

WATCH OUT! THE REVEREND PUDDICOMBE'S ABOUT!
Drama-doc written by B. Farquharson
Drawings by Cory Lyons
Performed in St Winifreds Church, Branscombe in 2007

Cast in Order of Appearance:
Barbara (the speaker): Barbara Farquharson
Rev. Puddicombe: Nigel Freathy
Villager & John Langmead: Sid Sweetland
Lord Rolle, Henry Carslake, & Elijah Chick: John Torrance
Bee Keeper, Farmer Purse, & Samuel Chick: Edwin Purchase
Maid: Val Marchant
Squire Stuckey: Paul Haines

Barbara, standing at lectern: Pen, pen, where's my pen?
Remember how I keep telling you to keep a diary – for yourself, for posterity. Well, I'm hopeless at it, but I did *try* when the Napoli grounded and spewed its containers onto the beach...

Reads out:

January 22 2007 We went down to look at the beach. What a desecration! Rubbish and muck strewn along it and containers crumpled or wide open spilling their guts out ... and people trashing the place



... And out to sea the ship piled high with containers and listing horribly ...



I can't imagine that anything like this has ever happened here before ... I suppose the only good thing is that no-one died ... [pause]

Voice from outside the door: Monstrous, terrible ... dear, oh dear !
The Rev Puddicombe sweeps in & hurries over to his writing table -

Puddicombe: Where's my quill? (starts writing):

[Buried] December 1802 Haagensen, Neils ..., a Dane, of Huntspill, aged 26 [died] 3 Dec. ... Holst, Christian Rosenberg, a Dane, of Grimsted, aged 19 [died] 3 Dec. ... Simpsing, Herman, a Dane, of Huntspill, Captain of the Omen, aged 42, [died] 3 Dec. ... The ship Omen... in which the above three unfortunate men were wreck'd, was from Frederickstadt, Norway, laden with Timber, Deals, &c., for Plymouth, and after unloading the Timber and Deals ... was intended for a voyage to the West Indies. She was a fine ship, measuring 150 feet from Head to Stern on her Deck: - had been an American Frigate, and was cut down for the purpose of converting her into a Merchant Ship. She had on board twelve Hands besides the Captain and a boy. Ten of the Hands and the Boy were sav'd.

Barbara: The man who wrote that entry in the Burial Register was the Reverend Thomas Puddicombe. Born 1762, died 1827. Vicar of Branscombe from 1794 until his death. A man feared – revered – reviled.

You must admit, it's an unusual entry for a Parish Register! I mean, until Puddicombe arrived in Branscombe, entries were, to put it mildly, terse. If you were getting married, there'd be your name, place of birth, name of witnesses. If a child was baptised, there'd be the name of the child, daughter/son of - , name of parents. If – when - you died, it was much the same.



But for some reason, Thomas Puddicombe wanted to say more. In his early entries, it was just a touch or two:

Puddicombe:

Ham, Elizabeth, daughter of Joseph Ham and Elizabeth his second wife died 7th June

1790 Parrot, John, Carpenter ... accidentally fell over Cliff, aged 68

Barbara: A bit later, under Marriages, he adds the father's trade -

Puddicombe:

1793, 7 January: Brown, William, Butcher and Charity Pidgeon [with] George Gill, Amy Northcott

Barbara: And for Baptisms, not just trade, but kin relations, and where people came from -



Puddicombe:

1804 Lockyer, Jonas, first living child of James Lockyer, cordwainer & Mary his wife (her parents from Northleigh)

1807 Dowell, Sarah, seventh child, fourth daughter of Amos Dowell, thatcher .. & Tamar his wife (she was illegitimate daughter of Mary Clark, reputed father John Northcott)

Barbara: Ah well, these things happen! Though perhaps it's a bit mean to mention it when she's become a respectable married woman.

You can see how, with all this detail, you can begin to build up a really interesting picture of the village - where people came from, what they did for a living and all the trades in the village – farmers & labourers, fishermen & mariners, cordwainers & stone-masons ... , how many children they had ...

When you add the information in the Register of Deaths, you're left with a sad recognition of how often babies died at birth or in infancy. I mean, take just one year – 1804 - an average sort of year. Eighteen people die:

Puddicombe:

January 7: Perryman, John, s[on] of Isaac & Jenny Perryman, aged 13 months

January 19: Perryman, Betsy, d[daughter] of Isaac & Jenny Perryman, aged 5 years

February 21: Leigh, John Carslake, s[on] of late William Leigh, gent. & Sarah his secd[second] wife, aged five yrs

February 24: Salter, Susanna, inf.[infant] daughter of William Salter, of Beer & Mary his wife

March 6: Satchell, Elizabeth ... w[ife] of William Satchell, a sailor in the King's Service, aged 26

March: Satchell, Nancy, inf. d.[infant daughter] of William Satchell, by his late wife Elizabeth

Barbara: Poor William – his wife *and* child -

Puddicombe:

July 19: Bartlett, Joseph Bartlett, s[on] of Joseph and Hannah Bartlett, aged 8

November 4: Woodrow, Elizabeth Woodrow, aged 40, w[ife] of Thomas Woodrow, Miller ... She died in childbed with her fifth child, and has left four children living.

November 30: Woodrow, Nicholas, inf. s.[infant son] of the above Thomas & Elizabeth Woodrow

Barbara: Gosh, she dies in child-birth, the baby dies, four motherless children. That means that fifty percent of the deaths are women dying in child birth or newborn babes or young children. Add to that two other people, a man and a woman, dead before they're thirty, another before she's forty, and another before 45. Only *four* out of the 18 make it to 70!

Another thing that Reverend Puddicombe records are contagious diseases. There's a very interesting account of an outbreak of small

Pox -



Puddicombe:

1810 Hoyl, Charlotte, wife of William Hoyl, ... aged 27. ... died the 13th February. ... She was the first seized with the Distemper and after her death by inoculation it went through the parish, and upwards of four hundred were inoculated and vaccinated, and a very few had the distemper in the natural way; and all did well (blessed be the Lord for his great mercies to them) except two children, one not a week old when it was inoculated.

Barbara: Puddicombe's entries in the Parish Registers are a mine of information – and, what's more, they tell us about everyone – people in the big houses, people 'on the Parish'. What makes these sources all the more valuable is that they come before the beginnings of more official and officious documentation of people's lives - the tithe map returns don't come in until 1840, the Census returns only begin in 1841.

Puddicombe isn't just good at *demographic* detail, he's also got a grand eye – nose - for the particular and peculiar. So again, his early entries are quite low keyed -

Puddicombe:

1790 Bartlett, Paul, a capital farmer of this place died of Cancer in the lip, aged 83 (only son of John Bartlett), father of a numerous family, four of whom with their mother survive

Barbara: But by 1795, when he's safely installed in the Vicarage, right through to 1813 he - well, he just takes off. He's a splendid old gossip, loves a good story, isn't at all squeamish, and, in a rather typical late eighteenth century way, loves anything a bit untoward - a bit macabre - death by misadventure, death by suicide. The oddity of life, and of death. He can be, as we'll see, an irascible old so-and-so,

but he's also very engaged with people, very curious, and sometimes, almost tender .

Puddicombe:

1794 Hurley, Edward, eldest son of William and Susannah Hurley. He was overturned in a boat with two others, William Dowell and Gilbert Bucknel, not more than 5 or 6 yards from the shore. Bucknel was washed from under the boat before animation was suspended; and Dowell not long after apparently dead; however he soon discover'd symptoms of returning life; and in a few hours was quite recover'd. Hurley lay upwards of



an hour under the boat his foot being got into a hole in the hatch of the boat, which he himself broke but two days before by jumping suddenly in; and there was not sufficient help at hand to turn the boat over again. After he was taken from under the boat he was taken to Farmer Samuel Bartlett's, the nearest house; where the several means recommended by the Humane Society for the recovery of drown'd persons, were us'd for several hours, but without success. What is very remarkable in this sad catastrophe: the boat was not overturned side-way; but the stern being toward the shore, the head was lifted up quite perpendicular, and so turn'd directly over; and no very great sea at the time. They had been casting the seine and had just freed it from a rock.

Barbara: perhaps one of the reasons he dwelt on this death was that Edward Hurley was ...

Puddicombe:

... married to Mary, the daughter of the late Revd Jno.[John] Kingman, vicar of this Parish; whom he has left a widow with four small children – all daughters. He was in the 33rd year of

his age; when he was thus in an awful moment, launch'd out of Time into Eternity.

Barbara: Old Puddicombe's got a sharp eye and a sharp tongue: he has a particular loathing of drinkers *and* spongers - mean-hearted men. Here he is berating the well-off sons of a woman who was on Parish relief.

Puddicombe:

[Jan. 19th] 1795 Newton, Mary, aged 85, Relict of William Newton, husbandman, she had been kept by the parish many years, and at last was buried by the Parish; tho' she had two sons living in the parish, and either of them in a situation to support her. Her eldest son William Newton, rented estates in the parish at the time - Rocknell and Elwerway, each rented at £45 per annum, and both together at the yearly rent of £125. She had also left her by her Father a considerable sum of money; which no one can account for.

Aye! And I'll tell you what the problem was! Not a year later her son, William Newton died, and I wrote – I don't mind saying so:

1795 Newton, William, ... a reputable farmer, aged 50. ... He died victim to the horrid sin of drunkenness ... 29 Dec. (buried) 3 Jan.



Barbara: He wasn't the only hard-drinking farmer -

Puddicombe:

[16 Feb] 1800 Ham, Abraham, aged 56, a Farmer He was a man of very athletic constitution, which he destroy'd by the pernicious vice of Drinking - particularly spirits - which he drank a considerable [quantity] while to very great excess. At length, however, hardy as he was, his constitution gave way; and after

lingering many months, being able to retain nothing, neither solid nor liquid, in his Stomach, he fell a victim to his folly; when had he liv'd a life of Temperance, in all human probability, his days might have been prolong'd to many years

Barbara: There are more moral tales of the evils of drink but that'll do. Now here's something rather different – a quite intricate biography – way beyond what's required for the Death Register .

Puddicombe:

[9 Nov] 1796 Shimells, Robert, widr, aged 77. He was the son of reputable parents [from] ... Shropshire. His Father, a Malster, dying when he was young; and leaving his mother with several children - 4 or 5 sons besides himself, and one daughter; his uncle Wm Shimells, Steward to the Earl of Petre, sent for her with her family, to live with him at Borecombe, in the parish of Colyton... which brought him into this part of the world. He obtained a settlement in this parish by service; and lived many years in the parish in the capacity of a Hind, and, in the later part of his life, work'd as a common Day-Labourer. He married Sarah the widow of George Bartlet; by whom he had no issue. In the close of his life he was maintain'd by the parish, and died at last in the parish house, and was buried a pauper. He had one brother, a ... [Roman Catholic] Priest; his family being of



the Romish Persuasion; and was himself intended for a Priest; but refus'd it, tho' it does not appear that it was from any truly religious motives; as he both liv'd, and (it is to be fear'd) died, in a stupid Ignorance of Eternal Things. He latterly profess'd himself a Protestant: On which account his Family disregarded him.

Barbara: Sometimes Puddicombe shows an almost *scientific* interest in how death occurs – maybe this has something to do with the fact

that his father was a surgeon. Here he seems to be getting close to describing, without knowing that that's what he doing, a cardiac arrest -

Puddicombe:

[25 July] 1800 Chamberlain, Richard, widower, aged 65 ... He was in service at the time of his death at Mrs Bartlett's, Lower House. His death was quite sudden. Having occasion to get out of bed a little before midnight, going round to the further side of the bed in which he had laid with a lad - a Servant in the house,



he of a sudden fell over the stair-case into the stairs. It does not appear, however, that his death was occasion'd by the Fall; but seems to have been an instantaneous arrest; for not half a minute before he fell, he spoke to the Shepherd, who lay in the same room, and yet he neither spoke, groan'd, nor sigh'd when he fell. Had he not been insensible at the instant he fell, it seems probably, especially as he knew the Shepherd to be awake, that in falling, he would have cried out. Besides, tho' he was taken up immediately; and tho' his neck was not dislocated, and not the least bruise appear'd upon him, he was as one, that had been some time dead, his limbs quite limber, and a deathly coldness throughout.

Barbara: And here's a story where the sadness of the tale is again tempered by the *particularity* of the incident. It's also one where you can almost see old Puddicombe sitting down with the people involved, nodding and quizzing them -

Puddicombe:

1805 Perry, Rachel, aged 20, d. of William and Susanna Perry. She lost her life by a fatal accident. A young man, nam'd Henry Northcott, her Sweetheart, going into the house of James Gush, where she was sitting by the side of Gush's wife who had a young child in her lap, by the Fire; and taking down

Gush's Fire-Lock to see if it was clean; he incautiously touch'd the trigger, not suspecting the Gun was loaded; and the Gun instantly



going of, log'd its whole contents in her Bowels. The muzzle of the Gun was so close to her, when discharg'd, that the perforation (which was through the upper part of the thigh, and over the groin, as she was sitting on a very low seat) was just as if it had been made by a Ball; tho' the gun was loaded with Shot. She languish'd the whole of the Day (it being about 10 o'clock on the Monday morning when the accident happened) and died abt. 2 o'clock the morning following, in the very bloom of life, and in full Health and Strength.

Barbara: Poor woman! Poor fella! Here's another sad tale – another story that tells something about the hardships of life in Branscombe -

Puddicombe:

1811 Stedham, William, s. of Thomas Stedham, of Coliton Raleigh, aged 18, ... This poor lad came very early in the morning to Mr. Ford's lime Kiln for a load of lime. It being very cold, it is suppos'd that he sat down at the Kiln's mouth and that being overcome with sleep he fell forward in upon the burning Lime; where he was found by Robert Ferryman, one of the Kiln Men, burnt to death.



Barbara: Oh dear! Lime-burning was one activity, smuggling another. And, curiously, for a man who's so censorious of drink, he's much less so about smuggling ...



Puddicombe:

1801 Cawley, William, aged 40, an inhabitant of Beer, a native of this parish; son of John & Sarah Cawley. He had been on a smuggling expedition, and was found dead early in the morning by John Halse in a field of oats call'd Five-Acres, on the west side of Markel's Hill; lying on his back with his head down hill, and [a] cask of spirit at some distance from him below.

Barbara: But what really arouses his curiosity, perhaps almost morbidly, is suicide. Maybe it's something to do with his trying to comprehend *accidental* as opposed to *providential* causality. During his incumbancy, there are three suicides – all women. Here's the entry for Jane Toulmin. She walked into the sea -

Puddicombe:

1798 Toulmin, Jane, aged 25, d. of the Revd Joshua Toulmin, a Dissenting Minister of Taunton, & Jan his wife She was found drown'd under the Cliff, on that part of the shore call'd Branscombe Cove, and there is too much reason to believe she deliberately laid herself down in the water for the horrid purpose of putting an end to her existence.

She had been for some months on a visit [to her sister] in ... Gittisham ... She was of a melancholy turn of mind, and had frequently express'd her fear that she could not be sav'd. The enemy taking advantage of this, prompted her to commit this rash Act. She quitted her sister's house on Sunday evening ... and tho' the most diligent search was made after her, no tidings



could be heard, she having disguised herself with an old bonnet of one of the servts., and an old black stuff Petticoat, which she wore like a safe-guard outside her own clothes, and being a short woman, and the Petticoat long, it almost wholly concealed her own dress, by which the messengers, sent in pursuit of her, described her ... Before she quitted her sister's house she put out what money she had, and left it in her Bed-Room; and, in this state, without a Six-Pence in her Pocket, she wandered about till Tuesday morning, the day, on which, it is to be fear'd, she put an end to her existence. She was seen at Beer walking very fast up Common Lane between three and four o'clock, and about a Quarter past 5 o'clock, she was discover'd in the water, by one Jn [John] Parrett, a carpenter.

N.B. The distance from Beer to Branscombe Cove is at least three miles. And, what is very extraordinary, she was ever before accounted a very bad walker.

Barbara: And two years later there was an almost copy-cat suicide: Elizabeth Ford, mother of William Braddick Ford, of whom you're going to hear more later on this evening, and who, according to Puddicombe, died of an excess of alcohol. Elizabeth Ford also walked into the sea.



Puddicombe:

Feb 13 1800: Ford Elizabeth, widow, aged 59, Relict of Edward Ford, a reputable farmer, and daughter of Nicholas & Mary Braddick. For some unknown cause, she form'd the horrid resolution of putting an end to her own existence by drowning herself in the sea. She was met in a Field, call'd Five Acres, on the top of Stockham's Hill, on Feby 13th, between 6 and 7 o'clock in the morning by two carpenters - Joel Bartlett and Daniell White, coming from Beer; where she had lived for 3 or 4 months with her Son-in-Law, Mr Miell, a dissenting minister and

his wife, her daughter. She was afterwards met by Joseph Tucker, Farmer, in Sea-Side lane who spoke to her



observing it was a cold morning; to which she replied How d'ye do? - I don't know your name. Having said this, she pass'd briskly towards the sea. She was observed by two young men from the Cliffs



walking on the shore with great speed towards the West; and about two miles to the Westward of Branscombe-Mouth they saw her walk into the Water, and awful to relate launch herself into Eternity. The young men hasten'd to her, and drew out a lifeless corps; and tho' means were tried as soon as circumstances would admit and vigorously pursu'd for at least 3 hours; yet all was in vain

Barbara: In 1813 these loquacious entries come to an end. The Church authorities, in their wisdom, insiste upon a tight little Recording form. There's no longer room for rambling.



So far we've seen Puddicombe the village scribe. But that's only part of his story. As we'll soon see, he's also the village scourge.

But first, what about his background? How did he come to Branscombe? What sort of religion did he espouse? High Church?

Low Church? How did he get on with his parishioners - what did people feel about him – what did he feel about them?

He was born in Lyme Regis. He was baptised, with his twin sister, Frances Mary, on Sept 8 1762. But his little sister died before the age of two.

His father was John Puddicombe, surgeon, alderman and twice Mayor. His mother was Elizabeth. Here's the family tree -



You can see that, even though his father was a surgeon, and even though the family must have been reasonably well off, child mortality was very high. The first Thomas must have died in childhood because our Thomas took his name; the first John died before his tenth birthday, the first Frances Mary died before she was four, the second John died as a baby, and so did the second Thomas. Only Elizabeth, Mary, the third John, and *our* Thomas - Thomas the third - make it through to adulthood.

Thomas is only 25 when his mother dies in 1787, and his father dies two years later. They're both buried in Lyme Regis.

He studies at Pembroke College, Cambridge and gains a B.A. in 1782. He's ordained September 1784. Rather interestingly, given what we're going to discover about the way he goes about things in Branscombe, he was around at Cambridge when Charles Simeon began to proselytize – Simeon was a charismatic man who, though he remained within the established Church, was a passionate evangelical, and *very* low church.

But, first, how did it come about that Thomas became the vicar of Branscombe? We're not entirely sure, but we do know that Elizabeth, the daughter of the incumbent vicar, John Kingman, married a certain Rev Richard Puddicombe of Shebbear & Sheepwash, and that their son was baptised in Branscombe in 1789. We're not sure how Richard relates to Thomas but it seems quite probable that there's a family link and that this helped Thomas get a foothold in the village.

One odd thing is that, although he didn't become the vicar of Branscombe until 1794, when Kingman died, he seems to have been around the place much earlier – maybe even as early as 1786 – thus only two years out of Cambridge, and only 24 years old. Looking at the Registers we find, in 1786, a *sudden* change in what's recorded. It's curious, the handwriting stays the same, it's the handwriting of Kingman's curate, George Tucker, but suddenly the earlier, laconic entries are superceded by the sort of Puddicombian entries that we've just heard. I mean, listen to this one, from 1790 – it's pure Puddicombe -

Puddicombe:

1790, Jan 2. John White – aged 77 – this man lost his life by a very trifling Accident: Paring the Toe-nail with a penknife a little too close so as just to draw Blood, it rankled, and Mortification coming on, carried him off in a few days.

That has to be Puddicombe! At any rate, June 1794 he finally becomes vicar. It seems he never married, he has a servant or two, and a young apprentice. He lives in the Vicarage down on the village square, opposite the Masons Arms - where the flats are now



This rare photo shows the *back* of the vicarage – the front faced the Square – and you can see Margels Hill behind. He stays in the vicarage for thirty-three years – right through until his death in 1827.

Branscombe was a large parish, he says there were 116 families, which, when you think about the size of families, could easily mean there were about eight hundred inhabitants (twice what we have now!). It was also a poor parish, and when Puddicombe takes up office times were particularly hard. The Napoleonic wars had gone on and on and had led to a huge increase in the price of cereals, and therefore the price of bread. And these hard times were often compounded by bad harvests. In 1800, there were huge demands being made on the countryside in order to feed the expanding naval

dockyards around Plymouth and there were lousy harvests. The local farmers took their chance and the price of wheat escalated from 6/- to as much as 20/- a bushel, which meant the price of bread also shot up and poor people in places like Branscombe were, quite literally, starving.

So what happens then? Well, it seems that in Branscombe over a hundred men gathered together. They called on kinsfolk who were in the local Voluntary Militia to support them, and, one day, in late December 1801 an anonymous letter flew over the garden wall behind Puddicombe's vicarage.



Sid reads the proclamation:

A Caution to Gentlemen and the Rogues of Farmers -

We are now going to acquaint you, that if you do keep on with the rise of Corn and other things, in the manner as what you do, we, the Volunteers and Inhabitants of this place, shall attack, by fair means or foul, betwix this and Christmass day.

To think of the cruelty of you rogues to us, your fellow creatures - though we cannot own you as fellow creatures, for you are more like savages - to think you keep up such an extortionate price of every thing, and constantly every day rising, so that young men and old women and children starve quietly. No, we will fight with sword and musket as long as we have a drop of blood in our bodies for ourselves and our dear wives and families, and likewise for his Majesty. We shall conclude, hoping your hearts will turn – but if not, you may depend that we shall come like a thief in the night.

God save the King!

Puddicombe: They threw it over the wall, and stuck another one up by the pump by the church! They added a note asking that I should read it out in church. And so I did ... and as I wrote to Lord Rolle, the

Magistrate and County Lieutenant. Well, I felt it my duty – I read it out, and then, as I wrote to him -

I gave the authors of it a Word of Exhortation and advice – I exhorted them to desist from Acts of Violence, & pointed out to them the dreadful consequences - ruin to themselves & misery to their families, & tried to persuade them to wait with patience till proper steps could be taken to redress the grievance

Ahh, I fear I was not successful, for whilst I was away during the week, they went up to Mr Stuckey and threatened him and made him so fearful that he agreed to write out a paper telling the farmers that they must sell their wheat at 8 shillings, not twenty. He tried to stick out for 10 shillings, but they threatened him. I fear that Lord Rolle thought that I acted with impropriety – but what else could I do?

Barbara: It fizzled out – well, how could the farm workers enforce anything? Lord Rolle dismissed four of the militia men who'd been involved and apparently he tried to get the farmers to sell their cereals at a more reasonable price. But Puddicombe was right, Lord Rolle was *not* impressed with his handling of the affair. He wrote to the prime minister – the Duke of Portland:

Lord Rolle:

On the conduct of the clergyman I shall leave to your Grace to your own opinion, I have mine!

Barbara: Most of the time though, life revolved around more parochial matters. Like trying to persuade people to pay their tithes. Which was, after all, the way in which the clergy supported themselves. It seems that Puddicombe took this matter very seriously! He decided that he was as happy to have the tithes in kind as in cash. A pig, or a cow, or, from bee keepers, a tenth of the honey was fine by him. His insistence on his dues led to considerable resistance – from the humblest labourer to Squire Stuckey himself.

The story goes that a farm worker arrived at the vicarage with a skep of bees -

Bee Keeper: Where be the vicar?

Maid: In his study ...

Bee Keeper: Reverend – here be the tenth part of my bees ...

Puddicombe: Excellent, leave the butt in the kitchen.

Bee Keeper: Oh no! tis my butt, an' I want en. Only the bees is your due ...

Puddicombe: But ... but ...



Bee Keeper: *My butt* – here be your bees!

Puddicombe: Good God!

Barbara: And there's a postscript. Phoebe Spencer told me that when this story was told in the Village Hall in the thirties a voice piped up from the back ...

Voice from the back of the village hall: Aye, that's right, that was grandfather! And what's more he hadn't sent the queen and by the evening they were all back home again!

Barbara: It's not just the ordinary bee keeper that was aggrieved – at the other end of the social scale 'Squire' John Stuckey fulminates in a letter to his cousin Thomas Langdon written in 1801 -



'Squire' Stuckey:

Puddicombe has become the most intolerable scoundrel that ever a parish was cursed with; his whole bent is to make the utmost penny of the parish; he will not compound with the farms but on his own terms and not as estates are rated but at what they are let for. He has sent me a notice in writing that he will insist on my Tythes in kind from Lady Day next.

Barbara: A bit rich coming from Stuckey, the most money- or at least property-grabbing man in the Parish! Where Stuckey was concerned, Puddicombe managed to get the last word. When Stuckey died he wrote in the Register –



Puddicombe:

1810 Stuckey, John, aged 91. ... He died possess'd of vast worldly property; which, after he had long possess'd, without enjoying and without using; he was, at last, constrained to leave to others

Barbara: And here's some-one else who was outraged at Puddicombe's tactics for extracting tithes This is a draft letter from Henry Carslake found in the Devon Record Office -



Henry Carslake:

Sir, I am rather surprised at your impertinent letter in accusing me of deceiving you in the age of a tithe pig. The pig was as old as I said it was, which I can bring proof and if you say to the contrary you are a liar. I have here inclosed your letter which may be of particular use ie to [wipe your] anum.

Ha ha ha, and as to your threats [of taking the tithes in kind], I care not ... Attack me which way you will I am in readiness [for you]. As the autumn is drawing nigh I can let you take choice of three old wigs to keep your old naked, empty skull warm if you will accept it.

I wish you good night

Henry Carslake



Barbara: This, by the way, is the *only* description we have ever found of the Reverend ... he is revealed to be *bald*!!

It seems that before Puddicombe took office things had been very lax and St Winifreds was in a dreadful state. In 1797 in answer to a Diocesan Questionnaire, which, I have to say, most incumbents answered with admirable brevity, our man was at it again, filling in the the bottom and then going round the side of the page -



Puddicombe: Aha! Let me see – First Question: Is the Church and Chancel in good Repair and your Churchyard well kept? And have you all things decent for Divine Service? Ahh –

Very far from; the inside of the Church & Chancel being in a most shatter'd Condition not decent to perform Divine Service in. I have, however, after two or three times presenting the Church, got the Parishioners to re-build the gallery, and consent to go on year by year repairing some part till the whole be completed. But, though I have two or three times presented the Church, nothing has been done yet. If the Windows are not repaired before Winter, particularly the East Window, I must be under the necessity of shuttering up the Church; or it is at

the risk of my own and my People's lives to assemble there for Worship, when the wind blasts strong from the East. I have been occasionally obliged to read the Prayers in the Pulpit, which is behind the Desk, and more shelter'd from the Strokes of the Wind ... Mr Flood, surveyor ... can inform your Lordships in what a truly shatter'd state it is

That's telling 'em!

Barbara: The Church Wardens' Accounts do indeed show that the gallery was rebuilt – at a cost of over £40 (one pound then was worth ninety pounds today) – and that over the years, the windows and the font were renewed. The Lord's Prayer, the Creed, and the Ten Commandments were painted up around the Chancel arch.



More radically, in 1802, a large amount of money – nearly a hundred pounds! - was paid out of the church rates for a complete new set of pews.

Puddicombe: We'll get rid of the worm-eaten benches and put in tall box pews. We'll make em cheaply out of deal, with oak floors to last. That'll stop em fidgeting and winking at each other across the aisle!



Barbara: But having built the high box pews he found the old pulpit was too low – he couldn't overawe the congregation when he preached!

Puddicombe: A three decker pulpit is what I need! A desk for prayers, a desk for the reading, and the old pulpit on top for the sermon. I'll move it over to the south side of the nave, where I can keep an eye on everyone –



Barbara: In 1815 he persuaded the Vestry, as the Parish Council was called, to accept an estimate for the huge sum of £248 for repairs to the church, the tower, and the roof. But the accounts show that the bill finally came to £375 and the Parish had to borrow three hundred pounds from the Honiton Bank. It seems likely that Puddicombe had managed to slip in his three-decker pulpit!

His aesthetic sensibility leaves a lot to be desired, and when, nearly a hundred years later, in 1911 the Church is restored, most of his work was undone, and the pulpit was moved back to its present place.



all these furnishing tell us quite a lot about the man – the way he wants to lead from the front, or from above. The way he wants to change the lax attitudes to Church and God. The way he wants to make the teachings of God visible to all. He also has built, at the back of the Church, three rows especially for the poor of the parish. A bit patronising perhaps, but at least he's trying to include the usually excluded.

The same energy is expended in his every day dealings with his congregation, some of which were lovingly recorded by Elijah Chick in his history of the church and parish.

First, he had to get the flock to Church:

Puddicombe (to the congregation): You're to read Psalm One Hundred and Nineteen – very slowly. I'm just going to ride round the village and fetch in the recalcitrants. I'll be back!

Barbara: Then he has to stop them misbehaving –

Puddicombe: I'll not have talking in the Church ... [Sexton] ... John Parrott – do you see those two girls sitting there? Take care they don't sit together next Sunday. They have done nothing but laugh and talk all the while I have been preaching. Farmer Purse, I think one of them is your servant!

Farmer Purse (squeaky voice): Noa sarvent o'mine, zur.

Puddicombe: You there, I saw you – come forward ... [pick someone out of the audience - place the dunce's hat on their head – point to the words-] *'A Despiser of God's Presence in God's Own House'*

Barbara: As for those who *really* had sinned - they were called to church at the time of Public service and he solemnly cursed them in through one door and blessed out at the other!

Man and woman shuffle in through the church door, covered in white sheets ...

Puddicombe: You terrible miscreants, you desecrators of the Lord's table, fornicators [**Puddicombe to ad lib**] Ah, but then God's mercy be on you ... blessed are the sinners ... Aye ... but don't do it again



Barbara: He's rebuilt the gallery (no organ in those days) - a fine place for the musicians and choir, but he's unhappy with the choir because they refuse to sing at the proper time.

Puddicombe: I won't have it, if you won't - well then you'll not sing ...

Choir: mumbling grumbles ...

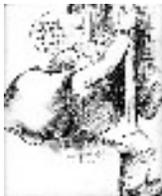
Puddicombe: That's it, no more. From now on I'll lead the singing with my violin –

[Puddicombe plays the violin and first two rows rise and join in on first verse of 'Oh God our help in ages past']

Barbara: Not only did he play the violin, and lead the singing, he also preached *excessively* long sermons morning *and* afternoon. Elijah Chick recounts that his father as a small boy, said, more than once -

Samuel Chick (small boy): Mauther, ha'er shut es buke yet?

Barbara: The length of his sermons was so well known that on one famous occasion, in December 1802, two n'er-do-wells, John Langmead, who lived in the village, and Amos, his son, who lived at Wonford in Exeter, chose their moment to attempt a quick burglary -



John Langmead: Arr - Amos, that be the way to do it. Up the drainpipe and in through the window, and no-one around to see us take the silver. Old Puddicombe still witterin' on in Church. Now get thee to Exeter to old Skinner, the silversmith and see what'll he'll give you for 'um.

On the 10th inst. during divine service in the afternoon the house of the Rev. J. Puddicombe, vicar of Branscomb was broken into and various articles of plate and other property stolen.

Barbara: Unfortunately for John Landmead, old Skinner the silversmith had his wits about him and Amos, who'd only just come out of jail, and three women – one of whom was, it seems, mute - who he'd sent into the shop with the stolen goods, were apprehended. When the Officers of the Law raided John Langmead's house in Branscombe they found a locked box with six gold rings, a pepper dredge, and a book, all the property of our good parson.



The Exeter Flying Post's account added for good measure that the Officer was persuaded that this gang were not just thieves but also poachers and smugglers.

But to return to church matters – the Reverend also got very choleric about the names people chose to give their children.



Puddicombe: Emmanuel! James Lockyer and his wife Mary want to call their son *Emmanuel* – I refuse to baptise it - someone else will have to do it. I conceive the name given to this child cannot be applied to any child of man without the highest blasphemy!

Barbara: There's no doubt – he's an old curmudgeon, but he does care about the spiritual well-being of his congregation. We find him writing in 1821 in his Returns to the Diocesan Questionnaire -

Puddicombe:

[I hold] Divine Service twice every Lord's Day, with Sermon both Morning & Afternoon, at 10 o'clock in the Morning throughout the Year; and at ½ past two o'clock in the Afternoon the greater part of the Year, and 2 o'clock during the three Winter Months ... [and there's] a Sunday School for both Boys and Girls – establis'd, supported, and superintended wholly by Myself ...

Barbara: You might describe him, as the Rev Butters does in 1949, as '*A man of marked individuality – a martinet in the parish*', or you might say, more generously, following Elijah Chick , that he was -

Elijah Chick: *Pretty much of a benevolent autocrat.*

Barbara: Alternatively, you might curl your lip and denounce him, as John Stuckey does in 1801 as -

'Squire' Stuckey: *Our Methodist raving ranting preacher Puddicombe.*

Barbara: And there, I think, is at least one clue to our man which goes right back to his Cambridge days and the preachings of Charles Simeon, that shows up in his attitude to the Church fittings, to his way of comporting himself vis á vis his congregation. He's a funny mix: tyrannical *and* Low Church, autocratic *and* open-handed. And we see it again when, in the early part of the nineteenth century, the first small group of Methodists begin to hold their services in the kitchen at Berry Farm. Apparently Farmer Sam Chick, Elijah Chick's grandfather, talked to the Reverend Puddicombe -

Samuel Chick: Come and see for yourself - come up to Berry farm and hear the way we comport ourselves. It'll do you no harm, you'll see -

Puddicombe: Alright Samuel, so I will. I'll hide me away in a back room so I can listen to what happens.

Barbara: He hides away, he listens, and whatever it was he heard, he's not displeased, and from then on, as long as *he* was vicar, Church and Chapel rubbed along together.

So there you go! What'd you think? Old curmudgeon? Rather endearing? Eccentric? Particular and probing in his understanding? Patriarchal? Determined to set his congregation on the right path? Out to extract the last penny? No respecter of class? Open to argument? Closed to argument? Maybe all of these!

When he died 1827, The Exeter Flying Post obituary pronounced that he was –

Villager:

A pious and worthy Vicar ... For the purity of his doctrine, the liberality of his sentiments, and a ready and diffusive benevolence, his memory is entitled to the highest respect.



Barbara: We'll give Elijah Chick, though he's a tad partisan, the last word.

Elijah Chick:

In the days long before the Oxford Revival of Newman and Pusey, there walked the narrow lanes and footpaths of the parish a worthy man, the Reverend Thomas Puddicombe. In his day most remarkable, respected by the good feared by the bad, his strict discipline, quaint sayings, long sermons, tolerant spirit, and keen eye for business, all conduced to enlist the sympathies or arouse the fears of his flock.

Barbara: Again, according to Chick, and speaking much in Puddicombe's favour, when he died, in June 1827, there was mourning in both Church and Chapel, and one old Chapel man, Harry Parrott, got so carried away that he shouted out, somewhat inappropriately ...

Villager: Praise be to God from whom all blessings flow!

Barbara: The Reverend Thomas Puddicombe was safely buried alongside his parents in the churchyard in Lyme Regis.