

KING HENRY VIII REFORM AND BREAKAWAY 1509-47

The English church was in no better and no worse shape than the two million strong population of England itself when King Henry VIII Tudor succeeded his father, Henry VII, in 1509. There was widespread clerical neglect, ignorance and pluralism; the monasteries had lost some of their sense of spiritual purpose; printing had put books within reach of many, but religious books were still tightly controlled ; not even an English Bible or the Sunday readings had been printed in translation; people were also bereft of clergy to educate them with such books; folk had long begun to reject the more superstitious excesses in traditional beliefs, but King and the least peasant alike were part of the same religious culture. Twenty five years after the end of the civil wars of The Roses, England was still neither a single nor a law abiding nation. The Welsh Lancastrian Henry Tudor took the crown of the Yorkist Richard III on Bosworth battlefield and married Elizabeth of York to confirm the peace. Civil war, anarchy, claimant against claimant for the crown remained a Tudor nightmare for another century. Law, order, dynasty and unity were clear Tudor priorities. A national religion helped cement national unity. To loosen the religion was to loosen the cement; to be at odds with it was to be a rebel and traitor. The word "heretic" itself meant "separatist".

1. Wheatley And District Before the Reformation

Wheatley village had a population of probably less than 200 in 1520, (40 adult males were liable for a tax in 1524 - Public Record Office, cited in Wheatley Records, 1956, Oxon Record Society.) A chapel made life easier for its inhabitants, saving them the long walk by Church Way over the Ladder hill to Cuddesdon church where they legally belonged. Some found it easier to go to Holton and the laxity of church law made it easy to shift allegiances. The parish was an outpost of the ancient diocese of Lincoln. The Bishop of Lincoln was a hundred and thirty miles away.

According to the Bishop's surviving records (Lincolnshire Record Society). Wheatley chapel was unstaffed and neglected through most of the reign of Henry VIII. First mentioned in Lincoln archives in 1427, the chapel had had an attendant priest (curate) around 1475, housed in a cottage on Manor House land owned then by the Lewknor family. A Wheatley man aged over 100 in 1577 remembered a man who had helped build this "church cottage". By the time the

young and zealous Bishop Longland arrived on Visitation in this far-flung parish of his diocese in the summer of 1518, he had already found 112 out of 141 Oxfordshire churches dilapidated ("*ruinosa*") and 52 with no resident clergy. Cuddesdon, a Deanery as well as a Parish church, increased both statistics by one. It had a "*ruinosa*" chancel (choir and altar area), no priest and some vestments were missing. In fact, Vicar Stephen Broadribb (priests were titled either "Sir" or "Mr") was granted a licence in 1516 to cover his absence for a year, but was still absent in 1520. (In 1523 Wheatley villagers, like those of Forest Hill, were contributing £2 towards a visiting friar to say Mass for them on feasts and Sundays.)

Waterperry too had a "ruinous" house and church; Forest Hill chapel had no lock on the baptismal font or on the oil cupboard (*aumbry*), no resident chaplain and an ill-kept cemetery - the lay Reader was also too senile ("*decrepitus*") even to provide Evensong (*Vespers*). Horspath and Elsfield had dilapidated chancels; horses grazed and left manure in the cemetery due to collapsed fence-banks. Holton rectory house was in disrepair, suggesting an absent rector, an acting curate or a rector residing at Holton's moated Manor House, courtesy its owner.

Local churchwardens made further reports (*presentments*) in 1520, but little had improved. Garsington had no clergy, a "ruinosa" chancel and rectory and was owed unredeemed credit, property and bequests. The Rector of Haseley refused to visit the sick, or mothers after childbirth or even go out further than his church lych-gate to meet funerals. The state of the church across England seems to have been much the same, with too few clergy, less than busy about too little, and a growing population, increasingly vocal and disenchanting. Predatory gentry also made traditional businesses out of church income.

The Dioceses of London and Lincoln appear to have been the worst affected. Apathy, criticism and loss of respect still did not make people "heretics" or what the Germans were now calling "Lutherans". Even the Pope seemed to accept the need for reform. It was Rome which had ordered Littlemore Benedictine convent to be closed. The nuns had owned Minchincourt (Nuns Court) at Forest Hill and Minchery Farm and Wood nearer Oxford for centuries. Rome had also closed down St Frideswide's priory in town. It was slowly being demolished in the 1520's for Cardinal Wolsey's great College at Oxford, to be named after His Eminence himself. The Cardinal, as well as being a Prince of the European Church, was the most powerful subject of the King. As Papal Legate for life he also had the power of the Pope in England. Reform was in the air; it was official; the authority and mechanisms for it were in place. It was, however, also late, slow, and somewhat negative.