumption than a deliberate choice, and which had led me to Oxford, was there menaced from within by doubt, and from without by rival claimants on my acceptance. I saw my simple faith in a new perspective as something generally questioned and fairly questionable'. But his faith was confused rather than simple. Journal entries reveal inner conflict, anxiety, doubt and inconsistency. Henson was placed in the first class of the honours school of Modern History in June 1884.

All Souls College, Oxford

The time had come for Henson to make a decision about his immediate future. Fortunately it was made for him when W.H. Hutton, Henson's history coach, recommended that he should stand in the annual competition for the All Souls Fellowship in October. Under their recent statutes All Souls offered fellowships to historians and lawyers. The standing was high as they looked for brilliance. The election of Henson was carried by a small majority, on 2 November 1884. He was not yet twenty-one. A retrospective glance that, 'I was welcomed with a generous kindness which made me feel immediately at home' was rose-tinted. His arrival was akin to that of an alien. There was and never had been a Fellow like him. He was snappily but sombrely dressed, every crease in his suit ironed into place, white handkerchief in jacket pocket and he wore a bowler hat. In an 1883 group photograph of eighteen members of the Modern History Society outside Kettel Hall, the Regius Professor's house in Broad Street, Henson sits on the grass, his countenance severe and disapproving, a sniff of Anthony Trollope's 'Septimus Slope' about his demeanour. He looks considerably younger than anyone else in the photograph, which includes men who would have a prominent future: an archbishop of Canterbury, several members of the House of Commons, distinguished lawyers, professors of history and a dean of Winchester.

For the first time in his life Henson was in receipt of a guaranteed stipend of £200 a year for seven years but this did not loosen the burden of providing money for the welfare of his family and the three children still at home. His father was beyond financial rescue as he careered towards bankruptcy. No other son could help. Frank had failed in business and Arthur had gone to India and severed contact with his family.

Henson always regarded his election to a Fellowship at All Souls College as the pivotal moment in his life. In so doing he acknowledged both the distinctiveness and imperfections of a unique institution. Founded in 1437 by Archbishop Chichele of Canterbury, it reflected in its constitution the influence of a transitional time when the ideas of medieval Christendom were visibly losing their hold on men's minds, and no clear vision of alternatives had yet dawned. Henson edited *A Memoir of the Rt Hon Sir William Anson* (1920) in which he explains the college: 'The purely ecclesiastical society became the least ecclesiastical of all academic corporations, the most natural in temper, the most closely connected with the national service, the least educational, finally (before the reforms of the nineteenth century came into effect) the last practically

serviceable to Church and State. Here we may distinguish three features of Chichele's foundation which gave it, for good and evil, its uniqueness among the Colleges – the absence of undergraduates, the non-residence of Fellows, the relatively low standard of academic achievement. The Founder had in view, not a teaching but a studying society'.

That view was challenged by the great University Commission of 1850. The position remained unresolved until a remarkable Fellow was elected Warden in 1881. He was Sir William Reynell Anson, the first non-clerical head of the college, a bachelor, eminent lawyer, and Whiggish Liberal in politics. He upheld the view that there was room for a college of an exceptional type, devoting itself through its professoriate and its library to university purposes, encouraging advanced study by the endowment of research, securing through a system of Prize Fellowships the continued interest in academic life of men engaged in professional or public work, and yet retaining its old character as a collegiate society. Henson was usually resident with three or four other Fellows whose numbers swelled at weekends with the arrival of other Fellows who were lawyers, civil servants, politicians and literary men. There were also guests. Anson remained as Warden until his death in 1914 during which period he was Junior Burgess (Member of Parliament) for the University of Oxford and a sound supporter of the Established Church – Chancellor of the Diocese of Oxford, a member of the 1910 Royal Commission on Marriage and Divorce and of the Archbishop's Committee of Church and State 1913. Anson showed a special interest in the welfare of the non-collegiate students, none more than Henson for whom he became a kind of substitute father and the wisest of counsellors.

A biblical phrase is apposite to illuminate Henson's years at All Souls: 'No man, when he hath lighted a candle, putteth it in secret place, neither under a bushel, but on a candlestick, that they which come in may see the light' (Luke 11:33). He lost no time in parading his talent and literary expression. His first paper on Wuliam Rufus (c.1056-1100), the second surviving son of William the Conqueror, attracted attention. He knew how to hold an audience in thrall by using language which developed into 'Hensonia'. Charles Oman, Chichele Professor of Modern History was gripped by Henson's 'extraordinary ability'.

Birkenhead

Henson was keen and active in preparing and delivering lectures but it was necessary to make money by tutoring pupils privately. Before he could establish himself he heard from Edward Watson, his own coach for the honours school who, once ordained, had left Oxford to be assistant curate at Holy Trinity Church, Birkenhead. When

Watson learned that William Rathbone, a notable Liverpool citizen, social reformer, philanthropist and Liberal Member of Parliament for a Welsh constituency, required a tutor for his youngest son Lyle who was educationally lazy, he immediately thought of Henson. The fee of £150 for six months tutoring was too tempting to refuse so Henson left for Birkenhead in April 1895. His duties were limited to evenings when Lyle returned from school. This gave Henson time for theological reading in the mornings. The afternoons were taken up with visiting people in the parish with Watson who cajoled him into helping with a Bible class and giving addresses at the Mission Church. These he prepared when Lyle had gone to bed. This excursion into preaching was not Henson's first. His former nurse told how on one occasion he had broken in on the company in the drawing room at Vale Villa clothed in his nightshirt and, in this quasi-clerical attire, delivered a sermon!

Birkenhead was in the throes of industrial depression following the decline in ship-building. Slums and dire conditions were new to Henson. The effect of his surroundings prompted him to begin writing his famous Journal on 12 May, 1885 'filled with impressions, descriptions, and criticisms, sometimes precipitate and unjust, but sometimes acute, and always fresh and sincere.' And so it continued!

Unfortunately Henson's early prejudices were strengthened. There were nine Anglican Churches and a Welsh Church in Birkenhead. There were more dissenting chapels in the town of every shade and revivalist category, together with a thriving Salvation Army. Henson's opposition to all places of dissent was not discouraged by Watson. Although Henson found schism-hunting wholly destructive of his time, he found compensation and 'enjoyable relief in challenging people, interrupting meetings and always expressing my revulsion of dissenters'. Away from Oxford, Henson's religious convictions were unsettled, his mind disordered. He had shifted position at Oxford, beguiled by 'High Church' Tractarian leaders. A journal entry of 19 May 1885 portrays a confused mind:

> If I could get a satisfactory attitude towards Protestants, I would take up definitely the Anglican position. As it is, I can't see any escape from the logical anathema. This would not be so hard to accept if the Anglican Church were in communion with the rest of the Church Catholic; but standing alone, what is the value of her anathema? What is the moral justification for such an inadequate course? In fact, I am rather alarmed at the position of the Anglican Church. If only the Roman anathema were removed, it would be tolerable, but now it is wretched. Cut off from sympathy with the only people who will have dealings with us, we have to rest content with an imaginary Catholicism and a theoretical communion.

> I wonder if I shall turn out a Broad Churchman after all. I'm awfully bored at being considered a 'Ritualist', and yet I can't complain if people put the only reasonable interpretation on my words. If they knew me better, they wouldn't do so, but as it is they are hardly blameworthy. I do feel caught in a perfect net. I've played with the Catholic idea so long to spite the Low Church people, that I can't resume my freedom now I want to do so! The idea of the Church has seized me, and I can't shake it off and yet I worship intellectual freedom; and I suspect (the suspicion ever gains force) that, if I am to be a 'Catholic', I must say goodbye to my intellectual freedom. There's an awful lot to swallow in becoming Roman, and even the gain doesn't seem certain, yet the loneliness of the Anglican position is tormenting.

How anyone could contemplate ordination in the Church of England with such thoughts is hard to fathom. Henson later regarded another entry in his journal for May on Church of England clergy as 'unquestionably crude and unbalanced' but at the time it was a realistic account of his thinking and continued to bother him when he returned to Oxford:

> The clerical life is admirably adapted to create the most contradictory types of character. On the one hand, it acts as a platform, upon which the weak man, the vain and the bad, may exhibit his faults to the world. The essence of the clerical position is its lofty responsibility, but that has a twofold influence on character. It saddens and humiliates, and, at the same time, it elevates and dignifies. In some men both these results appear in due correlation. Then we have a true saint, a St Anselm or a St Hugh, but, more often, we observe that one or other has an exaggerated position, and then in the place of saints, the world beholds autocrats or fools, despots or sycophants, priests or shepherds.

On 5 October, 1885, Henson called at the office of Rathbone Bros. in Water Street, Liverpool, to meet his employer, who expressed great satisfaction with Henson's tutelage of his son, received his payment, and returned to All Souls where he lived until the end of 1887. The Birkenhead experience indelibly changed Henson's sense of direction. On 6 October 1885 he walked to the church of St Mary the Virgin, Iffley in Oxford, and there, in the empty church, suddenly and unexpectedly took a vow:

> I felt that I was accepting a life of struggle and sorrow; it was as if the Lord Christ had raised His hands and shown me the nail-prints, and pointed to the cross, and called me to follow Him. There in Iffley Church, and standing before the alter, with my hand upon it, I dedicated myself to God and the Church. Registered in the Archives of Heaven is my vow, and here also, in the time to come, a reminder to me not to forget.

This was the action of a layman continuing as a layman, perhaps founding a lay order of preachers.

He needed the university milieu to challenge and remove his mental chaos. He did not seek the approval of other Fellows and probably did not know how to make himself acceptable to them. His personal angularity, incessant talking and dogmatic views made him an awkward denizen of the common room. He was like a verbal polemical tract. Gradually he grew to feel at home when Fellows and visitors alike were not only willing but also keen to listen to his distinctive views given in unmatchable prose. However, that had to wait, for Henson thrust himself into other activities. Had he overlooked his commitment to find or earn money to help his family?

Henson was a young Fellow when the General Election of 1885 was called. The election has been described as, 'the nearest point ever attained to the accomplishment of Disestablishment in England'. Gladstone's Liberal government fell on 8 June 1885. In fact, the Gladstone manifesto was silent on Disestablishment. The subject would not have been a central feature of the general election had not the National Liberal Federation meeting in Bradford on 1 October adopted the Radical Programme prepared by three Members of Parliament, Joseph Chamberlain, M.P. for Birmingham, John Morley, M.P. for Newcastle and Charles Wentworth Dilke, M.P. for Chelsea, which offered 'Disestablishment and Disendowment of the Church of England'. The Liberation Society then announced as if with a megaphone that feature of the Radical Programme, whilst the Church Defence Association amplified its own message that the Church was in danger. The bench of bishops showed themselves to be alert and assertive. Throughout the campaign the newspapers reported their speeches. The Archbishop of Canterbury, Edward White Benson, had little stomach for entering the political affray, but warned, 'circumstances might arise to compel me to do so'. For Woodward of Ely, Disestablishment was, 'the burning question of the day'; the country was, 'on the eve of a great and mighty struggle', Magee of Peterborough told his clergy, 'Church defence has become the plain and imperative duty of all churchmen'. Ellicott of Gloucester and Bristol, and Bickersteth of Exeter urged their flocks to demand disavowals of Disestablishment from their parliamentary candidates. Claughton of St Albans gave notice of the, 'signals of danger threatening the Established Church'. Hervey of Bath and Wells was apocalyptic in his denunciation of, 'an infidel, democratic and socialist upheaval against religion and against our Lord Christ'. Lightfoot of Durham foresaw 'irreligion and atheism' following disestablishment, whilst Maclagan of Lichfield, a future Archbishop of York, declared that, 'from the

hour that the Church was pillaged, the rights of property would be gone . . . when once its property was seized no other property would be safe'. The Conservative Party under Lord Salisbury, taking every advantage of the situation, determined to fight the campaign on the cry of, 'The Church in danger'. In December 1885 the outcome of the General Election was: 333 Liberals, 251 Conservatives, 86 Irish Nationalists. Of the Liberals, 171 favoured English Disestablishment, 228 favoured Disestablishment in Scotland or Wales or both, 63 were doubtful or opportunist, 13 were non-committal and 29 were against Disestablishment.

Advancing the Church Militant

For one last moment in the nineteenth century, the Established Church of England moved from the 'Church in Danger' to the 'Church Militant'. The aftermath of the Election led Henson away from massaging his discontent to beginning his own strenuous advocacy of the Church Militant. Still a layman, he founded on 10 February 1886 'The Oxford Laymen's League for the Defence of the National Church', of which he was also secretary. This was the year in which the Archbishop of Canterbury, E.W. Benson, called into existence the House of Laymen as an attempt to supplement the clerical Convocations and to form a consultative body of lay churchmen drawn by a system of election from each diocese of the province. It failed from the first to acquire a responsible character. There was another effect: the result, perhaps deliberate, of the formation of a nucleus for the nakedly denominational aspirations which were gathering strength within the National Church. Henson echoed the mixed metaphors attributed to Sir Boyle Roche, an eighteenth century politician: 'Mr Speaker, I smell a rat; I see him forming in the air and darkening the sky, but I'll nip him in the bud.' To Henson, it appeared that by degrees, by stealth and reform, the Established Church was intent in gathering to itself powers that were held by the State. Henson was adamant, 'That Parliament must, in the future as in the past, be the principal instrument of Church Reform. . . . Frankly, I think the broad interests of religion are safer in the hands of Parliament, acting always under the vigilant scrutiny of the Church, and subject to the restraints of public opinion'. It was certainly beyond the efforts of a single person to fight the mighty forces of reform, but that is what Henson intended to do when he founded the 'Laymen's League'.

Henson produced, paid for and circulated a Prospectus for the League throughout Oxford Colleges and at a time when his debts had risen to at least £170. Both he and the League began to be noticed

in the newspapers. His conviction was that if the Establishment of the Christian religion was beneficial to the nation, it was still more beneficial to the Church. A great deal was said about spiritual freedom. People were demanding to be free from what they called the trammels of the State, but in so doing they put before themselves the ideal of a Church free from State control, in which, as they imagined, their own particular type of religion would be left free to develop on the lines that they wished. In recognising the dangers, Henson sought to re-establish the Establishment. He was developing distinctive strengths towards a conviction that eventually found expression in one of his famous publications, more polemical booklet than pamphlet, running into five editions, *Cui Bono? An Open Letter to Lord Halifax on the Present Crisis in the Church of England* (1898). His clarity allowed of no misinterpretation: 'I believe in the National Church as the most beneficent of the National Institutions; every instinct of patriotism is outraged by the proposal to degrade and pillage her; but this is not the deepest basis of my loyalty. The National Church commends herself to my conscience and reason as the most faithful representative now existing in the world of that Divine Society which the Apostles planted, and which the primitive martyrs watered with their blood. . . . English Christianity eschews the striking effects of which continental religion is prodigal, but it is more thorough and robust, and perhaps covers a larger area of the national life'. Henson's instantly recognisable style and language had matured since 1886 for then he had not completely mastered the arts of writing, speech and posture that would make him famous. He wailed in his journal, 'I am not old enough or well-known enough to make the proper impression'. On speaking, 'The Warden (Anson) caught hold of me and gave me three pieces of advice about my public speaking: 'Stand still. Stand up. Keep your hands out of your pockets'. Membership of the League was never large, but from his All Souls' base he travelled far to lecture on 'Defence of the National Church': to Bournemouth, Margate, the Isle of Wight, Broadstairs and Norwich. The accuracy of his Journal should be watched for self-inflation. At Norwich Henson, 'always looked on this as my first experience of addressing a public meeting [for one hour and 20 minutes]on a fairly large scale'. A lengthy report in *The Eastern Daily Press*, 15 November 1886 mentions the lecture as of marginal interest, delivered in South Higham Parochial Hall, and having a rather thin attendance.

Henson described the Laymen's League as following, 'the familiar cycle of academic organizations – a vigorous start, a brief period of hectic activity, a rapid decline and an early oblivion'. He wanted the General Committee to be like himself, 'I would wish that they were bolder. Audacity is the very indispensable condition of success for a

League placed as this is'.The League may have survived if Henson's mind had been singularly focused. It was not. He planned writing a history of Ireland. He agreed to write the life of Pope Leo the Great (c.390-461 AD). He drafted articles with polemical intent on subjects which crossed his mind. Nothing came of them. 1886 was the year of his first published work, *Gordon: a lecture* and he then contributed a chapter on the Venerable Bede to *Essays introductory to the study of English Constitutional History* (1887) edited by H.O. Wakeman and Arthur Hassall.

Another troubling and fanciful aspect emerged in 1886 when in June Henson accepted an invitation from the Hon. James Granville Adderley to join the 'League of the True Vine', a fleeting wisp of an idea for spiritual discipline in a Tractarian manner. The League was in earnest in wanting to form a religious community and planned a set of rules and regulations under Adderley as Abbot, and Henson as Prior. It was not the first time that Adderley had tried to reproduce in the nineteenth century the literal *Imitatio Christi* which had been so wonderfully attempted by St Francis of Assisi. Henson reflected on the reason for the failure of the initiative:

> I lacked, alas, his fervour and self-sacrifice, and brought clearer and colder judgement to bear on the fascinating legend of St Francis. Moreover, he was more physically robust, and temperamentally less fastidious than I. Had our lot been cast in the Middle Ages, he would have followed St Francis of Assisi or St Bernard of Clairvaux; I should have more easily have betaken myself to Peter Abelard. Medieval asceticism with its disgusting disciplines, its grotesque literalism, and its intellectual puerility, revolted me, but hardly offended me. I had made for the History School a special study of the life of St Thomas of Canterbury; and I found myself more accordant with King Henry II than with the Archbishop throughout the famous conflict. I have often been commended in some quarters, and denounced in others, for possessing a 'lay mind' in ecclesiastical matters, and I do not recant what I imagine must be intended. Nevertheless I was oddly attracted by the life of renunciation which Jimmy Adderley pressed on me, and himself so notably illustrated.

The Oxford House, Bethnal Green

On 11 September, 1886, Henson went to stay with James Adderley at The Oxford House in Bethnal Green. It was the oldest university settlement, opened in October 1883. Toynbee Hall, a much more substantial settlement with Balliol backing, opened two months later. The Oxford House tradition was that of Keble College and stood

for the principles of the Christian Social Union. The Revd Edward Stuart Talbot, Warden of Keble College, Oxford, and Canon Henry Scott Holland of St Paul's Cathedral, were primarily responsible for bringing the House into existence. Holland referred to it in his whimsical way as a 'house for the rich unemployed'. William Anson, with reservations, associated All Souls with Oxford House. A disused school building attached to St Andrew's church was rented. After alterations there were cubicles for three residents and a single large room served for all activities. Three additional bedrooms were rented in a neighbouring house. The intention was to supply a headquarters for those university men who wanted to study the problems facing the people and local government. Residents from Oxford had to be prepared to take part in the furtherance of Christianity, raising standards of education and seeking ways of improving the appalling sanitary conditions of the neighbourhood. Filling the six places was difficult, for many of those who went soon returned to the comforts of Oxford. When Henson first arrived he knew he had a bolt-hole at Oxford. Adderley was the Head of Oxford House. It appears inexplicable that such contradictory characters should be life-long friends. Adderley was educated at Eton and Christ Church, Oxford. Theatrical in manner he was a founder of the Oxford University Philothespian Society. He became a larger than life figure: mercurial, devoted, ebullient, romantic, ritualistic and a militant socialist, calling himself a 'gospel Catholic'. He was also a Fabian and a sympathiser with the 'Broad Church' Modern Churchman's Union. He argued for disestablishment, not to give the Church of England greater rigour, but to make it a free church with full latitude for all its various parties. He was a layman when Henson first met him and once ordained saw no contradiction in moving from London's East End (Bethnal Green, Bromley-by-Bow, Barking and Plaistow) to the West End (Mayfair, Marylebone and Covent Garden). He wrote *Stephen Remarx* (1893), an irrepressible and rumbustious novel about the Church in the East End, modelled after his conceit of himself. 'Jimmy' Adderley's address in retirement in Strawberry Hill was 58 Pope's Grove!

Henson described his personal religion at Oxford House: 'On the one hand my discontent with the contrast between the comfortable, even luxurious version of Christian obligation of which I had found so easy to approve in Oxford (though never without recalcitrant protests from a troubled conscience), and the drab and squalid conditions under which that obligation had to be decided in Bethnal Green, became intensified'.