

W. D. Parish, the Sussex Dialect Dictionary and Lewis Carroll

William Douglas Parish (1833-1904) was vicar of Selmeston and Alciston for more than forty years and had a major impact on the village, not least because he was responsible for the demolition of the old church and the building of the present one. According to his neighbour of many years, the Reverend Edward Boys Ellman, he had 'plenty of money' and could afford to indulge his interests, which included etymology, education and cricket. He is probably best known for his Dictionary of Sussex Dialect, an interest for which he excused himself because he 'lived for several years in a village spelt Selmeston and pronounced Simpson; within reach of Brighthelmstone, pronounced Brighton; and next to the village of Chalvington, called Charnton'.

Parish was the fifth son of the quaintly named Woodbine Parish (1796-1882), a diplomat, traveller and scientist, and his first wife, Amelia Morse. Early in his career, Woodbine Parish (who was knighted in 1837) worked for Lord Castlereagh on the peace settlement that followed Waterloo: the peace treaty signed on the part of Great Britain on November 20 1815 is actually in his handwriting. Sir Woodbine later combined his diplomatic work with scientific research, particularly geology and palaeontology and, while in South America, was involved in surveying a large part of the Bolivian Andes.

W. D. Parish was educated at Charterhouse and Oxford before being ordained to the curacy of Firle and Beddingham in 1859. In 1863, he became vicar of the adjoining parishes of Selmeston and Alciston, where he remained until his death. From 1877 to 1900 he was also chancellor of Chichester Cathedral.

Boys Ellman describes Parish as 'one of the most genial of men – who possessed an ever-ready fund of humour'. However, he appears to have had some mild eccentricities. For instance, Boys Ellman records that; 'in the early 'sixties, during the American [civil] war, he [Parish] had a fancy to go to America and see what was going on. He took up his quarters at a farmers, but he said he soon found out that the farmer's only farm implements were a revolver and a bowie-knife, so he hastily left. During the siege of Paris [1870-71] he had a great desire to try to get into that city to see what was going on, but he yielded to the wishes of his father and did not make the attempt.

As well as the Dictionary of Sussex Dialect, Parish co-authored a dictionary of 'the Kentish Dialect'. Other publications include *The Telegraphist's Easy Guide* (1874), which is described in the Oxford Dictionary of National Biography as 'an explanation of the Morse system written primarily for the boys of his

parish, to whom he taught signalling as a pastime'. The British Library does not appear to have a copy.

He also edited [The Domesday Book in Relation to the County of Sussex](#) for the Sussex Archeological Society and a 'List of Carthusians' (old boys of Charterhouse School).

Perhaps more interestingly, he wrote a pamphlet called 'School Attendance Secured without Compulsion' (1875). This sets out a scheme by which parents were required to pay three pence per week, rather than the previous penny. The parents of any child who, within seven months of the school year had completed 200 attendances, were repaid two pence for each week the child had attended. There were other payments for sitting exams and an extra shilling was paid to each child who attended 400 times during the year. As reported in the local press, the experiment aroused great interest and was mentioned in the House of Commons debate on the Compulsory Attendance Bill.



One of Parish's friends was 'Lewis Carroll' (Charles Lutwidge Dodgson) and it is said that parts of the Alice books were written in the Summer House of what is now The Old Vicarage. There is no contemporary record of Carroll's visits, but he is known to have gone to Eastbourne regularly and there is a strong oral tradition regarding his visits to Selmeston. In his sketches of Sussex writers,

which contains a biographical sketch of Parish, Richard Knowles refers to one such record. A granddaughter of Boys Ellman recalled that when she was a child there was a papier-mâché model in the vicarage dining room that resembled the Jabberwocky in *Through the Looking Glass*. She is reported to have recalled that, when she was a child, she had 'never tired of being told by Mr. Parish how this creature had been the source of inspiration of one of Carroll's characters in *Alice*'. This story is echoed in a letter to *The Times* published on January 14, 1932, from F.S. Morgan (vicar of Selmeaton until 1930) which states:

We are all familiar with Lewis Carroll's awe-inspiring picture of the Jabberwock; but it may be news to some that this creature of his imagination was constructed of papier-mâché in the dining-room of Selmeaton Vicarage, Sussex, where he frequently stayed with the then vicar... A present resident in Selmeaton has vivid recollection of being taken, when a child, by the vicar to look at the finished monstrosity'.



Twas brillig, and the slithy toves
Did gyre and gimble in the wabe;
All mimsy were the borogoves,
And the mome raths outgrabe.

There is another Carroll story. This suggests that the strange bird, the 'borogove' referred to in *Jabberwocky*, was based on a stuffed bird sent to Parish from South America. The bird disintegrated considerably on the journey, but Parish

had its head and long legs mounted on a stand. According to Parish's obituary in the *Sussex Daily News* (September 24, 1904) it had been shown to Carroll, who became 'infatuated' with it and 'a picture of this curious looking "make up" was printed in "Through the Looking Glass".

Parish had seven brothers and five sisters. Of his brothers, one became a major-general, another became an admiral and a third followed their father into the diplomatic service. He never married, a fact that is referred to in one of the anecdotes about Parish contained in Boys Ellman's "Recollections". He describes having tried to persuade Parish, a lifelong bachelor, to subscribe to the 'Clergy Widows' Fund' for the Lewes Archdeaconry, of which Ellman had long been secretary. Parish refused on the grounds that he was helping the society already, by not marrying.

Parish died in Selmeston Vicarage on September 23, 1904, and he is buried just by the church porch. Inside the church there are a window and two brasses in his memory. The grave next to Parish is that of [Frederick Stanley Mockford](#) (1897-1962) so that, by a strange coincidence, a man whose mother was called Morse and who published an explanation of Morse Code (with its famous SOS signal) is buried right next to the originator of the 'Mayday' distress call.

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