

POST REFORMATION CATHOLIC HISTORY IN THE FOREST OF DEAN AND WEST GLOUCESTERSHIRE.

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The area we are going to look at today is that part of Gloucestershire that lies between the rivers Severn and Wye. Up until 1541 it was in the Diocese of Hereford, and in that year it became part of the newly created Diocese of Gloucester. The north of the area is served by the present day Catholic parish of Newent and Blaisdon. The south of the area, the Forest of Dean, is served by the Catholic Churches in Cinderford, Coleford and Lydney. But in the whole area there are only two Parish Priests.

In the north of the area there are 20 Anglican churches that are of pre-Reformation Catholic origin, and in the Forest area there 18 such churches. The latter are situated around the boundaries of the Forest, outside of what was the Royal Demesne land. This land was kept as a hunting area for the monarch and any potential building development was prohibited, so that until legislation changed during the 19th century the area was extra-parochial.

In May 1927, the then Bishop of Clifton, Ambrose Burton, received a letter from Mr George Hare of Cinderford. In his letter, Mr Hare pleaded the case for the sending of a priest to reside and Minister in the Forest area. Mr Hare had come to live in the Forest in 1919 and in the ensuing 8 years had not seen a Catholic priest there. He was concerned about the lack of Mass, of opportunity to receive the Sacraments, about the upbringing of his children and those of a small number of other families, in the Catholic faith. In order to fulfil his Easter duties he had to cycle a round trip of 18 miles to Ross-on-Wye (in the Cardiff Diocese) and had to take two of his children to Gloucester for Baptism, a round trip of 28 miles. At the same time, Mr Hare also wrote to Fr Chard, the parish priest at Gloucester, seeking his support. Fr Chard in turn wrote to Bishop Burton.

It took further letters and persuasion from Mr Hare to get any movement. Eventually a first Mass, attended by about 35 people was said at Cinderford in 1929. Catholic development swiftly followed and in 1930 a parish priest was appointed to Coleford., the new Church there (where we are today) being opened in 1933. The Salesians (of Blaisdon Hall) served Cinderford during the later 1930's until the arrival of the Oblates of Mary Immaculate before the start of the Second World War; the church at

Cinderford being opened in 1939. The Salesians also opened a Mass centre at Newent in 1935 and the present church there, of Our Lady of Lourdes, was opened in 1960.

One can well understand Mr Hare's feelings when he wrote his initial letter to Bishop Burton. The Forest of Dean and west Gloucestershire in general, it must be said, up until then received little attention from the Vicars Apostolic of the old Western District (1688-1850) and the diocese of Clifton (created 1850).

What do we now know about Catholicism in the Forest of Dean and west Gloucestershire following the period of change in the legal situation and organisation of the Church in this country, ie. The Reformation and break with Rome, which took place over the 60 years or more from the later 1530's to the end of the reign of Elizabeth 1 in 1603. The interlude in this period was Queen Mary Tudor's restoration of Papal Supremacy in her short reign from 1553 to 1558.

Well - we know that the majority of people had conformed to the reforms and what has become known to history, as the Elizabethan Settlement, the bringing into existence of a state church, which later became the Church of England. Those persons wanting to remain Catholic found they were in a different position, as far as the law was concerned, and that, if they did not attend the services of the Established church, they were to be considered recusants and thus subject to legal penalties.

However, as the changes during Elizabeth's reign took effect, many people continued Catholic practices at home in as much secrecy as possible, while, at the same time, attending the new church services as required. At Blaisdon, for example, in 1572 both the churchwardens and parishioners were arraigned for holding on to catholic church ornaments. At, not too far away Ruardean, in 1557, a John Staley was accused of 'using his rosary beads on Trinity Sunday last'. Getting married posed difficulties - in 1576 a Richard Vaughan and his wife Elisabeth, of Abenhall, were accused by the authorities, of fornication, when they set up home together. It seems that they were probably married by a Marian priest (operative or ordained during Mary Tudor's reign).

Also, in 1576, both the vicar and churchwardens at Aylburton, near Lydney, were brought before the authorities for their determination to continue Catholic practice, in that they were encouraging the ringing of bells on saint's feast days, a practice then being discouraged. This vicar was described by the authorities, as a 'maintainer of popish purgatory and other papistries'. He was ordered to declare in his own pulpit that he was a convicted papist and that he had learnt the error of his ways. He and his churchwardens were then excommunicated from the state church (the

payment of a fine following excommunication enabled re-acceptance into the church and lessened escalation towards further penalty).

Other people refused to attend church. In Bishop Cheney of Gloucester's 1577 'Return of Recusants', for example, there are 7 persons from Newent, 2 from Kempley and 2 from Hasfield listed for church non-attendance. The 2 listed from Hasfield were John Pauncefoot and his wife Dorothy - who were associated with the work of the Gloucester-born seminary priest and martyr Blessed Thomas Alfield (hanged Tyburn 1585). In 1584 John went into exile in Europe and there translated Catholic literature into English. Dorothy, who did not want to go abroad, suffered imprisonment in London soon after her husband's leaving England. A contemporary report refers to a Mr Thomson (a gentleman from Burford, Oxon.) being in Gloucester gaol with the martyr Blessed Stephen Rowsham at the time of the latter's imprisonment and execution in 1587. Mr Thomson had fled from Burford to the Forest of Dean, where he lived and sheltered a priest.

The record of Catholic activity in the Forest and west Gloucestershire area diminishes from the end of the 16th century until the early part of the 20th century. However, that is not to state that there was none in the period 1600 to 1900.

In the wider Forest area, outside of the Royal demesne land, there were a few wealthy local families who remained Catholic after 1600. The Wynter family of Lydney are well known - I understand that you are going to hear more about the Wynters this afternoon, so I will not talk about them now.

Less well known, but of significance through to the 18th century were the Hall family of High Meadow near Newland and nearby Staunton. The Halls, over many years increased their holdings of woodlands and developed forges and iron works in the north west of the Forest. By the time their heiress married into the Catholic Gage family of Firle Park, Sussex, in 1717, the Halls had amassed thousands of acres around the Dean area. The Halls also had land and forges in neighbouring Monmouthshire and Herefordshire. By 1640 the then head of the family Benedict Hall, held a solid, continuous block of land from Redbrook and High Meadow through Lydbrook and Ruardean. When Benedict's descendant, the 4th Viscount Gage, sold the High Meadow estate to the Crown Commissioners of Woods in 1817, it then covered 4,257 acres, and included several farms, woodlands, mills and ironworks. Such was the complexity of the sale that it was not completed until the final instalment of the purchase price was paid to Viscount Gage in 1821.

During the English Civil War, Benedict Hall sided with the Royalists and commanded troops in various engagements in the ongoing struggle between the local Royalists and the Parliamentary garrison of Gloucester. He was

sequestered for an allegation of recusancy before 1650 but recovered the sequestered portions of his estates by 1657. Benedict died in 1668 and is buried in Newland church (which you will visit this afternoon). His wife was Anne Wynter, daughter of Sir Edward Wynter of Lydney. As far as is known the couple had 9 children - 5 daughters and 4 sons. Henry Benedict Hall, the eldest son inherited the bulk of the estates. Another son - William , continued iron smelting in forges at Lydbrook; 2 daughters married into the Catholic Wakeman family of Beckford, (Glos.); another daughter married into the recusant Jerningham family of Costessey (Norfolk) and Painswick (Glos.). The other 2 daughters, Cecilia and Catherine, became nuns at the English Benedictine nuns convent in Cambrai, Flanders. Cecilia died there in 1651. Catherine was Abbess 1673 to 1677 and died at Cambral convent in 1692. Their mother, Anne, went to live in the Cambrai convent following Benedict's death and died there in 1676. The Cambrai convent, as some of you will know, was the forerunner of Stanbrook Abbey near Worcester, now recently moved to North Yorkshire.

The Halls contributed to charity work in the near by Coleford area, establishing an almshouse and had some association with the setting up of a workhouse experiment in Coleford in 1676 - 60 poor people in the first year, and 100 in the second, were contracted to make woollen clothing.

Henry Benedict Hall married Frances Fortescue, a relative of the martyr Blessed Adrian Fortescue (executed 1539 under Henry VII). Their daughter Benedicta Maria Theresa Hall, inherited the High Meadow estate in 1718 on the death of her father. It was through her marriage to Thomas, Viscount Gage, that the High Meadow estate passed in the Gage family. This Thomas lapsed as a Catholic and conformed to the Church of England. Benedicta Maria's and Thomas's son was the General Gage who commanded the British troops defeated at the end of the American War of Independence.

Catholicism remained in the extended Hall family through the generations as the Non Juror - returns of 1717 for the parish of Staunton show. Eleven other names, too, are recorded for Staunton , including a Cornelius Ryan - 'gentleman'. Between 1748 and 1779 two Jesuit priests are recorded as living at Cherry Orchard Farm, Newland - just below High Meadow - and then a property of the Gages. They were the Hon. Francis Dormer and James Beeston alias Bourgeois. Some of you may know the Dormer family (well known Catholic family).

The site of where the Hall's family mansion of High Meadow (built early 1670's and demolished early 19th century) was can be seen from the minor road that runs along the ridge to the north east of Newland. What remains of the mansion are visible grass mounds following demolition of the house. Note the much earlier buildings to the left which formed part of the Hall's previous house - late medieval windows can be seen in these. These latter

buildings are now part of the property of the present day High Meadow Farm. The gates of the Hall's mansion were taken to Firle Park and erected there (where, I think, they can still be seen today).

When at Newland church this afternoon, you might ponder on the following. In December 1680 there was a particularly virulent anti-catholic sermon preached there by the Rev. Thomas Jekyll. He was, at that time, the Lecturer to the residents of the Jones charity almshouses in Newland. You will see the almshouses as you approach the church. They are the white terraced buildings currently being renovated. The Jones charity derived from the Will of William Jones who died in 1615. It was administered by the Haberdashers Company of the City of London. The Haberdashers Company had created Lectureships in a few places in England where it was thought that there was a degree of Catholic presence that had to be contained (Bedale, in Yorkshire, for example, was another such place).

The so called Popish Plot (Titus Oates) was running its course during 1680. Jekyll, due to his connections (predecessors of the Whigs), referred in his sermon to the alleged Popish Plot and its nearness, i.e. in Monmouthshire and south Herefordshire - around this time St David Lewis had been executed at Usk and St John Kemble at Hereford. Perhaps, inferred Thomas Jekyll, the plot was also nearer to home, that is amongst the Catholics in the area around Newland, High Meadow and the Forest. Local Catholics, feeling offended, asked was Jekyll referring to them? Complaint was made to the Rector of Newland ,who in turn brought the matter to the attention of the Bishop of Gloucester, who then reprimanded Jekyll. Shortly after this Jekyll returned to a Living in the City of London and early in 1681 had the sermon published. I will now circulate a photocopy of the frontispiece of this publication. There is an original in the Gloucestershire Records Office. The sermon includes attacks on Pope Paul III (who in the previous century had called together the Council of Trent) , transubstantiation , and devotion to Our Lady.

Other significant Catholic families in the Forest were the Vaughans and Ropers of Ruardean, and the Wyralls of English Bicknor. As yet we do not know much about the Ropers and Wyralls.

Mr Roper, though, was on a list of Gloucestershire 'Catholics of Substance' who, it was proposed in 1680, should be removed to Suffolk. A plan was suggested - remember this was the period of the Popish Plot - to remove certain Catholics of prominence from their homes to other parts of the country, the idea being that this would deter the possibility of local action by

Catholics. Henry Benedict Hall (High Meadow) and John Vaughan of Ruardean were also on the list. This proposal was dropped.

The mother of the above John Vaughan is of special note. She was Joan Vaughan (nee Baynham - another Catholic family in the area), a grand-daughter of Sir William Wynter of Lydney. Joan married John Vaughan of Clyro (Radnorshire) and Kinnersley (Herefordshire). Joan was an heiress in her own right and also acquired her husband's property on his death. She lived at Clyro but then came to live at her Ruardean property.

A charitable and brave person, she was in 1641, when aged about 56, indicted for harbouring a priest - named in the indictment as John Broughton. On her arrest she was lodged in Gloucester gaol. The alleged offence was treasonable - subject to the death penalty on conviction. Her case, however, did not come to court due to the intervention of King Charles I and she was released. Her counsel prepared a defence arguing that proof of ordination of the priest was necessary to prove priesthood. Some wonder whether this defence was an influence in the judgement of Lord Mansfield in the next century accepting this very point. 'John Broughton' was the alias used by Dom Mark Crowther O.S.B. 'Broughton' was his mother's own family name.

John Mark Crowther was born in Shropshire in 1584 and trained for the priesthood at St. Alban's College, Valladolid, Spain. He was professed a Benedictine in 1609. He was sent on the English mission and was Provincial of the Benedictines South Province for four years during the 1620s. Joan Vaughan seems to have employed Dom Mark as a steward thus giving him a base to minister from. He clearly had knowledge of estate/woodlands management. As 'John Broughton' he was appointed the first Deputy Surveyor of the Forest of Dean in 1633, and remained so to the end of the 1630s. Although by then being normally resident at Ruardean he was in the early part of 1632 in prison in London having been accused of being a priest. The matter was not proceeded with and he returned to the Forest to become involved again in forestry issues. A point to note is that the priest catchers responsible for Dom Mark's imprisonment in 1632 were part of the same group who later pursued Blessed Henry Morse in London (executed Tyburn 1645). At least one of these men was also responsible for bringing about Joan Vaughan's predicament in 1641.

It is worth mentioning that the struggle between Charles I and Parliament was becoming even more intense in 1641. There were moves, on the part of Parliamentarians to discredit Queen Henrietta Maria using her Catholicism as the focus. This had implications for some Catholics. It may be that this situation was a factor in the intimidation of Joan Vaughan and Dom Mark - the issue requires further study.

Following her release Joan Vaughan lived on for many years. Dom

Mark died at the English Benedictine Abbey at Lamspring, Prussia in 1658.

Let us now move to that part of West Gloucestershire north of the Forest.

At Pauntley there was, in the early 18th Century, a Catholic community centred on Pauntley Court. The Anglican authorities recorded 12 papists there in 1705, and 4 in that area in 1780. The numbers in 1705 were due to the presence of the then Catholic owners of the Court - the Somersets, and then Pastons. A building at the court was, in the early 18th century was known as the Chapel house. A priest was a member of the household in the 1720's. Pauntley court - some of you may already know this - was, many years before, the home of Dick Whittington!

Between 2 and 3 miles from Pauntley is the vilage of Redmarley D'Abitot. In the Anglican diocese of Worcester in 1767 ' return of papists' there are 14 male and 15 female recorded as papists, among them were 5 farmers, a mason, and 2 coopers. This community received support from the Hanford family of Woollas Hall, on the western slopes of Bredon hill (north of Tewksbury). The family had property in Redmarley and some members lived there. The Hanfords supported a Benedictine school there during the 1730 - 1740's for which two consecutive Benedictine priests, Dom David Cox and Dom Anthony Hutchinson, had responsibility. It may have been that this was a preparatory school preparing boys for education on the continent. In the this period, Redmarley D'Abitot was in Worcestershire and later came into Gloucestershire. Today the village is in the parish of Our Lady of Lourdes Newent.

Before leaving Redmarley we should note that the Jesuit Bishop James Etheridge was born here in 1808, and who was appointed Vicar Apostolic for Guyana, being consecrated Bishop by Cardinal Wiseman at Farm St. London in 1858. He was responsible for the building of the Catholic Cathedral on Bankdam, Georgetown. He died at sea on 31st Dec. 1877, whilst undertaking further duties in the Caribbean area.

Timothy Nourse, who achieved renown in the sphere of agricultural science and estate management, retired to his family estate at Newent in the 1670's because on becoming a Catholic he had to resign his appointments in the University of Oxford. He lived on in Newent for about another 20 years. In his Will he left financial provision for the establishment of a charity for apprentices in Gloucester. This was a practice that a number of relatively wealthy Catholics followed, particularly in the north of England. I will now distribute photocopies of the cover of his work 'Campania Foelix' which will give you an idea of his contribution to knowledge.

Returning to the Forest, a significant piece of information, as shown by

the Anglican authorities' Returns of Papists, is that, for part of the 18th century there was a relatively large number of Catholics in the locality of Lydney. The Catholic Wynter family were resident at Lydney for most of the 17th century, and perhaps their living there encouraged the survival of others in their faith - 20 Catholics are recorded as living there in 1676. In 1705, 29 were recorded - several of them women - servants, the wife of an innkeeper, farmers' wives and the wife of a periwig maker. Just outside Lydney at Woollaston, the

Catholic presence included the Gwilliam and Harris families, and was partly founded in the farming community, but by 1705 included servants, a mason and labourers. In 1735, 30 papists were recorded in the area and it was noted that a 'Mass priest comes once a month'. In the 1750 survey numbers reduced to 8 Catholics at Woollaston and 3 at Lydney. This is all worthy of further research.

In the later 19th century there was some Catholic activity in Coleford. In 1855 Father Thomas Abbot, priest at Monmouth, was granted Missionary faculties for the Forest. He described the Catholics in the Forest as a few old native Catholics and poor Irish labourers who came to the coal pits when work was scarce in Wales. Father Abbot established a Mass centre for occasional Masses at a local farmhouse. He started a Sunday school in Coleford in 1860. In response to a petition, signed by 51 Catholics, he founded a Poor school there in 1862, about half of the attendance of 30 pupils being Catholics. The school is not recorded after 1867. Father Abbot was a priest in the then Diocese of Newport and Menevia and was concerned that the Forest might be passed over by the Diocese of Clifton. His link with Coleford appears to have ended by 1882. Later an Italian priest came there for a short time. Mention is made that, in the 1890's, a chaplain from Courtfield, home of the Vaughan family, served Catholics in the Coleford and Lydbrook area - you may wish to ask Mr Vaughan about this on your visit to Courtfield tomorrow afternoon.

In 1910 permission was obtained by Miss Myers, then resident there for Mass to be said at Eastbach Court.

Mass was said at St Briavels, in the home of the Radcliffe family, between 1911 and 1928. Father Towne, then at Chepstow in the Cardiff Diocese, was helpful in bringing this about. In recent times a diary has been found in the priest's house at Coleford partly outlining the history of this development.

This brings us back to Mr Hare's letter to Bishop Burton in 1927. While more is now known of Catholic lives and activity in the Forest and west Gloucestershire area following the Reformation period, there is still much to be discovered. Thank you for your attention!