

# Rector and council clash head-on over graveyard

THE CHURCH and a parish council have clashed head-on in a row over a full graveyard in Chenies.

Chenies Parish Council and villagers say that the Rev Bob Stapleton's Rectory garden is meant to be an extension to the graveyard and that he should give it up.

Mr Stapleton says that there is no such obligation and that the parish council is trying to wriggle out of its own responsibility to provide burial ground.

The half-acre piece of land, which forms about 90 per cent of the Rectory garden, was conveyed in January 1967 from the Bedford states.

The aristocratic family have traditionally been buried in Chenies and have a patch of land reserved in the graveyard now.

## Argument

The dispute is over whether the land was given to the village or to the Benefice of Chenies. And there is argument over the interpretation of the 1967 legal agreement.

Mr Stapleton said that this row has been going on for years, starting before he came to the village 15 years ago.

He had recently sent a copy of the agreement to the Church Commissioners' solicitor who concluded that no one could compel Mr Stapleton to hand over the land.

Mr Stapleton said: "I'm amazed that in spite of this evidence, they still won't believe it."

## 'Old employees'

He said: "It's up to them to do something about more ground, not to try and give the impression through the Press, both local and national, that I am responsible."

"The graveyard itself is almost full and I am restricting burials to those whose ancestors have been here. That really means the old employees of the Bedford Estates."

Councillor Nigel Ince, vice-chairman of the parish council, said

that he felt the Rector was being "rather implacable" about the churchyard.

He added, however: "I am sure that there is room for a good old British compromise here, if only we could get together and talk about it over a pint or something."

"We don't want to take half his garden but if we had space for 30 or

40 graves that would see us through perhaps 20 or 30 years. I would certainly suggest to the parish council, and I am sure it would agree, that we could take over the maintenance of that part of it."

Now that the churchyard was full, the only alternative would be for the parish council to find some land in the village, buy — or more

probably compulsorily purchase — it, prepare it and maintain it. This would be a great burden on the rates.

Councillor Ince said the plans drawn up in 1967, when the Bedford Settled Estates transferred the land to the Benefice, clearly showed a line drawn through what is now the Rector's garden, and one

side of it was marked "extension to churchyard." A private plot with space for 40 graves was marked for the Duke of Bedford's family use and this has been bounded by a hedge and set aside, he said.

"We feel there is a moral obligation to make this land available to the village, even if, legally, the Rector can claim the

power to do what he wants with it," he added.

The parish council has sent a questionnaire round the village to test local opinion. If it proves strong enough on the issue, a petition will be sent to the Bedford Estates in the hope that they could use their influence in the matter, said Councillor Ince.