

THE LAST DAYS OF HAILEY ABBEY
AND OF GRETTON CHURCH CHAPEL

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Old Gretton Chapel.

In the centre of the hamlet of Gretton, Winchcombe to Stanley Panlurge, there still stand portions of a chapel-of-ease erected there, presumably, in the middle of the fifteenth century, if not earlier. During many recent years they were covered—and I imagine that they still are so covered—with heavy masses of ivy, and now form part of an inhabited cottage.

This old chapel, of which there is an interesting drawing in the late Mrs. Dent's Annals of Winchcombe, published in 1877, became disused as such in 1868. Nobody now seems to know much, if anything, concerning its history, and local tradition is as silent concerning it as are the tongues of generations of the humble folk of Gretton who worshiped there in the distant past.

Indeed there may not be much to know, but a search in the Chantry Certificates preserved at the Public Record Office has at least soon afforded some information.

In 1546, the year before Henry VIII. died, the last material blow of the Reformation had been dealt and, to quote the historian Froude, the remaining property of all ecclesiastical and semi-ecclesiastical foundations, the lands, the rent-charges, the miscellaneous donations for the support of universities, colleges, schools, hospitals, almshouses, or parochial charities, for chantries, trentals, obits, masses, for stipendiary priests in family or other chapels, for religious services of different kinds, for candles, offerings, ornaments of churches, and other useful or superstitious purposes, were placed by parliament in the hands of the king, to receive such "alterations" as the change of times required.

Parliament had hesitated before placing so large a trust in the hands of the King, but they eventually did so, and forthwith he appointed commissioners to take possession of all such property as he considered came under the Act. His legal power, however, died at his death, and the Protector Somerset had to apply for and obtained a renewal of it.

The new Act (I. Edward VI. cap. 16) made the King's power even more explicit, and was strongly opposed by Archbishop Cranmer, who was quick to foresee the consequences. He received substantial support from several other members of the episcopal

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bench, but their efforts failed. So, with certain high and specified exceptions, the Act was put into full operation, and even the shrines and altar plate at York Minster were sent to the Mint, there to be melted down and cast into base coin. The contagion quickly spread, and everywhere the chalices, jewels, bells, and ornaments of country churches and chapels were being offered publicly for sale, sometimes by the local parochial authorities; at other times by higher and more capable authorities. It will be seen later that it was suggested that such action as this had even been taken in the little and remote hamlet of Gretton.

So, under date 14 February, 1548-9, the Commissioners for Gloucestershire certify (1) to the King the position of the chapel of Gretton, and that certain lands belong to it for the maintenance of a priest there. At that time they say amongst other things, that the incumbent is one Richard Freeman, and that the rents of the lands and benefices by means of which his maintenance is supplemented produce £3 3s. 4d. A sum of 3s. 6d. has to be deducted, and the clear income therefrom is £2 19s. 10d. There are no ornaments, plates, or jewels.

This certificate does not add much to the history of the chapel, but further research has disclosed an interesting suit relative thereto, and which came before the Court of Requests a few years later, at a time when the country was becoming well-accustomed, under Philip and Mary, to the return to the Roman obedience. All statutes against the Pope had been repealed in 1554, and that very awkward subject of the restitution of church plunder—in which friend and foe had alike participated—had been decided, at least so far as the monastic lands were concerned. They were to stay in the hands of their present owners.

There remained, however, the great deprivations of almost innumerable smaller foundations, and the inhabitants of Gretton might well think that, under all the new circumstances, something should be done for them, that they might be helped to recover the ways and means of their very modest needs prior to the passing of the Chantries Act.

So, pursuing the search, I have found the documentary record of an appeal made in 1557, to the Court of Requests (2), by

(1) P.R.O. Chantry Certificates, Gloucestershire, 22/60 and 23/51 and 85.

(2) P.R.O. Court of Requests, 20/127.

Thomas Grenyng, John Teynton, Adam Smythe, and Richard Teynton, who are named as representing one hundred and forty of the inhabitants of Gretton, an estimate which was ultimately reduced to one hundred.

On behalf of these inhabitants appellants say they have a chapel-of-ease situated a long mile and a half from the parish church of Winchcombe, to which church there is, they add, a very foul and hilly way, and one very painful for the very aged people of Gretton to take in the winter.

Although, they continue, no presentment was ever made by the inhabitants of Gretton that the rents of the lands by which their priest was maintained should, under the Act, go to the King, yet Anthony Ayleworthe, of Ayleworthe — between Naunton and Notgrove, co. Gloucester, and others have for five years past received all such rents. The natural consequence has been that the chapel at Gretton has been without a priest, since there is now no income for his maintenance, as there always was in the past. The appellants therefore have already prayed that all such rents may be restored to their former uses, in order that there may be divine services celebrated in Gretton chapel once again, to the relief of the inhabitants and for the peace of mind of Anthony Ayleworthe and his colleagues.

However their appeal has fallen on deaf ears, and as for Ayleworthe and the others they utterly refuse to be affected in any way. So there is nothing for it but for the people of Gretton to ask, as they now do, that the defendants may be cited to appear before the Court, to answer to this appeal.

On 24 November, 4 and 5 Philip and Mary (1557-8), Letters of Commission were "given at our Manor of St. James," and there then followed the answer of Anthony Ayleworthe.

He refers, in his reply, to the Act made in 1547, for the transfer to the King of all Chantries, Chapels, Colleges, Obits, Lamps, Lights, etc., set apart for the finding of any Stipendiary Priest "except Chapels of Ease and such like Chapels, whereunto no more lands or tenements belonged than the churchyard or a little house or close." By this Act he claims that, without any manner of inquisition or presentment made by the oath of twelve men, the King was lawfully seized of the lands at Gretton. So seized, the King under his Great Seal—by Letters Patent, dated 22 August, 1540—sold the Gretton lands to William Sale and William Bridge, the tenants thereof at that time

being John Smyth, Widow Agnes Martone, William Hardeyne, Ryehard March, Thomas Moge, Adam Smyth, Thomas Hunt, John Teynton, John Steyl, Ryehard Marche, Henric Greeninge, Philip Smythe, Agnes Higgyns, and John Craker. Thus far the defendant.

In due course there comes the replication of Thomas Greyning and his Gretton neighbours. They now become more explicit. Gretton Chapel, they say, is "a chappell of ease of great antiquitie," founded for the use of those inhabitants of Winchcombe who chanced to live more than one mile or more distant from their parish church. It is of much necessity, for otherwise those inhabitants specified would be deprived of divine services for the greater part of the year, for all manner of Sacraments and Sacramentals and other divine services have been ministered there."

The lands in question have belonged, they continue, to Gretton chapel for time out of mind, and the rents have been used for the reparation of the chapel and the maintenance of all divine services there, "for the ease and quietnesse" of the villagers. The lands were never given to King Edward VI. under the late Act, and therefore he could not sell them, as alleged, to William Sale and William Bridges.

The defendants rejoin emphatically that the late King did become possessed of the said lands, by virtue of the Chantries Act, and that he sold them to Sale and Bridges who, for £90 5s. 2d. sold them to Anthony Ayleworthe. The said lands were specially set apart in order to provide funds for finding a priest "to sing mass in the said chapel for soules departed." As long as Winchcombe Abbey stood—the last Abbot, Richard Anceline, had surrendered to the King's commissioners in 1539—a monk from the Abbey used to say mass in Gretton chapel, and for his services received the profits of the said lands. The monk was appointed by the Abbot, and removed by him, and the inhabitants of Gretton had no voice in the matter at all.

Gretton chapel, the defendants continue, is not such a chapel as is mentioned in the said Act, for no marriages, burials or churchings could take place there, "nor such Sacraments and Sacramentals ministered therein as in other churches are ministered." Confessions were always heard by "the Curate of Winchcombe" who, they say, still confesses Gretton people who go to Winchcombe church for that purpose. He

also still administers Extreme Unction — they refer to this anointing as "extreme Visitation"—to all sick persons there, when afflicted with some grievous bodily disease, and at the point of death; and also buries the Gretton dead at Winchcombe.

Also, they maintain, the said chapel can be no chapel of ease, for such chapels are maintained and the priests of them are found at the costs and charges of the parsons and the vicars and with some part of their tithes, and not with lands and rents. For proof of this statement they instance two other chapels within the parish of Winchcombe, which they admit are really chapels of ease within the meaning of the Act. One of them is the "Chapel of Charlton Abbates," and the other "the Chapel of Potteslippe." At Potteslippe chapel, indeed, "there be two priestes singuings," and they are maintained by the tithes and not with any lands or rents, as defendants can easily prove.

Gretton, they continue, is not one mile distant from the parish church of Winchcombe—thus it pleased them to think—and they hint that the dissatisfied inhabitants might take an example from the inhabitants of the village of Naunton who, although they dwell a mile further away from Winchcombe, yet come to all manner of divine services at the parish church there, "without any manner of grudging [grumbeling]."

The present King and Queen, Philip and Mary, they say, are now possessed of one part of the Gretton lands, and the yearly profits therefrom, viz., nine shillings, are paid regularly to the Receivers of Gloucestershire by one Henry Hodgkins.

Apparently at some time or another in these proceedings it had been alleged that Aylworthe had damaged the chapel at Gretton, but he now declares that he can prove that it is "unruined and undefaced" by any act of his or by any persons at his command, but that the damage has been done by complainant and his adherents, who have defaced the chapel and "taken away all the implements of the same without the consent of Aylworthe. Nor has he ever forbidden the use of the chapel to anyone, and the people have always been able to have a priest at their pleasure. He adds that there formerly belonged to the chapel more than forty acres of arable land, meadow, and pasture, the yearly value of which was £3 6s. 8d. Furthermore, as the King and Queen are possessed of part of the lands, and that they were lawfully purchased of King

Edward VI., Ayleworthe concludes by praying in aid of King Philip and Queen Mary that the Privy Council may be informed of the action of the Gretton people, in order that the Queen's inheritance may be preserved.

There then follow the interrogatories to be administered to deponents against Ayleworthe in this suit, and finally, on 19 April, 1558, a Commission sat, presumably at Winchcombe. The Commissioners were Sir Thomas Throckmorton and William Resde, esquires.

The first deponent to be heard is Thomas Hyde, of Little Washborne, aged 30, who says that in Gretton there are fifteen "habitacons and Mansyon howses and tyme out of mynd hath so bene," and that there are about one hundred inhabitants. The distance to the parish church is a mile and a half, and there has always been a chapel of ease called Gretton Chapel.

The inhabitants, deponent adds, have always "used for their ease to hier and fynde a priest to Mynyster and Celebrate devyne Service," which he says, consisted of "Masse Matens and Evensong, holye Brade and holye water," and other ceremonies at all such times as were considered necessary.

The reference to the Holy Loaf, or "panis sanctificatus," is interesting. This loaf was brought to the celebrant after Mass on Sunday, and after being blessed—not, of course, consecrated—by him, was cut up and distributed to the congregation, to be consumed in token of friendly amity. A collection was usually made at the time that the bread was distributed to the congregation, in the same manner as is done, up to the present day, when the Holy Bread is distributed at High Mass at the Church of the Madeleine in Paris. The custom of the distribution of the Holy Bread was almost universal in this country prior to the Reformation. One of the demands of the Devonshire men when, for the purpose of resisting the changes in faith and ritual, they broke out into rebellion in 1549—only eight years before the Gretton suit came before the Court of Requests—was that they should have "holy bread and holy water every Sunday." The use of the Holy Loaf actually appears, in the churchwardens accounts of St. Mary's, Reading, as late as the year 1618.

To return to the depositions of Thomas Hyde, he says that he has known priests to be hired by the inhabitants of Gretton for the space of three whole years. Sometimes they were only hired for the winter half.

year, and for certain other times of the years, "thought out" by the inhabitants and agreed upon with the priests. Deponent—although he does not say so—is referring to the period of nearly twenty years that had elapsed since the suppression of Winchcombe Abbey for, as already shown—and as is repeated later on by another deponent, Robert Page—the Gretton people by the interest of the Abbot, "commonly hired some Moncke of the Howse to serve them in the Winter time," and at such other times as they could agree upon.

The profits of the lands belonging to the Chapel, deponent continues, have always been used for the hiring of a priest to serve at Gretton. There were two churchwardens elected annually, and they received the profits of the land and paid them to the priest. If it happened that these profits did not suffice, the churchwardens then proceeded to gather the required balance amongst the inhabitants, and sometimes they sold certain wood growing upon the lands, so that they could "make out the wadge of the preste."

The yearly rents of the lands averaged £3 6s. 8d., but sometimes more than this, for certain meadows were leased by the year for the best advantage. Deponent concludes by stating that he does not remember any priest or clerk who was ever instituted at Gretton Chapel, nor any that ever served here, but such as the inhabitants "did put in and out," as they pleased.

This evidence is corroborated by Bartilmew Porre, of Winchcombe, aged 56; William Smarte, of Greet, aged 64; Robert Page, of Alderton, aged 56; and John Hale, of Naunton, aged 50. It is rather curious that apparently no inhabitant of Gretton deposed before the Commissioners. And so the end.

Doubtless, however, the unfortunate inhabitants of Gretton must have lost their suit, notwithstanding the new order of things, an order which was so soon to pass away again.
