

The Vicar and the Box

Throughout history we have had a fascination with secret boxes. What's inside ? What happens if I open it ? How do I get the damn thing unlocked ? Where would Portia be without her caskets ? Or Pandora without her box ? Or the Covenant without its Ark ?

Back in the 19th century there was one particular box whose mysteries gripped a nation, and it happened to be in the possession of the rector of Oldswinford.

If you know anything about the history of this neck of the Black Country, you won't be surprised to learn that the rector concerned was a Foley. For more than two centuries the Foleys had dominated the area, first as wealthy ironmasters and then as landowners. And, as patrons of St Mary's, the Foleys were not averse to keeping the job in the family. In 1797 it was Thomas Philip Foley's turn to take the reins.

By all accounts, Thomas Foley was a larger-than-life character. Once voted the best-dressed undergraduate at Cambridge, Foley had taken to the avocation of Anglican vicar like a fish to a bicycle. The evangelical wing of the Church held far more appeal than the staid conservatism of middle-of-the-road Anglicanism.

It was in this spirit of dissent that Rev. Foley welcomed a somewhat unusual guest to the rectory in the summer of 1803. Her name was Joanna Southcott.

Miss Southcott was undoubtedly one of the most controversial figures of her age.

Born in Devon of humble stock, Joanna had, in the 1790s, begun to experience religious visions. Like a cross between Joan of Arc and Nostradamus, Joanna became both a mystic and a prophet, and by the time she moved to London to concentrate on publishing her pronouncements, Miss Southcott had many thousands of followers eating out of her prophetic hand, and that included the rector of Oldswinford.

The Devon mystic tarried several months in Oldswinford. Joanna's declaration that the Second Coming of Christ was imminent had made the capital a little too hot for her, and it was advisable to take her show on the road. One wonders what the more conservative church-goers of Oldswinford felt.

Joanna's Southcott's meteoric rise ended more with a whimper than a bang. When the Second Coming had still not come by 1814, Joanna announced (at the age of 64) that she was herself miraculously pregnant with the new Messiah. It's said that Rev. Foley had his horse saddled up in the rectory stables, ready to ride down to greet Him.

But whatever pains Joanna experienced at the end of that year, they were nothing to do with labour. She died on December 27 1814.

But this was not the end of Miss Southcott and her prophecies, not by a long chalk. From the 1790s onwards Joanna had been handing over to her followers sealed copies of her sacred writings, which were then placed inside a "Great Box". She gave instructions that, at some unspecified point in the future, when the country was in crisis, the casket was to be opened, though only in the presence of all 24 bishops of the Church of England.

On Southcott's death in December 1814, her executors sent the casket to Jane Townley in St Pancras, who had for many years had faithfully served the prophetess as scribe and co-worker. And on Townley's death eleven years later, the remaining executors were unanimous in choosing Thomas Foley as the next custodian, an honour he accepted with alacrity. In June 1825, therefore, the box of prophecies

arrived at Oldswinford rectory. Foley wrote with excitement: "I am preserving the Spiritual Ark of God, and the Divine Writings are now as safe and untouched as when deposited under my care. We must prepare ourselves for the time when the Lord assembles His soldiers to meet the storms of the Great Trial."

Such was his sense of duty that when the rector's family went away, Foley stayed home to guard his sacred tabernacle.

Southcott's box remained at Oldswinford until Thomas's death in 1835, when it was taken up by his son, Richard, who was also a clergyman. And thus the holy box was taken from us, down to the rectory of North Cadbury in Somerset.

At various times both Foleys were under strong pressure to open their precious box. Its apocalyptic contents would, it was hoped, herald profound political change, as well as religious. One leading campaigner was T. P. Hudson, a Chartist and member of the Birmingham Southcottian church, who fired off letters to the Bishop of Worcester, Prince Albert and even to Queen Victoria in an effort secure their consent for the contents to be revealed. All to no avail.

So what was (or is) inside the Oldswinford ark ?

That's when things begin to get more complicated. By the 20th Century the line of descent of Joanna's ark was not quite so clear as it was in the 19th, and there were a number of boxes around which were claimed to be hers. One was opened (with much press attention) in 1927 and found to contain little more than an old lottery ticket and a horse pistol. Unlikely to save the world, then.

Another box is still held by an old Southcottian society down in Bedford, but they have always struggled to amass the requisite number of bishops to stage a grand opening. And even here there is no guarantee that this is the Foleys' casket.