

Mitchells Fold Chirbury Stanton Lacy Culmington Munslow Bourton



February snowdrops at Stanton Lacy in the Shropshire Hills

Country Churchyards in the Shropshire Hills



A map of the Shropshire Hills region with churches numbered, from the guide we used: 'Explore Country Churchyards in The Shropshire Hills' (see end of article for details).

Martin and his wife Magda's February tour of churches in the beautiful Shropshire Hills.

You might well think that February is just about the worst time to pick for a pleasant weekend away, due to the cold, ice and likelihood of snow. Yet for us it proved a risk worth taking, as we set out by car to discover the hidden delights of some of the most charming churches in the Shropshire Hills.



Thomas Bray

The trip was inspired by the chance mention of an exceptional Shropshire clergyman during lunchtime Holy Communion at St Edmund's (Bottom Church), which I attended on Wednesday 15th February, the day in 1730 when churchman **Thomas Bray** died.

Revd Bray was born in **Marion, Chirbury, Shropshire** in 1658 and attended Oswestry School, then All Souls, Oxford and subsequently Hart Hall (now Hertford College). He was later ordained in the Church of England and founded the [Society for the Propagation of Christian Knowledge \(SPCK\)](#) in 1698 as well as the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts in 1701.

The late 17th century was the time of rapid expansion of the British Empire, in the Americas, Africa, India and the Far East. Britain was fast painting the world red as it acquired colonies the world over (as its European rivals were also endeavouring to do). Alongside its territorial conquests, there was another battle taking place, for the souls of the conquered peoples. SPCK provided the missionaries who followed in the wake of Britain's generals with Bibles, religious texts and pamphlets to disseminate the Gospel to the heathen peoples of the Empire.

So we set out for **Chirbury** to see what mention there is of this great Shropshire clergyman at the church. Our route took us first to Shrewsbury, skirting around the southern part of the ring road, then southwards to our first port of call in the Shropshire Hills, Stiperstones. The Stiperstones Inn is an unexpected gastronomic delight located near the iconic and sinister Stiperstones - for centuries rumoured to be the abode of the Devil on wild, dark, wintry Shropshire nights. In the small library in the bar area, we found an delightful book of art and poetry devoted to the myths and legends of the area that made an amusing lunchtime read over a pint of Guinness, and a Brie bake.



First stop: lunch at the Stiperstones Inn



The wild and barren Stiperstones, centre of many a Shropshire folk legend

We let the Satnav choose the route from Stiperstones to Chirbury: the landscape becoming more and more dramatic as we neared the Welsh border.



Walking on Stapeley Hill near Mitchell's Fold, where there is a neolithic stone circle



The ancient stone circle at Mitchell's Fold

We made a detour to the stone circles at Mitchell's Fold, walking along the ridge leading to the ancient monument and looking back across the route we'd travelled to the Stiperstones, now in the far distance. A more bleakly beautiful view it would be hard to imagine.



St Michael the Archangel, Chirbury with war memorial in the foreground



The reredos at St Michael the Archangel, Chirbury



The roof at St Michael the Archangel, Chirbury

Chirbury is a small village not far from the Offa's Dyke path from north to south Wales. The church of **St Michael the Archangel** at its centre is an absolute delight with a very distinctive exposed latticework beamed roof. It still has its old box pews, and a raised chancel with some very attractive shaped brass handrails leading to it from the nave. The reredos is also very unusual having a mosaic 'sun' panel representing Christ as the light of the world in the middle, and two mosaic panels with what appear to be two images of St Michael, one at either side. (You will recall that in the Book of Revelation, St Michael the Archangel leads God's forces against the devil during the War in Heaven, and on victory, Satan is cast out of Heaven.)

While there is indeed a plaque to the left of the chancel remembering **Revd Bray**, very surprisingly there does not appear to be any other monument in the church or village to this highly influential man who played a key part in the spread of Christianity across the

globe. However there is a very informative feature about him and his work with the SPG and SPCK on the noticeboard.

(More images of St Michael's Church, Chirbury at the end of this article)



Ludlow Market, late Saturday afternoon

On leaving Chirbury we headed south-east towards Ludlow where we spent the late afternoon exploring this beautiful medieval market town with a very imposing castle, the former centre for the governance of the Welsh Marches (the border area with England).

Every time we visit this remarkable town, there is something new to discover, or a change in the ownership of the shops. This time Emporos (a well known craft and toy shop in the town) seems to have expanded with a new Lego and model shop near the Bull Ring, while a long-established discount clothing store on two floors in the same road has closed down. One constant is the excellent bookshop in the town square, which has a loyal band of aficionados who support it; it also sells a range

of paints, brushes and other artists' materials to the thriving fine art community in the area.

By late afternoon the famous Saturday market was winding down and most stallholders had disappeared off home for a well earned cuppa, leaving a few flower and bulb sellers so we bought snowdrops for our garden.

Retail behemoths such as Tesco have, sadly, begun to encroach on the town, although it the superstore is located on the outskirts of the central tourist area. However Costa Coffee has taken over premises very near the square, its brashness clashing with the sedate medieval ambience within the town. Their arrival resulted in closure of the small independent coffee shops, which is a great shame as they lent a distinctive quality that attracts travellers and gives Ludlow its unique character.

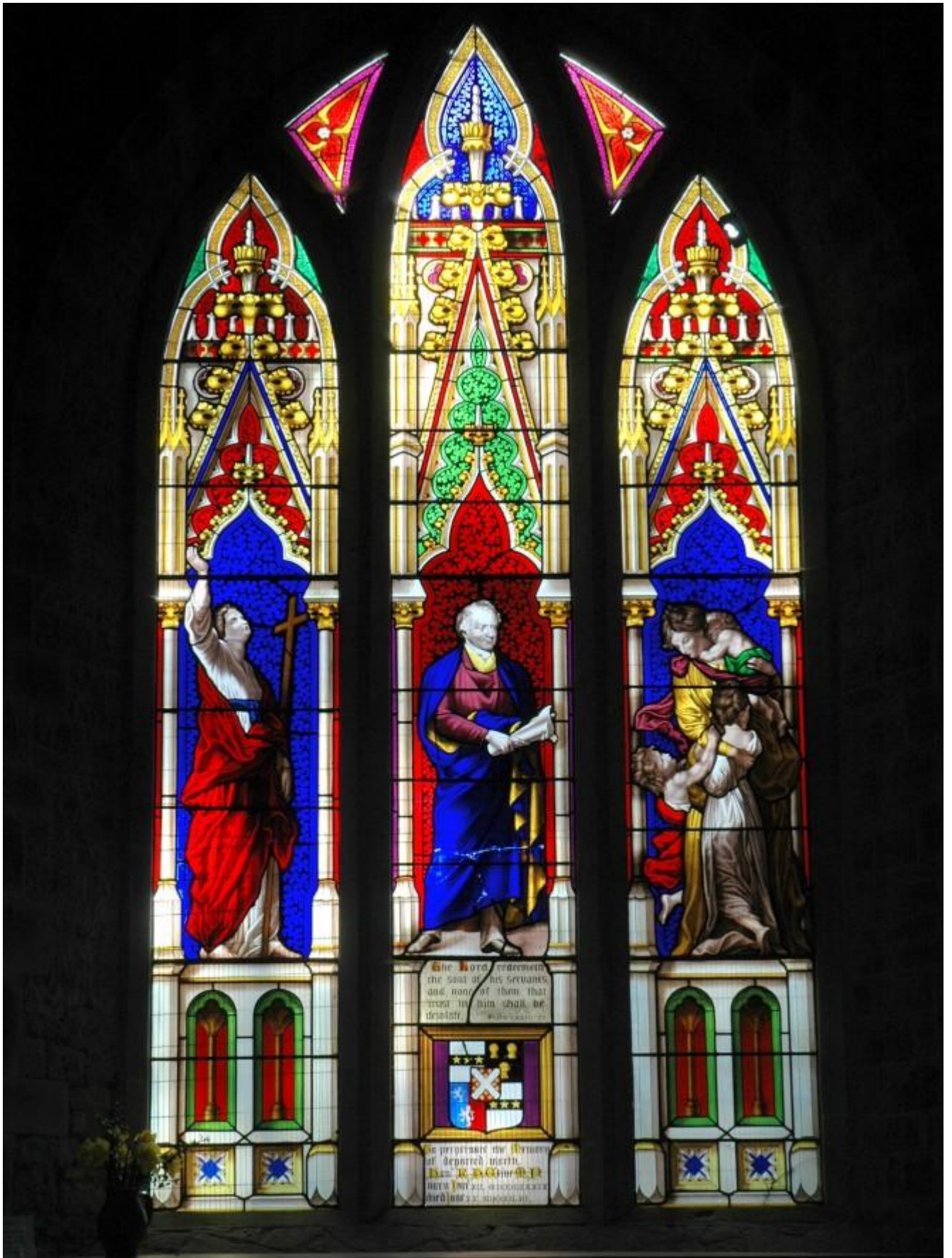
Talking of corporate behemoths, we did in fact stay overnight in the nearby Ludlow Woofferton Travelodge on the main A49 road to Leominster. It was quite a bargain at £39 for a double room and probably cheaper than most comparable accommodation in the area. It has the advantage of a surviving Little Chef (many have closed throughout the country) just across the car park. The Solway Arms, a large pub on the corner that served food has sadly been closed for at least a year, so rather than go out or use Little Chef we took some salad ingredients back to the room.

We did however indulge with breakfast at Little Chef. We set the Satnav for our first destination which was on the route from Ludlow to Much Wenlock. This is a real gem and contains four churches on the route itself, and several others not far off it.

There is something about the starkness of the frozen landscape at this time of year that gives it an other-worldly quality – a common emotion in Shropshire. In the early stages of our trip the vast expanse of Titterstone Clee was on the southern horizon, swathed in snow from an overnight fall. The huge hill remained a companion on the skyline for over 15 minutes on our road north-eastwards.



Snowdrop field, Stanton Lacy graveyard



The Lord redeemeth
the soul of his servants,
and none of them that
trust in him shall be
desolate.



In preparation the Officers
of departed worth
Wm. R. B. G. G. G. G. G.
DIED 18th JULY 1860
Aged 72 years

Memorial window to Robert Henry Clive - Clive of India's grandson, at St. Peter's, Stanton Lacy

Stanton Lacy was the biggest find of the visit. The church is off the main road and the first thing you notice is the rising banks of the churchyard bedecked with snowdrops. Planted by a 'Mrs Bowles', a very devoted lady in the Victorian age, they have remained a feature of the churchyard ever since, becoming a tourist attraction in this early part of the year.

As you wander around, every aspect of the graveyard is a delight with some very old gravestones strewn around. Inside is equally imposing with a large stained glass window dedicated to Robert Henry Clive (1789-1854), a local MP and grandson of Clive of India.

Yet the sight that remains in the memory are the fields of snowdrops, a fleeting glory - return in two weeks' time, and they are gone.



All Saints', Culmington with its futuristic spire

The next church was All Saints' in **Culmington** which has a very distinctive aluminium finial in place of a conventional spire, which dates from 1969. It looks very

futuristic, like some sort of radio telescope exploring the far reaches of the universe. It's probably the result of some unforeseen happening that befell the former spire which was too expensive to repair (just like a similar church in Golden Valley that we visited). The parishioners went for something idiosyncratic, and arrived at a memorable structure to replace it.

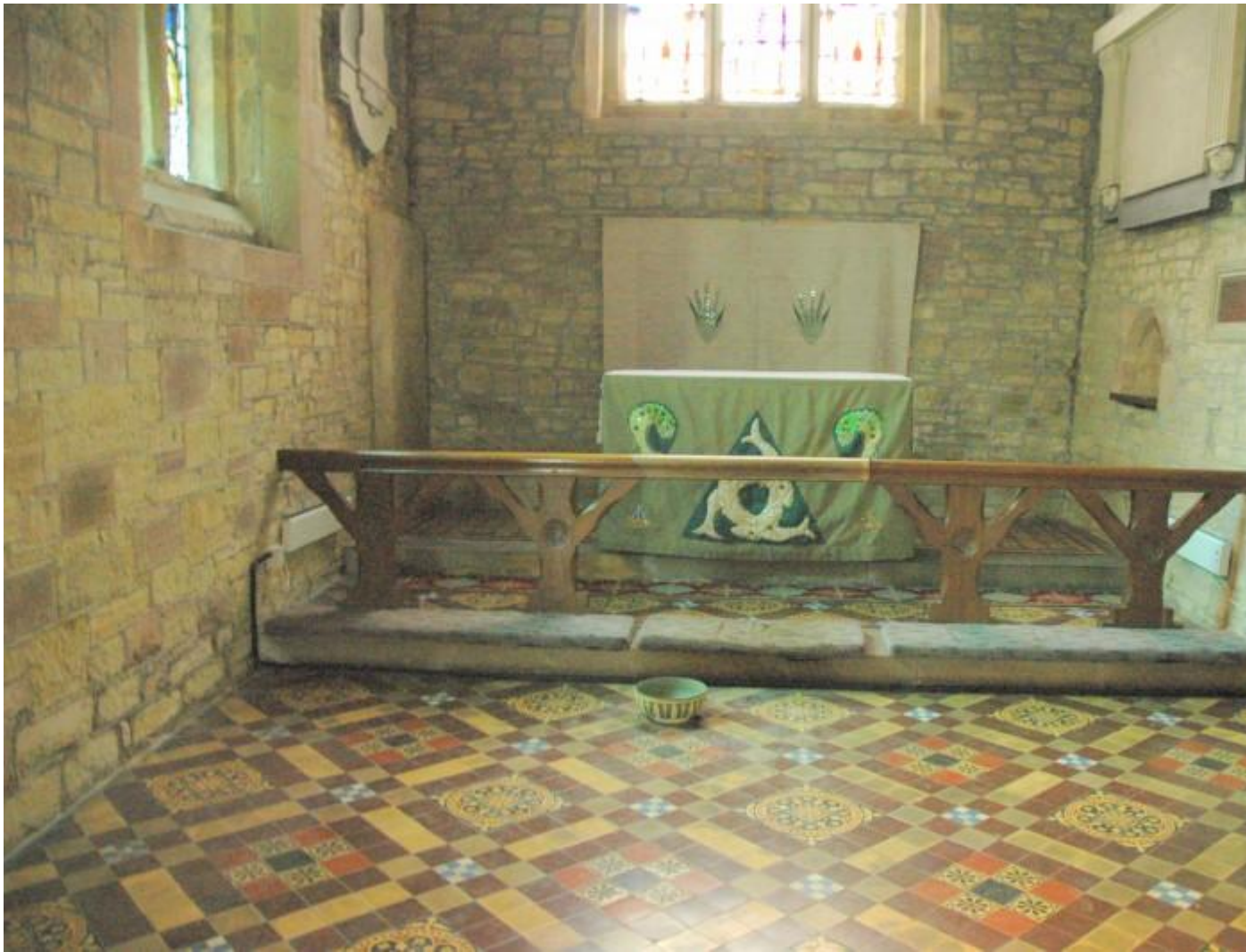
As we approached I felt an instant affinity, seeing a sign to 'All Saints' – but that's where the similarities ended, the church having a very different ambience from ours, despite being of similar size. It was Sunday morning - and Morning Communion was in full swing, so all we could do was to walk around the outside and take photos of this remarkable building.

It was the week that the secularists and Richard Dawkins led a major assault on Christianity in Britain and as I walked nearer I heard the sounds of a hymn being sung most sweetly by the communicants.

I thought how deeply the faith is held by such people, in countless communities around the country. They are utterly devoted and draw immense comfort from their faith – it is part of their very being: something the rest of our nation who do not attend (or not believe) have lost, to their detriment.



St Michael's, Munslow



Altar at St Michael's, Munslow

The third church we visited at Munslow is an ancient Saxon building, set back from the road which houses a copy of the Mappa Mundi. It was the smallest church we saw in our visit but in many ways the more beautiful for it containing some exquisite medieval box style pews. Soon after I entered, a lady came in with her friend. I thought they might be flower arrangers or churchwardens: I told them we were visiting Shropshire churches, but it turned out that her mum had recently died and she was making sure the church would be big enough to accommodate all

the mourners at the funeral. Amidst all the sound and fury of the debate on Christianity's relevance, we forget the timeless function of the church at life's turning points, providing solace in moments of great human sadness.



Pulpit at Holy Trinity, Bourton



The Gallery, Holy Trinity, Bourton

Our final stop was in Bourton where we stopped to have coffee at the local pub before visiting the church.

The pulpit is beautifully carved in wood and there is an elevated choir gallery which doubles as the bellringers' platform.

We had visited five of the thirty or more churches in small village communities in the Shropshire Hills whose graveyards are maintained by the God's Acre charity. It was a delight and made all the more memorable by the ever-present snowdrops that bedeck the sacred grounds of these old buildings in February.

We resolved to set aside another weekend to continue our exploration of this beautiful area which is so close to us in Sedgley, yet whose backwaters and secret places are so often overlooked as one hurtles blithely along the main roads of the shire.

Martin and Magda Jones

February 2012.

Explore Country Churchyards in The Shropshire Hills



*Protecting wildlife
Preserving heritage
Involving communities*

We used an excellent leaflet: 'Explore Country Churchyards in the Shropshire Hills' published by 'Caring for God's Acre', a small independent charity, with assistance from Natural England and Shropshire Hills Area of Natural Beauty.

www.caringforgodsacre.co.uk

More images of St Michael the Archangel, Chirbury



Chancel and nave



Flying buttresses, built during renovations in 1871



The eagle lectern



Feature about Revd Thomas Bray on the noticeboard



IN MEMORY OF JOHN AND CATHERINE
THEIR SON JOHN

IN MEMORY OF JOHN AND CATHERINE
THEIR SON JOHN

IN MEMORY OF JOHN AND CATHERINE
THEIR SON JOHN

The East Window



TY SOUL DOTH MAFNIFY THE LORD

AMDG. HANC FENESTRAM PONENDAM CURAVIT
IOANNES BU RD HUJ. ECCL. VICARIUS A.D. 1890

The Magnificat window



**The sole remains of the Priory which was destroyed during the Dissolution of the Monasteries.
The church used to be the Priory's church.**



The pulpit

More about Thomas Bray

In 1696 Thomas Bray, an English country parson, was commissioned to report on the condition of the Church in the colony of Maryland. He spent only ten weeks in the colony, but he radically re-organized and renewed the Church there, providing for the instruction of children and the systematic examination of candidates for pastoral positions. He founded thirty-nine lending libraries and numerous schools. Both in Maryland and upon his return to England, he wrote and preached in defence of the rights of enslaved Africans, and of Indians deprived of their land. Back in England, he worked for the reform of prison conditions, and for the establishment of preaching missions to prisoners. He persuaded General Oglethorpe to found a American colony (Georgia) for the settlement of debtors as an alternative to debtors' prison. He founded a missionary society, the SPG (Society for the Propagation of the Gospel) and an educational and

publishing society, the SPCK (Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge), both of which are still active today.

The Reverend Dr Thomas Bray (1658 - 15 February 1730) was an English clergyman born in Marton, Shropshire in 1656. He was educated at Oswestry School and Oxford University, where he earned a B.A. degree with All Souls College and a M.A. with Hart Hall.

After leaving the university he was appointed vicar of Over Whitacre, and rector of Sheldon in Warwickshire, where he wrote his famous Catechetical Lectures. Henry Compton, Bishop of London, appointed him in 1696 as his commissary to organise the Church of England in Maryland, and he was in that colony in 1699-1700. He took a great interest in colonial missions, especially among the American Indians, and it is to his exertions that the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel (founded 1701), now known as USPG, owes its existence.

He also projected a successful scheme for establishing parish libraries in England and America, out of which grew the Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge (founded 1699). Bray envisioned a library for each parish in America, funded by booksellers and stocked with books donated by authors. These libraries were meant to encourage the spread of the Anglican church in Britain's colonies, and as such were primarily composed of theological works. It was a major endeavour, as at the time the only other public libraries in the American colonies were at a small number of universities.

From 1706 until his death in February 1730 he was rector of St Botolph's, Aldgate, London, being unceasingly engaged in philanthropic and literary pursuits.