

Clay, Rotha Mary., The Hermits and Anchorites of England. Methuen & Co. London, 1914.

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XIV. THE SIXTEENTH CENTURY

Ther was an Ancres with hom I had not a lytyll besynes to have her
grauntt to com owte, but owte she is.—Commissioners’ Report,
Worcester.

There ys a chapell . . . which in tyme past hath ben an hermitage,
wherein a pore impotent man, sometime heremyte thereof, doth dwel
not able to pay the rent.—Chantry Survey, Tadcaster.

Although in the sixteenth century recluses were not so numerous as formerly, they were still to be found in many churches and religious houses ; e.g. at Wakefield, York, Lincoln, Norwich, London (Bishopsgate), Westminster, and other places. Elizabeth, queen of Henry VII, made gifts to women enclosed at St. Albans and at Gloucester ; Katherine of Aragon gave alms to the anchoress of Stamford and to the anchorite of Marlborough ; and the pensioners of Henry VIII included “ancres”.¹ Many other instances are found in wills. A Somerset testator (1523) leaves : “To the Anchresse of Crookehorne, 40*d.* and a pair of shetes. To the Ermytt there, 3*s.* 4*d.* and a pair of shetes.” At Faversham “my Lady ankeris” was succeeded by a male recluse ; Cromwell’s *Remembrances* (1529-31) included petitions from the anker of Faversham and from his sister, Ann Sawsten, and as late as 1541, a legacy was made to Sir Thomas Crakynthorpe, anker. A will of 1528-9 shows that there were ankers both at the White Friars and Black Friars of Lynn.²

To such benefactions there was usually added a request for intercessory prayer ; e.g. at Faversham (1519) : “To the Ancres in the churchyard to the intent she shall pray for my soul and all Christian souls, 4*d.*” ; and at Sandwich (1523) : “To the Ancras being at Our Lady Church in Sandwich to pray for my soul, 6*s.* 8*d.*”. Sums of money were bequeathed

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to the priest enclosed in the Austin Friary at Northampton, known as “the ancre of our lady of Grace,” or “the Armett of Saynt Austens”. The parson of Creaton gave 20*d.* “to the good father Anker for to say v massys of y^e v woundes of our Lord Jesu cryste”. At the time of the surrender of the house, Robert Barrett was anchorite.

The cell, as a recognized part of the chantry system, was doomed at the Dissolution of the Monasteries. The inmates were quickly disposed of. In vain the nuns of Polesworth, with their abbess and an “ancess”—reported by the commissioners as women of a very religious sort—intimated their desire to continue there or to be transferred to other houses (1536). They were allowed, indeed, to buy a brief respite, but in 1539 they were forced to surrender. One of the nuns, possibly the recluse herself, was close upon 100 years old, and the commissioners themselves begged the Court of Augmentations to ratify pensions to all : “for most of them were aged, impotent, or friendless”.³ The solitary Dominican sister at Worcester was dismissed under compulsion with a feint of acquiescence. The official visitor of the Blackfriars wrote to Thomas Cromwell that he had not a little business to get her out, “but owte she is.”

The Dominican anchoress of Norwich came under the influence of Thomas Bilney, the Protestant reformer, who presented her with a copy of the New Testament translated by Tyndale, and also with a book called the *Obedience of a Christian Man*, which was amongst those prohibited by Bishop Tunstall. When Bilney was convicted of heresy, there was a danger lest she should be incriminated. When therefore he was about to suffer for his faith at Norwich (1531), he made a solemn declaration at the stake, which was recorded by one who was present :—

“And where as that the lady Ankeres of the blak freres is put in grete trouble and surmised that she shuld be a heretike and that I shuld teche and instructe her with heresyas as well by bookes as otherwise. Good cristen people here I take my deth upon it that I doo knowe her but for a good and vertuous woman. I beseeche god to preserue her in goodnes. And I know non heresy in her nor I neuer taught her heresy. I wold god there were many more so good lyvyng in vertue as she is both men and women.”⁴

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In all probability she was the “Katern Man late recluse in the house of the late Blak Freres” to whom in 1548 a pension of 20*s.* was granted by the Corporation for life, on condition that she relinquish such right as she had in the “ancess-house”. Two years later the civic assembly passed another resolution : “It is agreed and graunted that Katheryn Manne syngle-woman shall have fre libertye to occupie within this cittie so long as she shall kepe her shoppe and be soole and unmarried”. Some recluses, old and feeble, were dependent upon the alms of those who had known them in the old days ; this in 1546-7 the parson of All Saints’, Norwich, bequeathed 6*s.* 8*d.* to Mistress Kydman,⁵ sometime anchoress of Carrow.

Buildings were disposed of in various ways. The “Ankeresse House” at Exeter was granted with St. John’s hospital into private hands, whilst the “late ancrs of Excetour,” Alice Buttes, received an annuity from the Crown. The cell at Allhallows, London Wall, was suppressed in 1538, and was given to the City sword-bearer. In 1516, there had been an anchoress living at St. John’s chapel, Wakefield, but a century later Dodworth speaks of it as “now translated into a laythe (i.e.barn), on the south side wherof ther is a hollow place yett extant in the wall wher [an][sic] anchoret lived”.⁶ Such tenements were occasionally put to parochial uses, and became a vestry, or, as at Gateshead, a school. The four rooms at Chester-le-Street were occupied by widows, who paid a few shillings a year to the churchwardens. In 1619 these building were granted to the curate, but in 1629 the parish paid his house rent elsewhere “in lieu that formerly he solie have had the anchorage, which is employed to support the poor”.⁷

There were hermits, too, scattered up and down the country during these years preceding the Dissolution of Religious Houses. Road and bridge hermits were still doing useful work, and were popular objects of charity. The private accounts of Sir Henry Willoughby in 1561 show “rewards” paid to the “armytts” called Egerton and Mytton, and to the “armytts” of Bindon and Polesworth ; and as late as 1542 he

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gave twopence to a poor hermit at the gates.⁸ Persons travelling would give alms to hermits on the highway. Henry VIII on a journey “paied in almes to an heremyte upon the waye” 4s. 8d. He also allowed £3 6s. 8d. to the hermit of Deptford towards the repair of his chapel.⁹

The enterprising hermit of Lydd seems to have made himself indispensable to the town, and to have remained on at the hermitage from 1520 to 1558 in the capacity of agent in connexion with church restoration.¹⁰ John Bate supplied loads of gravel, and even lead for the roofing of the chancel, e.g. :—

“1532. Itm receuyd of father armyte for Half a C and
20 lb. of Lede, 4s. 8d.

“1538-9. It pd. to the hermyte for certen Stonys of
hym Bought for to Amend the churche Wall, 2s. 8d.”

But whilst some were honest, hard-working men, others were idle and greedy of gain (pp. 61-2). William Thorpe, the Lollard, had spoken in his *Testament* (1460) of “heremites and pardoners, ankers and straunge beggers” who had leave to defraud the poor.¹¹ There was some truth in his complaint, for the system of indulgences was frequently applied to their support, and some undoubtedly held position which were connected with superstitious uses. In 1443, for example, the pope offered an indulgence to penitents who should visit and give alms to a chapel¹² in the parish of Stalham, dedicated to St. Andrew “at which John Kylburn, a hermit, has long dwelt, and whither resorts a great multitude out of reverence for the said saint, by whose merits divers of those who visit it have been delivered from diseases”. Pilgrims to Bawburge were wont to

resort to the orator of the hermit near the bridge, and after mass he “attended them to the town, sprinkling them with hyssop and holy water”. Another instance of such service occurs at Hinxton, in the neighboring county of Cambridge. An Elizabethan inquisition on concealed lands reported as follows :—

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“We find lykwise that an Ermite . . . dwellinge there did cast hollywater on them that came to him fortye yeares sithence and tooke the proffitts thereof. . . . But whether the sayd howse and close were given or used to anye other superstitious use before or since that tyme we knowe not.”

A similar commission held in the country of Northampton elicited the information that at Beston¹³ in Brampton Ash there was a hermitage called the chapel of St. Augustine, where pilgrimage used to be made to an image of that saint, and where mass was many times celebrated in a superstitious manner. Pilgrimage was also made to the hermitage at Little Harrowden, whereof the hermit-chaplain, Sir Thomas, was the recipient of numerous bequests in the reign of Henry VIII.

The hermitage at Southampton, situated near the old ferry over the Itchen, was frequented by pilgrims ; the present Chapel Road was once the “causey of our Lady of Grace”. Henry VII’s charter presents a curious admixture of secular and spiritual interests. “Considering that by a confluence of our subjects and others the town may be greatly improved and advanced in wealth and prosperity,” a yearly fair of several days’ duration is granted to the mayor and burgesses, as also to William Gefferery, hermit of the chapel of the holy Trinity and the Blessed Mary, “in which chapel the said glorious Virgin is very frequently honoured by the faithful”. In 1510, Henry VIII visited this place and gave 6s. 8*d.* in alms.

The hermit of Colnbrook, near Windsor, was guardian of another shrine in honour of the Blessed Virgin. Elizabeth of York made an offering of 8*d.* at “our Lady of Cabroke,” and gave the same day to the hermit in alms 12*d.*

The chapel of Court at Street in Aldington sprang into fame about the year 1525 through its connexion with the “Holy Maid of Kent”. Before becoming a nun at Canterbury, Elizabeth Barton had lived in Aldington. There she was visited with sickness which manifested itself in seizures and trances accompanied by wild speeches, and resulted (so says the statute-book) in “wekeness of her brayne”. The parson of Aldington, Richard Master, encouraged the woman

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to believe herself inspired, and spread exaggerated reports, with intent to increase the number of pilgrims to the chapel “for hys own lucre and advauntage”. Instigated to play the prophetess, she predicted that if the King’s marriage with Anne Boleyn took place, she should be burnt and he would die a villain’s death. An immense crowd gathered at the chapel, in whose presence the nun became rapt :—

“At her next voyage to our Lady of Court of Strete, she entred the Chappell with Ave Regina Coelorum in pricksong. . . . Thre fell she eftsoones into a marveilous passion before the Image of our Lady, much like a bodie diseased of the falling Evill, in the which she uttered sundry metricall and ryming speeches, tending to the worship of our Lady of Court of Strete, whose Chappell there shee wished to be better mainteined, and to be furnished with a daily singing Priest.”

A hermit-chaplain, Sir William, was duly appointed, and “the Heremite was enriched by daily offering”. When the fame of the place was at its height (1528) a typical bequest was made by Isabel, Lady Poynings :—

“To the herymete of Curte of Strete vjs. viiij*d*. To our Lady Chapel . . . a yard and two nails and a half cloth of gold, for a vestment.”¹⁴

The chaplain himself was the subject of one of the nun’s “revelations”. Whilst she was at Canterbury, and he at Aldington, she announced “what meate the Heremite had to his supper, and many other things concerning him,” whereat people marvelled greatly. Lambarde’s account, in his *Perambulation of Kent*, was written within thirty-six years of these events.

Elizabeth Barton herself may have been the victim of hallucinations, but her aiders and abettors who compiled the rolls of prophecies, were certainly guilty of fraud. Bidden by an angel, she visited Henry VIII himself : possibly she told him the story repeated by Chapuys in a letter to Charles V, namely, that she had seen the seat prepared for him in hell (cf. p. 160). She confessed many mad follies to the archbishop, but desired permission to go again to Court at Street,

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and “there have a trance, and then know perfectly”. At length she admitted her treason against God and the King, and publicly confessed her falsehoods at Paul’s Cross. Cranmer declared, in 1533, that the feigned revelations of the false nun were had in abomination ; and Sir Thomas More—who had once thought her pious, albeit strange and childish—now regarded her as “the wicked woman of Canterbury”. Elizabeth Barton, the parson of Aldington, and their accomplices, were imprisoned, convicted of high treason, and executed (April,

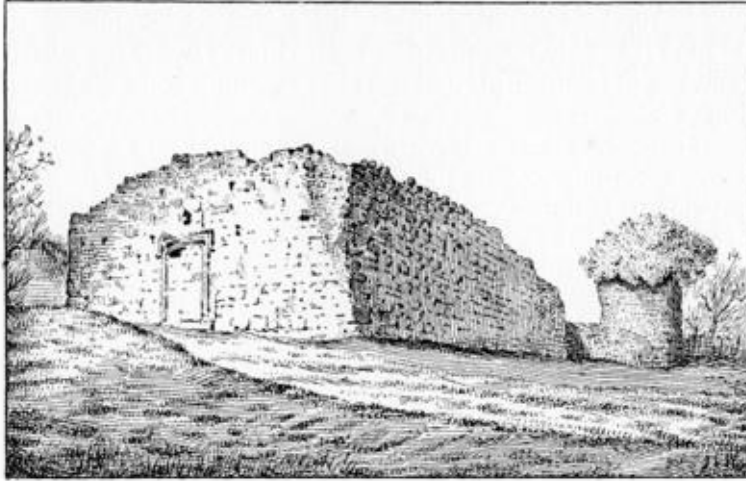


FIG. 8.—Chapel of our Lady, Court-at-Street.

[Illustration : Fig 8.—Chapel of our Lady, Court-at-Street.]

1534) : “This day the nun of Kent, with two Friars Observant, two monks, and one secular priest, were drawn from the Tower to Tyburn, and there hanged and beheaded”.¹⁶ The hermit escaped, but disappears from public notice. His ruined chapel, the scene of all this excitement, is still standing (fig. 8).

One of the last of the Kentish hermits, an intelligent and hard-working man who dwelt by Richborough Castle, was visited by Leland and commended by him : “I had Antiquities of the Heremite the which is an industrius man”.

The last tenant of the hermitage near Southwick was Prior

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William Noxton, who took refuge there from the sweating sickness (1534). Writing to Lady Lisle he says that the visitation of God is very sore, and that his letter is “scribbled with a comfortless heart in the eremitical habitation of St. Leonard”. In 1544, St. Leonard’s Armytage, consisting of house, chapel, garden and closes, was disposed of by the Crown.

The last solitary of Sherborne died a few months before the expulsion of the monks from the abbey. One of the earliest entries in the parish registers the burial of William Howell, hermit of St. John the Baptist (1538) When visiting this town, Leland noted that “there was an hermitage of S. John by the mylle, now down”. Human bones have been found in the plot of ground near the saw-mill, still called “St. Jone’s”.

There were a few survivors of the old days, in places not easily accessible to state officials. About the time of the suppression of Holme Cultram Abbey, in Cumberland, the following notice occurs : “There is a chapel called St. Cuthbert’s Chapel with two garths containing one acre in the occupation of Richard Stanley hermit there, with a little moss thereunto belonging”. The Survey of Yorkshire chantries includes the pathetic memorandum concerning Tadcaster :—

“There ys a chapell in the sayd parishe, covered with stone, which in tyme past hath ben an hermitage, wherein a pore impotent man, sometyme heremyte thereof, doth dwel not able to pay the rent ; which chappell with th’ appertences ys worth to be letten by yere as appereth by the rental, vj s. viij d.”.

In the case of the last chaplain of Warkworth hermitage, the grant made by the Earl of Northumberland to Sir George Lancastre (p. 48) was ratified by the Court of Augmentations in 1537, save that in lieu of twenty marks, he was to receive ten marks yearly, with the profits of the Rood chapel, and of St. Leonard’s hospital at Wigton. Before 1567, the place had ceased to be occupied. Clarkson’s Survey observes that :—

“Ther is in the parke also one howse hewyn within one cragge, which is called the hermitage chapel : in the same ther haith bene on preast keaped, which such godlye services as that tyme was used and celebrated. The mancion howse ys nowe in decay : the closes

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[Plate XXXVII : Warkwork Hermitage.]

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that appertained to the said chantrie is occupied to his lordship's use."¹⁵

If, indeed, any solitary remained in his cell after the Dissolution of the Monasteries (1536-9), he was almost inevitably homeless after the Suppression of the Chantries in 1546. It was reported in 1548 that the chapel of Horteley in Batheaston "wherein an Armyte sometyme dwelled" had for the last twelve years been inhabited by another tenant.

St. Brandan's chapel at Bristol—reported by Leland to be "now defacyd"—was secured by the town clerk, who built a windmill in its place. The site (which became a fort in the Civil Wars) is now occupied by the Cabot Tower. The chapel near Plymouth is referred to in 1591 as a barn and messuage called "the hermytage of our ladie at Quarrywell". St. John's chapel, which had belonged to Tavistock Abbey—"a little cottage much ruyned, with two little garden plotts"—was used in the seventeenth century first as a pest-house and then as a poorhouse. The premises of Malmesbury Abbey, sold in 1544, included "St. White's Armitage" upon Burton Hill. Leland mentions another "in the Dike of the Toune at the West Ende of the old Paroche Chirche," that is, in the Avon valley, south of Malmesbury. In the following century Aubrey noticed several ancient buildings, which looked like hermitages, about Malmesbury and Westport. In the parish of Stanton St. Quintin "stood a very fine hermitage, moted about in an oaken wood". Alluding to a ruined chapel at Yatton Keynes, Aubrey says: "I think there was a Hermitage by it, but a pleasanter romancy place I know not easily where to find".

The solitary now belonged to a bygone age—the true solitary, that is, for the "ornamental hermits" of the pseudo-gothic revival belong to a wholly different category. Recluses were swept away by the flood which carried off all that was in any way connected with monasticism. They had, however, fulfilled their purpose and justified their existence. They were not a class composed wholly of eccentric and fanatical, or selfish and morbid persons who shirked the duties of life. They were often men and women of strong and saintly character

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whose life commanded respect and won gratitude from their fellow-men, who recognized them as workers. At its best, the contemplative life was a career and a noble one. There were of course some whose conduct brought discredit on their profession, but there were others who lived up to the highest ideals set for them by one of themselves:—

"Righteous hermits also have a single aim: in charity of God and of their neighbour they live; worldly praise they despise; as much as they may, man's sight they flee; each man more worthy than themselves they hold; to devotion continually their minds they give; idleness they hate; fleshly lusts they manfully withstand; heavenly things they taste and eagerly seek

; and earthly they covet not but forsake ; in sweetness of prayer they are delighted.”¹⁶

The passionate earnestness of purpose in such a life commands the admiration said to have been expressed in an outburst of enthusiasm by a Protestant moralist, Dr. Johnson : “I never read of a hermit but in imagination I kiss his feet”. Even the most cautious critic of the twentieth century, fearful of idealizing the “Dark Ages,” may well echo the words of the hermit of Hampole :—

“Hermetis lyffe therefore is grett, if it gretely be done”.

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Footnotes~

1. Nicolas, *Privy Purse Exp.*, I, 67, 102 ; L. and P. Hen. VIII, IV., pt. iii., p. 2732 ; III., pt. ii., p. 1545.
2. Consist. Court, Norwich, Reg. “Godsalve,” f. 269.
3. L. and P. Hen. VIII, x. No. 1191 (2).
4. Foxe, *Acts and Mon.*, ed. Townsend, IV. 642, App. iii.
5. At the bishop’s visitation in 1514, the sub-prioress had complained “that Dame Margaret Kidman is unkind”.
6. *Church Notes* (Rec. Ser., 34), 51.
7. W. O. Blunt, *Church in Chester-le-Street*, 13-5.
8. *Hist. MSS. (Middleton)*, 1911 ; 331, 335-6, 346, 389.
9. *Privy Purse Exp.* 42, 273 ; L. and P. Hen. VIII, v., p. 749.
10. A. Finn, *Records of Lydd*, 346, 359, 376, 381-2. etc.
11. Foxe, *Actes and Mon.*, ed. 1538, p. 543.
12. Probably at the place now called Chapel Field.
13. Or Bedstow. Sir John Hoit of Brampton by Dingley by will dated 25 March, 1419-20, leaves “to the emendation of the hermitage of Bedstowe, xl s.’. Linc. Reg. Repyndon, *Mem.* f. 190 d.
14. Test. Vetusta, 634.
15. Percy’s *Reliques*, ed. 1858, III. 333.
16. From Richard Rolle, *Fire of Love*, 29, 30.

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