

This is the twelfth of an occasional series of articles by David Stone about incidents in the history of Swanton Morley and its church

WHEN THE RECTOR HAD TO DISOWN HIS WIFE

Here we continue the story of Thomas Morley. (Note that in the last article I called our rector, Thomas ‘Morley’, but in the events that follow he is referred to as Thomas ‘Norley’.) We left Thomas in 1552, probably feeling quite relieved that the visitation by the Duke of Northumberland’s men was over. But, as we saw last time, the young king, Edward VI died in July 1553 and Northumberland was executed for high treason in the August of that year. The Catholic Queen Mary came to the throne and married clergy, such as Thomas, were in for a nasty shock.

Once again, if you want to skip the background material about the legality of clerical marriages, you can jump straight to the next page.

Married clergy in the reign of Henry VIII

It was not until the time of Pope Gregory VII, at the end of the eleventh century, that the celibacy of the clergy became a firmly established rule in the Church. Before then, although the marriage of priests had been widely discouraged, it had never been definitely forbidden. Later, with the arrival of the Reformation, in most countries that adopted it there also came the abolition of clerical celibacy. In England, however, this abolition was a complex and convoluted process. The situation during the reign of Henry VIII was extremely confused. At the beginning of his reign, although he had banned preaching about clerical marriage, the number of married priests began to grow. So, in November 1536 he ordered his bishops to conduct secret enquiries to identify married priests. Some enquiries did take place but these were not entirely effective. As part of an alliance with the Lutheran princes Henry was under concerted diplomatic pressure to accept clerical marriage, but he refused to concede. For Henry was never a Protestant; he really remained a Catholic who had rejected the authority of Rome. Thus, his proclamation of November 1538 included an order that married priests be deprived of their livings. This was clarified and strengthened when Parliament passed the ‘Act of Six Articles’ in July 1539. However, despite all this, Henry’s chief minister, Thomas Cromwell, continued to patronise and promote married priests. It would seem that, whilst stringent laws existed, they were not always enforced, although some married priests did have to flee abroad.

The situation changes under Edward VI

Under the first parliament of his reign the Act of Six Articles was repealed, thus removing the taint of criminality from clerical marriage. However, the clergy themselves remained divided on the matter and so Parliament passed a bill in February 1548 which more or less said that, although it might be preferable for priests to remain chaste, it was better that they should marry openly than just pretend to be single. It was also noted explicitly that the children of married priests were legitimate. Finally, in 1549 it was decreed that all ecclesiastical or spiritual persons, so far from being denied matrimony, had full liberty “by the laws of God lawfully to marry.” In general, however, the English people remained rather hostile to clerical marriage.

And is reversed again under Mary

In August 1553, barely a month after her accession, Mary issued her ‘First Proclamation about Religion’ calling for the restitution of the old religion. In November 1553 and March 1554 she sent to the bishops a whole series of articles dealing with ecclesiastical matters. Among the latter was an instruction to proceed with all speed to deprive from their benefices and ecclesiastical promotions “all such persons who contrary to their order and the laudable custom of the church have married and used women as their wives.”

The situation in the Norwich Diocese

Here we are very fortunate because we have available a mass of evidence which is not available in any other diocese. There is in the Episcopal Registry a complete list of the clergy in the diocese who, during the first years of Mary's reign, were proceeded against on a charge of illegal marriage. There seems to have been very little delay after the receipt of the Queen's instructions. On Tuesday 13 March 1554 Consistory Court hearings began at Norwich Cathedral. Forty-nine married clergy had been cited to appear on that day, and they were all in attendance. They were told that, owing to recent changes in the law, their marriages had now become illegal, and that each of them was charged with this offence. By 31 March the number of defendants who had been dealt with had mounted up to 110. Altogether the treatment meted out to 159 of the married clergy is recorded, but there were 332 names on the official list. It is quite possible that many of the remaining 173 never appeared in court at all, preferring to relinquish their orders quietly and unofficially. In this way, many who retained their wives are known to have drifted into lay occupations. Others went abroad and remained there until the days of Elizabeth.

The distinction between the Regulars and the Seculars

One of the results of the dissolution of the monasteries had been that many of the monks and friars who were then dispossessed had drifted into the ranks of the secular clergy and had found employment in the parishes, or as chantry chaplains. Some of these, in company with their secular colleagues, had then married when in 1549 it became lawful to do so. But the fact that these 'Regulars' had once taken the monastic vows was not forgotten. With the Secular priests, a concession could be made to those who "with the consent of their wives or women do consent to abstain" and were willing to separate. Once suitable penance had been done, the bishop was empowered to re-appoint them to another living. The Regulars were suspended and deprived like the rest, but in addition they were immediately divorced by the court.

As a typical example of what happened to the Seculars, we can look at the thirty who were in court on 16 March, the first proper day of business. The first on the list was the rector of St Michael Coslany. His wife was with him and they were asked whether for the future they wanted to remain separate. Both of them answered "No", as did twenty-two other couples. Five others expressed their willingness to conform to the law and to live apart. The other two said that their wives had died.

The penance that had to be paid

A typical penance for the priest was to walk in front of a procession in the cathedral wearing a white 'rochet' and carrying a rod a book and a taper. He then had to confess his sins to the congregation. Rather unfairly, not only did his wife have to do much the same thing in her parish church, but also to wear on her head a paper on which was written that she is a fornicator.

Now, it had become usual for many of the reforming clergy, including Thomas Norley, to cultivate beards, and when they appeared in court they were all of them ordered to cut them off as quickly as possible.

The fate of Thomas Norley

There is a degree of uncertainty about what happened to Thomas Norley. Most names in the list have either one or two asterisks against them, showing that the incumbents were either probably or certainly not restored to their parish; Norley, however, has no asterisk, which suggests that he was allowed to return. Yet we know that William Gippe(r)s was rector in 1555. Norley's name is also one of only 40 out of the total of 149 that has *caste* (chastity) written against it. It is suggested that this may mean that his chastity could be relied on by the Crown. So did he completely abandon his wife? If we can find his will then maybe this will tell us what happened to him after he left Swanton Morley.