

The Pracy Family History

Not a rogue? – an Edwardian clerical impostor

In December 1910 Rev. E.A. GARDNER, the vicar of St. Gabriel's Canning Town, advertised in the *Church Times* for a curate. He received an application from a Rev. C.W.O. JENKYN, who was said by Crockford's *Clerical Directory* to be 'a person of exemplary character'. Gardner interviewed the candidate and agreed to engage him subject to a satisfactory reference, which was soon forthcoming. Rev. E.R.P. ROWE of 68 Briant's Avenue, Caversham, Oxfordshire, sent a glowing testimonial. Ironically, in view of what was to follow, the letter concluded that 'as a man he is thoroughly straightforward and of the highest character'. Gardner had no hesitation in appointing him as curate, and paid him 18s out-of-pocket expenses. On Christmas Day the new man married three couples and on Boxing Day a fourth, signing the register C.W. Jenkyn.

On New Year's Eve, Gardner paid the curate £2 17s 9d for carrying out his duties and gave him permission to go to see his brother but, a week later, he had not returned as agreed. This aroused Gardner's suspicions so he made enquiries and found that the man he had engaged was not the real Rev. C.W.O. Jenkyn. A warrant was issued for the arrest of Charles John Johnson, and served on him near Gardner's house on 14th January by Detective Sergeant William ELSAM. Johnson replied: 'I admit I am not Jenkyn, but I am not a rogue. I am a priest but, unfortunately, I am suspended. I should like to see the vicar and explain the whole thing to him. That is why I am here today.' When charged at Plaistow police station he said, 'Yes, quite so,' and added that his correct middle name was George. The *Stratford Express* gave a thorough report, but did not explain how Johnson was identified as the culprit, and found so quickly.

The case was heard on 16th January at West Ham Police Court, West Ham Lane, before the stipendiary magistrate, Robert Alexander GILLESPIE. The prosecution counsel, Frederick Augustus Simpson STERN, went over the facts of the case. The letter purporting to be from Rev. E.R.P. Rowe was not genuine, and Charles Johnson himself lived at the address from which it came. Johnson 'was not the person he represented himself to be'. It was 'an open question whether he was really a clerk in Holy Orders because in 1907, in consequence of a certain offence', Johnson was 'found by the bishop incapable of holding a preferment'. He had since 'held office at other places'. The matter of whether he was still in Holy Orders required careful consideration, so 'the Archbishop of Canterbury had been communicated with' but 'no reply received yet'.

The *Stratford Express* gives no further details of Johnson's offence, but in *The Times* of 30th May 1906 there was a full report, which can be amplified from other sources. In 1893 he went to train for the ministry at St Bee's, a theological college in Cumberland. While there he met and married Betsy KIRKUP. They had two children but seldom lived together and, by her account, he deceived her several times. Betsy said that in 1902 Johnson took up a curacy at Helston in Cornwall, and an Elizabeth FAIRCLOUGH came to live with him as his wife. She was almost certainly a woman of that name who in 1901 was living in the High Street at Hemingford Abbots, where she was a servant to the Chief Constable of Huntingdonshire and Johnson was the curate, lodging a few doors away and claiming to be single. (Curiously, his entry in Crockford's suggests that in 1902 he

moved from Hemingford Abbots to the parish of St Ippolyts with Great Wymondley near Hitchin, but does not mention Helston.) In 1904, when Charles and Elizabeth had a daughter, they registered her in the names of 'Charles George Johnson, clerk in holy orders' and 'Elizabeth Johnson, formerly Fairclough'. From September 1904 to February 1906 Johnson was a curate in Buckinghamshire at St George the Martyr Wolverton, where Betsy visited him. He sought a reconciliation but she replied: 'It's too late now'. According to his entry in Crockford's, he moved on to another curacy at St Bartholomew East Ham, not too far from Canning Town. In May 1906, in the Probate, Divorce and Admiralty Division of the High Court – popularly known as Wills, Wives and Wrecks – Betsy petitioned for the dissolution of their marriage 'by reason of his desertion and adultery with Elizabeth Fairclough'. She was granted a decree nisi with costs, and custody of the children. In late 1909 Charles George Johnson and Elizabeth Fairclough were married in the Abingdon registration district.

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The case was held over for a week for further enquiries, which suggested that 40-year-old Charles George Johnson – described as a good-looking, thickset, clean-shaven man – had carried out a rather unsubtle fraud. The charge therefore was that Johnson 'did, unlawfully and knowingly, by certain false pretences, obtain of and from Ernest Arthur Gardner, the sum of £3 15s 9d, with intent to cheat and defraud, between December 17th and 31st'.

In 1909 Johnson had impersonated his near namesake Cyril Paul Johnson in a curacy at Southall but 'there was some scandal with regard to two young ladies there', although Charles insisted that he was not involved. He nevertheless left Southall but was remarkably unfortunate in applying first for a post of curate in Lincolnshire to the uncle of the real Cyril Paul Johnson, and then to a church in Warwickshire where the sidesman knew Cyril.

Despite his past record, Johnson 'felt that in this particular case there was no intention to defraud', but on the advice of his solicitor, Charles Crank SHARMAN, pleaded guilty. Sharman claimed that

when quite a boy, prisoner fell the victim to a person in a very inferior position and very much older than himself. Unfortunately, he married her and troubles arose. He never lived with her, and afterwards something occurred. He had never been co-respondent in a divorce case.

This was, to say the least, economical with the truth. If there was a victim in the relationship, it was Betsy, not Charles. Whatever her social status, she certainly was not 'very much older than' him: when they married in 1894, he was 23 and she was 21. The 'something [that] occurred' was his unfaithfulness to her. And, as the prosecution pointed out, though Charles had never been co-respondent in a divorce case, he was a respondent, having been divorced by Betsy.

Sharman argued that 'apparently the Bishop did not think it a very bad case, because he did not "unfrock" him' but merely suspended him indefinitely, 'so he could be restored at any time'. Johnson was 'deprived of holding preferment but not from holy orders', which meant that he could not take a post in the Church of England, but could take other jobs such as in teaching, for which his education qualified him. His new wife was pregnant, which is why he was so desperate for money.

For the magistrate, the money (which would only have been worth about £220 in 2010 values) was not the main issue. He concluded:

It is perfectly clear that he has been carrying out this sort of thing on previous occasions. It is not only a legal wrong, but there is a tendency of hypocrisy about it which makes the case ten thousand times worse. Prisoner will go to prison for six months in the second division.

This meant that he would avoid hard labour but scrub his own cell, wear prison clothes and work eight hours a day at 'light labour' (library or clerical work). Johnson told Detective Sergeant Elsam 'I am not a rogue'. That is, perhaps, a matter of opinion.

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On the day after the conviction the vicar entered a note into the parish register:

The four marriages numbered 111, 112, 113, & 114 were solemnized by the Revd Charles George Johnson, who assumed the name of C. W. Jenkyn. His personation formed the subject of an inquiry at West Ham Police Court on January 16th and 23rd 1911. On inquiry it was ascertained that he had been pronounced incapable of preferment, but not deprived of Holy Orders.

*E A Gardner
Vicar
January 24th 1911*

The four couples were: John George CHANDLER and Matilda DEARING; George William COLLIER and Mary Ann ASBURY; Albert Edward PRACY [my grandfather's first cousin] and Ellen CUTLER; James Wade FOULGER and Ada BADNALL. Their descendants will be relieved to know the court had it 'on the highest authority' – presumably the Archbishop of Canterbury, although there are no records of the case at Lambeth Palace Archives – that, despite Johnson's deceit, the marriage ceremonies he conducted were legal and valid.



St Gabriel's vicarage. This photo was taken from <http://www.gutenberg.org/> but the link no longer works. The church was founded c1868, damaged during the Second World War and demolished c1955.

This piece is based on articles in the *Stratford Express* on 21st and 28th January 1911. Thanks to Brian Horridge of the Guild of One Name Studies for drawing the episode to my attention, and to the staff of Newham Archives and Local Studies Library for their assistance. Charles George Johnson is a fairly common name and a Google search did not come up with anything definite, but Rev. Jenkyn, who won the Military Cross in World War I, was a keen bellringer and www.odg.org.uk/history/past_masters.html has a portrait and potted biography of him.

David Pracy, May 2010