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BATTLE AND DISTRICT HISTORICAL SOCIETY RESEARCH GROUP

BATTLE BETWEEN 1588 AND 1660

THE DEANS OF BATTLE

FOREWORD

The formation of the Society's Research Group in 1996 had three objectives, the first to revive an old tradition of the Society to encourage local archaeological or historical research, the second to gain training in historical research method and the third to select a significant period in English history and study its course in relation to contemporary local life, thought and events in Battle and its environs. The period chosen, from Armada to Restoration, was one of upheaval and change, not least in matters of religion; and it was decided to begin with a study of the four deans of St Mary's Church of that period.

INTRODUCTION

At a time of growth in Europe of the Reformation Movement, Henry VIII severed the English connection with Rome and the Abbey of Battle came to an end. The English reformers of the sixteenth century turned to Calvin rather than Luther, though under Charles I there was some reversal with Archbishop Laud's Arminianism to sacerdotal traditions of the past. (Jacob Arminius was a Dutch reform theologian between 1603 and 1619 who took issue with the prevailing Calvinism of the time and was eventually banished from Leyden; but not before his influence had spread, and in England formed the basis of Laud's hostility to Puritanism, and of his attempts to restore liturgical practice.)

The influence of Arminianism was powerful but ultimately shortlived. A yet more dramatic change caused ecclesiastical anarchy and confusion when the supremacy of the King was usurped by Parliament, who became judge and jury in Church affairs. In 1640 a Committee was appointed to deal with "scandalous ministers", that is, effectively, to remove those clergy who were loyal to Church and monarch. A result was the disintegration of the Church across England and the destruction of its property and furnishings.

In 1643 Parliament accepted the Solemn League and Covenant by which the reformation of the Church was delegated to the Westminster Assembly, a congregation of English puritans, Scots presbyterians and enthusiastic laymen. It precipitated the first ejections of clergy, a process that was accelerated in 1645 when the Prayer Book was forbidden and substituted by a single legal service book. From this moment the services of the Church were performed in an atmosphere of suspicion and fear.

One immediate result was the deterioration of parish records, particularly the Registers of Births, Marriages and Burials. There are, indiscriminately across the country, huge gaps which graphically mirror the wider anarchy. In 1654 Cromwell appointed "a Parish

Register", an "able and honest person" to take over the entering of Births, etc. Significantly, this "person" needed not to be within the Church. Many livings from which the clergy were ejected lay vacant for years, the revenues being purloined by Parliamentary Committees, while office was assumed by all manner of unsuitable intruders. There are reports of "swarms of illiterate mechanic preachers, even of women and boy preachers."

The fate of the ejected clergy was grim. Some 3000 were dispossessed of their livings, and many "shut up in ordinary London jails, but later lodged in Lambeth Palace and other sequestered buildings." When the jails proved insufficient, use was made of ships in the Thames where "they were kept under decks so low that they could not stand upright." Some, more fortunate, tried to maintain themselves by teaching, but Cromwell forbade this in 1655. There was provision "to allow the wives and children of delinquents one-fifth part of the estate and goods which should be seized", but this was seldom honoured.

The offences of which the ejected clergy were found guilty were a mixture of serious deficiencies and petty grievances. Pluralism, non-residence, irregular services, merged with a miasma of trivia such as the positioning and furnishing of the Communion table, haunting taverns and watching sport on the Lord's Day. Life under Cromwell was drear indeed and the restoration of Charles II must have been to many a joyous liberation.

At the Restoration no Acts of Parliament were needed to abolish the various ordinances against the Church as, in the eyes of the law, these were Acts of a rebellious government. The ejected bishops and clergy who survived (about one thousand) reclaimed their livings. The intruded ministers were obliged to "renounce the Covenant, accept ordination, pay canonical obedience, subscribe the Articles and use the Prayer Book". The minority, who found these conditions unacceptable, were removed after three months notice, on St Bartholomew's Day 1662. Thus was order and tranquillity restored.

Against this broad picture may be set the four deans of Battle between the late sixteenth century and 1660: John Wythines 1572-1615, Thomas Bainbridge 1615-1629, Christopher Dowe 1629-1643(?), Henry Fisher 1644/5-1662. Between 1643 and 1645 it would appear that a minister, John Rowlandson, dispossessed of his Bakewell living by the royalists, drew the revenues of Battle Church until he regained his former incumbency.

JOHN WYTHINES : Dean 1572-1615

John Wythines was born in Chester and attended the King's School there. His recorded burial in Battle in 1615, in his 84th year (ie he was 83), would appear to give a birth date of 1531/2. This being so, the gaining of his BA at Brasenose College, Oxford, in January 1559 would seem to give, for the times, a somewhat late age of 24 or 25 at matriculation. MA 1561, he became Doctor of Divinity in 1570 and from 1567 to 1573 was Fellow and Senior Bursar of the College and Vice-Principal from 1567. Despite the entry on his brass memorial in the chancel of Battle Church, it is clear he was not at any time recorded as Vice-Chancellor of the University.

Wythines was therefore prior to 1572 an Oxford University don; and subsequently, to 1615 dean and vicar of St Mary's Church, Battle. The title of dean is a relict recalling the foundation and supervision of the Parish Church by the Abbey (there was longstanding resistance by the Abbot to the Bishop of Chichester's authority within the liwa, a situation which Sir Anthony Browne appeared not particularly anxious to dispel) and the incumbency is to this day a "common" (but not a royal) peculiar. Sir Anthony was the grantee of the Abbey and its estates at the Dissolution and his descendants remained a notably Catholic family with an impact on both national and local history. There are Wythens family entries in the parish records of both Eltham in Kent and Wantage, Berkshire where in 1575 and 1584 the registers record the birth of sons to John and Margery Withens and in 1589 a son to Doctor and Margery Withens; which may mean that a wife to Wythines spent her years with family away from Battle where there is no record of the Dean having such a connection. His Will, proved 3 June 1616, reveals a widow who remarried in 1621.

Once in Battle it would appear he remained sympathetic to the Catholic faith. A report entitled "An Account of the Dangerous Combinations of Recusants in and about Battle in Sussex 1596" states:-

Informacons of certaine abuses in Sussex. Popery since the L.(ady) Montague's coming to dwel at Battle, religion in that countrey, and especially in that towne, is greatly decayed, as may appear by these few poyntes. D,(octor) Witheris, Deane of Battle is suspected to be very backward in religion. For this two yeares and more he neither ministreth the communion nor receaueth it; but commonly, if there be a communion, he getteth some other to doe it, and either getteth himself out of the towne or keepeth his house. His wife cometh scarce twis a year to church and receauth not the communion, he hath a sonne and a daughter at man's estate, which neuer receauth the communion The jurisdiction of the place is in the deane, wholly exempt from the byshop's visitation, and is altogether neglected by him; soe that they doe what they list. There are many in the towne that never receauth the communion, and come very seldome at churche.

The same document also reports that the Dean kept the company of Lady Magdalen Montague, a known recusant, and two gentlemen named Gray and Terry. Both had served time in prison for their beliefs, committed by "Sir Fraunceys Walsingham". Gray was a Catholic priest and Terry a schoolmaster in Battle. It was an age of Church wall whitewashing and lettered biblical inscription. Yet despite the destruction of medieval glass and image, the memorial brasses and Sir Anthony Browne's tomb survived, together with the parish registers and from 1630 the churchwardens' accounts. Wythines, like his successors, may have been away at intervals, leaving a curate in charge. But the evidence points to his residence at the deanery and to the likelihood that, with Bible and Prayerbook in English, services and baptism, marriage and burial went on as parishioners would expect by tradition and law. What may be more open to doubt, with the influence of the Abbey, is the vigour and conviction which upheld protestant church and education in the town.

In 1612 the Sussex clergy were ordered to provide armour and other equipment towards coastal defence by the county militia. Doctor Wythines was ordered to contribute a "musquet and corselet furnished". The document speaks of West Hoathley, Bolney, Brighthelmstone and Chayligh (Chailey) as being within the Deanery of Battle though this seems inconsistent with the fact of Battle being purely a parish on its own, irrespective of the term "dean" being applied to its incumbent. Nonetheless, the fact that these other parishes were required at most to provide a corselet (West Hoathly and Bolney one between them) would indicate something of a higher status for Battle.

In St Mary's Church chancel lies John Wythines's monumental brass, laid in black marble. He is represented full-face with beard and moustache. He wears a ruff and academic gown, square cap and scarf of a Doctor of Divinity, with a book in his right hand and a large ring on his thumb. The effigy is 35 inches (900 mm) in length. Below the figure are two rectangular plates with Latin inscription, the first translated as "Here lies John Wythines, born in the most noble city of Chester, educated in the University of Oxford and then Fellow of Brasenose College, Doctor of Divinity and Vice-Chancellor of the aforesaid University of Oxford; forty-two years Dean of the Church of Battle, who died the 18th day of March in the 84th year of his age, and of salvation, 1615." He was at one time a university proctor but no record of him as Vice-Chancellor has been found. The second of the plates bears four religious verses. From the mouth of Wythines himself issue two further Latin texts.

Also in possession of St Mary's Church is a silver flagon measuring 11.5 inches (292 mm) high and weighing 35 oz (63g). Bearing the hallmark of 1697, it is inscribed "the gift of Mrs F. Newham AD1705, granddaughter of Dr Wythines formerly Dean of this Church of Battell". It is a large plain flagon with hinged cover, thumb piece and scroll handle engraved with the arms of Wythines.

From the latter and the evidence of his will Wythines was a man of property and of some family. The Chester connection could well be explored. After early years as an Oxford college fellow, he subsequently became parson of a Sussex parish of some standing, from where sprang Thomas Pylcher, priest to recusants, executed in 1587 by the authorities. At the end of his long life he was buried within the sanctuary beneath an elaborate and costly tombstone. While clearly a family memory of him survived into the reign of Anne.

Wythines's tomb - brass, scholar's attire and Latin inscription - suggest at least the traditionalist. The reports to Burghley would indicate further that he had local acceptance, not least from Lady Montague, and from those principal sources of local law and order, the gentry, the justices and the churchwardens; while the position of "peculiar" and the proximity of the Browne family kept the bishop at arms length. Sussex was in general protestant and, in the end, pro-Parliament. But it was still an age when thought was in terms of locality rather than nationwide; and Battle was for long, like Arundel in the west, slow to change. Dean Wythines officiated through the Armada and the Gunpowder Plot, despite the reports of local informers, and died in possession of his office in 1615. Perhaps the clue may be sought towards the end of life of the arch-recusant but locally

esteemed Lady Magdalen herself. On 19th April 1607 the King's Council wrote to the Attorney General when rumours of prosecution were in the air: "In regard that she is a noblewoman, aged, and by reason of her fidelity in the time of Queen Elizabeth was never called in question, it pleaseth the King's Majesty that in her old years she be free from molestation." All charges against her were removed.

NOTE

Spellings of his name vary, as frequently in this period. Other forms are Wythin, Withines, Wythens, Witheris, Withers, Wythings, Withyns, Withens, Witnes and Wytings.

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THOMAS BAINBRIDGE : Dean 1615-1629

Thomas Bainbridge was at Christ's College, Cambridge from 1593 to 1646 - undergraduate and BA 1596/7, MA 1600 (incorporated Oxford 1603), BD (date lost), DD 1617, Fellow of the College before Michaelmas 1599, Master 1622-1646 and University Vice-Chancellor 1627-28. During the latter time he received Charles I on a university visit. The basic facts of his life are recorded in Peile's Biographical Register and we continue first with details from this and from Dr Peile's history of the college. Bainbridge was born at Kirkby Lonsdale, in all likelihood at Hawkin Hall, in 1573/4, the

son of a wealthy clothier, Edward born 1508 and his second wife, Elizabeth. Edward, by his first wife, had a son, Christopher, a Fellow of the college 1574-84, of Puritan disposition, who left to take a living in Hertfordshire; though with the death of his father at that time it is for conjecture that he may have inherited Hawkin Hall and taken on the care of his half-brother, Thomas, aged ten. In the 1580s there was a second Bainbridge, a Fellow of Christ's who, with Francis Johnson, was arrested in 1588/9 for anti-authority preaching in St Mary's. Johnson fled to Holland as a 'Brownist' leader; Cuthbert survived as Fellow until his death in 1620.

Bainbridge might in early life have been a little indiscreet, if we are to judge from an accusation in 1602 by two Fellows; though after an appeal to the Vice-Chancellor's court, his accusers could do nothing beyond allege "a very scandalous fame spread abroad both in town and College." He was quite a disciplinarian, not a scholar or theologian of great esteem, received no preferment in the Church, but as Master something of a diplomat. Contemporary accounts range from "a severe governor" to "an easy-going person", but also "a benefactor to his college which flourished greatly under his government" and "he was accounted a witty man and a good preacher". He complied with William Dowsing's requirements in the college chapel (Puritan obliterations - "2 January 1643, we pulld downe divers Pictures and Angells and the Steps D. Bambridge have promised to take them downe. 'Orate pro animabus' on the brasen Eagle") and survived as head of college when nine others were ejected by the parliamentary committee; dying in college two years later. His widow, Mary, lived until 1670/1, his sons Edward and Thomas having graduated at Christ's in 1646 and 1653 respectively.

Cole writes of his obsequiousness (meriting future favour) when writing to the King on the death of the Duke of Buckingham; but Peile questions this as overstated. Overstated also seems to have been the account of John Milton's suffering at the hands of Bainbridge. Milton was at Christ's between 1624/5 and 1632. The story was that Milton thought himself to have been deprived of the chance of a fellowship by the appointment of another with more powerful patronage. He quarrelled with the college authorities (Thomas Baker 1608-1674 says with the Master, other with his tutor Chappell), was "whipt" and rusticated. The rustication is not confirmed by college records and "whipt" very likely arose from subsequent gossip. In due course Milton left Cambridge, writing in 1642 "the more than ordinary respect which I found above any of my equals at the hands of those courteous and learned men, the Fellows".

None of the above authorities for Bainbridge's life refer to his incumbency of Battle other than the Register of 1913, although even here Peile is doubtful. Bainbridge was appointed Dean of Battle in March 1615, following the death of John Wythines, and was officially presented by James I on 13th June 1615. He may have visited his parish on occasion, possibly during long vacations, before he relinquished it in 1629, but there is no further record which points to any residence or activity. There is some evidence, however, from another source. In 1618 Bainbridge obtained dispensation from the Archbishop of Canterbury to hold in plurality the neighbouring vicarage of Icklesham, where he was installed on 7th May 1618. Then relative silence until 26th April 1644 when its

parishioners petitioned the Committee of Plundered Ministers that Bainbridge "was wholly non-resident for 25 years and employed scandalous curates." He successfully pleaded special dispensation for heads of university colleges and was retained as Master of Christ's though ordered to remove his curate from Icklesham and pay £5 a year to a curate nominated by the Committee. Meanwhile, the parishioners were to pay him arrears of his tithes to enable his payment of the new curate. It would thus appear that between 1615 and 1629 at Battle, and 1618 and 1644 at Icklesham, the Church revenues were drawn by an absentee incumbent. It remains to investigate what contribution the not all scandalous curates made to Church life and persuasion of the time. Certainly the parishioners of Icklesham were dissatisfied with their sequel for again, on 10th July 1645, they complained to the Committee that Michael Suep, the successor, was an "intruder" and claimed "he is not in (holy) orders and therefore could not officiate as curate." He was eventually accepted after attending "upon Divines for ordinacon".

Thomas Bainbridge died in 1646 and was buried at the Church of St Andrew the Great, across the road from his college, on 9th September. In his Will dated 11 September 1645 and proved on 6th July 1649, he left Christ's College £50; while his widow, Mary, who lived until February 1670/1 and held several leases from the college, left to it a silver-gilt salver.

It has been estimated that after the Reformation, over 40% of parish advowsons were owned by the laity - king, aristocracy and local gentry - who sometimes took a share of the tithes and certainly appointed those who for one reason or another they looked upon with favour. Small parishes with small revenues were doubled or trebled under one clergyman - "pluralism". Among the offenders were bishops and cathedral deans themselves, together with court and university clergy. Such church state made its contribution to the strife between king and parliament, royalist and puritan. To quote Cole - "he was one of the four masters of colleges of Cambridge who by especial favour of their friends and their own wary compliance kept their places in 1643." But it can also be said that Thomas Bainbridge, priest in Battle and Icklesham, and master for twenty-four years of a Cambridge college, was but a feature of the times; and in 1644, in the interests of order and continuing education, even the Puritans had to give way.

NOTE

Other forms are Bainbrigg, Baynbrig, Baynbrigg, Bunbridge and Bambig

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CHRISTOPHER DOWE : Dean 1629-1643

Christopher Dowe or Dawe was probably born about 1595 but nothing is known as to where, or who, his parents were. His university career gives the earliest known details of his life. He matriculated at Christ's College, Cambridge in July 1613, attained BA in 1616/7, MA 1620 (incorporated at Oxford 10th July 1621), BD in 1627 and DD in 1638. He was a follower of Archbishop Laud and no doubt shared his philosophies and teachings.

Following the resignation of Thomas Bainbridge, Dowe was presented on 23rd September 1629 as Dean at Battle by Henry Needler, or Needle, "gentleman of the City of London". On the dissolution of the Abbey, the advowson of St Mary's had fallen, with properties and customs, to the courtier Sir Anthony Browne but in 1605 was sold out of the family in circumstances yet to be determined. There is some thought that Catholic properties under forfeit were manipulated by sympathists. A John Needler was admitted at Christ's College in 1632, born at Horley, Surrey; and between the Master of the time, Dowe, and Needler, there must be some link, although Battle was never a college living.

Dowe, as distinct from Bainbridge, made the living his home. He resided in the deanery house adjacent to the Church, which stands today, and the parish registers record the baptism and burials of his children:-

Name	Baptised	Buried
Christovoure	2 February 1631	26 November 1633