

EDWARD VI

THE STRIPPING OF THE VILLAGE CHURCHES 1547-1553

Edward was Henry's only male child, son of Queen Jane Seymour. The boy-King was in the care of a Regency council, including staunchly Protestant relatives and ambitious nobles. (Protector Somerset demolished four churches and three Bishops' homes in London to make way for his great Somerset House.) Calvinist exiles from Henry's reign, radically "low church" and "fundamentalist", returned to England full of pent-up zeal and with experience of the Continental reformation. The English church of King Henry, by comparison, was still quite conservative and Lutheran-Catholic. Archbishop Cranmer now showed his radical side. Legislation quickly followed the start of the new reign. The Mass service was abolished (it survives in Christmas, Michaelmas and Candlemas) in favour of the Communion or Eucharist (Greek for "Thanks") service. The First Book of Common Prayer was introduced in place of the Missal. The phrase "Hocus Pocus", corrupted from the Latin words of the Mass "*Hoc Est Corpus* (This is My Body), tellingly came to mean "magic". Latin vanished from the churches. Stone altars were replaced with tables, the slabs used as doorsteps. At Garsington the altar has been found in the floor.

There was unrest and revolt, particularly in rural Norfolk, Oxford and Cornwall. 1549 also brought a crippling harvest. The Cornishmen called the new liturgy a "Christmas party". A revolt in Oxfordshire had to be dispersed by a large armed force of gentry and the Vicar of Chipping Norton hanged from his own steeple as a warning. Two prisoners from Thame were taken to London and "examined touching insurrection" in 1550, but released on their own recognition of £5 each. In 1552 a John Jones of Shirburn was pilloried in Oxford market place carrying a "paper with great letters, 'Mover of Sedition and Spreader of False Rumours'" *{Acts of the Privy Council, 1550-53}*

The Crown was still in debt. The abbeys had gone and parish churches were next. Royal Commissioners visited Cuddesdon and Holton parishes in the autumn of 1552 to list the church fittings. Eight months later they returned to confiscate anything deemed "Romish" or surplus. The Roods had already been taken down in most places. The Rood *{Rod or Stick - Chaucer calls the Cross the Rood-Tree}* was a tableau of painted statues of Jesus on the Cross, flanked by Mary and St John, positioned on a great beam across the Chancel or Rood-Arch, between congregation and choir and altar. The beam formed the top of a Rood-Screen which divided and partly hid choir, altar and Mass service from the congregation (mostly) standing in the nave of the church. Attendance was often perfunctory - a look-in at the elevation of the Bread and Wine, rather than staying for the duration.

The Rood was accessed by the Rood-Loft stair and was looked after by a Rood-Warden who also tended the Rood-Light. There was even a feastday - Rood Day - on May 3rd to mark the finding of the Cross by St Helena. Traces of Roods torn down in Edward's time can be seen in almost every medieval English church. Rebuilding in Cuddesdon church has obliterated the stairs and remains; a modern iron screen stands where the Rood screen once stood. Haseley has the loft still and had the screen till 1740; Woodeaton church keeps its name, "Holy Rood" together with its Rood screen. Not a single intact Rood, however, has survived anywhere in England.

Chapel churchwardens James Gadbury (d.1557) and Thomas Webb (d.1565) presented what was left in Wheatley chapel to the King's deputies, explaining "there was never taken inventory of this chapel afore." Or so they said. The Gadburies were known as fast workers. It is possible that some parishioners followed the example of those in Thame and Holton in hiding or even themselves selling the best of fairly meagre church goods. The chalice, the two small bells and a surplice of Breton linen were taken "for the need of the King's Majesty for a mass of money". The remaining Romish vestments of cheap Belgian and Neapolitan cloth were to be sold by Webb and Gadbury for the poor.

"A cope of Fuchsan appes, a surplesse of Lokerum, a vestment of Dorynx, two small bells and a silver gilt chalice. " Wheatley Chapel Declaration to King Edward's Commissioners, 1553

Cuddesdon church lost a wealth more including "great bells, four copes, two gilt chalices," many copes and chasubles of damask, silk and crule, in set-pairs of gold, crimson, red and green, together with linen drapes for the altar. Holton and Waterperry lost their small Sanctus or Sacring Bell (which told people when the Bread and Wine was being consecrated - "sacring" - at Mass) and the small bell-turrets remain empty on the roofs to this day. They did leave a surviving Ave Maria bell to Waterperry. Holton lost its only chalice and was left with a brass altar cross. In their zeal to purify, the reformers destroyed, melted and limewashed away a slice of English heritage - artistic, literary, musical and popular. An element of greed at all levels was excited by the general availability of bargain land and furnishings. Like Turks afraid of Byzantine ikons they hacked and burned the "graven images", the stained glass "painted puppets" and made limewash a measure of purity of belief. The Rector of Great Haseley, Henry VIII's Royal Antiquary, had begged the King to set up a national library and depository for abbey and church treasures. His bid failed. Only about 5% of England's pre-Reformation culture survives and an estimated mere 1% in Scotland. Modern scholars speak of "a lost tribal memory", "a British Renaissance which never happened" and "stray cultural objects with no frame of reference."

To come near to understanding the 16th century English Reformation in the late 20th century, one might look at Greece, Sicily or perhaps the Irish Aran Islands, where rural rythms of religion and life have not been separated as abruptly or as dramatically as in the rest of urbanised Europe. Religion there, without colour, humour and nature would not be religion. It also has a healthy built-in anticlericalism, realistically critical of institutions with day feet while being part of them. In the English Reformation this surfaced in an angry isolation, difficult to understand at this distance.

Tailors made fashionable clothes out of the damasks and brocades of the clerical vestments. Missal pages were used to stuff shoulders, cods and chests; many a funeral pall and altar frontal went into the larger houses as window and door curtains. Stanton St John lost its two organs. Holton churchwardens apologised that two vestments had already been stolen from under their noses. This was small beer compared with Thame where the people testified (in some fear) that the local *mafiosi* (led by the churchwardens) had looted everything from altars to jewellery to the tune of £300 (gold) - a small fortune. The Great Bell, the High Altar Cross and the High Altar itself went. "When the altars were ordered taken down in 1549, under King Edward VI, the same had carried away the stones by night and no accounts were presented by the church wardens for over three years." The looters threatened reprisals

against anyone who "told the truth therein". Perhaps years of watching gentry like Sir John Williams grow rich on church spoils provoked ordinary people to want a share of the action. Robert Johns of Thame, as early as 1537, had proposed a quiet sale of goods to thwart King Henry's intention. The same man in 1550 was interrogated in London over insurrection against King Edward. Forty years later the Oxford Archdeacon's court was still hearing cases of people in unlawful possession of looted church fittings.

"Two silver gilt chalices, two copper gilt crosses, four large bells, a little bell and two handbells, a crimson velvet cope, two yellow satin copes, one old cope and two red vestments, two green damask vestments, two white satin vestments, two green crule vestments, nine altar cloths, one brown altar cloth frontal, painted clothes for the [Easter] Sepulchre"

Cuddesdon Church Declaration to King Edward's Commissioners, 1553
