

Old Vicarage No.8

The Old Vicarage lies north-west of St. Michael's Church. It was built during the incumbency of Jeremiah Taylor (1709-28), and is of brick with stone quoins. The roof is hipped with a parapet and there is an ornate hood over the front door. Many of the small-paned 'windows' are in fact only painted to look like windows. Some of these may have been blanks in the original design of the house, to give an external appearance of symmetry, while others could have been blocked to avoid paying the window tax, or, in the 19th century, to avoid being overlooked by the classrooms of the National School across the road.

The Old Vicarage is best known for its association with John Fletcher, the evangelical vicar who lived there from 1760-1785. Born in Nyon, Switzerland in 1729 as Jean de la Flechere he came to England in 1752, and became a tutor to the two sons of Sir Thomas Hill of Tem Hall, Archam.

Fletcher experienced an evangelical conversion and became an acquaintance of John and Charles Wesley. He was ordained in 1757 and served as a curate at several parishes including Madeley. In 1760 Sir Thomas Hill arranged for the incumbent of Madeley to move to Cheshire and Fletcher took his place. It seems that he wanted to work in an industrial parish where he would face the social and industrial problems of the age.

Fletcher became increasingly involved in the evangelical movement and in 1768 he became Super-

intendent of the Countess of Huntingdon's seminary at Trevecca. He held this position for three years, eventually resigning because of his opposition to certain Calvinist doctrines which the Countess supported.

Fletcher preached throughout the coalfield area, not only in Madeley. After John Wesley preached at Madeley in 1764 there were a number of Wesleyan Societies in Shropshire which Fletcher helped to look after. There was some opposition to Fletcher's evangelical fervour and at Little Wenlock eggs were thrown at him and horses were driven through the congregation. Despite this, many who professed themselves Methodists remained attached to the parish church.

Fletcher died in 1785 but his wife Mary whom he had married in 1781 was allowed to go on living at the vicarage until her death in 1815, with her adopted daughter Mary Tooth. Even when, after Mary Fletcher's death, Mary Tooth moved to a house nearby she was allowed to continue holding worship meetings in the vicarage barn until 1831 when it was demolished.

After Fletcher's death something of a cottage industry grew up around his memory. Engravings of Fletcher's bedroom, his vicarage and the vicarage barn were sold to his followers who also demanded locks of his hair or specimens of his handwriting. His influence remained very strong in the area for about fifty years after his death, but by the 1840s the separation between Anglicans and Methodists was complete.

John and Mary Fletcher and Mary Tooth are all buried in Madeley churchyard under an imposing cast iron tomb, just the other side of the wall from the vicarage garden.

The Old Vicarage was sold by the Church Commissioners in 1976 and since that date has been a private residence. It is listed as a grade II building in the Department of the Environment's list of buildings of special historic and architectural interest.

The church of St. Michael is not the one in which Fletcher preached, as in 1796 the medieval parish church was replaced by the present one, which is built to a design by Thomas Telford.

