

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

### **WHAT HAPPENED TO THOMAS NORLEY?**

I concluded my last article by musing about the fate of Thomas Norley after he gave up his wife and left Swanton Morley in 1554, and I did not really expect to have anything more to say. However, I have managed to find out a little more, so I thought that you might like to hear about it before I wander on to something else.

In those days, a successful priest made his money by being appointed to hold the benefice of a church or the prebend of a cathedral. Also, it was very common for the rector to pay a salaried priest (vicar) or chaplain to do the job for him, and to pocket the difference. Much the same thing held true for a prebend. We shall see later that Thomas Norley managed to hold a couple of prebends and a benefice at the same time.

Thomas is described as being vicar or chaplain of Harston in Cambridgeshire from September 1539 until at least 1547 (other sources say 1551). He probably moved directly from there to Swanton Morley in 1550. But we are more interested in what happened to him after he left here in 1554. We suspect that he had agreed to give up his wife and was probably given a benefice elsewhere during the reign of Queen Mary (1553-1558).

Now everything changed when Queen Elizabeth came to the throne in November 1558. In 1559 two acts were passed which together are generally called the Elizabethan Religious Settlement. On 24 June 1559 a new Act of Supremacy was passed. This replaced that passed public or church office in England to swear allegiance to the monarch as Supreme Governor of the Church of England. Failure to so swear was a crime. The Oath was later extended to include members of parliament and people studying at universities. All but one of the bishops lost their posts, a hundred fellows of Oxford colleges were deprived and many dignitaries resigned rather than take the oath. The bishops who were removed from the ecclesiastical bench were replaced by appointees who would agree to the reforms. The other act was the Act of Uniformity; with this act Elizabeth made it a legal obligation to go to church every Sunday. It also set the order of prayer to be used in the English Book of Common Prayer.

After Elizabeth's succession, priests seem as a general rule to have taken back their wives. However, if Thomas had indeed agreed to be *chaste* and to abandon his wife, then she may not have been too keen to have had him back.

Whatever the truth, Thomas certainly seems to have prospered under this new regime. He was installed as a prebendary at Worcester Cathedral in December 1560, and in 1563 he was presented by the Queen to a prebend in Westminster Abbey. He held both prebends until his death in 1570. However, he does not seem to have taken his prebendal duties too seriously for it is noted in the Acts of the Dean & Chapter of Westminster that "Thomas Norley, Stall IV, paid a rare visit to a long meeting in 1569."

But, at the same time as holding these prebends he also held a benefice, for we know that in July 1569 the Queen presented him as rector of St Nicholas, Barton-le-Clay in Bedfordshire, (in the diocese of Lincoln). The Patent Roll covering this appointment says that he was the Queen's sub-almoner. A note on the Barton-le-Clay website refers to their old rectory building, the Tudor part of which is thought to date from 1563, and says, "Anglican clergy were not allowed to marry until 1549 so it is likely that Thomas Norley (1569) was the first priest able to forsake the cold and draughty accommodation in the tower for the relative comfort of the new dwelling." He was still rector of Barton-le-Clay when he died in 1570.