

An expenses scandal in Birmingham

1795

From our correspondent in Birmingham

I have seen information which shows that the General Levy imposed on the Town by the Church of England for repairs to their churches in the Town has been used for items not remotely connected with repairs. The Levy is determined annually at St Martin's Annual Vestry Meeting, usually held on Easter Tuesday, when the churchwardens of St Martin's for the ensuing year are elected. One churchwarden is chosen by the rector of St Martin's and the other by the inhabitants of the Town. At the same time the sidesmen for St Martin's are elected. Then there is Town business, carried out, appropriately, at this meeting as St Martin's is the parish church of the Town. The Overseers of the Highways in the Town are appointed and a regular item on the agenda is the determination of the Levy. The outgoing churchwardens of St Martin's and St Philip's and the outgoing wardens of the three chapels of ease viz., St Bartholomew's, St Mary's and St Paul's submit audited accounts showing their repair costs for the previous year, and it is from these figures that the magnitude of the General Levy is determined.

I have been able to see the Town Book of St Martin's, where the minutes of the Vestry Meetings affecting the Town are written up and at a special meeting held on November 2nd 1795 the following resolution was passed:-

“It appearing that in some instances the expenses incurred at the Warden's dinner at Easter have been charged to the Public It is resolved that in future no such charges will be allowed, but

that they must be defrayed by the persons present on such occasions”.

It looks as though the Wardens, maybe outgoing and incoming, had an annual dinner at Easter and charged the cost of it to the Levy. A real night out on the Town!

But that was not all. Another resolution concerns some curious goings on at St Paul’s Chapel. The resolution states that :-
“Whereas it has been the practice at St Paul’s Chapel for the wardens to give certain sums of money to the Minister instead of the surplus of sacramental wine and which sums of money have been charged to the Town, it is the opinion of this meeting and therefore resolv’d that the said practice shall be absolutely totally and immediately discontinued”. This is a very strong condemnation indeed of behaviour at St Paul’s, where the minister is the Rev’d T W Young. Just how frequently this practice occurred is not known. The Sacrament of the Lord’s Supper takes place at Christmas, Easter and Whitsunday and the fourth Sunday of the month immediately after Divine Service in the morning. In a year this could add up to a significant sum being charged to the Town.

The question now is whether there will be any resignations and whether the Magistrate will bring any charges. What is certain is that future accounts of the churchwardens and wardens will undergo strict scrutiny before the Levy is determined.

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