

THE BEILBY PORTEUS  
MEMORIAL LECTURE

*The inaugural lecture given by*

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*Rembrandt Peale, The Court of Death was based on the poem,  
Death: A Poetical Essay by Beilby Porteus.*

*The figures in the monumental painting were life-size. Death is surrounded by personifications including Despair, Fever, Consumption, Hypochondria, Apoplexy, Gout, Dropsy, Suicide, Delirium Tremens, Intemperance, Remorse, Pleasure, Pestilence, Famine, War, and Conflagration. To the right, a warrior, an orphaned infant, and a widow show some of the people afflicted. In the foreground, Old Age is supported by Faith.*

## **Sundridge St Mary**

### **200th anniversary of the natale of Bishop Beilby Porteus.**

“On the 2nd of November 1787, Dr Lowth, Bishop of London died; and the next day, [or the day after] I received a letter by express from Mr Pitt [for I was then at Hunton 5 miles SW of Maidstone in Kent] to inform me that he had lost no time in recommending me to the King for the See of London, and that His Majesty had been pleased to accept very graciously his recommendation.”

Bishops did not retire until the twentieth century and no doubt there had been conversations well in advance of Dr Lowth’s demise in view of his ill health but still the contrast with the practice of the twenty first century is startling. Just to take one example, the Bishop of Chelmsford signified his intention at the beginning of this year to retire. He left office in July 2009. It will take until December to assemble the first meeting of the Crown Nominations Commission and the members will then have a second bite at the cherry in February 2010.

What with enhanced Criminal Records checks and the like, it is very unlikely that Chelmsford will learn the identity of its new bishop until after Easter and it must be doubtful whether the preferred candidate will be free to begin his work until the autumn of next year; well over 18 months after Bishop John made his announcement. The modern system obviously reflects wider consultation, greater democratic participation, and a fidelity to due process. It has still to be proved that it produces a superior kind of bishop.

“Having been accustomed for many years to the tranquil pleasures of a country life at Hunton, when I relinquished that charming parsonage on my promotion to the See of London I found it necessary to look out for some little retirement more distant than Fulham [yet not too distant] from London; where I might pass quietly two or three months of the autumn, enjoy without much interruption my friends and my books and, by *alternate, study exercise and ease*, recruit my spirits and my health, after the fatigues of a very laborious diocese for nine successive months in the year.... I fortunately met at last with a pretty cottage in my favourite County of Kent, at a little village called Sundridge, not more than 23 miles from London, the communication with which was very easy and commodious both for myself and my clergy.”

We hear Beilby Porteus speaking here not with the awful solemnity which Dr Johnson expected of the bishops of his day but informally in a private publication, written

towards the end of his long life to describe three of the various houses in which he had lived - Hunton, Fulham and Sundridge.

The inscription on the fly leaf of the copy I spotted in a York bookseller's catalogue reads "The Executors of the late Mrs Porteus in presenting this volume to Mrs Hawkins, beg leave to mention the Bishop's particular request expressed in his own handwriting in every copy given away by himself "that the work should never be made public or reprinted". Those who turn its pages however in search of scandals and gossip will be disappointed but we do see the Bishop out of his lawn sleeves with a keen eye for natural beauty and a generous appreciation of his neighbours.

I find Beilby Porteus one of the most congenial of my predecessors for reasons that I hope will become clear during this talk. I do not of course live in Fulham Palace where the shelves Porteus had constructed to accommodate his scholarly library still exist in the part of the Palace devoted to a Museum of the See of London. I say shelves advisedly because the See of London has been subject to depredations from those charged with the preservation of the patrimony of the See. Porteus's whole library was given by the Church Commissioners on permanent loan to University College London in the 1950's.

I live in the Old Deanery of St Paul's. Most of the house is offices and public rooms and the family and I occupy the former servants quarters. To survive these days bishops have to be prolier than thou. But I do have an official portrait painted by Porteus's contemporary the fashionable and prolific John Hoppner - a favourite of the Prince of Wales. It shows the Bishop at his desk at work on some great tome with a background of leather bound folios. He looks just as Dr Johnson would have wished. Boswell's *Life* describes Johnson's uneasy conscience at having consented to dine with Porteus then Bishop of Chester in 1781 during Passion Week.

Boswell records of Johnson "He also disapproved of bishops going to routs, at least of them staying at them longer than their presence commanded respect. He mentioned a particular bishop. "Poh! [said Mrs Thrale] the Bishop of --- Is never minded at a rout." Boswell. "When a bishop places himself in a situation where he has no distinct character and is of no consequence, he degrades the dignity of his order." Johnson. "Mr Boswell, Madam, has said it as correctly as could be."

We know from the Boswell Papers that the Bishop cited by Mrs Thrale was Porteus.

Johnson was somewhat severe in such matters. He was once in company with several clergymen "who thought that they should appear to advantage by assuming the relaxed jollity of men of the world; which it may be observed in similar cases they