

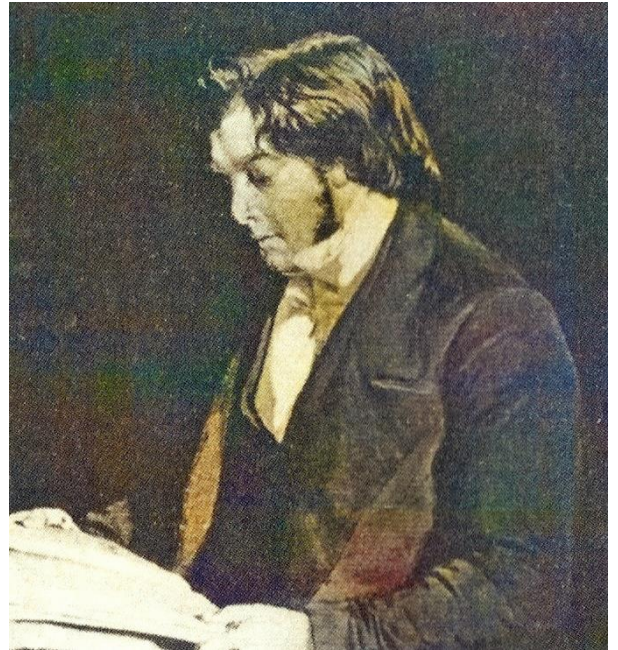


Reverend James White's 'Hospitable Abode'

The Reverend James White (1804-1862) played a central role in the development of Bonchurch in the 1840s, and in its popularity as a destination for Victorian writers and artists.

Born in Scotland, and educated at Glasgow and Oxford Universities, he was Vicar of Loxley in Warwickshire when in 1829 he married Rosa Hill. Rosa was the daughter of Charles Fitzmaurice Hill of St Boniface House, described as the 'Lord of the Manor of Bonchurch', and Rosa inherited considerable property from him, including two farms, *Marepool* and *Macketts*, which covered most of the land in Bonchurch.

In June 1836 James White had a private Act of Parliament passed enabling him to grant building leases on the Bonchurch estate; such Acts were necessary at that time if old and unprofitable estates were to be broken up. There is no suggestion that this was against Rosa's wishes, but it was not until 1882 that married women in England could own and control property in their own right.



Although always referred to as 'The Rev James White', he left his career in the church after his marriage and became an author, publishing more than 15 books and writing regularly for *Punch*. He and Rosa moved to *Uppermount* one of the few large houses in Bonchurch at that time, while a new home, *Woodlynch*, was built for them on part of Marepool Farm. At the other end of the village, Macketts Farmhouse became *Undermount* and the site of one of the farm barns there was used to build *Winterbourne*, which the Whites rented out. Thus began the development of the village as we know it today.

In 1840 novelist William Thackeray said in a letter to a friend: *Little James White made his appearance yesterday looking very fat and chirping [despite some] disappointment in his building speculations. A friendly and sociable man, White brought a whole new circle of literary friends to Bonchurch. Historian J L Whitehead wrote: It can very truly be said that few villages of the size of Bonchurch can boast of having had so many brilliant writers, etc., associated with their early history. One of the most widely known was the Rev James White. . . . Tennyson, before he established himself at Farringford, was a frequent visitor to Mr White's hospitable abode. . . . the village was made familiar with the personal presence of Mark Lemon, of Leech, Richard Doyle, Thackeray, Carlyle, Douglas Jerrold, Justice Talfourd, and lastly, Charles Dickens.*

Thackeray, Dickens and Carlyle are familiar names now, but others less so, although all were well known in their time, some of them for their radical politics. Mark Lemon was an actor, playwright and founder of *Punch*, John Leech a cartoonist, Douglas Jerrold a playwright, and Thomas Noon Talfourd was the MP behind the Copyright Bill of 1842 (Dickens dedicated *Pickwick Papers* to him). John Leech lived in Hillside Cottage for some years, and in the summer of 1849 Charles Dickens rented Winterbourne for a family holiday: his daughters Mary and Kate were much the same age as James and Rosa's daughters Charlotte (Lotty) and Clara, and the two families were good friends. In 1850 Dickens, who was trying to persuade White to come to London to celebrate his birthday, wrote *I have always had in my mind that you might come here with Lotty any day. Lotty has come without you, however (witness a tremendous rampaging and ravaging now going on upstairs!)*

But beneath all the good fellowship at Mr White's 'hospitable abode' there was great sadness for James and Rosa, as their children died one by one. Three little daughters Mary, Rosa and Marion, had died in childhood, and were buried in the old churchyard in Bonchurch; the graves of other members of the family are in the new churchyard. Lotty, who had 'rampaged' in the Dickens home when she was eleven, died when she was 20. Clara was married in Bonchurch in 1862 (with friends Mary and Kate Dickens as bridesmaids) but it was not to be a long marriage - she died in 1864, although her father was spared that grief, dying himself in March 1862, shortly after the wedding. After Clara's death, her widowed mother Rosa moved to Devon to live with her only surviving child, James Logan White, who was unmarried, listed in the 1881 census as 'Army Officer Retired'. Rosa died in 1882 in Devon. James, the last member of the family, died six years later in Bonchurch.

Lesley Telford, [Ventnor & District Local History Society](#) using records from our archives.

Photograph here from Richard J Hutchings book 'Dickens on an Island'. Article updated March 2022