

# Henry Venn of Huddersfield

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## Revd M. M. Hennell, M.A.

From Queen Elizabeth I's reign till the present century at least one member of the Venn family has been in Holy Orders. Henry Venn's father, Richard Venn (1691-1739), for many years Rector of St. Antholin's, Watling Street, was a strict High Churchman with Jacobite leanings. He was the first London clergyman to refuse his pulpit to George Whitefield. He also showed a High Churchman's aversion to Dissenters, which was shared by his son, who constantly assaulted the son of a Dissenting minister who lived in the same street, and who, although two or three years Henry's senior, used to keep out of the street if the Anglican champion was in it. Energy and high spirits marked these early years; he was quick-witted and quick-tempered, but capable of great affection and a great favourite in his own family circle and outside it. His home was at Barnes and he went first to school at Mortlake, till his father died when he was fourteen. After brief periods of private tuition and in two other schools he went up to Cambridge at the age of seventeen.

From 1742-47 Henry Venn was at Jesus College, where he was a Rustat scholar. He was a keen cricketer and reckoned one of the best players in the University. In the week before he was ordained he was playing for Surrey against All England; after the game he threw down his bat, saying, "Whoever wants a bat which has done me good service, may take that: as I have no further occasion for it". When asked the reason he replied, "Because I am to be ordained on Sunday; and I will never have it said of me, 'Well struck, parson'"<sup>1</sup> He was ordained by Bishop Gibson of London, but he served a curacy at Barton, near Cambridge, which he held together with a Fellowship at Queens', to which he had been elected earlier in 1747. He lectured in Geography and Greek for two-and-a-half years and visited the poor of Barton and distributed tracts. In the summer of 1750 he gave up his rooms in college to become curate to the Rev. Adam Langley, who held the livings of St. Matthew's, Friday Street and West Horsley, near Guildford. He was in London for the summer and at West Horsley for the winter months. He held this appointment till 1754 when he became curate of Clapham, in conjunction with which he held three London Lectureships, including St. Antholin's.

Henry Venn took his clerical duties very seriously: he also attended assiduously to the needs of his soul. He gave himself to solemn meditation, to the reading of Scripture and the study of "pious books". Among the latter was Law's *Serious Call*. The challenge this book contains affected him in the same way as it affected John Wesley. Though neither found Law's theology ultimately satisfactory and later criticized it severely, his writings did awaken in both men a sense of sin and a thirst for God, which made them seek in the Bible the Christ who justifies by faith alone.

Henry Venn made this discovery shortly before his appointment to Clapham. He seems to have been left in sole charge in the parish, for the parish records contain no reference to the Rector who appears to have resided on his family estate at Radley. Here he met John Thornton, the merchant prince, who soon after Henry Venn's arrival was converted through the influence of Martin Madan, and who was to become, in Charles Smyth's apt words, "the Nuffield of the Evangelical Revival". The friendship between Henry Venn and John

Thornton was deep and lasting and the families were intimately connected for more than a century.

Henry Venn's connection with the leaders of the Methodist Revival dates from this period. As early as March, 1754 Venn wrote to Wesley for a personal charge, and in 1756 he attended Wesley's conference at Oxford. In the following year he itinerated with Madan and Whitefield and stayed with the Countess of Huntingdon at Clifton. In the same year Whitefield preached twice in Clapham Church and henceforward frequently in John Thornton's house. Henry Venn himself was the first parochial clergyman in the neighbourhood of London to preach extempore.

More important than any of these influences was that of the wife he married in 1757. Eling Bishop was also a parson's daughter. Henry Venn met her while she was working with her sister in a dressmaker's shop in Teddington. They seem to have been drawn together by a common concern for Christian truth. Henry was still groping towards some understanding of the implications of his new found faith while Eling's conventional beliefs had been severely shaken by a careful reading of the Bible and by obeying her mother's injunction carefully to prepare herself for receiving the Holy Communion on her twenty-first birthday. Henry Venn introduced his fiancée to several of his Christian friends, including Romaine and the Wesleys. From the latter she seems to have imbibed, and to have imperfectly understood, ideas of Christian Perfection against which she reacted with such violence that she drove her husband far into the Calvinistic camp and caused a sad rupture between him and John Wesley at Huddersfield.<sup>2</sup>

However this may be, Eling seems to have been a vivacious, intelligent girl with a strong, attractive personality. She was married to Henry Venn in Clapham Old Church on May 10, 1757. "As soon as we married," Henry Venn writes,<sup>3</sup>

"we lived at Clapham in Surrey, a favourite village where many London merchants, having acquired fortunes, chose their country seats, desiring in general, only to enjoy themselves. To such the doctrine of the Gospel preached with zeal and boldness was very offensive. Of this there was soon proof sufficient. But though I myself was so zealous, it was thought, Mira<sup>4</sup>, from her vivacity, was no more pleased with such doctrine than themselves. One of the ladies who visited Mira was determined to try if it was not so and whether the wife could be prevailed upon to repress the disgusting earnestness of her husband. My dear Nelly was then near a year old, and Jack was soon expected to make his appearance. The lady began with observing that all the gentlemen believed I was a very good man and very ingenious—that it was only to be wished that I would not carry matters to such lengths, nor be so very alarming in the application of my doctrine. To this Mira returned that I believed all I said and was under a necessity of speaking as the oracles of God spoke. The lady then urged her to consider her own case. The prospect of a large family without a provision, and need of many friends; but this was not the way to procure them. 'Oh friend,' replied Mira, 'I am sure it is, for the Master Mr. Venn serves is too great and too good ever to see him, or his, real losers for faithfulness in His service'. She here spoke under the influence of the faith and hope in God which were soon to be put to a very severe trial.

"For in the following year, grieved at the obstinate rejection of the Gospel during five years by almost all the rich (and there were but few poor in the place), I accepted a living unexpectedly offered to me by my very affectionate friend, the Earl of Dartmouth".

In fact the patron was not Lord Dartmouth but his friend, Sir John Ramsden, whose family had almost owned Huddersfield for centuries. Sir John appointed Venn on Lord Dartmouth's recommendation.

In 1760 Huddersfield was an overgrown industrial village with a population of about five thousand. It was an important centre of wool manufacture, but as yet there were no factories and weaving was done in cottages in the town and in the surrounding villages, many of which lay within the parish boundary. The importance of this appointment can hardly be over-estimated in the history of the Revival, for Huddersfield was the first of the growing industrial communities to receive an Evangelical incumbent. Venn's like-minded contemporaries were mostly situated in remote villages, Grimshaw at Haworth, Fletcher at Madeley, Hervey at Weston Favell. The only man whose responsibility corresponded in size to Venn's was Samuel Walker of Truro. As Bishop Ryle says Venn was the only early Evangelical who could number his lawful parishioners by thousands.<sup>5</sup>

From the outset Henry Venn drew crowds to the parish church. He frequently began the service by reminding his congregation that they were in the presence of the great God of heaven, he prefaced both the Psalms and Lessons with short introductions and sometimes devoted the sermon to expounding the liturgy he loved. His preaching was vigorous and direct, full of lucid exposition of the Scriptures and enhanced by racy anecdotes. He was known locally as "T'owd Trumpet". Many who heard them sought his help in private interviews. The children in the vicarage soon grew accustomed to seeing these inquirers waiting to see their father. Eling, the eldest, tells us what she remembered:

"I used to hear Ruth (the maid) come running across the long passage; the door would open and she would say, 'A man wants to speak to you about his soul'. 'Tell him to come in,' my father would say. I remember the look of many of them to this day, with channels upon their black cheeks, where the tears were running. 'Oh, Sir,' they would begin at once to say with eagerness, 'I have never slept since last Thursday night. Oh Sir, your sermon'. 'Well, I am thankful to hear it,' my father would say. 'There, my dears, shake hands with that good man and go!' 'Are these your children?' 'Yes, pray for them,' my father would say. Then when we were gone, my father would pray for them, and speak to them in the most solemn manner. This would happen three or four times in the morning. 'There was quite a troop of t'young beginners,' as Ruth used to say."<sup>6</sup>

On weekdays he preached eight or ten times in the open air in the districts furthest from the church. He also adopted Wesley's idea of holding class meetings in different parts of the parish. A class leader was appointed to lead in prayer when the vicar was not present. At each meeting a verse of Scripture was discussed. There were also special meetings for young people in the villages and once a fortnight he instructed the children in the Catechism.

When Henry Venn's grandson, Henry Venn of C.M.S., visited Huddersfield in 1824, he found several people who, after a lapse of fifty-three years, remembered the changes his grandfather's ministry had wrought. One told him how in spite of much initial opposition from the wilder elements, he overcame it by his courage and love for people; also how he put an end to butchers killing their meat on Sunday and taking it to the shambles and how he prevented travellers from exposing their goods on the same day. Another told him how his grandfather's keenest supporters, known as the "Venn people", would patrol the streets on Sunday to see that all was quiet and urge those they met to go to church.<sup>7</sup>

His real success, however, lay in the changed lives of many who came to hear him. These included Thomas Atkinson, who later became a large woollen manufacturer in the Huddersfield district, William Hey, the Leeds physician, who frequently made the fifteen mile journey to hear Venn, and James Kershaw, of Halifax, who was converted from Socinianism by Venn's preaching. Joseph Cockin tells the story how, as a boy, he consistently defied his father's command not to attend Venn's church, even to the extent of swimming a river to escape from his pursuing parent; he was finally expelled from home, and taken in by one of the congregation.<sup>8</sup> Samuel Bottomley, another lad, used to hide in his pew after morning service in order to be locked in the church so that he could stand in the place and kneel on the stool where Henry Venn had just been. Both boys became Independent ministers. Henry Venn tried to persuade the Countess of Huntingdon to accept Bottomley for Trevecca College, but being unsuccessful he sent him to the Independent academy at Heckmondwike to be trained by James Scott. During the twelve years of Venn's ministry at Huddersfield no less than twenty-two men offered for the ministry, but like Cockin and Bottomley they had to look outside the Church of England because they could not raise the money for their training. Such a fund came into existence in 1777 as part of the work of the Elland Society, which has supported Evangelical candidates ever since.

The Elland Society was originally a clerical society formed by Henry Venn for Evangelical clergy in the north on the lines of Walker's Clerical Club.<sup>9</sup> The society met four times a year at Huddersfield Vicarage for fellowship, study of the Greek Testament, and discussion on a set subject which would make their ministry more effective. (The Eclectic Society in London was to be run on much the same lines.) When Venn left Huddersfield in 1771, his successor was unsympathetic, and the society moved to Elland, where Henry Venn's former curate, George Burnett, was vicar.

Henry Venn was at Huddersfield for twelve years. They were not easy years, for the living was only worth £100 a year and he and Mira soon had five children. Gifts in kind came from John Thornton and Mira was an excellent manager and made good use of her professional ability as a dressmaker, she also took the precaution of making her husband empty out his pockets before he went visiting to ensure he did not give away what was so badly needed at home. When he handed his parish register to his successor the "poor" was marked against many names and "very poor" against others. Asked for an explanation Venn said that from the "poor" he took nothing and to the "very poor" he always gave something. One day Henry Venn was deep in prayer seeking help to meet a tradesman's bill, when he received an anonymous gift of £50 from a grateful reader of his *Complete Duty of Man*.<sup>10</sup>

The situation was made more precarious by Mira's death in 1767, but the children were most imaginatively cared for by the wife John Riland married and brought to live at the vicarage the following year. She was herself an early convert of Henry Venn's. In 1771 Henry Venn remarried; the second marriage seems to have been as happy as the first, but the second Mrs. Venn does not seem to have interfered with her husband's theological views.

1771 was also the year that Henry Venn left Huddersfield for Yelling in Huntingdonshire. Even before Mira's death he had been showing signs of consumption and by 1769 he was looking so ill that Lady Dartmouth said he gave her a pain in the stomach every time he entered the pulpit. Realizing that to continue at Huddersfield would kill him, he looked for lighter work in the country. Yelling was the answer to this situation. A large deputation pleaded with him to stay, offering to pay for another curate and to be satisfied if he would

only give out a hymn. The appeal was of no avail and on Easter Day, 1771, he preached his farewell sermon on “Christ is all in all”.

“I go to Yelling a dying man,” Venn wrote to Mrs. Riland, but in fact he recovered his health and lived another twenty-seven years; the most important part of his ministry lay ahead. In the small country parish his ministry prospered, there were large congregations and about a third of the village was to be found in Yelling Rectory kitchen for Sunday evening meetings. In 1791, during a period of ill health, he had to employ a curate, the Rev. Maurice Evans, who seems to have been more popular than the vicar, but Henry Venn rejoiced in this. “Honest Evans carries all before him. . . . God honours him and I will honour him.” However the people knew that Henry Venn cared for them: in times of unemployment and when bread was short he appealed to Huddersfield for help; Thomas Atkinson sent clothes and blankets woven at his own mills.

Nevertheless his parochial duties were not arduous and a great deal of his time was occupied with educating his family. “You tell me,” he writes to Mrs. Riland,

“you have no idea how we go on. Take the following sketch. I am one of the first up in the house, soon after five o’clock; and when prayer and reading the blessed Word is done, my daughters make their appearance; and I teach them till Mrs. Venn comes down, at half-past eight. Then family prayer begins, which is often very sweet, as my mother’s maid, and my own servants, are all, I believe, born of God. The children begin to sing prettily, and our praises, I trust, are heard on high. From breakfast we are all employed till we ride out, in fine weather two hours for health; and after dinner we are employed again. At six, I have always one hour for solemn meditation and walking in my house till seven. We have then, sometimes, twenty, sometimes more or less, of the people, to whom I expound the Word of the Blessed God; several appear much affected; and sometimes Jesus stands in the midst, and saith, ‘Peace be unto you’. Our devotions end at eight; we sup, and go to rest at ten. On Sundays I am still enabled to speak six hours, at three different times, to my own great surprise.”<sup>11</sup>

The daughters referred to are Jane and Catherine, for Frances had died before they left Huddersfield and Nelly and John were sent away to school, though for two brief but important periods Henry Venn made himself John’s private tutor. In 1791 Henry Venn lost his second wife, but his daughter Jane looked after him both at Yelling and the house which John found for him at Clapham a few months before he died.

“Yelling is only seven measured miles from Everton,” Henry Venn wrote to Newton just before he moved into his new rectory. When he arrived Newton at Olney and Berridge at Everton were the only Evangelical clergy within visiting distance. Yelling became the posting box between Olney and Everton parsonages. Venn saw something of Newton until he left for London in 1779, but Berridge he saw at least once a week. There seems to have been a standing arrangement for dinner at Everton on Tuesdays: later Charles Simeon was brought in as a third. After the first occasion Venn reported to Mrs. Riland: “He calls wives ferrets”.<sup>12</sup> However, marriage was not the only point at issue between the two men, there was the difference over Church Order. This has been dealt with so admirably in Canon Smyth’s book,<sup>13</sup> there is no need to do more than underline its importance here. Both Berridge and Venn preached beyond their parish boundaries; Berridge was more inclined to preach in neighbouring parishes and Venn to go on preaching tours for the Countess of Huntingdon and others. He never abandoned this practice, though he did resign his chaplaincy in 1780 when the Countess of Huntingdon was forced to license her chapels as Dissenting Conventicles, but, unlike Berridge, he looked upon irregularity as a temporary expedient to be given up as

the Church returned to her true mission and he encouraged the second generation of Evangelicals to act differently from his own. Under the leadership of Simeon they did so and Evangelicalism became the greatest spiritual force in the Church of England during the early part of the nineteenth century, and very few Evangelical clergy followed the Countess and the Methodists into Dissent. The Independent Chapel at Huddersfield was not his creation and his support for it was temporary. It was possibly the sad experience of seeing his converts staying permanently outside the Church of England that shaped his final views.

The circle of Cambridge men he influenced was a wide one. Soon after his arrival at Yelling undergraduates were visiting him and he made arrangements to stay in Cambridge itself to succour them within the town for a short period. Among those who came out to him were Thomas Robinson, Fellow of Trinity and later Vicar of Leicester; he used to speak of “My great prototype, Mr. Venn.”<sup>14</sup> Others included Joseph and Henry Jowett, sons of an old Leeds friend, William Farish, Charles Simeon and Henry Coulthurst. All these were Fellows of their colleges and Joseph Jowett and Parish became Professors. In 1784 Venn formed a Yelling Clerical Society of which this group formed the core. A later group included Charles Jerram, of whom there is an amusing Memoir<sup>15</sup> and Thomas Thomason. John Venn was at Sidney Sussex College from 1777 to 1782, during which period he gathered a small group of Christian friends round him, whom his father sometimes met and advised. John Venn knew of the “singular gownsman of King’s College”, but he seems to have been too reserved to invite him to meet the others. Simeon and John Venn did not meet till John’s last year when Christopher Atkinson introduced them. Within a month he had taken Simeon over to meet his father. “In this aged minister,” writes Simeon in his Memoir,<sup>16</sup> “I found a father, an instructor, and a most bright example; and I shall ever have reason to adore my God to all eternity for the benefit of his acquaintance”. Within the next three months Simeon visited Yelling six times. For the fourteen most bitter years of struggle at Holy Trinity Church for the soul of undergraduate Cambridge Simeon knew he had for his support the prayers, the godly counsel and the ripe wisdom of Henry Venn. Behind all Simeon’s great influence lies that of Venn.

Besides these qualities there was impish wit and irrepressible joy; on his death-bed Henry Venn was in such high spirits through the prospect of Heaven that his doctor said he delayed his departure for a fortnight.<sup>17</sup> This, together with his rugged goodness, make him one of the most attractive figures of the Evangelical Revival. No wonder Cowper felt impelled to write to Newton in 1791: “I have seen few men whom I could have loved more, had opportunity been given me of knowing him better”.<sup>18</sup> No wonder that his son could write of “that dear and admirable man to whom indeed under God I owe almost every blessing I enjoy in life”.<sup>19</sup>

## **REVD M. M. HENNELL**

Endnotes:

- 1) H. Venn, *Life of H. Venn* (1835), p. 13-14.
- 2) This seems to be the real reason for Henry Venn’s becoming temporarily a partisan on the Calvinist side while at Huddersfield. *The Life and Times of Selina, Countess of Huntingdon* is misleading on this point and on many others with regard to Henry Venn. It was Calvinistic propaganda that made John Venn write the “Memoir” of his father. Henry Venn of C.M.S. took up the argument with the author of the *Life and Times* in the *Christian Observer*, May, 1840.

- 3) Sketch of Life of Eling Venn, by Henry Venn (MS in Venn Family Papers.)
- 4) Henry Venn had nicknames for his wife and all his children.
- 5) Ryle, J.C., *Christian Leaders* (1889), p. 269.
- 6) J. Venn, *Annals of a Clerical Family* (1904). p. 82.
- 7) MS of H. Venn's 1824 visit (Venn Family Papers).
- 8) *Memoirs of J. Cockin* (1841), p. 18, 19. Quoted in *Annals*, p. 84.
- 9) See G. C. B. Davies, *The Early Cornish Evangelicals* (1951), Chapter IV.
- 10) *The Complete Duty of Man* was first published in 1763 and aimed at providing an alternative to *The Whole Duty of Man*—a typical eighteenth century work. Venn's book is a manual of doctrine and ethics particularly valuable for Christian families. The forms of prayer at the end include true riches, especially those "For a student educating for Holy Orders" and "Before the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper".
- 11) H. Venn, *Life of H. Venn*, 211-12.
- 12) To Mrs. Riland, Sept 11, 1771 (MS in Venn Family Papers).
- 13) Charles Smyth, *Simeon and Church Order* (1940)
- 14) E. T. Vaughan, *Some Account of the Reverend Thomas Robinson* (1815), p. 251, 2.
- 15) *Memoirs of the Rev. Charles Jerram* (1855).
- 16) W. Carsus. *Memoirs of the Life of the Rev. Charles Simeon* (1847), p. 23.
- 17) *Annals*, p. 104. *Life*, p. 59.
- 18) Quoted in Life of Venn, p. 148-9, from *Private Correspondence of William Cowper, Esq.*, by John Johnson, Vol. II, p. 261.
- 19) Introductory Memoir in *Parentalia* (MS in Venn Family Papers).