

EPILOGUE

ROGER HOLMES

'The Knicker Vicar of North Yorkshire'

'Did you capture a scandal on video?' asked an ad in the *News of the World* in March 1997. 'We'll pay £250 to tell YOUR story. Ring the newsdesk any day of the week. Don't worry about the cost, we'll call you straight back.'

The 1990s scandals industry is a sharp-clawed predator and naughty vicars are prized game, as Roger Holmes, vicar of All Saints Church in Helmsley, Yorkshire, discovered on Easter Sunday 1997. After preaching what was to be his last sermon at the 8:30 service that morning, he went home, to be greeted by a whey-faced parishioner with a copy of that morning's *News of the World*. On its front page were grainy stills printed from a video-recording of himself in bed with a woman who was not his wife, 'sneering' – so the paper reported – 'I'm the Knicker Vicar of North Yorkshire.'

I relate the tale not because it matters, or is unusual – but as an example of how a story which matters not at all, and is in no way unusual may temporarily grip, horrify and (let us be honest) entertain much of the nation.

For compared with some in this book it was hardly a scandal at all and certainly not news. Presumably vicars have been unfaithful since vicars began. But it was the end of Roger Holmes's clerical career. He was suspended from all 'priestly duties' that evening; a day later he resigned his living, apologising to parishioners for the 'hurt' he had caused them. 'Mr Holmes is not my favourite incumbent in any case,' said his superior, the Bishop of Whitby, when told by the tabloid of its exclusive, 'Cheating Vicar in Video
See Outrage'

The goings on in Helmsley were picked up with alacrity by the *Daily Telegraph* and the *Daily Mail*. The latter summed things up best: 'An Unholy Affair: Or how the RE teacher's wife was filmed in bed with their vicar while her husband ran off with a church warden.' 'I was dealing with what seemed to be more than a menage of trois,' added the Bishop of Whitby.

What the papers quickly dubbed 'the ultimate Aga Saga' began in 1994 when the Reverend Roger Holmes and his wife Lynn arrived in Helmsley from the Yukon, in Canada. He attracted notice as a forthright, muscular clergyman in a backwater parish dominated (says the woman who became his mistress) by 'miserable, carping old-timers'.

Two couples in particular became close friends of the new vicar and his wife; the Schofields and the Roberts. All had young children and a taste for religious discussion. Alison Schofield and Adrian Roberts became church wardens. Gillian Roberts joined them as secretary of the Parish Council and editor of the parish newsletter.

For Mrs Roberts, a specialist in medieval literature more at home in Bloomsbury than the Yorkshire Dales, it was an exhilarating time. She relished the companionship and debate. She had married Adrian, a fellow student, shortly before he took a post as a religious studies teacher at his old school, Ampleforth, the leading Catholic college. Though the couple bought a pleasant house, Ivy Cottage, just outside Helmsley and had two children, things did not go well. Their second child was diagnosed as having cerebral palsy. The life of a schoolmaster's wife did not appeal to Gillian. She took every opportunity to visit her old bookish haunts in London.

There have been claims and counter-claims about when the infidelities began and whose provoked whose – and who cares? – but nobody denies that in time both Mr and Mrs Roberts were seeing someone other than their respective spouse; and each knew about the other.

Certainly by the middle of 1995 Gillian and her vicar were in love. 'I felt like a teenager and all love-poetry suddenly seemed real,' she wrote later in the *Daily Mail*. 'Roger, the vicar, is a passionate sensualist and sex, when it began between us, was a reflection of that.'

church-warden, Alison Schofield – had intensified. In February 1996 he left his wife and moved in with Alison. Roberts's behaviour did nothing to moderate the bitterness he felt at his wife's adultery. He and Alison went to the Bishop of Whitby, the Right Reverend Gordon Bates, and told him of the local vicar's sins. Summoned to explain himself, Roger Holmes denied everything. By now tongues were wagging in Helmsley. But few in the town were much exercised by what was going on. So Adrian Roberts rang the *News of the World*.

The paper dispatched three reporters from London and they met – while Gillian Roberts was away – in Ivy Cottage. They were not trespassing. When his marriage broke up Adrian Roberts retained not only a set of doorkeys but ownership of the house. He let the reporters in. They glued a tiny video camera to the inside of a bookshelf, in the master bedroom which by then was being shared by Gillian Roberts and the vicar. And somehow – no one quite likes to say by what route – they took away with them *verbatim* extracts from Mrs Roberts's diary entries. These described not only the course of the affair but intimate details. Soon they were to be read at breakfast tables throughout Britain.

Interviewing the couple later for a radio programme about press methods I called at Ivy Cottage. Mrs Roberts showed me the hole in the door of her bedside bookcase. It was no bigger than the head of a small nail. She told me she felt 'violated' by the existence of the videotape and by the publication of passages from her diary.

The paper had the evidence it wanted and on the eve of publication approached the couple. They were at home watching the boat race. 'I went outside after I'd had a bit of time to think and told the reporter what I thought of the *News of the World*,' Mrs Roberts explained to me. 'He wanted Roger to come out, he said "we know that's his car". What we wanted to avoid at that point was a photograph of him leaving the house.'

It was too late. On Easter Sunday the *News of the World* splashed its video nasty. 'Cheating Reverend Roger Holmes looked his Bishop straight in the eye and promised he was pure in body and soul . . . and then carried on his debauched lust for wild sex and corporal punishment with his Church secretary . . . the affair will devastate the pretty town of Helmsley, where

paper's main picture of the 'sex romp' showed little more than the vicar's bald head.

Helmsley was not devastated. Though the local newsagent had to order in extra copies of the *News of the World*, the scandal was a three-day wonder.

Except of course for those directly concerned. You might say that four lives have been hit by something like a hurricane. You cannot say they played no part in calling it into being but nor can you say that any of them expected or deserved what came to pass. I include the story by way of postscript to this book. I include it because it crystallises for me – and may for you – what is so very odd, so compelling, and so unfair about scandals in which men of the cloth fall from grace.

The tale of the Knicker Vicar seems to have all the elements. Sin – of a faintly exotic kind. A respectable neighbourhood, an appearance of propriety and an apparently pious churchman. And of course a shock disclosure and a mighty fall. In the words of George and Weedon Grossmith's Mr Pooter in *Diary of a Nobody*, 'Ho! What a surprise!'

Yet if you examine the building bricks from which this sensation is constructed – as I did – what have you but a handful or ordinary (and in this case rather pleasant) people whose behaviour – reprehensible or otherwise – has departed not a jot from that of millions of their fellowmen and fellow-women, since human history began?

So what is it about vicars? You cannot even say they stand as symbols for a faith in which most of their countrymen any longer believe. More than ten times as many people read the *News of the World* as follow any religion with anything that could be called conviction.

Some have suggested the pleasure people take in such stories is simply the glee with which the lesser see the greater fall. But this explanation does not suffice. Bigger figures than Roger Holmes – tycoons and newspaper editors – can tumble with a lesser splash than the errant vicar. Some of these great men may wag a more censorious finger at the common people than vicars ever do yet their disgrace has less capacity to amuse, less power to make others hug themselves with pleasure.

I am far from solving this riddle but end with one thought.

Gillian Roberts spoiled the fun for me in a way in which it would have done, I suspect, for almost every reader of the *News of the World*. Instead of comic caricatures one encountered real people, no larger than life, who bleed. I actually preferred the story when it was offered to me as a novelette might be. Enjoyment of a good read is in no way spoilt by the knowledge that none of the characters portrayed is intended to bear any resemblance to persons living or dead. It almost goes the other way; as the characters become more real those pseudo-scandals crumble in our hands.

Do churchmen provide, even in a godless age, pantomime representations of universal stereotypes: naughtiness and censure made flesh? Each of us fears and resents (a little) the Accusing Voice. To construct for ourselves pantomimes in which what we fear is represented as a figure of ludicrous hypocrisy who gets his comeuppance because in the end he is no better than us, is enormously reassuring.

So we seize on stories such as that which Helmsley sent the *News of the World* with a relish which tells us more about ourselves than about Helmsley, or anyone who lives, preaches or fornicates there. In a sense, Helmsley, Roger Holmes, Gillian Roberts, the cartoon vicars and cartoon choirboys, the Rector of Stiffkey, John Wakeford, Dr Dodd... all that cast of cartoon cats and cartoon mice, together with their cartoon landscape of kitchen tops, catflaps and mousetraps or altars, sacristies, prying eyes, newspaper presses and waiting gallows – do not exist save in the imagination of passing ages.

AFTERTHOUGHT

A RESEARCHER WRITES

On 25 October 1997 the old British Library closed. For a month a great tribe of British Library readers – dispossessed, unwillingly evicted from their homeland in the heart of the British Museum – was allowed to roam, unsupervised, before being relocated to a new site a few hundred yards north of Bloomsbury. Where did they go in the meantime? I personally found shelter in Lambeth Palace Library, a serene place looking onto a grassy courtyard with a small gurgling fountain, secretly relishing researching a book on religious scandal in the seat – so to speak – of the Archbishop of Canterbury.

Readers of this book will by now have realised that its researcher must have spent an unhealthy amount of time in the company of drunks, fornicators, adulterers, the mentally unbalanced – and British Library readers. In the somewhat ignoble cause of unearthing 2,000 years of religious scandal I spent the best part of a year in the old British Library, and two or three months more in the new one in St Pancras, and it is hardly surprising that, as I lifted my head from books about wicked bishops, transvestite methodists and mutilating nuns and looked up at a mass of people silently reading, frantically scribbling, quietly murmuring to themselves, or fast asleep, I should muddle the two and suspect that libraries are deranged places. The moral of Eden's apple is that knowledge is dangerous and here there were hundreds gorging the stuff; gorging it, digesting it and finally secreting it in the form of books – which end up in the British Library.

Actively seeking out religious scandal gives one a slanted sense not just of the clergy, but of those who have written about the clergy. Matthew in his introduction suggests that there is