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### **Wakefield's Reformation. Part I Resistance.**

The year is 1536. Wakefield is the largest and most prosperous town in the West Riding, enriched by the manufacture and sale of cloth. Its trade includes the London markets and the continent. Some of its citizens hold office in the government, the Universities and the court. The town is aware of religious controversies, but seems unaffected.

Henry VIII, still a popular monarch, is stamping his ideas on the new Church in England. He has already rejected the authority of the Pope, discarded his first wife, Catherine of Aragon and married his second, Anne Boleyn. And, doubting her fidelity, he has just beheaded her. He disapproves of Luther's teaching and attempts to retain the basis of the Catholic faith, but also to modify it to his liking. He is however, also being driven by personal and State needs; he desires a male heir and the treasury is depleted. Guided by Thomas Cromwell, he sees in the Church's wealth the answer to his financial state.

To this end, he and Cromwell have appointed commissioners throughout the kingdom to assess the wealth and spiritual health of the monasteries; others were to assess the treasures of the parish churches and, later, the Chantry chapels. Further commissioners began to impose on the parish churches the registration of baptisms, marriages and deaths.

#### **The Pilgrimage of Grace and Its Aftermath**

The coincidental arrival of all three commissioners in 1536 in the town of Louth in Lincolnshire prompts the parish priest, Thomas Kendall, to preach a sermon which stirs a riot and begins what will become the Pilgrimage of Grace. At its peak this "protest march" is estimated to be 40,000\* strong, comprising commons, clergy, gentry and aristocracy. It will involve Yorkshire, Lincolnshire, Lancashire and Cumberland. Though some pilgrims are stirred by new taxations, some by imposed enclosures and some by personal vendettas, the main motive of the Pilgrimage (a contemporary title) is anger at the closure of the smaller monasteries and the threat to the larger ones. There is fear, too, for the treasures of the parish churches and an (ill-founded) fear of the new parish registers. The Pilgrimage marches under the Banner of the Five Wounds of Christ and the oath of the pilgrims includes allegiance to both the Church and, importantly, the King. The Pilgrimage has already occupied York; now it has marched south to take Pontefract and its castle.\*\*

\*The population of England at that time was approximately 2 -2.5 million.

\*\*The handbook of the History of Pontefract Castle makes no mention of the Pilgrimage.

Wakefield, though off the main route of the march, is divided and in ferment. A lawyer of the town, Thomas Grice, writes “...*The common people say openly that surely they will pay no more money for they have it not, and as for the jewels of their churches, they will part with none..*” From the Perceptory of St John of Jerusalem at Newland (near Normanton), the tenants “...*stirred the people...*” The small monastery at Sawley, north of Wakefield, but within the jurisdiction of the King’s Steward of Wakefield, Richard Tempest\*, still remains open and is defended by his son, Nicholas who has also reinstated the monks. Richard Tempest gathers a “...*body of horse..*” and gallops to Pontefract Castle where he takes the oath and joins the Pilgrimage and his kinsman, Lord Darcy. His bitter rival in the town, Sir Henry Saville, has also gathered men, but joins the King’s army, assembled on the south bank of the River Don at Doncaster.

The Pilgrimage moves from Pontefract to face the King’s Army across the river. It is a critical time. It is raining heavily and the river is in spate. Though “...*one, Dyamond of Wakefield had derived a policy for going over the water..*”, they could take no ordnance. If they could cross, the inferior, ill organised royal forces would prove inadequate to resist. Civil War is imminent.

During the unavoidable pause, there is much talk. The parley is disjointed. Messages travel to and from Doncaster and the pilgrims’ headquarters at Pontefract. The King’s spokesman is skilled in diplomacy; Robert Aske and other leaders of the Pilgrims are perhaps too gullible. They are persuaded that the King would hear and address their complaints. Remarkably, they disperse peacefully. They promise to recompense any damage caused by the march. There has been little serious violence and only one death – of a commissioner in the initial fracas in Louth.

A rather vague Pardon is issued and announced in Wakefield in December 1536. The people and clergy of the town agree to pay the extra taxes, understanding that their complaints are being addressed. But they never were.

Still the North simmers. In early 1537, against Aske’s advice, Thomas Bigod attempts to resurrect the revolt in the Northeast. It fails. More than 200 rebels (from both insurrections) are executed, including Robert Aske, Lord Darcy and more than 50 priests and monks and several abbots. Robert Aske has no memorial.

In 1541, the unrest flares again. A large group of citizens of Wakefield and the West Riding plan to take over Pontefract Castle at the Palm Sunday Fair and hold it in anticipation of a general rising. Moreover, they hope to receive help from a Scottish invasion. They hope, too, that Henry would be distracted by more adventures in France.

\*Richard Tempest was also Steward of the Duchy of Lancaster for Clitheroe Manor.

In the event, the Wakefield Plot is betrayed. Many flee but about 25 are arrested. Fifteen are executed, including Sir John Neville of Chevet and several priests. Henry personally conducts his Regal Progress to the North to accept the formal submission of both gentry and clergy. The North gradually quiets. Yorkshire, and Wakefield in particular, settle into comparative tranquillity or, at least, resignation.

### **Change – and More Change**

The 1538 Injunctions of the Archbishop of York, Edward Lee, stressed the King's Headship of the English Church. They demanded that all churches hold the specified books in English and insisted on the rigorous teaching of basic prayers; regular sermons were obligatory, including, twice per quarter, the formal rejection of the Bishop of Rome as Head; it was to be emphasised that Salvation is through only the Redemption of Christ. Pilgrimages were banned and Saints' Holy Days greatly reduced. These were viewed by the reformers, along with some sacraments, indulgences and other Catholic devotions to be distractions from the Christocentric essence of Christianity. Over the next four decades, the Injunctions became more specific both doctrinally and liturgically. The Churchwarden emerged as a central figure in the propagation and the monitoring of the Reform in the parishes.

Wakefield's longstanding parish priest, Thomas Knolles (1502-1546) was a graduate MA with a Doctorate in Divinity. He was elected president of Magdalen College, Oxford in 1527. He accepted the reforms, though his will suggests he remained sympathetic to the Old Religion. His successor, Thomas Robinson (or Robertson) (from 1546-1558) was a brilliant student at Magdalen and an enthusiastic reformer. He became a Protestant Divine and contributed to the Book of Common Prayer and the new Communion Service. Archbishop Holgate (from Hemsworth) reformed and became Archbishop of York. The recently appointed Prior of Nostell, Robert Ferrar preached Reform widely in the area to resolve "*religious ignorance*".

With the accession of young Edward VI (1547) and the Lord Protector, the Duke of Somerset, the religious changes gathered pace. Clergy were allowed to marry. Churches were re-ordered and sacred images defaced or destroyed. Some though, were hidden.

With the advent of Queen Mary Tudor (1553), the country returned, officially, to traditional Catholicism. Robert Parkyn, a parish priest from Hemsworth survived four monarchs, despite remaining sympathetic to the Catholic cause. He rejoiced at Mary's accession. John Hamerton of Purston Jaglin lamented the deterioration of Pontefract and pleaded for the restoration of the Hospital of the Blessed Trinity and the College and grieved over the damage caused by the advent of the New Religion.

The most striking feature of Mary's accession was the resumption of the public Mass. In 1555 Henry Saville, the new owner of the Chapel of St Mary on the Bridge, reported that in

that chapel, "...*God's service is daily maintained...*" Sufficient plate and vestments for the Masses suggests that the stripping of the churches had been incomplete.

The persecution of persistent reformers, so vicious in the South, hardly affected Yorkshire. There was only one execution in the county, at Richmond. Richard Bunny and his two sons, Edmund and Francis, fled to Calvin in Switzerland. They returned later and became prominent Puritans. Robert Ferrar, former prior of Nostell, was appointed Bishop of St David's, Carmarthen under Edward, but was found guilty of "*superstitious practices*" by his fellow Protestants. He was imprisoned until freed under Mary Tudor. The Catholic hierarchy however challenged his beliefs about clerical marriage and transubstantiation. Refusing to abjure, he was burned at the stake at Carmarthen.

Any likelihood of a more permanent return to Catholicism disappeared with the premature death (1558) of not only Mary and Cardinal Pole, but also twelve diocesan bishops (there was an epidemic of lethal "*sweating sickness*" at the time). The Catholic cause seemed lost.

### **Wakefield's Reformation 2 (Protestant Ascendant.)**

The Act of Supremacy defined the new monarch, Queen Elizabeth I, as "governor" rather than "head" of the Church. The Act of Uniformity (1559) dictated that the Prayer Book became central to the liturgy and obliged "*every person*" to attend their church each Sunday and Holy Day.

In the early years of Elizabeth's reign, there was, not surprisingly, a confusion of religious beliefs throughout the land. In Wakefield, Thomas Robinson (Robertson) the Vicar, had converted to Catholicism under Mary and had been appointed dean of Durham Cathedral. Refusing Elizabeth's Oath of Supremacy, and harried and fined, he remained active for some years, writing copiously in defence of the Sacraments. Two Sandal priests may have remained Catholic (there is some doubt) but Brian Jackson conformed, remaining the vicar for some years.

The first years of the new reign remained comparatively quiet in the North, but with the advent of Archbishop Grindal to York and the Council of the North, the rules of Conformity tightened. A large problem facing the development of the English Church was the shortage of adequately prepared clergy. The ex-priests of the Old Religion, no matter how committed they were, or were not, to the Reforms, were incapable of the enthusiastic propagation of Protestantism. As a result, the liturgical life in the individual parishes was very mixed. In the West Riding, the puritan clergy organised 'Exercises' to retrain and re-enthuse the parish clergy (see below).

Then, in 1569, the Earls of the Northeast rose in revolt, having withheld their support in 1536. But they failed to gain enough support and their small army was crushed. Elizabeth

ordered some 500-700 (some say 200+) executions in reprisal; “...scarce a village in the North escaped seeing a hanging...”

Some pockets of Catholicism persisted. Generous estimates of Recusancy were only 1-2% of the population in Yorkshire by the end of the 16<sup>th</sup> century. Persistence was higher in rural areas, dependent on sympathetic local gentry. The comparatively high number in Sandal was certainly linked to the support of Thomas Waterton and Francis Jackson (Warmfield). The level was higher, too, in Cawthorne where Waterton had lands. In Wakefield and its small townships, recusancy was uncommon.

The Papal Bull of Pius V (1570) had a disastrous effect on Catholics, for, by condemning Elizabeth and her laws, Catholics became *de facto* traitors and therefore responsible to the secular authorities. Moreover, threats from Spain stirred national anxieties and anti-Catholic feeling grew. Fines escalated from 20 pence for non-attendance at church in 1559 to £20 twenty years later (£20 was then the annual salary of a parish priest or minister.)

To avoid fines, husbands conformed to protect their wives, but that loophole soon closed. Others moved – or kept on moving. John Bretton of Sandal, after four years on the run and impoverished, was arrested in Wakefield, imprisoned and executed.

### **Attempts at Renewal**

The first seminary priests arrived in England in 1574, the Jesuits in 1580. Between 1558 and 1600, 107 Yorkshiremen were ordained abroad; 47 were executed and two died in prison. Half enjoyed less than five years of priesthood. Nine were thought to have apostasised.

Wakefield and the surrounding district produced several priests. John Amias (or Anne) from Crofton was arrested in Lancashire and executed in York in 1589. Robert Watkinson, a schoolboy in Castleford, was executed in 1602 within a month of his ordination (betrayed by a spy at the seminary.) Anthony Champney (alias Forester) from Cawthorne was imprisoned for a year then banished. Priests were zealously pursued in the area. John Redman from Lancashire was indicted in Wakefield in 1597 and Richard Kirkham was arrested in the town and executed at York in 1582, three years after his ordination.

The Jesuits certainly visited Yorkshire. John Gerard recalls staying at Woolley Hall where he was harboured by the Percy sisters<sup>1</sup>, often meeting other priests there. Edmund Campion spent some time in Yorkshire.

All these priests brought with them a new brand of Catholicism. They were young, zealous and educated, in contrast to their forerunners. They were sustained by the community, usually through a network of safe houses.

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<sup>1</sup> Lady Elizabeth was married to Richard Woodruff. Lady Mary stayed with them until they moved to London. She later founded a Benedictine convent in Brussels

The persecution was far less intense in the religious confusion of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, but Catholicism remained the 'Elephant in the room' with occasional flares up (Gunpowder Plot of 1605 and the Titus Oates' Papal Plot of 1678). The new Anglican Church, struggling to find a 'Middle Way', was torn between the extremes of the Non-Conformists (mainly Puritan, Presbyterian) and the 'High Church' of Bishop Laud. The divisions became politicised. Senior positions were allowed only to those communicating in the Anglican Church. Non-Conformists suffered, especially the Quakers. Besse<sup>2</sup> records that 15,000 suffered and 450 died under Charles II. Despite some attempts by the Stuarts to achieve toleration of Catholics, the possibility of a Catholic line of Succession with the birth of James II's Catholic son, resulted in his replacement by William and Mary.

### **A Puritan Town?**

Puritans took Protestantism to its ultimate Calvinistic conclusion. They were devoted to the Word – the bible and the sermon. Loathed and admired in equal measure they were rigid to a degree, eschewed all symbolism and imagery and could not tolerate Catholicism. They changed the culture of their towns, acquiring advowsons and attempting to appoint their own men, always seeking a "*New Jerusalem*". The woollen towns, including Wakefield, became notorious (or famous) for their Puritanism, though in Wakefield it was a little diluted by its Royal connections.

Wakefield's Parish Church like many others, was stripped of its altar, whitewashed throughout (1600), adorned with Texts and the pulpit remodelled (1635). Puritans demonstrated their 'election' in Philanthropy: provision of education and relief of the poor. Henry Arthington, citizen of the Wakefield, published a Tract in 1597 "*Provision for the Poore Now in Penurie*" which anticipated the Poor Law of 1603 that remained largely unchanged for 200 years. In 1591 Queen Elizabeth Grammar School was formally opened, enabled by a bequest of Francis Gaunt and supported by leading citizens, especially the Savilles, the Bunny family and John Mawde.

Ministers were expected to attend "*exercises*" in Halifax and were carefully monitored for their beliefs. These were important in the re-training of ex-priests and the maintenance of doctrinal and liturgical discipline. Several in the Wakefield area suffered for sundry misdemeanours. Joshua Kirby was imprisoned for praying for Charles II after the Restoration; Mr Scargill was ejected from Chapelthorpe; Edward Hill was ejected from Crofton "*for acts of non-conformity*" and "*Not wearing a surplice*". John Stocks, Vicar of Sandal 1625 was evicted, with his wife and family, for Royalist sympathies; Timothy Wood, usher of the Grammar School, refusing to accept the Act of Uniformity was imprisoned at York Castle.

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<sup>2</sup> J.Besse. A Collection of the Sufferings of the People called Quakers. 2 Vols 1753 ii p.xxxix

Yuletide was curtailed; with the cancellation of many Saints Days, citizens were deprived of Holidays; the Mysterie Plays were modified and then cancelled. The Sabbath was sacred and, on that day, all frivolity and games were forbidden. Wakefield was maybe no longer a Merrie City but perhaps it was a more efficient and better educated one.

While it is possible to pin-point the beginning of the Reformation to the time of Luther's written protest in 1517, it is difficult to estimate when it finished; indeed it seems to many that it continues to the present day. It is certainly possible to identify areas of Europe where the cultural and religious barriers are still manned and the battles still fought as they were in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries. The Celtic nations have long and bitter memories; and strict Calvinism still thrives in parts of Switzerland

Fortunately, violence is increasingly rare. The ecumenical movement has, over the last century, softened our relationships. We try to understand each other and to learn. We pray and work together. We are beginning to understand more of what we share rather than concentrate on what separates us.

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2910 words RM March 2018/19

An abbreviated summary of a thesis presented at the Departments of History and Local & Regional History, University of Leeds, 2001. The full text (*Wakefield's Reformation*), fully referenced, is available from the author.