

The pre and post Reformation Church in Shillington (Beds) in the sixteenth century

The church dominated life in Shillington before the Reformation, not least because the manor of the village was held by Ramsey Abbey. The manorial court, presided over by the abbey's steward, sanctioned the transfer of holdings from one tenant to another, supervised the activities of the farming year and resolved local disputes. These temporal concerns were only part of the authority that Ramsey Abbey exercised. It also held the advowson of the church and so collected the great tithes the villagers paid each year and appointed the clergy who served the village church. Just as the bailiff played a vital role in the temporal life of the village, so the vicar led its spiritual life through the weekly services and festivals of the Christian year. He was important too, at key stages in the individual's life from baptism and the churching of women through confirmation and marriage to extreme unction and burial.

The beliefs and practices of the medieval church are well documented and Shillington would have followed the common pattern. It is possible to have some glimpses of how the villagers responded. The existing structure was built in the fourteenth century, a large imposing hall church, built high on a hill dominating the village. The basic structure has been little altered so evidence of pre-Reformation usage survives. The most revealing are the numerous graffiti scratched into the soft chunch stone. Many of these are religious in character - two crucifixions, for example - and were possibly a way of leaving a prayer in the church. The most striking of the graffiti is a beautifully drawn head of the Madonna. The importance of the Virgin Mary in pre-Reformation worship is further borne out by fleur de lis, her symbol, carved into the pillars and numerous letter M. Popular in the Middle Ages were Bestiaries which gave not only the natural history of the creatures included but also the moral to be learnt from them. All Saints has a graffito of a snail, who was born in mud and ate mud according to Bestiaries and so was a symbol of sloth. There is also a graphic drawing of a dog, not only a symbol of loyalty: a dog who was hurt would lick its wound to bring about a cure and in the same way, the Christian should confess his sins and so be saved. The thinking behind some of the graffiti is much less clear. There are a number of heads, one of a king, others appear to be devils; numerous shields, one upside down indicating death. Even where the meaning is not

clear, the sheer number (over 100) shows that the church was a familiar place which individuals related to and wished to make use of for their own purpose. Some of those purposes may not have had church approval. Cut into the jamb of the south door is a four foot long hobby horse, part of May Day Festivals of which the church disapproved.

A survival of medieval practices is the carved wooden screen between the chancel and the nave, erected so that the chancel, the most sacred part of the church where the Mass was celebrated, was separated from the nave, which was not only where the congregation stood during the services but where a variety of business and other activities occurred. The rood and rood loft has not survived the Reformation, but there are two reminders of its presence and how important it was. One is the aperture by which the rood loft was reached. It was customary to have statues of Mary and John at the foot of the cross on which Christ hung but all this was shrouded throughout Lent and revealed again for the solemn Good Friday services. Except during Lent, candles were lit each Sunday on the rood loft but evidently the parishioners and clergy wished to give even more prominence to these symbols. On the north pillar to which the screen is attached is a graffito of a cresset, indicating that an additional source of light stood near the screen.

Who made the graffiti and their exact meaning for those responsible is now impossible to say, but, cumulatively, they convey that the church was a natural part of every day life. Its importance for individuals can also be judged from the bequests made in wills. Nineteen wills of Shillington villagers, made between 1500 and 1542, have been published. All of them follow the standard practice of a bequest to the high altar 'for tithes forgotten'. Some leave malt or barley but the usual bequest is of money varying from 6d to 20d, although Matthew Arnold in 1523 left 3s 4d¹. Other religious bequests reflect personal choice, although it is impossible to say whether these were a matter of habit or social conformity or personal piety. They do, however, give a good picture of how the church was furnished and so indications of what was considered important. The fullest picture comes from William Lawrens' will of 1500². He left 2 bushels of barley to the torches which gave a flaming light during Mass from the Elevation of the Host to the Agnus Dei, the high point of the service. In addition he left one or two bushels of barley

1. B.H.R.S. Vol 76 No. 10

2. B.H.R.S. Vol 45 No. 34

to eleven lights or candles. Four of these were to statues of the Virgin Mary. One of these would have been by the high altar as required by canon law, one was 'in the north part of the church', another 'in the south part of the church' and the fourth in St. George's chapel. This reinforces the message of the graffiti of the prominence of the Virgin Mary. Since the twelfth century the church had laid great emphasis on the sanctity of the Virgin Mary and her role as a conduit of prayers to her Son. Wearing a rosary and saying it regularly was encouraged. Stories of her life and birth and death were developed and different aspects of her character were emphasised in the iconography. Robert Lawrens, possibly William's son, in 1522³ left a bushel of barley to the light before Our Lady of Grace and another to the light of Our Lady of Pity.

While Mary embraced all aspects of human life, saints were identified with particular qualities and were helpful in meeting particular needs. Their iconography were teaching tools of what the good Christian should aspire to and devotion shown to them was another way to God. William Lawrens' will shows those featured in All Saints. He made bequests for lights to St. George who stood for the victory of good over evil and was particularly associated with the Last Judgement, to St. Katherine linked to child birth and holy death and to St. Roke, a safeguard against plague. The prominence of the Last Judgement and a holy death is pre-Reformation theology will be discussed later. The presence of St. Roke in All Saints is a reminder that ~~periodic~~ outbreaks of plague were frequent and a constant fear. For women, child birth, too, was dangerous and so St. Katherine's help was sought and the service of the churching of women was the opportunity for thanksgiving for safe deliverance.

The third group of lights in William Lawren's will highlight other important aspects of the church's teaching. There was the light of All Saints, the church's dedication and the light of the Holy Trinity, that highly complex teaching of one God in three persons. The last two lights to the crucifix and the sepulchre, reflect the centrality in the church's teaching of the supreme importance of the death of Christ who died to save sinners. The greatest pageantry of the church's year revolved around Holy Week from the re-enactment of the entry to Jerusalem on Palm Sunday. During the week every confirmed

3. B.H.R.S. Vol 76 No. 7

Christian was required to make an individual confession to a priest. The Mass on ^{Mandy} Maunday Thursday led to the unveiling of the Rood from its Lenten cover and a consecrated wafer being placed in a pyx for the Good Friday service. There was no Mass on a Good Friday but a solemn dirge during which the congregation crawled to the crucifix on their knees and the pyx and a crucifix was 'buried' in a sepulchre. Lights were lit before this and a constant vigil kept by paid watchers until Easter morning when the pyx was returned to its usual place and the cross was paraded around the church before Mass was held at which the laity received their only communion of the year in bread only⁴.

William Lawrens' will, therefore shows All Saints filled with symbols and statues, significant to the church's teaching, treated with reverence. It is not clear from the wills whether all these lights were permanent features. John Eynsham, for example, in 1515⁵ left 4d to every light 'that is customarily kept'. Others selected particular lights for their bequests. It may be that the choice of which saints should be in the church varied from time to time. St. Margaret does not appear in William Lawrens' will but features in three wills in 1515: John Eynsham left 2s and John Whiteslowe 12d to her tabernacle while Roger Townysend left money to paint her tabernacle⁶. Perhaps she was a new introduction sponsored by a devotee just as the parish priest of Morebath in Devon had introduced St. Sidwell there and encouraged bequests to her⁷.

While leaving money for lights in the church is a common feature of wills, another aspect of religious life which comes through particularly strongly is the belief in the purgatory. At death, every soul went to purgatory to be cleansed of sin. This had long featured in the church's teaching but had been particularly emphasised from the fifteenth century and it had clearly been absorbed by the parishioners of All Saints. How long a soul spent in purgatory depended on a number of factors. Obviously the Christian quality of the life led was important but so was a good or holy death. Part of this was a responsible settlement of one's earthly affairs. Wills could be drawn up at any time but they were often a part of the death bed scene and signed in the presence of witnesses respected in

4. Duffy : Stripping of the Altars p 22 ff

5. B.H.R.S. Vol 76 No. 146

6. John Eynsham Vol 76 No. 146, John Whiteslowe Vol 37, p 55, Roger Townysend Vol. 37 P 58

7. Duffy : Voices of Morebath

the local community. The will usually began with a profession of faith and the bequests to the church followed. The final element was the disposal of earthly possessions. The other important element in holy death was making confession of sins and receiving Extreme Unction. Sudden and unexpected death was dreaded as, without a holy death, the length of time in purgatory would be prolonged. A third factor which could help the soul through purgatory was the prayers of the living. Men, therefore, left money in their wills for masses to be said for their souls.

Some of these bequests are simply instructions to executors to use the residue of the estate once all other bequests had been made, to pay for masses for the soul of the legatee, his wife and friends. Those who could afford to do so and/or were more concerned about purgatory were more specific. John Smyth, for example, left 30s in 1522 to pay a priest to say a series of masses for him⁸. John Dryver had left even more : £6 in 1505⁹. Yet others made arrangements for such masses to be said for eternity, that is until the second coming of Christ when all would be judged. William Lawrens added to all his bequests to the church¹⁰ 6 acres of arable land. His wife was to have the use of this land but at her death it was to be rented out and the proceeds used to keep obits for him, his wife and friends for ever. Others left stock for the same purpose; in Morebath, Devon, this was sheep, in Shillington cattle. In 1523 Matthew Arnold bequeathed 4 of his milk beasts to be let out annually at 20d a head to keep his 'year tide' (masses on the anniversary of his death). His son Richard was to have these during his lifetime but then the church wardens were to let the beasts 'to an honest man of the parish who must enter into a bond that the number is kept up'¹¹.

Another way of ensuring masses were said for your soul was to belong to a social gild. Both men and women could belong, paying an entry fee and an annual fee so only the better off were members. The gild took responsibility for the conduct of the funeral, paying for all the rites, and annually on the gilds day of dedication held solemn mass for the dead at which the names of all past members were read out. This festival was a major occasion in the community with procession and tolling of the church bells. The next day

8. B.H.R.S. Vol 76 No. 126

9. B.H.R.S. Vol 58 No. 59

10. B.H.R.S. Vol 45 No. 34

11. B.H.R.S. Vol 76 No. 10

it became a joyous occasion with a feast of ample food and drink, with music and entertainments. Membership of the gild, which was run by the laity, although the clergy could be members, was a major commitment to the community. Although only the better off were members, some of the poor in the village were paid to attend a funeral as 'weepers' and they also benefited from the surplus from the feast day. Although heirarchical, it was important to social cohesion and typical of the pre Reformation in mingling the religious with the secular, in this case masses for the dead with feasting and charity to members who fell on hard times.

Shillington's gild was the Fraternity of Jesus. From the late fourteenth century, the cult of the Holy Name of Jesus developed. It emphasised the sweetness, gentleness and accessibility of Jesus¹² and from this cult the fraternities proliferated from the 1470s. No records of Shillington's fraternity survive and it is not known when it was founded. However as each of the wills from 1500 include bequests to the Fraternity of Jesus it is clearly well established and was drawing members from outside the village. Thomas Rawlyns who was rector of Meppershall, a neighbouring village, was one of these. He left 10s to the Fraternity in 1506¹³. Village members left amounts ranging from 16d to 10s. The wills show that the gild was planning to expand : in 1505 John Pate left £6 - 13 - 4d 'for purchasing a licence from the lord king for purchasing lands for the said fraternity'¹⁴. Ten years later Roger Townysend left 12d to building a brotherhood house¹⁵. Adjacent to the church is a sixteenth century building whose basic structure is similar to that of many gild houses. At the edge of the garden near the church fence, human bones have been dug up so it is possible that the land, or part of it, was originally part of the grave yard. If this was the brotherhood house, it is appropriate that at a later date it become a public house, The White Horse.

The absence of any sharp division between religious and secular, illustrated in the fraternity, is also evident in a surprising survival. All Saints possesses a fifteenth century portiforium or service book. The pages are decorated with scroll work, the script written in black and red. The first page of each important festival has more elaborate decoration

12. Duffy : Stripping of the Altars p 115

13. B.H.R.S. Vol 45 No. 145

14. B.H.R.S. Vol 58 No. 55

15. B.H.R.S. Vol 37 p 58

illuminated in gold leaf which was also used on the initial capital letter. It may well have been produced by the monks of Ramsey Abbey. If so, one of them drew two of his fellows in a delightful small doodle at the corner of a page. Once the services were fully written out, there were three sides of vellum blank which was used to record 'An olde record for the makyne and reparyne of Shillynton church pale'. A list of names follows with the length of fence for which each was responsible. Among the names are those of William Lawrens and John Pate whose wills have been discussed. Similar lists survive for Morebath where it is possible to see that the length of fence was related to the size of the individual's land holding¹⁶.

What happened to the portiforium at the Reformation is unknown. It surfaced again in the early twentieth century in an antiquarian bookshop and was identified as belonging to Shillington by the list in the back. That unknown covers all the changes in the church in Edward VI's and Mary's reign as no records survive from the period. Evidence from early sixteenth century wills shows that for the better off, the church and its beliefs were integrated into daily life in the village at least at a level of acceptance and conformity and for some of major significance and piety. Doubtless some were well versed in the subtleties of the faith and others more superstitious, treating saints, for example, rather as lucky mascots than path ways to God. There is no reason to think that the poor were any different in the variety of commitment and involvement in the church, even though they had no wills to leave which could give some insight into personal attitudes. How did all these people respond when, in Edward's reign, the Latin Mass was replaced with an English prayer book, the stone altar with a wooden table? Much colour went from the church as the statues were removed with their candles, the rood taken down, the vestments discarded. The loss was not only in familiarity and tradition but in money : it cost money to make the changes and capital investment was lost. Some parishes delayed making the changes as long as possible. Some hid rejected vestments and statues. Others sold as much as possible. For example, St. Mary's Church, Stamford walled up a statue of the Virgin Mary which was discovered in restoration work in the nineteenth century¹⁷. Haddenham in Cambridgeshire sold their gold and silver objects and forestalled seizure by the crown by using the money to repair the church roof and drainage gullies and

16. Duffy : Voices of Morebath p 50

17. Duffy : Stripping of the Altars p 490

dykes¹⁸. Then, after all the upheaval of Edwards reign. Mary's accession in 1553 meant yet more change as, as much Catholic ritual as possible was restored, only to be abolished again five years later when Elizabeth came to the throne in 1558. The one indication that there may have been some astuteness in Shillington in the management of change is that, although guilds were abolished, the church wardens took control of the Brotherhood House. In 1578 it was leased to Rowland Bolton for twenty one years at a rent of 31s 2d a year¹⁹.

Perhaps as significant for the future of the village was the dissolution of the monasteries. With the rest of Ramsey Abbey's land, the king took possession. The manor became in 1556 part of the Honour of Ampthill, held by Elizabeth, while some land and the advowson of the church became part of the endowment of a new college at Cambridge, Trinity College. The land, initially managed by the king's bailiff instead of the monastery's, was gradually sold to a variety of private owners. Trinity College kept its endowment into the twentieth century. Again there is no indication of what the impact was for the villagers, but it must have added to all the uncertainties created by the changes in the church.

However, although it is impossible to chart the process of change, the churchwardens' accounts which survive from 1575 do make it possible to discern something of the life of the Protestant church in the village in Elizabeth's reign. To those familiar with the building thirty years earlier, the church itself must have appeared austere. The walls were white washed and the only touch of colour, the royal coat of arms which every church was obliged to have. This was probably raised in the chancel arch where the Rood had been - this was certainly where it was placed in 1604 when the churchwardens paid 3s 1d to have James I's arms erected after Elizabeth's death. The only other more decorative feature was the Lord's Prayer, the Creed and the Decalogue which every church displayed behind the altar.

The churchwardens' accounts show that service books were frequently bought. A communion ^{book} ~~book~~ was acquired for 7s in 1581, a service book and two psalters for 5s in

18. Ibid p 484

19. Victoria County History : Bedfordshire p299

1594. By now the villagers would be familiar with the cadences of the Prayer Book and although the English of the services was unlike their everyday speech, it would be more recognisable than the Latin mass had been. There was more emphasis on the congregation's participation in the prayers and responses and preaching was given prominence. In 1585 the large sum of 36s 6d was expended on acquiring an English Bible. In the next year an hour glass was bought for 4d, which shows the length of sermon which was regarded as normal. All the clergy were encouraged to expound from Biblical texts each Sunday, but the problem for the Elizabethan church was a lack of sufficiently educated clergy which led the bishops to authorise books of homilies to be read. There is no evidence that Shillington's churchwardens purchased such books and all the Elizabethan vicars were graduates, so perhaps having Trinity College as a patron was some guarantee that the vicar was capable of delivering his own sermons, although a graduate vicar did not necessarily mean his curate was similarly educated.

The centrality of a preaching ministry in the Protestant church complements changes in the belief and practices of the communion service. In the Catholic church, Mass was the main service which everyone was expected to attend each Sunday. The belief was in transubstantiation, that the bread and wine, when blessed by the priest, became the actual body and blood of Christ. So sacred was this that only the priest took the bread and wine at each service, the laity usually receiving communion only at Easter, and then the bread only. The Protestant church rejected the belief in the Real Presence; when blessed the bread and wine was filled with the spirit of Christ but did not change its nature. Furthermore the congregation received both the bread and wine. Easter remained the most important festival when everyone was expected to participate, but the communion service or Lord's Supper was not celebrated each Sunday in most churches, but four times a year, including Easter. The congregation was encouraged to take communion on each occasion. The practical consequences of this are reflected in the churchwardens' accounts in the expense of purchasing the wine. In 1592, 5 gallons and 1 pint of wine was bought for the Easter services at a cost of 15s 10d whereas the bread cost a mere 5¹/₂d. There were fewer communicants at Christmas but '9 quarts' (2 gallons and 2 pints) were still required. At this period, while Henry Totham was vicar, Shillington conformed to the usual practice of Communion services being held four times a year, with Matins and Evensong being the usual Sunday services. However, earlier, when

William Butcher was vicar between 1575 and 1592, wine was bought fortnightly and it may be the service was held each week. A quart of claret at a cost of 5d each fortnight with additional quantities for Christmas, Palm Sunday and Easter meant the total cost in 1579 was 17s 10d with an additional 1s 5d for bread.

These purchases show important changes in the practices in All Saints in Elizabeth's reign and the influence of the clergy on the church's life. William Butcher's regular Communion is a conservative stance of retaining the centrality of sacerdotal worship, albeit with different meanings to the Catholic Mass. Hugh Totham's arrival sees an abrupt change of practice towards a more Protestant version of the church. With the Lord's Supper celebrated four times a year, Matins and Evensong became the principal services. Both are shorter services than Holy Communion, so permitting more time for sermons and a teaching ministry.

Major expenditure on church furnishings in 1594 reflects the changing practice as well. There had been some pews in the church since the fifteenth century but the increased length and importance of sermons made more necessary, so 11s 2d was spent on oak and elm to make 'forms'. Some are described as low forms, possibly for the children. At the same time 3s 4d was spent on a seat with a hinged door for the vicar. The cost of constructing the pews and the seat was a further £1 - 0 - 10d. The seat may have been a response to the Bishop's Visitation Articles of 1591²⁰ which required the minister to be 'in such place of your church or chancel as the people may best hear the same'. If so, it was doubtless complied with all the more readily because it accorded with Totham's view of his ministry. The medieval screen still closed the nave from the chancel, so it is likely this new seat was placed on the nave side of the screen.

1594 was an expensive year. In addition to the new pews and seat, windows were mended, the church was white washed, the gatehouse was re-tiled and a new gate was made. Altogether £3 - 10 - 1d was spent. Nor was that the end of it as 1595 saw major work on the roof which appears to have partially collapsed as 6d was paid for 'the layinge uppe the leadd tymber and stone when the church fele'. While these years saw

20. Ed. J.E. Farmiloe & Rosita Nix Seaman : Elizabethan Churchwardens Accounts p xix

major work, scarcely a year passed without some maintenance work, often of the leads and the windows, presumably caused by the church's exposed position on the hill.

Work on the church building was necessary expenditure, that on the bells more nearly approach a labour of love, desirable and an object of pride but not vital. While not evidence of religious piety like paying for candles to be lit before particular statues, paying for the bells was an expression of identification with the church and community. They were pealed for Sunday services and weddings. They were tolled on Good Friday and before funerals. They were rung in celebration of the anniversary of the Queen's accession and on other national occasions like the defeat of the Spanish Armada. The practice of change ringing as a leisure activity was growing. All Saints had five bells and unusually heavy ones. In addition to the frequent costs of paying the ringers for services and for new ropes and baldricks, the churchwardens spent considerable amounts on re-casting. In 1575 the great bell was taken down and carried to Buckingham for repair. Casting the bells appears in 1579 and ten years later, £5 - 19 - 10d was spent on casting bells in Hitchin. Yet more work was done in 1603, this time in Leicester at a cost of over £37. Special levies were raised to meet these major costs, so it is a measure of the bells' importance to the village that this was acceptable.

One extraordinary series of entries in the accounts of 1575 shows that the habit of church ales, fraternity feasts and other medieval customs survived. The churchwardens paid for a May feast and bought five calves, three lambs, 6 lb raisins, 2 lbs currants, over 20 lbs of butter, 'dossen and a half of bread', to say nothing of pepper, saffron red sandal wood and an unspecified quantity of beer. A minstrel was also hired. One can only hope that a good time was had by all. The presence of a 4 foot long graffito of a hobby horse on the jamb of the south door of the church suggests that such feasts had a long tradition in the parish although the church had repeatedly tried to suppress such pagan survivals. There are no further entries of this sort, so maybe, at any rate in terms of church sponsorship, this was a last fling. Research elsewhere shows that church ales gradually gave way to church rates as a means of raising money to meet church expenses²¹.

21. D. Underwood : *Revel, Riot and Rebellion* p 47 ff

Feasts had often had a charitable outcome in gifts to the poor. Before and after the Reformation, the church encouraged charitable giving as an important part of a Christian life, but there is little in the records to show how this was done and who, in the village, benefited. The Elizabethan churchwardens' accounts record payment to licensed beggars from outside the village, to the county gaol, to hospitals at Dunstable and Canterbury but all these were requirements laid on the parish from outside. There is no mention in the accounts of measures to help the village poor. Nor do they feature in the bequests of pre Reformation wills. The one exception to this is two references to almshouses. John Eynsham in 1515²² left 2s 4d to each of four almshouses and the churchwardens' accounts in 1596 have an item for the repair of the almshouses. There was doubtless a poor box in the church and collections from time to time but how the village treated their poor remains obscure. Only with the coming of the Elizabethan poor law is there a glimpse of the possibility that some regular system existed : in 1596 the churchwardens bought a book for 'the collectors of the poor'.

The church beliefs and practices at the beginning of the sixteenth century were very different from those at the end. A revolution had occurred and just what those who experienced the change in Shillington felt about it is unknown. They conformed to the official teachings with just tantalising indications in retaining the Brotherhood house, in the survival of the portiforium and in the May feast, that they used their own judgement as to how and when they complied.

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