

From Reformation to Civil War, 1550–1660

CHAPTER 6

Religion and rebellion

The Reformation was not a popular movement that triumphed quickly but a long drawn-out process that was imposed from above. The corporation of York obeyed the orders of the Elizabethan settlement of 1559 reluctantly, but many of its citizens continued to use Catholic phrases in their wills throughout the 1560s. No-one in Yorkshire was killed for his or her religion during Mary Tudor's brief reign (1553–58), though 45 were punished for heresy, but 20 Catholics were martyred at York in the 1580s. The most famous was Margaret Clitherow, a butcher's wife in the Shambles, who was pressed to death in 1586 for refusing to plead to a charge of harbouring priests. Many other martyrs were also natives of the city or its hinterland, but the stronghold of Catholicism was the Yorkshire Dales. Nearly all the leading families in Nidderdale and half those in Richmondshire were Catholic. In the last two decades of Elizabeth's reign, 35 North Riding men are known to have been trained as priests in continental seminaries and the number of Catholics in this part of Yorkshire actually increased, despite the severe penalties threatened by the law. Guy Fawkes, of course, came from York. In James I's reign Catholics were seen as less of a threat to the state, though crippling fines were often imposed upon them. Two out of every three of the 300 or so Yorkshire households that remained staunchly Catholic throughout Elizabeth's reign were of gentry status. Rural squires, who were related through marriage, such as the Ingilbys, Yorkes, Trappes, Plomptons, Middletons and Tankards, saw Catholicism through its most dangerous years. and in north-western parts of the county numbers rose during the reigns of the early Stuarts. In most parts of Yorkshire, however, Catholics formed an insignificant minority.

Neither the Wakefield plot of 1541 nor the Seamer rising of 1549 caused the government much concern, but the rising of the northern earls in County Durham and North Yorkshire in 1569–70 was a serious rebellion led by the Earls of Northumberland (Percy), Westmorland (Neville) and Cumberland (Clifford), the heads of old feudal families who resented their loss of power to the Tudors. The plot championed the Catholic cause but it failed to attract the

same response as the Pilgrimage of Grace had done a generation earlier. The rebels marched from Durham to Ripon, burning communion tables, English bibles and service books, but they failed to take York and were forced to retreat. Neville fled to Flanders and in 1572 Percy was beheaded in York Pavement and his head displayed on Micklegate Bar. The failure of the revolt marked the end of the Middle Ages as surely as did the dissolution of the monasteries and the events of the Reformation. Elizabeth appointed trusted men to key positions; Edmund Grindall became Archbishop of York and Henry, Earl of Huntingdon, was made Lord President of the Council of the North. Strong Tudor government brought its rewards, for the prosperity of England rose markedly from the middle years of Elizabeth's reign onwards.

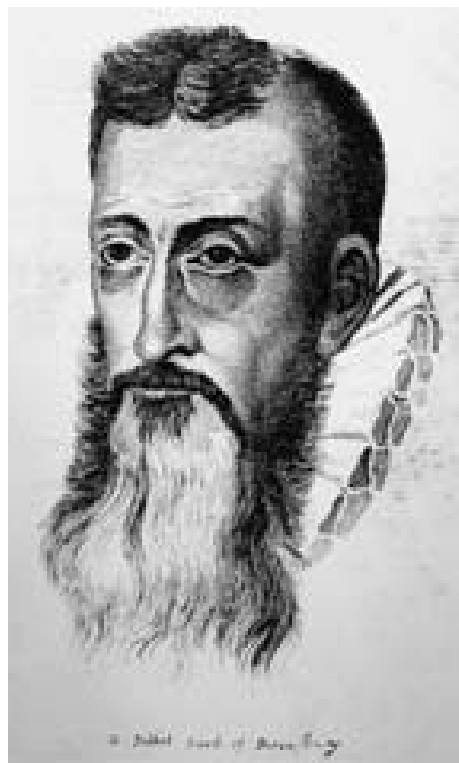
George, the sixth Earl of Shrewsbury, was given the unenviable task of keeping Mary, Queen of Scots, prisoner after she had fled to England. Between 1569 and 1584 she moved from one of the earl's properties to another but was held mostly at Sheffield, where the old hunting lodge had been converted into a great country house. George was the mightiest lord north of the River Trent

Pontefract Castle. This painting purports to show the castle and All Saints church about 1640, just before the Civil War. This view was based on an Elizabethan survey and is of uncertain accuracy.

The castle was undoubtedly one of the most important in the North until it was slighted by Parliament in the late 1640s after it had been actively occupied by royalist troops. It was built on a rocky outcrop and a Norman new town was laid out beside it. All Saints was a large church that was severely damaged during Civil War siege. In 1789 it was replaced as the parish church by St Giles.

WAKEFIELD ART GALLERY





and a firm Protestant, a man who could be relied upon to support the crown in the North, just as his ancestors had.

The great landowners

When Elizabeth came to the throne in 1558 six noblemen and 557 gentlemen had seats in Yorkshire. On the eve of the Civil War in 1642 the number of gentry had risen to 679, of whom 195 lived in the North Riding, 142 in the East Riding, 320 in the West Riding and 22 in York. Many could trace their descent from medieval knights and at least 270 had ancestors who had lived in Yorkshire since 1500. James I knighted 60 Yorkshiremen, raised 35 to the new order of baronetcy and ten to the peerage, but many other gentry families fell upon hard times through bad management and costly suits at law or by living beyond their means.

The signatories to a petition for a new university at York in 1641 confessed that ‘we have been looked upon as rude and barbarous people’, yet at that time 172 heads of gentry families had been educated at university – mainly at Cambridge – and more than 100 had travelled on the continent. Elizabethan families with cultured interests, such as the Fairfaxes and Saviles, were the first to have a sense of being Yorkshire folk, distinct from other Northerners. Sir William Fairfax decorated his great chamber at Gilling Castle with a splendid collection of the arms of the Yorkshire gentry. Outsiders recognised the

left Turret House, Sheffield Manor Lodge. During the sixteenth century the Earls of Shrewsbury converted the old hunting lodge in their deer park into a splendid country house. Most of the house was dismantled in the early eighteenth century, but the turret house, which stood at the entrance to the grounds, still stands in much the same state as when it was built in the 1570s and 1580s.

right George, Sixth Earl of Shrewsbury (c.1528–90). George was the richest nobleman north of the Trent. His many properties included Sheffield Castle and the Manor Lodge, where he held Mary, Queen of Scots, in custody.

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‘... a stiff-necked, wilful ... obstinate people.’

EDWIN SANDYS, ON YORKSHIREMEN

peculiarities of Yorkshire speech and character. In 1549 William Thomas remarked that the difference between a Yorkshireman and a Londoner was as pronounced as that between a Florentine and a Venetian and nearly 40 years later Edwin Sandys, Archbishop of York, was moved to say that he had never met or heard of such a ‘stiff-necked, wilful, or obstinate people’. A character in a *Brief Discourse between Yorkshiremen & Scottish-men* (1650) declared that he was ‘a Yorkshireman born and bred, I care not who knows it; I hope true Yorkshire never denies his county’. Most people in seventeenth-century Yorkshire did not think of themselves in this way, however, for their mental horizons were limited to the ‘countries’ or neighbourhoods with which they were familiar. Dalesmen had nothing much in common with the farmers of Holderness, while the cutlers of Hallamshire had little contact with the textile workers to the north of the Don and Dearne, let alone the inhabitants of the other two ridings.

The satirical ballad, *The Dragon of Wantley*, which denounced the ruthless way that the Wortley family extended their chase at Wharnccliffe, attacked the selfish interests of hard-headed gentry. The Constables, Fairfaxes, Gascoignes, Saviles, Tempests and others were as powerful in their own districts as their medieval predecessors had been. They tackled their loss of revenue from inflation with such vigour that on most Yorkshire estates rents rose higher than prices in the century leading up to the Civil War. The Saviles of Thornhill managed to increase the rents on their 12 Yorkshire manors by 400 per cent between 1619 and 1651. Landlords and tenants were often engaged in long and bitter struggles, though a few examples of a more conciliatory approach can be found, as when Henry Tempest of Tong advised his son in 1648 that he would be blessed and his descendants would prosper if he did not oppress his tenants and allowed them to live comfortably.

Recovery and growth

During the reign of Elizabeth the population of England recovered from its long decline to a level that had not been reached since 1300. This recovery had begun by the late 1530s, when the earliest parish registers regularly record more baptisms than burials. Growth was particularly vigorous in the western parts of Yorkshire where land was cleared from the wastes again. Between 1377 and 1563 the population of the West Riding rose from about 75,000 to 100,000, with the fastest rates of growth in Swaledale (about 900 to 2,600) and Richmond (620 to 1,615). In the Forest of Knaresborough the number of cottagers on the edges of the commons attracted the bailiff’s attention in the 1520s and caused increasing concern in the second half of the century. The whole of western Europe witnessed moderate growth at this time and England’s population almost doubled from about 2.75 million to about 5 million between 1541 and 1640. The old problem of how to sustain more people was solved by new industries and improved farming practices which provided enough food in all but the worst years of harvest failure.

Yet people were still likely to succumb to sudden outbreaks of disease. In August 1551 all but six of the 49 people who were buried at Halifax had died of the ‘sweating sickness’, seemingly a variant of influenza. In 1555 and 1556 harvests were ruined by heavy, persistent rains and in the following two years the sickness killed 8 or 9 per cent of England’s population. In 1557 and 1558 the parish registers of the West Riding woollen district recorded more burials than baptisms and in the Kirkburton register the words ‘plague time’ appear against the months of July, August and September 1558. Parts of Yorkshire were visited by both plague and ‘sweat’ in 1551–52 and by the ‘new ague’ in 1558–59. During these years, York’s population was reduced by at least a third to unprecedented low levels. The city was thereafter immune to epidemics for 45 years, prompting a local gentleman to say in 1598 that the city rarely suffered from any infectious disease. Other Yorkshire towns that succumbed to virulent plagues included Doncaster, where 747 people died in an outbreak that lasted from September 1582 to December 1583, and Richmond, where plague killed two-thirds of the inhabitants between August 1597 and December 1598; the parish register recorded 1,050 deaths by ‘pestilence’ and others were buried

Aerial view of Richmond Castle, with the town beyond. Holy Trinity church stands in the Market Place and the curving row of buildings follow the line of the medieval walls. Richmond recovered from the severe outbreak of plague to become a prosperous Georgian market town. It is interesting to compare this modern view with Speed’s map on page 89. WWW.WEBBAVIATION.CO.UK



The tomb of George, Sixth Earl of Shrewsbury, Sheffield Cathedral.

George is depicted as a knight in armour, with his head resting on a rolled-up mat, as was usual then, and his feet on a talbot. A huge monument, inscribed with his virtues, honours and connections, rises above him. His wife, Bess of Hardwick, is buried in Derby Cathedral.

PHOTOGRAPH: CARNEGIE, 2004



in unconsecrated ground in Castle Yard and Clarke’s Green. An inscription in Penrith church claims that 2,200 people in the deanery of Richmond died at that time.

In more settled times, the outer bailey of Richmond castle was converted into a market place around Holy Trinity chapel. The parish church lay on the outskirts of the town, probably on the site of an earlier church that served the pre-Conquest settlement. In the fourteenth century the bailey defences were enclosed with town walls, whose curving lines are now followed by shop frontages. By the time of Speed’s map, some of the old market stalls had been replaced by permanent buildings and the livestock market had become so congested that it had been removed to the edge of the town. Extramural development along Frenchgate, Bargate and Newbiggen occurred early in the medieval period as the town began to prosper. In 1258 the Franciscans founded a friary to the north of the town.

Local populations recovered from such epidemics because of younger marriages and higher birth rates, but plague continued to strike randomly. York’s immunity came to a dreadful end in 1604 when 3,512 people, that is 30 per cent of the inhabitants, were killed in the city’s last major visitation