

Preface

This book is about a group within the clergy of the Church of England that is at once very common and very rare. All clergy spend at least a year in deacon's orders, and indeed continue in deacon's orders for the remainder of their lives. Yet the number of clergy in the Church of England who have chosen to remain as deacons only ('distinctive deacons') is at present very small (fewer than one hundred). The fact that all clergy must pass through a 'diaconal' period in their lives would be enough on its own to justify a study of what being a deacon in the Church of England has meant over the centuries, but there is of course more to the diaconate in Anglicanism than the so-called 'transitional diaconate'. Beginning in the mid-sixteenth century, there existed a persistent minority of clerks in holy orders who remained deacons, and deacons only, for a lengthy period of time – sometimes even for their entire lives. This book shows that such individuals cannot simply be dismissed as freakish exceptions. The existence of lifelong deacons may be a backwater of controversy in the contemporary church, but there was a time in the nineteenth century when the issue repeatedly took centre stage at the Convocations of Canterbury and York, and even provoked a bill in the House of Commons. *Inferior Office?* tells, for the first time, the history of this largely forgotten segment of the clergy, as well as the controversy that has often accompanied it.

This book originally grew out of an interest in marginalised elements of the early modern clergy, an interest that in turn developed from my previous work on early modern popular religion. More often than not, the clergy who got themselves into trouble with the law for engaging in unauthorised practices were not the career priests who held incumbencies, but more shadowy figures of lower status: chaplains, perpetual curates and schoolmasters in holy orders. The clearest way in which a member of the clergy could be marginalised was by being excluded from priest's orders. A study of

deacons, therefore, has much to reveal about the little studied social composition of the clergy in the early modern period and thereafter. Rather than a monolithic elite composed of graduates of Oxford and Cambridge, the clergy were a diverse group, and the early modern and eighteenth-century church was constantly suffering from a crisis of manpower. The half-educated individuals who were drafted in to solve this crisis were often those who remained in deacon's orders. In some parts of England, especially the Province of York, ill-educated clergy predominated until the mid-eighteenth century.

Once we acknowledge the presence of a local body of clergy within rural communities, who sometimes maintained a trade alongside their ministry, we are forced to question historical perceptions of the role of the church in early modern society. The parson was often perceived by the local community as a figure of authority, and sometimes as an alien intruder differentiated from the local community by class and origin, but it seems less likely that this was true of the marginalised local clergy who remained as lifelong deacons. The present volume is certainly not a comprehensive social history of the marginalised 'lower orders' of the clergy, but I hope it may provide the stimulus for more research into the diverse educational backgrounds and social roles of clergy between 1550 and 1800.

In addition to my interest in marginalised clergy, curiosity about the almost total absence of deacons in the Church of England stimulated me to write this book. Permanent deacons have been part of everyday life in the Roman Catholic Church in England and Wales since the 1970s, and the idea of permanent deacons assisting the parish priest seems natural to many Catholics. In the Church of England, by contrast, Readers regularly assume many of the same roles performed by deacons in the Roman Catholic liturgy, in spite of the fact that deacons exist in both churches. This seemed to me a curious anomaly in the Church of England requiring a historical explanation, and subsequent conversations with Anglican distinctive deacons convinced me that the history and position of deacons within the church was worth studying. This book is a work of history in which I make historical judgements (rather than theological ones), and it is not my intention to put forward one particular view of the way in which the diaconate should develop in the Church of England. However, this book is intended as a contribution to the ongoing debate about the role of non-priestly ministry within the established church. The year 2014 marked 175 years since Thomas Arnold first proposed a permanent 'order of deacons' in a sermon in Rugby's

parish church in 1839, and 2015 marks 30 years since General Synod voted to ordain women as permanent deacons, but there has been little discussion of the diaconate in print since the publication of *The Mission and Ministry of the Whole Church* in 2007. The question of why Arnold's vision has yet to be realised in England in any significant sense, in spite of so much effort by so many, needs to be asked for the twenty-first century.

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In order to avoid confusion in the text, I use the term 'Readers' (with an upper case 'R') to refer to lay individuals formally appointed Readers after 1866 (now officially known as Licensed Lay Ministers). Non-ordained individuals who acted as scripture readers before 1866 are referred to with a lower case 'r', since the formal title 'Reader' was sometimes given to ordained ministers before the nineteenth century. All dates given in the text are Old

Style (Julian Calendar) before 14 September 1752 and New Style (Gregorian Calendar) thereafter, with the year taken to begin on 1 January throughout, rather than 25 March. All translations from Latin are my own, unless otherwise stated. I take full responsibility for any errors or omissions in the text.

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