

# The clergyman behind the carol

**Edward Peacock** explores the story of clergyman J M Neale, who wrote *Good King Wenceslas*, the carol about the Bohemian king Saint Wenceslaus

**W**ho is the Czech whose name is known to more British people than any other? Possibly Good King Wenceslas, particularly at this time of year. In last year's Christmas BCSA Review, Angela Spindler-Brown wrote about the history of this carol, which curiously is popular in Britain in a way it isn't in Czechia.

What of the man who wrote this carol? He was John Mason Neale, an often controversial 19th century Anglican clergyman. He was a brilliant intellectual, and was dogged by ill health (dying in 1866 at the age of only 48). That ill health, however, meant that he was unable to go into a normal parish ministry, and that meant that he was able to devote much more time to scholarship and hymn-writing.

He went to Cambridge University, and while there became much involved with the growing 'high church' movement in the Church of England that sought to regain for Anglicanism much of the Catholic tradition that it thought had been lost at the Reformation. This was far from popular, for there was then still a strong English dislike of anything that could be seen as 'Popery', and the defection from the Church to Rome of Cardinal Newman in 1845 convinced many to see the Roman Catholic Church as a real threat.

At Cambridge Neale was also a founder of the Ecclesiological Society, also known as the Cambridge Camden Society. This interested itself much in church architecture, and is significant because it became most influential as the Victorians built Anglican churches aplenty not only in England but right across the British Empire. Its belief that the Gothic, 14th century style was the perfect expression of church has led to its being seen as the accepted, normal design of a church, a view eroded only well into the 20th century.

His interest in churches as buildings led him to dive right into controversy over pews and pew rents. In many Anglican churches certain pews were reserved for people who paid for the privilege, and some were 'box pews', arranged in squares and with high sides, so that the occupants faced each other, some with their back to the altar and the preacher, and all rather separate from the other worshippers. Like the rented pews these were for the well-to-do, and Neale saw these as exclusive and therefore pernicious to the ideals of the Gospel: in his words they were marks of "human pride and selfishness and indolence."

In 1840 he became Chaplain at Downing College, Cambridge, but his high church (or 'Anglo-Catholic') convictions clashed with the prevailing ethos there and he resigned after only a few months. He obtained a curacy at St Nicholas' church, Guildford, but news of



The stained glass window in East Grinstead Church depicting J M Neale

his Anglo-Catholic practices reached the Bishop of Winchester who thereupon refused to license him to the parish. In 1842 he did, however, become parish priest of Crawley in Sussex. He threw himself into the work, but after a only a few weeks his health gave way and he resigned.

He went to Madeira to regain his health, and then in 1846 was appointed Warden of Sackville College in East Grinstead in Sussex. This was an almshouse, in some disrepair, and with only a small salary. He was vigorous in renewing the place and in looking after the elderly inhabitants. But, again, news of his Anglo-Catholic ways reached the Bishop (this time of Chichester), who forbade him from carrying out normal priestly functions. This 'inhibition' lasted for the next 14 years and was very painful to him.

At first he was also unpopular with the townsfolk, because of his 'high church' practices, and indeed there was a full-scale riot at a funeral of one of the female residents of the college. A dispute over how the service should be conducted led to the coffin being seized and carried away by a mob, who returned with blazing torches, caused much damage to the college, and frightened Neale's children among others.

His time as warden was beset with disputes (and even litigation) with two difficult assistant wardens. But he persevered and found time to initiate the Sisterhood of St Margaret, which still exists today, working with the marginalised and the underprivileged.

He also wrote voluminously: articles, hymns, translations, sermons, poetry and theology. The income from this supplemented his meagre stipend as warden. His monumental works were a history of the Eastern Orthodox church, then largely unknown to the English, and an unfinished study of the Psalms.

Many of his hymns are still sung today, such as *O Come O Come Emmanuel* (one of my own favourites) and *All Glory Laud and Honour*.

To return to Good King Wenceslas – Neale's argumentative side can be seen in an exchange he had with a vegetarian about the words,

*"Bring me flesh and bring me wine  
Bring me pine logs hither  
Thou and I shall see him dine  
When we bear them thither."*

The vegetarian wanted the first line of this verse to read, "Bring me milk and bring me bread", to which Neale retorted that the third line would then become "Thou and I will see him fed". Fortunately flesh and wine stayed!

Neale's hard work won round the citizens of East Grinstead, huge numbers of whom turned out for his funeral. No riots this time. He can now be seen in a stained glass window in East Grinstead church.