

A Tale of Two Chancellors:¹

The Ineffectual Reformation in Elizabethan Staffordshire

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The Elizabethan Reformation in Staffordshire had a shallow seedbed. The radical reformers of the 1540s had greeted the conversion of the county with a mixture of high hopes and hyperbole. The East Anglian preacher and disciple of Latimer, Thomas Becon, wrote a treatise *The Jewel of Ioye* urging that itinerant preaching missions be sent to the provinces. He depicted his mission field as “so barbarouse and rude a country ... where Christe I thynke as yet was neuer trulye preached” and where “the Papistes and Antichristes thynke their kyngdome most strongest and most lyke to continue.”

He claimed miraculous success in his mission, yet Protestantism failed to take root in the Staffordshire archdeaconry of the diocese of Coventry and Lichfield in the way that it did in Shropshire or Warwickshire. In part this was because of the geographical remoteness and sparse population of much of the county, a pastoral economy, predominantly moorland and forest, rather than arable or ‘champion’² land where nuclear concentrations of population might be influenced by a ‘godly’ landlord or minister. Certainly it was the perception of the governing elite, articulated by Burghley, that such pastoral communities were lawless, stubborn and uncivil and “of worse condition to be quietly governed than the husbandmen”. Moreover, there were few towns that might have fostered communities of the godly, an absence of trade routes or centres of Protestant learning, and a lack of powerful local families who embraced the new religion.

This was the inauspicious background to the restoration of reformed religion within the structures of the Elizabethan Settlement. It is said: “Come the hour, come the man”. Unhappily for reformed religion, this was not the case in Staffordshire. William Overton, who was Bishop of Coventry and Lichfield from 1580 until his death in 1609, has been described by Patrick Collinson as “the least admirable of the Elizabethan bishops”. It was the misfortune of his diocese that, at a critical time for the Elizabethan Religious Settlement, he appointed as his Chancellor John Beacon (ob. 1587), a Puritan ‘politique’ who was as querulous as he was. The scandal of their very public alienation, Overton’s abortive attempt to rid himself of Beacon by appointing the decent but ineffectual Zachary Babington (ob. 1614) in his place, and the “squalid battle for the chancellorship of the diocese”³ were among the many factors which contributed to the failure to establish the Reformation in Staffordshire, a county which even by the end of Elizabeth’s reign was believed by many to be only half-Protestantised.

Overton’s predecessor, the first Elizabethan Bishop of Coventry and Lichfield, was the former Marian exile Thomas Bentham.⁴ Throughout his episcopacy (1560-1579) he lamented the state of religion in his diocese. Thus as early as 31 October

1560 he wrote to his fellow reformer Edmund Grindal, then Bishop of London: “to signifye ... amonge what troublesome people I dwell and partly to desyre helpe agaynst theyr pretended malyce”; whilst as late as 1578 he was complaining to the Privy Council that, in identifying recusants, “I find few trusty to deal with and fewer willing to utter what they know”. Yet if one reads such correspondence in its proper context one finds that Bentham was constantly making such excuses for his own inadequacies, as is illustrated by his letters to the Queen and to Alexander Nowell, Dean of St. Paul’s (and brother to Lawrence, Dean of Lichfield). He pleaded that his straightened finances were insufficient to “kepe house and familie mete for [my] calling” and that “yf her majestie do not helpe me I shall not onely be most clerely undone, but also so defaced and discouraged in this cuntry that I shall never be able to do any good”. His family is engagingly depicted in bas-relief on his memorial at Eccleshall church.

Bentham was a radical reformer. He was a Hebrew scholar and had shown courage as pastor to the Protestant secret congregation in Marian London. He achieved success in his archdeaconry of Warwickshire, where he could boast in the returns of November 1577 that, in contrast with the rest of his diocese, there were no recusants. Nor should he be criticised for not attempting to pursue Protestant reform in Staffordshire and neighbouring parts of Shropshire and Derbyshire. For instance, he deprived and imprisoned the Marian Bishop Ralph Baynes’ conservative Vicar General, Anthony Draycott, and instructed Archdeacon Richard Walker to root out popery and to insist on temperance, psalms, sermons and homilies. He reprimanded Henry Teechoo, vicar of Montford, for his use of images and tabernacles; caused John Kroke, “clearke of Whitchurch”, to be committed to prison (whilst showing leniency to the curate who, although a “wyllful” and “stubborn parsoun”, had pleaded in mitigation “greate sekenes and sorennes”); and prosecuted John Stanley, Vicar of Alton, for carrying banners in the Rogationtide perambulation. Yet in his letters he was constantly justifying himself against accusations of laxity made by reformist allies such as George Toperley, Archdeacon of Shropshire; and on occasion he recognised his own ineffectuality. Thus to his chancellor, James Weston, he conceded: “I use soo moche sofftnes yt make the proud and pevysh papistes stout and bolde”.

On other occasions, as in his letter to Edmund Grindal, he sought to excuse his failures: “I am farr from good counsel and destitute of lerned men for lack of lyvynge to geve theym and I can gett no helpe of any iustice”.

In fairness to Bentham, he faced two insuperable obstacles in establishing radical Protestantism in Staffordshire. The first was the limitation on his jurisdiction imposed by extensive ‘peculiar’, vested in the Lichfield Cathedral Chapter and the

The tomb of William Overton, Bishop of Lichfield and Coventry 1580-1609. "The least admirable of the Elizabethan Bishops" Patrick Collinson.

Dean and Chapter of the Minster Church in Wolverhampton, which prevented his taking disciplinary action, particularly in urban centres. An early example of his frustration is found in his correspondence with Lawrence Nowell and the Lichfield Chapter requiring the "reformation" of the church at Eccleshall, the location of his palace. The congregation showed

synges and tokens of open sedition and manifest rebellion ... [such] that yf it be not in tyme corrected yt wyll growe to suche a scabbe that you and I and all the godley in this cuntry shall not be able to cure, besides the danger that we shall incurre towards the Quene yf we do not withstand yt.

It was to such peculiarities that he attributed the fact that the diocese had become "a den of fugitives, the very receptacle of all the refuse that is thrown out of the other dioceses about me".

The second obstacle had been recognised a quarter of a century before by Thomas Becon, namely the dearth of episcopal patronage in the county:

I wolde wish more lerned pastours to be appointed to fede the flocke of Christ ... The patrones of the benefites [sic] are not altogether blameles for giving the lyvnynges to such ignourant men.

Whether out of affection or reward. Not only did Bentham as diocesan Bishop control the patronage of few benefices where reforming ministers could be placed and where clergy sympathetic to him could be installed. The Crown also held few advowsons in the county to which his patron Nicholas Bacon as Lord Keeper could allocate his protégé bishop's nominees. Most benefices were controlled by an uncooperative Cathedral Chapter or by private patrons. Indeed some parishes were controlled by Catholic patrons, such as the Levesons; and notably in Burton-upon-Trent by the Pagets where, from 1560 until 1576, the incumbent Thomas Smith was a former monk and brotherhood priest of the dissolved Tutbury Abbey. The Pagets' influence continued until their downfall after the Throckmorton Plot in 1584. An illuminating example of resistance to episcopal wishes even by loyally Protestant patrons is to be found in Richard Bagot's presentation in 1573 of Richard Cook as Rector of Blithfield despite Bishop Bentham's having disciplined him only months before for "too moch familiaritie and bearing with them in Stone which are judged to be papistes" when Cook was curate there.⁵ As a result Bentham did not enjoy in Staffordshire the support of men like Archdeacon Lever in Coventry or the schoolmaster Thomas Ashton in Shrewsbury, enthusiastic proponents of the radical ministry of prophesying. One of Bentham's few confidants was Robert Aston, Rector of Sandon (a parish of which from 1554 to 1604 the recusant Erdeswicks were patrons), who was not a natural radical ally but one of the few graduate clergy in the county with whom it is likely that the scholarly Bentham could empathise.

Above all, the ministry of preaching had since the Bishops' Book of 1537 lain at the heart of Protestant pastoral mission. As Thomas Becon had averred: "one faithful preacher ... is better than ten thousand mumbling mass-mongers"⁶ Yet it failed to flourish in Staffordshire throughout the reign. In 1583 when Archbishop Whitgift conducted a visitation to try to resolve the dispute between Overton and the Lichfield Cathedral Chapter there was not a single divinity lecturer at the cathedral. Thereafter the Privy Council directed the Chapter to appoint one. In 1593 only 15% of Staffordshire incumbents were licensed to preach. This was hardly an advance from the radical despair of Bernard Gilpin in a sermon to Edward VI's court in 1552 that "a thousand pulpits in England are covered in dust".



However, if Bentham had legitimate claims to decent 'godliness', the same could not be said for his successor, William Overton. He had ruthlessly climbed the greasy pole of Elizabethan church politics, marrying the daughter of Bishop William Barlow of Chichester in 1566 and becoming Treasurer of that diocese the following year. He assiduously cultivated the patronage of Robert Dudley, Earl of Leicester, who in turn sponsored his career and instigated his appointment as Bishop of Lichfield and Coventry in September 1580. Yet even before his episcopacy he had little credibility as a principled opponent of Catholics. As early as 1571 in his acrimonious career he had been wounded by allegations of papist sympathies, which in a tone of desperation he denied in a lengthy letter to Leicester:⁷

I trust you will regard me a poore gentleman nurtured and brought up always at my booke ... a longe professor of the Gospell, a traveller in the Church of Christ, a preacher of hys word and such a one as have suffered many stormes for the trueths sake.... I am no papist (O, my Lord) nor halfe papist as they informe you ... But alas, your Lordship is sone to be seduced and caried away with the paynted hypocrisie of slie and subtyll serpents Alas! Why should your Lordship



The tomb of Thomas Bentham, Bishop of Lichfield and Coventry 1560-1579 with a bas relief of his family.

Sandon churchyard, Staffordshire, in 1582 the scene of violent defiance by the Catholic gentleman Hugh Erdeswick who in the presence of Bishop Overton beat a Justice of the Peace with his staff, causing Overton to denounce him as “the sorest and dangerousest of papists one of them in England”.



so easily conceive of me to be a papist, which have alwayes abhorred papistry from my hart, and upon the reports only of those that are but papists themselves, or, worse than papists, men of noe religion which serve the tyme for advauntage sake.

In 1579 as Treasurer of Chichester, he had engaged in a bitter battle with his ultra anti-papist bishop Richard Curteys (whose appointment he had tried to block in favour of his own brother-in-law). It culminated in Overton’s assize sermon distinguishing between those “cleaven altogether upon the pope and popery” and “the many whose eyes God hath not yet opened” who might yet become loyal subjects “whom we must not despise but pray for”.⁸ Even had this profession of tolerance been genuine, the timing could not have been worse. It coincided with concerns about potential Catholic ascendancy if the Queen were to marry the Duke of Anjou, as expressed by Leicester in a letter to Burghley:

I do assure your Lordship, since Queen Mary’s time, the Papistes were never in that jollity that they be at this present in this Country.⁹

Overton had fierce enemies and “the misfortune to be opposed by the Dean and Chapter of his church from his first Entrance almost into his Bishopric”. He had started off on the wrong foot by demanding financial subsidies from the Chapter and wealthier clergy, thereby intimidating the avarice that continued throughout his episcopate. He was quick to canvass the support of powerful external patrons in this internal diocesan dispute. In June 1581 he wrote to Walsingham that he had

the stubbornest diocese in all the land, and a clergy the most unwilling to show themselves ready and dutiful in any good service, especially if it touches their purses.¹⁰

The following year he addressed his complaints directly to the Queen, warning her that she lived in a lion’s den amid the plots of “all your evil willers, though the Devil himself, and his Vice-Devil the Pope, and all the Popish enemies you have in the world”.¹¹ He spelt out the connection of such conspiracy with his Prebendaries, calling for a commission to enquire into their peculiar jurisdictions. In turn, and predictably as the common currency of abuse, his enemies levelled the slur of popery against the Bishop. His Chancellor and former ally, John Beacon, was his opponents’ “chief manager of the quarrel on their side” to the extent that Leicester “fell off from him and rather took the other side”.

Beacon had the reputation of being a near-Presbyterian and was well known as the leader of the Puritans in Cambridge in the early 1570s.¹² As Chancellor of the Diocese of Norwich he had quarrelled with Bishop Edmund Freke, accusing him of favouring Catholics such as Sir Thomas Cornwallis (agent of the Duke of Norfolk), and he sided with the Puritan clergy and gentry who opposed Freke. Writing to Nathaniel Bacon in 1578 he protested that he was content to be called a favourer of Puritans “when generally all the good men in the country are calumniated in that way”. When Freke tried to get rid of Beacon, he was translated by the patronage of Leicester and Walsingham to the chancellorship of Chichester where he met Overton. When the chancellorship

of Lichfield and Coventry became vacant, it degenerated into the subject of court politicking and canvassing. Both Overton and Beacon claimed the other as his protégé; but doubtless under their common patronage by Leicester, Beacon joined Overton as his Chancellor at Lichfield and Coventry.

At first they made common cause in radical reform. Despite the opposition of Archbishop Whitgift and the Privy Council, Overton attempted to enlist the help of Puritan preachers in the appointment of educated and godly ministers in the diocese by publishing *Certain Advertisements* for the examination of candidates for livings; a process that had been pioneered by Beacon in Norwich in the 1570s. This was not sufficient to satisfy more radical Puritans such as William Ashton of Moreton Corbett in Shropshire, who attacked Overton for instituting clergy without consulting the “eldership” of the parish. As he had done in Norwich, Beacon sided with radical dissidents and (paradoxically) the conservative Cathedral Chapter against his bishop. Their rift became public and acrimonious.

Overton used all the power vested in a bishop to remove Beacon. He sought to supplant him by appointing Zachary Babington as joint Chancellor, a measure that led to lengthy disputation before the Privy Council and the intervention of Doctors’ Commons. The latter advised on 20 January 1583 that “the office should be executed by them conjointly” and recommended that the Archbishop should write to Overton accordingly. Babington wrote to Walsingham challenging the order of Doctors’ Commons; and in turn Beacon challenged the decision in submissions to the Privy Council on the basis that Overton was determined to exclude him entirely from the execution of his office. Even paranoiacs have enemies. Overton, upon the pretence of non-user of office, sought to exclude Beacon wholly. According to Strype, “this occasioned a Resistance and Disturbance in the Cathedral Church which amounted to a Riot”, which in turn forced the bishop to adjourn the case to the security of his palace at Eccleshall, where he shut the gates against Beacon. Thus deprived of the benefits of *audi alterem partem*, Beacon also played dirty. He produced a letter purporting to be written from Chichester by William Overton to Mrs. Beacon on 15 April 1580. It promised that, if appointed to Lichfield and Coventry by influence of Dr. Beacon, Overton “hoped that they would come and live with him and all that he had should be theirs”.

The only problem was that the letter was in Beacon’s hand, purporting to be a true copy of Overton’s letter, and that it was not produced by Beacon until

January 1583, long after Overton had been elected Bishop on 10 September 1580 and well into their acrimonious litigation. Based on correspondence of such dubious provenance, Beacon complained that the Bishop's ill usage of him and his wife had caused her "such an inward griefe that she never joyed again until she was delivered of a mane child before her tyme".

Beacon did function to a limited extent as Chancellor. In 1585 he wrote to Walsingham from Doctors' Commons condemning one Wolsley, the "obdurate priest" installed by the Pagets, Catholic patrons of Colwich, and extolling the virtues of Robert Calvert, "a zealous and painful preacher". However, the Gordian knot was only severed by Beacon's death in 1587.

In fairness, during his episcopacy Overton, with the support of his preferred Chancellor Zachary Babington and Dean George Boleyn, was moderately diligent in his attempts to combat recusancy and promote reform. He confronted the irascible Catholic, Hugh Erdeswick of Sandon, condemning him as "the sorest and dangerousest papists one of them in all England"; and presented him before Star Chamber after, in Overton's presence, he had struck a justice of the peace "upon the pate with his crabtree staff" in Sandon churchyard. When in 1588 sundry recusant gentlemen were committed to the custody of loyal and reliable Protestants, Overton received John Draycot and his Chancellor Zachary Babington received Richard Biddulph. In December 1591 he was proactive in directing the Recusancy Commissioners to track down seminary priests and the following year in the seizure of recusant arms. Likewise in 1598 he and Babington cooperated with the justices and deputy lieutenants in drawing up certified lists of recusants. Moreover, although the target of Puritan polemic in the Marprelate letters, he granted preaching licences to radicals such as Arthur Hildershan and William Bradshaw, encouraged clerical exercises in Burton upon Trent, and permitted non-conformist opponents such as William Axton to continue in their ministry.

However, like Thomas Bentham before him, he had limited success. Many clergy and churchwardens were reluctant to report offenders and expose to penalties members of their closely-knit communities. Thus Ralph Addereley (one of the justices with whom Bishop Bentham had corresponded in 1560) wrote to the deputy lieutenant Richard Bagot complaining that the parishes, not the deputy lieutenant, were responsible for the inadequacy of recusancy returns: "If there be any defect or want of dewtie hitt is in the clergy". In any event many clergy were totally unfit for office. Archdeacon John Walton of Derby was accused of corruption, adultery and simony and Sir Hugh, the curate of Armitage, of the theft of the Queen's deer. As late as 1593 only 12% of Staffordshire clergy were graduates. Even luke-warm assessments of clergy in the archdeacons' return of 1593 (for instance as *mediocriter doctor*) were flattering compared to the Puritan return of 1604 ('scandalous', 'swearer', 'drunkard').

William Overton died in April 1609 and was buried at Eccleshall, the seat of his episcopal palace. His ornate tomb survives to celebrate his life. His meagre achievements did not.

References

- ¹ This title was conceived before encountering Peter Lake's "A Tale of Two Episcopal Surveys: The Strange Fates of Edmund Grindal and Cuthbert Mayne Revisited", *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* 18 (2008) 129-163.
- ² The Tudors tended to use the term 'champion' to define what modern topographers would describe as 'champagne', that is open, rolling countryside.
- ³ Patrick Collinson, *Archbishop Grindal 1519-1583: The struggle for a Reformed Church*, 1979, 285.
- ⁴ See *The Letter Book of Thomas Bentham*, eds. Rosemary O'Day and J. Berlatsky, 4th Ser. Camden Misc XXVII (1979) and Rosemary O'Day, *The English Clergy*.
- ⁵ See Cook's letter thanking Bagot for his support; Folger, L.A. 651 and Anthony Petti's helpful note, *Roman Catholicism in Elizabethan and Jacobean Staffordshire* (1979), 2.
- ⁶ *Prayers and Other Pieces*, ed. John Ayre (1844), 160.
- ⁷ 22 May 1571: *Longleat Dudley Papers*, V237; ed. Owen, 174-177.
- ⁸ *A Godley and Pithie Exhortation, made to the iudges and iustices of Sussex, and the Whole Countrie, Assembled altogether at the Generall Assises* (1580), cited by Michael Questier in *Catholicism and Community in Early Modern England*, (2006), 48.

Holy Trinity church, Eccleshall, Staffordshire
The parish church to the episcopal palace of the Bishops of Lichfield and Coventry from the grant of Eccleshall Castle to St Chad in 669AD until the seventeenth century. Also in 1560 the scene of female Catholic resistance to Bishop Thomas Bentham, "open sedition and manifest rebellion wycked wemens doynge".



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⁹ Strype, *Annals*, II, 567.
¹⁰ *Cal. St. P (Dom) 1581-90*, CXLIX, 37.

¹¹ Strype, *Annals*, III 97.
¹² Victor Morgan, *A History of the University of Cambridge*, 2004, ii), 71, 73; and Patrick Collinson, "Pulling the Strings: Religion and Politics in the Progress of 1578" in *The Progresses, Pageants and Entertainments of Queen Elizabeth I*, 2007, eds. Jayne Archer and others.

John Shand, sometime Chancellor of the Dioceses of Lichfield and Southwell, wishes to emphasise that the Elizabethan bishops he depicts bear no resemblance to the bishops he has served. He hopes that Chancellor John Beacon bears no resemblance to himself.