

Thomas Keble was born at Court Close, Fairford on 25 October 1793, the younger son of John Keble, vicar of Coln St Aldwyns, and his wife Sarah. John Keble, his elder brother, was one of the major figures in the Oxford Movement.

Like his brother, Thomas was educated entirely by his father at home; at the age of 15 he was elected Gloucestershire scholar of Corpus Christi College, Oxford, in 1808, graduating in 1811, taking a second class in classics and a third in mathematics. He followed his father into the ministry of the Church of England and was made deacon in December 1816, and ordained priest the following year. From April 1817 to October 1818 he was curate of Sherborne with Windrush, Gloucestershire, but, after the first of several serious illnesses, he returned to Oxford in the autumn of 1819 to become college tutor at his old college. At the time he headed the list of scholars, and, according to a contemporary at Corpus, accepted the post reluctantly. In 1820 Keble was elected probationary fellow, the following year fellow, and in 1822 junior dean of the college, a position he held until he left Oxford two years later, by which time he had also gained his Bachelor of Divinity degree.

While at Oxford he shared with his brother John the curacy of Eastleach Turville and Eastleach Martin near Fairford until 1824, when he became curate of Cirencester. The following year, on 14 June, he married Elizabeth Jane Clarke, elder daughter of the Revd George Clarke who was an old family friend and rector of Meysey Hampton near Cirencester. His brother John later married her sister Charlotte.

In 1827 Keble was instituted to the living of Bisley which was then a large and scattered parish with a number of outlying hamlets inhabited mainly by very poor and neglected agricultural labourers and weavers. During his forty-six years at Bisley Keble persevered, in spite of many set-backs, to improve the physical, moral, and spiritual welfare of his people, organizing self-help and emigration schemes, and building a remarkable number of churches with districts assigned to them carved out of the old parish of Bisley (see the building programme below). Keble was also concerned to provide proper education for the children of his parish, and schools were built and endowed in each of the villages.

A high-churchman of the old school, whose manner could at times be autocratic, Keble was nevertheless an exemplary and devoted pastor, his whole life being one of concern for his parish and people. He was one of the first in England to revive daily services in church, a feature of his work which was made the subject of a poem by his friend Isaac Williams. Keble's example was taken up, through Williams, by John Henry Newman at St Mary's, Oxford and at Littlemore, from where it spread throughout England.

As one of the original Tractarians, Keble was closely involved in the early years of the Oxford Movement, his contribution to which has not always been fully appreciated or acknowledged. His opinions were highly regarded by many friends and contemporaries, and his judgement on spiritual questions was frequently sought by his elder brother. Keble was particularly identified with the 'country' wing of the movement, and he and his curates became known as the Bisley School. Through a notable succession of these curates, including Isaac Williams, Sir George Prevost, Richard Champernowne, Robert Suckling and Robert Gregory, Keble's reforming yet orthodox views became established in many Gloucestershire parishes and further afield.

For much of his life Keble was dogged by poor health, and the demands of his parish left him little time for literary work. However, among his published writings are four of the famous Tracts for the Times: numbers 12, 22, 43, and 84. The first three were published separately under the

pseudonym Richard Nelson. Keble also wrote fifty-five of the Plain Sermons, by Contributors to the Tracts (1839–48), the publication of which was probably first suggested by him. He translated the Homilies of St John Chrysostom on the Epistle to the Hebrews for the Library of the Fathers, and in 1872 published a short tract, Considerations on the Athanasian Creed. He also edited a translation of Thomas à Kempis's *Of the Imitation of Christ*, and assisted his brother in his edition of the works of Richard Hooker (1831–5).

Thomas Keble resigned the living in 1873 and died at Bisley Vicarage only two years later on 5 September 1875. He was buried in All Saints' churchyard on 11 September. He left three daughters, two of whom married curates and one son Thomas who had succeeded him as vicar of Bisley in 1873.

Keble's curates

Thomas Keble benefited from attracting fellow priests of considerable ability to assist him at Bisley. Some he had met at Oxford, others were family friends; all of them were fired with a desire to renew the life and teaching of the Church of England. Together with their vicar Thomas Keble, they formed a group that became known as 'The Bisley School'. They were known for putting into practice in these parishes the ideals and principles of Christian faith and living that had been conceived in Oxford.

From left to right:

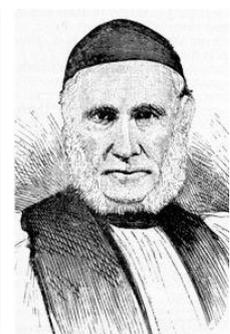
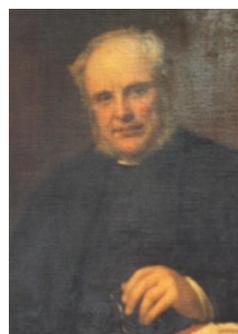
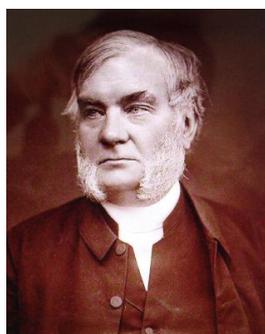
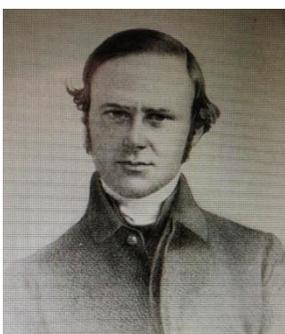
Robert Suckling – first priest of the newly built church at Bussage. Worked to alleviate poverty. Founder of the House of Mercy, working to free girls from prostitution.

Robert Gregory – curate at Oakridge. Went on to be Dean of St Paul's Cathedral, London.

Richard Champernowne – from Dartington Hall in Devon. Curate at Oakridge. Married Keble's daughter Elizabeth (window in All Saints commemorates this marriage and that of John Keble to Charlotte Clarke).

George Prevost – became Vicar of Stinchcombe and Archdeacon of Gloucester. His son married Keble's daughter Sarah.

Isaac Williams – priest, poet and hymn writer. Gave the high altar at Bisley. Married Richard Champernowne's sister Caroline.



The building programme during Keble's time:

- 1832 Bisley Vicarage
- 1837 St Bartholomew's Oakridge
- 1841 Christ Church Chalford extended
- 1846 St Michael & All Angels Bussage
- 1855 St John the Baptist France Lynch
- 1862 All Saints Bisley restored
- 1863 The Wells extended
- 1868 St Augustine's Eastcombe

The state of the Church of England when Thomas Keble moved to Bisley in 1827

There were major problems with the Church of England which had existed for decades and which neither the church nor the state seemed capable of tackling:

- The Church was aligned with the Tory party, representing the upper and landed classes. Since the French Revolution these ruling classes and clergy had been very fearful of any change or radical reform.
- As an established church, the Church of England was closely identified with the state. It was possible to view it simply as a government department with no sense of a spiritual calling or mission.
- The Church had managed to ignore the industrialization of England, and had made no provision for the enormous population explosion in urban areas. The poor were largely unchurched.
- There was widespread opposition to new scientific thinking and rationalism that was seen to be against the will of God, undermining the teaching of the Bible by encouraging doubt.
- The Church of England opposed the granting of any freedoms or civil rights to members of other Christian denominations. It defended its monopoly in imposing tithes on the whole population. MPs and university dons were legally required to be members of the Church of England.
- Clergy appointments were a major scandal: there was enormous disparity in pay which often led to pluralism (clergy holding more than one post), non-residence (clergy not living in the parish), and nepotism (patrons only appointing relatives). It is reckoned that in about half of the parishes in England there was no resident priest. Clergy were seen to be materialistic, corrupt and lax in their duties.

The movements to reform the Church of England

From 1830 onwards there were a number of moves both from within the church and in society at large to reform the church. Each initiative sought to bring change to different aspects of the church's malaise. It is fair to say that they each had a measure of success and by the end of the 19th century the church was an entirely different body. The following is a brief summary of the general approach of each movement:

From within the church –

-low church evangelicals. *"Personal repentance and faith. Knowledge of the Bible"*

-high church tractarians *"Holiness of the church, its ministers and sacraments"*

-Roman Catholics and Non-Conformists *"Equal rights for all. Disestablish the Church of England"*

From outside the church –

-the State *“Reform the church admin; rights for other denominations; engage with society”*

-liberal rationalists *“Embrace the new discoveries in science and philosophy”*

Tractarians

Members of the earlier stages of the Oxford Movement named after the Tracts for the Times published from 1833 by High Church Oxford priests and academics. Amongst these Tractarians were John and Thomas Keble, John Henry Newman, Edward Pusey, Isaac Williams and Hurrell Froude. Their desire was to renew the Church of England from within by reasserting the holiness and divine calling of the church, appealing to both the ancient traditions of the church and also the handing down of spiritual authority at ordination. Their appeal was largely to fellow priests and academics to renew their vocation to a church that was in danger on the one hand of becoming controlled by the state, and on the other of selling out to scientific rationalism that was beginning to question the whole basis of faith. The movement was open to the accusation of ‘Romanising’ the Church of England, taking it too close to the Roman Catholic Church which itself had been emancipated in 1829. Many from the Oxford Movement did indeed join the Roman Catholic Church, most famously John Henry Newman, a close friend of the Kebles, who later became a cardinal in that church. Whereas the early Tractarians were from the conservative and academic upper classes concerned that the church support the status quo, by the end of the 19th century the movement became more radical, identifying with the urban poor in slum areas of poverty and deprivation, and calling for social change and justice.