

CHANGE AND DECAY IN EAST SUFFOLK: THE VICISSITUDES OF PARISH FORTUNES

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AT ITS MOST BASIC LEVEL, the foundation of a chantry always carried the implicit obligation of intercessory prayers for the souls of the faithful departed in return for endowment. The very word 'chantry' came from the Latin *canto-cantare*; and in many instances, founders required that the priest should 'sing' for their souls. Worldly payment in return for spiritual benefit lay at the heart of all religious foundations, and chantries established by the wealthier members of society might include charitable benefactions for their less fortunate brethren in the form of hospitals and almshouses. Here, the chantry chaplain or Master, together with the inmates, would supply a powerful prayer-force in return for the temporal comforts provided by the foundation. Religious gilds, the corporate answer to the individual chantry, were very similar foundations. Because the same intention was common to each of these smaller intercessory institutions, including free chapels, they were all entered in the Chantry Certificates at the time of their suppression in 1548 (Redstone, 1904-6).

The fortunes of four intercessory foundations in East Anglian parishes will be considered here, all excellent examples of the enrichment of history by documentary sources from the late medieval period, through the Reformation and out on the other side, certainly as far as the Commonwealth and sometimes further. These foundations are all to be found in East Suffolk, an area whose late medieval wealth came from testators involved in agriculture, cloth manufacture and, not least, from the fishing along the lengthy Suffolk coastline with its navigable rivers for water borne transport and its inland harbours. These four parishes vary considerably, as do their histories. Their fortunes were all greatly enhanced by water, but directly in the case of one and indirectly in another, that same commodity brought about their downfall.

Running through the fabric of these parochial histories is the thread of religious dissent, some premature, some tardy, for East Anglia has to be viewed against a background of sharp divisions, early rejection and late avowal. The Norwich heresy trials of 1428 to 1431 reveal the heretical ideas of sixty men and women from the diocese of Norwich, twenty six of them from the Waveney valley including seven from the parish of Beccles. As Norman Tanner states in his introduction to the printed version of that manuscript, it is 'by far the most important record of Lollardy in East Anglia. It shows the extent of heresy at an early date in the area ... it offsets East Anglia's reputation as an exceptionally 'High Church' area in the late Middle ages and helps to explain why it later became a Puritan stronghold' (Tanner, 1977, I).

One hundred years after the Norwich trials, the bishop of Norwich, Richard Nix, observed that 'clerics from Cambridge and merchants and such that have their abiding not far from the sea' were responsible for the infiltration of Protestantism (MacCulloch, 1986, 157). Ipswich certainly, as one of the most important east coast ports, was an early reformed town; and its parish of St Lawrence is a prime example of this. Elsewhere in Suffolk, the non-conformity that followed the Reformation is first to be seen in the timber-framed farmhouse at Walpole, converted into a congregational chapel as early as 1647 (*PSLAH*, xl, pt 2, 244). This may have been the earliest non-conformist chapel in the county and the country; followed by countless later chapels built in the non-conformist 'cubic' style.

What any parish experienced during or as a result of the Reformation stems from unique circumstances pertaining to that individual parish. Working with 198 churchwardens' accounts gathered from English parishes before, through and after the Reformation, of which only 18 cover the vital years 1535 to 1570, Ronald Hutton showed convincingly that there could be great disparities or great similarities between parishes across the country (Hutton, 1990). This was true of East Anglia. There is no particular knowledge of the religious sympathies of the parishioners in three of the foundations discussed here. Only in Ipswich can the persuasion of the parishioners be assumed.

In 1548, the Chantry Certificates were drawn up in the name of the boy king, Edward VI, as the new regime sought to expunge the doctrine of Purgatory, a man-made belief which was to have no place in the reformed Church. But there was more in it than that for the Crown – there was profit to be reaped, land to be apportioned and artefacts to be appropriated. The Chantry Certificates for Suffolk show a thin spread of intercessory institutions across the county, which at that time was the thirteenth largest in England. Was this paucity of foundations due to Suffolk's disenchantment with the traditional Catholic church? Kreider's work on chantries considered that piety in Suffolk - and Oxfordshire - was luke-warm in comparison with the offerings of other less affluent counties (Kreider, 1979). In 486 Suffolk parishes there were only 66 intercessory institutions which could support a priest, made up of three hospitals, seven religious guilds, twelve free chapels and forty-four chantries, but there were some omissions too. Where, for example, was the Spring chantry from Lavenham, founded by the wealthiest commoner in the land? Where was Sudbury college? Had Ipswich no hospital?

The entire map of England had been cleansed of monastic houses between 1528 and 1540, and there is no doubt that there were great fears among the population, both clerical and lay, for the future of the intercessory institutions and their endowments. Additional documentation and visual evidence reveal that many more intercessory institutions had been founded than appear in the Suffolk Chantry Certificates. Several of these institutions actually survived into the early fifteen forties, but although entered in the Certificates these foundations had been dissolved before the certificates were drawn up in 1548, Nayland chapel being an instance of this (Knox, 1991). And yet the Chantry Certificates are an invaluable adjunct and using them in conjunction with churchwardens' accounts, inventories, wills and later post-Reformation documentation, it is possible to consider the chantry foundation of Edmund Daundy in St Lawrence church, Ipswich, and the chantry's subsequent decline. On the coast at Walberswick, the earliest stage of a fifteenth-century parochial chapel and, later, its re-building can be traced and then followed through its treatment at the hands of iconoclasts in the seventeenth century, ending with its almost total destruction. In the parish of Beccles, standing high above the river Waveney, the fate of the Guild of the Holy Ghost took a slightly different turn (Evans, 1989). At Dunwich, whose demise is closely related to the North sea which has carried away its seven medieval parish churches on the crumbling coastline, there are two hospital foundations to be considered.

DAUNDY'S CHANTRY, IPSWICH

Ipswich lay on the river Orwell to the south of the county with a population of between three and five thousand in the early sixteenth century (Webb, 1962, 24). It may not have been the seventh largest town in England, but at that time it was possibly the seventh most prosperous town in the land, a position which it retained until the seventeenth century. It had been granted its charter by King John in 1200 and its government was enforced by 12 portreeves or portmen, that title now commemorated in Portman road, the home of Ipswich Town football club. The fortune of the town was built on trade, shipping and cloth, the fabric exported to the Low Countries, Spain, Portugal, the Barbary coast, and in the north to Danzig, Elbing and Russia. In the early 17c the ship building industry caused Ipswich to be called The Shipyard of London – but with the collapse of the cloth industry around 1660, the fortunes of shipping foundered.

Edmund Daundy was an Ipswich merchant, a portreeve and a bailiff. He was the founder of Ipswich market cross and of the almshouses in Lady lane, for the upkeep of which he left land to his fellow bailiffs. His chantry foundation appears in the Chantry certificates of 1548 as follows: 'Mr Daundeyes chantry, alias Beckett's chantry, founded by Edmund Daundeye, for morowe mass to be sung in St Lawrence church, Ipswich, and for one obit. Clerk, Sir Thomas Pecocke, aged 43 years, well learned, no other living. Yearly value £5 18s. Clerk's stipend £10 12s 3d. Goods to the value of 5s.' (Redstone, 1904-6, no.34, p.37).

A copy of Daundy's foundation document dated 30 November, 1514, was entered in the register of St Lawrence church.¹ His will survives, dated 2 May, 1515.² Two weeks later he died. He was buried under a whitestone on which there were brasses, yet even the stone has now gone. The foundation document reports that Daundy was establishing a perpetual chantry with an endowment of 100 acres on the fringes of Ipswich. He appointed a priest, James Crawford, to serve at the altar of St Thomas in the parish church of St Lawrence, the Martyr, to pray for the prosperous state of his sovereign Lord the king, Henry VIII, his dear beloved wife Queen Katherine and also for himself, Edmund Daundy, but also for Daundy's nephew, Thomas Wolsey, clerk, dean of the cathedral of Lincoln, while they lived and for their souls after death. Crawford was also to pray for the soul of Anne, the wife of Edmund, and Robert and Joan Wolsey, parents of the said Thomas Wolsey.³

In the foundation document Daundy described Crawford as a man of ability and honest learning. He specified what prayers were to be said including a daily mass and a requiem mass once a week and he supplied two vestments which were to be folded and laid up in a chest with locks, especially provided for the purpose. All chantry foundations provided liturgical books and the essential chalice and paten, the contents of which represented the transubstantiation of Christ's body. Care of vestments, repair of books and maintenance of plate and living quarters lay with the chantry priest, and loss of office was threatened if the property was alienated or allowed to decay. Daundy reserved 3s 4d. a year from the stipend for maintenance, with a further 11s granted to Crawford to cover the cost and charges of subsequent priests, the equivalent of a modern day 'upset allowance'. Daundy also commanded that his chantry priest 'should haunt no tavern nor common alehouses and from all unlawful games and sports utterly to abstain'. On the anniversary of Daundy's death, the chantry priest, having paid the parish priest, the parish clerk, the singing and serving clerks, the choir boys, sexton and bell-ringers, was to pay twelve poor people of St Lawrence parish to pray for Daundy's soul and the souls which he had specified. The two bailiffs of Ipswich were to receive 13s 4d.

Nothing more is heard of James Crawford, the chantry priest, until the late 1530s by which time he had been in the post for over twenty years. By then he was probably in his middle to late forties. The deposition of Laurens Stystede, one of the bailiffs of Ipswich, was dated 10 March, 1538 at Ipswich.⁴ He stated that James Crawford, priest, said that he would sell his chantry. He had, before that, cut down twelve score of young trees in a ground called Rysynges, and thirteen score in the Dene, parcels of the said chantry. Robert Joyne, the other bailiff, and the portmen and 'divers honest persons' of the parish of St Lawrence were called and they summoned Crawford before them. He was told that he might be deprived for making this waste, which was contrary to the ordinances of Edmund Daundy, the founder. Crawford replied that he would rather sell than that the King should have it. In consequence of this he was dispossessed of the chantry. The deposition was signed by Robert Joyne, John Allyn, Robert Dawndy, John Sparrow and Stystede. Nicholas Hervy and Rauf Goodwyn, the current Ipswich bailiffs, wrote to Thomas Cromwell later that year and it becomes apparent that Crawford was of the old persuasion. 'Robert Daundy of Ipswich, merchant, came before us, the bailiffs of the town, and commanded us in the King's name to attach James Crawford, clerk, of treason, who was indicted two years past when the said Robert Daundy and John Butler were bailiffs. He says Crawford was never arraigned upon indictment, and we have attached him accordingly. Ipswich 15 December'.⁵

Thomas, Lord Wentworth, wrote to Thomas Cromwell the same day informing him that James Crawford, late chantry priest of Edmund Daundy of Ipswich, was an enemy to the Word of God.⁶ During the Pilgrimage of Grace, the bailiffs had reported Crawford's demeanour to Wentworth. He had been deprived of the chantry by them because he did not keep the ordinances made by Edmund Daundy and so, at Wentworth's request, they had appointed Thomas Bekone, a discreet priest, well learned and of honest conversation. Wentworth was a protestant supporter, known to be antagonistic to conservative priests (MacCulloch 1986, 160). Wentworth and Bekone happened to be on the same side. James Crawford was not. Bekone, a Norfolk man, was a Cambridge graduate, ordained in 1538. In 1532 he had been employed at Rushworth college in Norfolk, 'the boys [there] put under the tuition of no less a personage than Thomas Becon the Reformer, then a young man of twenty, who

had recently taken his BA degree'. He later went on to be a chaplain to Cranmer (Jessop 1888, xxxviii; Venn 1922, 114). As an early protestant, Bekone was probably already known to Wentworth, who placed him in Daundy's chantry. In Bekone's later writings, he grouped together chantries, great monasteries for the pot-bellied hypocrites, great colleges and free chapels 'for soul carriers and purgatory rakers', but his fervour and reformed ideals shone through as, looking on the twilight of the old Catholic order, he asked 'When was the love of man ever so cold to the poor?' (Jordan 1959, 163). It is not known how long he stayed in Ipswich but, many years later under Mary Tudor, he was convicted of heresy, forced to recant and burn his books and he left the country while she was on the throne. He returned under Elizabeth to become a noted protestant author and preacher.

Maybe the bailiffs thought twice before appointing another priest of Wentworth's choice for the subsequent and last holder of the chantry was Thomas Peacocke, a graduate from Cambridge (Venn 1922, 326). Peacocke was described as being 'well learned' in the Chantry Certificates, but perhaps because he had catholic sympathies the certificates do not say he was of honest conversation. Ultimately he was president of Queen's college, Cambridge, but lost his preferments after the accession of Queen Elizabeth. As for James Crawford, he was guilty of adhering to the faith in which he had been instituted to Daundy's chantry. He was last heard of as chantry priest elsewhere in Suffolk in 1540.⁷

At about the same time as the chantry was dissolved, Barker, Alberd and Dyché, the churchwardens of St Lawrence, sent certification to the commissioners of the Crown enumerating the ornaments, plate, jewels and bells they had sold and on what they had spent the money.⁸ They had already sold enough plate at 4s 8d. an ounce to bring in £48 6s. A cope and a shrine of gilt and timber with the tabernacle went for £9. Four hundredweight of latten and brass, the banner cloths and the altar cloths and other sundries brought the total to £63. The parishioners of this early reformed parish had already filled up the niches where images had stood and had whitened the walls of the church, which were now adorned with scriptural texts as ordered by the Crown. Eleven stained glass windows 'of feigned stories contrary to the king's majesties injunctions' were soon to be glazed with white glass costing £12. They had begun to lead the roof and so far had paid out 22s, and added 'The rest hath great need of leading for the rain it raineth in'. Money over and above the sums specified was lent to poor men in the parish 'for which we have obligations with good surety'. The declaration was signed with the consent and agreement of the whole parish and over forty names were appended.

Nearly one hundred years later in 1643, the Suffolk Puritan, William Dowsing arrived in the parish of St Lawrence (Cooper, 2001, no.84, 233). He was responding to a warrant from the earl of Manchester to deface and demolish the imagery in chapels and churches 'that all crucifixes, crosses and all images of any one or more persons of the Trinity, or of the Virgin Mary and all other images and pictures of saints or superstitious inscriptions in or upon all and every church' should be taken away and defaced (Cooper 2001, 12). Later, angels, superstitious vestments, rood-lofts, holy-water stoups and organs with their cases and frames were included for destruction. His work pattern was to make an inventory of the offending objects when he arrived in a church, to destroy what he could in the time he could spare, and leave orders for the remainder to be destroyed after his departure. In Suffolk he visited 113 churches himself, but he worked with deputies who undertook the destruction elsewhere. All he could find within St Lawrence church that might offend his reformed beliefs were two popish inscriptions, 'one with beades' and written *Ora pro nobis*. Unlike his visits to many other churches in Suffolk, here there were now no popish pictures – these had already been thrown out with the stained glass of feigned stories a century before.

In looking for visual evidence of chantry chapels, it is well to remember the words of Bishop Stokesley to Thomas Cromwell on the destruction of the Grey Friars at Reading in 1536, that he had defaced the chapel inward (Stone, 1972, 1). In the sixteenth century it was the defacement of ornament in parish churches which took place. Subsequent desecrations of the seventeenth century completed the wreckage. Anything that remained as evidence of late medieval practice was tidied up by the Victorians and the interior of St Lawrence church is a prime example of Victorian thoroughness. The site of Beckett's altar was on the south side of the nave although now there is little

left that could be identified as relics of past doctrine, whereas every niche, every piscina, every fragment of traceried screen are vital clues in the siting of former chapels. The Victorian restorers completed the internal destruction in the nineteenth century. The parish church of St Lawrence, Ipswich, now redundant, is an exhibition centre. No visible memorial exists to the charitable and religious Edmund Daundy. And yet his endowment is perpetuated in the name of the Chantry Estate in Ipswich. He would not be displeased to know that in 1951, a council estate of 3,260 houses was built by the Borough Engineer's department on his chantry lands, that same borough of which he had been such a conscientious member (Pevsner, 1975, 308).

ST ANDREW'S CHURCH, WALBERSWICK

Walberswick, at the mouth of the river Blyth, tells a different story at a later date. Walberswick was not a parish, but a chapelry of Blythburgh down river from Blythburgh itself in which lay a small Augustinian priory and a grand parish church. Several coastal villages on the Suffolk coast which were not parochial faced a similar situation. Sizewell chapel, for example, which was in Leiston parish, was badly attended by its small coastal community of fishermen at the time of the Reformation, and the chapel was dissolved and left to rot. The difference between Walberswick and Sizewell, however, was that Walberswick was a fishing community, bustling, buoyant and wealthy. Its fortunes and those of Blythburgh rose and fell together.

By 1426 the small chapel on Walberswick marshes had not been large enough for the growing congregation of the port (Gardner, 1754, 152). The inhabitants had already made up their minds to improve the situation and the elders of Walberswick drew up a contract with two local masons for the building of a church tower on land recently provided by the manorial lord three furlongs northwards on a fine eminence adjoining Fish Street.⁹ The contract gives details of the materials that the people were to supply, but using the local building material of flint put a restriction on how much wall could be erected in a year. The mortar used had to be thick and there had to be plenty of it for in one year a height of only 10 foot of flint wall might be achieved, being built one foot at a time to allow the mortar to set. The masons worked from the feast of the Annunciation – Lady day – to Michaelmas, but no later as winter frost might damage the construction. The masons were to be paid 40s each plus a barrel of herrings and a gown of livery per annum, and a masons' lodge was to be erected. The tower was to be built on a new site. By 1450 it was completed and it is from this date that the churchwardens' accounts survive and run in minute detail for fifty years (Lewis, 1947). The inhabitants next began to build a new church adjoining the tower; and the churchwardens' accounts from 1450 onwards record the moving of windows with all the old images and King Harry's table from the abandoned chapel to the new church. By 1473 they had started to build the north aisle and had demolished the old chapel, but at the same time they were also constructing a new quay at the water's edge and a guildhall for the gild of St John. Other gilds supported in Walberswick at that time were the gild of Our Lady and of St Andrew, who was the patron saint of the new church. St Barbara, the patron saint of firemen, artillerymen, architects and military engineers, also had a gild dedicated to her at Walberswick, a reminder of the exposed position of the settlement on the water front.

The fortunes of Walberswick were founded on fishing; and churchwardens' accounts and local wills reveal a highly organised fishing industry with a drip feed from the profits into the church coffers. At the end of each voyage or each fishing season, every fisherman was entitled to a dole, from the Old English *dāl*, a share of the catch. These tended to be apportioned by custom and a fish-tithe, known as Christ's dole, was paid in cash or kind towards the harbour maintenance and the upkeep of the parish church in the home port, both being paid in equal portions (Millican 1970-72, 154-7). The fish-tithe paid by Blythburgh and Walberswick in 1411, as agreed by Roger Swyllington, lord of Blythburgh and Walberswick, and John Hetherynham, the prior of Blythburgh, and twelve local fishing masters was as follows: 'that the tithe of fish, that is of herrings, smelt and other fish, used to be paid, is paid and in the future should be paid in the following form ... the foresaid tithe should be

paid and assessed according to the rate of hire of the ship in which the fish are caught, after the expenses of the food of those in the ship have been deducted ... then it should be seen how many portions the ship should receive for labour and for transport of the fish. If the ship takes four portions, then one portion shall be given for the tithing; for example, if the ship takes four thousand herrings, then one thousand shall be given as tithing, and if the ship takes two thousand herrings, then five hundred shall be given as tithing, and so on, whether more or less. In the tithing no other expenses are to be deducted' (Harper-Bill, *Blythburgh*, 239).

The Walberswick church accounts of 1453 record that that portion of Christ's dole paid towards the maintenance of the church by a local boat-master would be 6s 8d per thousand full herring and 3s 4d for schotten herring, fish that had spawned (Lewis, 1947, 89). 16d was paid on 4000 sprats. In 1455 there were thirteen named herring boats at Walberswick quay and Harry Poty, a local boat owner, paid 13s 4d on behalf of his fleet of fishing boats; and another 13s 4d would have gone to the maintenance of the harbour (Lewis, 92). It is from figures such as this that the rebuilding of Walberswick church was realized. More important for the future, however, is to appreciate the wealth generated by the thousands of North Sea herrings and Icelandic cod caught annually by even a relatively small fleet, and the uncertainty in a Protestant climate of a future founded entirely on one commodity, particularly if it happened to be fish.

Walberswick had always been supplied with secular chaplains by the Augustinian priory at Blythburgh. These chaplains, some of them named, flit in and out of the pages of the churchwardens accounts for the fifty years from 1450-1499. Vestments were made for these men, and they in turn made new manuscript service books for the new church on the coast. In 1537, Blythburgh priory, its personnel reduced to a prior and two canons, was suppressed under the act for the dissolution of priories worth less than £200 a year. There are no records to reveal Walberswick's reaction to what was happening upstream but, if nothing else, it was the disruption of a small, tight-knit community.

In 1560 'by an inundation of the sea' Walberswick and Dunwich sustained a great loss of board, plank, timber and salt (Gardner 1754, 164). In 1585 the town, being very poor, agreed at an assembly to sell the great bell from the church for which they received £26 8s 9d from Thomas and George Smith from Ipswich (Gardner 1754, 159). Three years later the town could no longer support its poor '... seeing the great decay of fishing fare ... by which trade the town was and is yet simply maintained ... our good and best occupiers of fishing fare are deceased and that divers good houses of late time, by misfortune of fire, are consumed ... We are not able to continue maintenance of our charges without some other trade or traffic than fishing fare' (Warner, 2000, 15). A rate was raised on vessels in and out of the port loaded on or off the quay, and the embattled Walberswick fishing industry, already stripped of much of its profit, was supported by the export of dairy products from its port. In 1609, an order was made at Beccles sessions with the consent of the inhabitants of Walberswick 'that none but old men, who had spent their former days in fishing fare, should occupy the coasting business for butter ... and that young men should diligently attend the fishing craft that bred up fit and able masters of ships, and skilful pilots for the service of the nation'. By 1628 upwards of eighty people were described as likely to perish for want of necessary food and sustenance and a weekly rate was raised from leading citizens within the Blything Hundred (Warner, 2000, 44). In 1633 there were 71 families in the town, but the following year only fifty four, part of the town having been destroyed by fire (Gardner 1754, 159-60).

In April 1644 William Dowsing arrived at St Andrew's church. His journal reads 'Brake down 40 superstitious pictures; and to take off 5 crosses on the steeple and porch; and we had eight superstitious inscriptions on the gravestones' (Cooper 2001, 297). The churchwardens' accounts for that year describe the arrival of Dowsing at the church to see about taking down images, brasses and gravestones while others were paid for raising the brasses, taking down cherubs and disembowelling the organ, for which the wardens paid out 13s 10d (Gardner 1754, 160). In 1652 Walberswick was described as one of the poorest towns in England, 'we not being able to repair our church ... and at this present, not above one man living in the town that have five pounds a year of his own' (Gardner 1754, 176). They were charged with not having things convenient at the church and, in 1696, the

church was pulled down (Gardner, 1754, 162). The three remaining bells, the lead and timber were sold for £303. Charges and materials for patching up half the south aisle for congregational use came to £291. The people of Walberswick were left with £11 13s 2d.

THE HOLY GHOST GILD, BECCLES

Beccles, in the north of the county, was the third largest town in Suffolk. It sat at the top of a prominent cliff on the south side of the river Waveney, facing the county of Norfolk across the water. Here was an important port for the herring catch brought up the navigable river Waveney from the coast. The river provided excellent transport for water traffic, an Elizabethan survey stating it would bear a keel or barge of 20 tons; and road traffic from London to Yarmouth passed through the streets of the town until the mid-eighteenth century when the turnpike was built. The Old Fish Market, listed in Domesday, was overlooked by an ancient chapel dedicated to St Peter, the fisherman. Up the hill at the highest point between the cliff and the New Market stood St Michael's church alongside its detached tower. Within St Michaels, several religious gilds celebrated including the gilds of the Holy Ghost, St Michael, the Ascension, the Holy Trinity, the Holy Name of Jesus and the gild of St Nicholas (Suckling, 1846, I, 13), of which two appear in the 1524 subsidy returns, the gild of St Michael's stock being worth £6 and that of the Holy Ghost gild £5 (Evans, 1989, 31). Only the Holy Ghost gild is entered in the chantry certificates of 1548. The earliest trust deed in the archives of Beccles Borough Records, dated the twenty-third of December, 1544, shows that property extending to forty-two acres had been transferred to 'the present alderman of the gild of the Holy Ghost of Beccles', John Thorne, and others, seventeen in all, by the two Beccles chaplains, Henry Bendes (or Bendysche) and Edward Woodcock, described as 'surviving feoffees'.¹⁰ The 1544 deed refers back to another of twenty-fourth of October, 1542, in which William Rede, gentleman, of Beccles had enfeoffed the two chaplains, Henry and Edward, together with Robert Neve and William Sparham, both deceased, of all the gild's property in Beccles and Gillingham.

Under the 1544 deed certain conditions were laid down. For the next twenty years at Whitsun the feoffees were to elect an alderman (later called a governor or collector) and four gildholders who were to manage the lands and present an annual account the Sunday next after the feast of St Andrew the apostle (November 30). The income was to be spent on masses to be said at the Trinity altar in St Michaels for the feoffees, the gild members and the souls of the dead: that on the Monday after June 29 (St Peter's day) each year 6s 8d was to be expended to mark the anniversary of eight named people, all of whom had died in the previous century. These were most likely the original founders of the Holy Ghost gild. Among them were John Chevers, who had bequeathed land lying in Beccles to the gild in 1471.¹¹ Two years later Margery Pareys had left property to the gild at Ringsfield Green, a few miles west of the town.¹² The gild had also benefited from the bequests of Edmund Crowe and Robert Quynte.¹³ Any change from the 6s 8d after the clergy had been paid was to go to poor scholars. From the annual income Crown taxes were to be paid and the remainder went to sustain the poor and the sick who were assessed at 5d or less. When the 20 year period ended, the feoffees were to use the income for the use of the inhabitants of the town; and if the purpose of the gild at any time became illegal the gild property was to be sold to the highest bidder and the proceeds used for the benefit of the gild.

The emphasis here is on the care of the townsfolk at large plus a clause that could provide for the safe transference of gild property if the going got tough. This really was planning for the future. Four years later this is how the gild was described in the Chantry Certificates: Beccles. Lands and tenements in Beccles put in feoffment by the Alderman and four gild holders of the Holy Ghost Gild, to find a priest in the parish church of St Michael's, Beccles, for 99 years, to keep certain obits yearly and to discharge the taxes, fifteenths or subsidies of all such poor people as should be charged from 5d downwards. Priest, Henry Bendes, clerk, 'of small learning'. Yearly value £10 9s 4d. Priest's stipend £6 11s 5d. Population 800 houseling people. The gild was not authorized, but erected 'of devotion' (Redstone, 1904-6, 34).

In 1548 the alderman of the gild was still John Thorne. In his will of 1559, his executors were required to buy for the honour of almighty God 'a cross of silver and gold, price £20, to be used in Beccles church if the law allows', otherwise the executors were to sell the cross and use the money for the benefit of Thorn's soul.¹⁴ The introduction to Thorn's will may be described as conservative, but this particular bequest reveals an affection for the old religion. What the entry in the Chantry Certificates suggests is that the wording had been particularly carefully chosen, with an emphasis on helping the poor with financial aid for ninety nine years rather than praying for souls.

It is not known how the gild kept their property. Elsewhere in Suffolk there were various devices used to transfer gild property underground and undercover, which then emerged on the other side of the Reformation as Town land. Gild halls were often renamed the Town House and a trawl through White's directory of 1844 shows many instances of this. One of the best examples is the Town estate in Halesworth, a few miles from Beccles, vested in trustees for the public use and general benefit of the parishioners, and consisting of premises formerly called the Gildhall, a stable and about 58 acres of freehold and copyhold land, amounting to about £211 pa, applied in repairing the church, paying salaries to the organist, parish clerk, sexton etc, in providing sacramental bread and wine, in supporting the almshouses, in lighting the town, and occasionally supplying the poor (White, 1844, 372-73). Today the Town Land feoffees of Beccles administer property for the benefit of and to profit the common utility of the inhabitants of Beccles.

The greater part of the Beccles Town Land assets was Beccles fen, 1400 acres of reclaimed marshland on the east of the town, stretching out towards the river and beyond. Until the dissolution of the greater monasteries in 1539, Beccles manor had belonged to the abbey at Bury St Edmunds but, for the previous one hundred years, the townsfolk had controlled the reclaimed fenland almost without interference from the abbey, and for this it paid the abbey an annual rent of £6 14s 4d. With the dissolution of Bury abbey there was, not surprisingly, some alarm concerning the fen – would it be lost to the town, and if so, was there anything the town could do to prevent it? Anxious to save their occupation of the fen after the abbey's demise, the townsfolk in 1540 approached William Rede who, although a Norwich merchant, lived in Suffolk and was a Suffolk JP. His daughter, Joan, was married to Robert Daundy, and his son, William, was as difficult to deal with as William senior proved to be. Rede promised to negotiate on the behalf of the gild and although the town provided money from the sale of gild properties (the gild is not named) Rede obtained letters patent which named him and his heirs in trust for the benefit of himself – and others who were inhabitants of Beccles. In 1542 he and his wife had obtained a grant in fee of Beccles manor and all other property in the town and surrounding villages formerly belonging to the abbey of Bury. In 1544 the town exerted pressure on Rede to secure another patent, but as he still held the deeds which empowered him, the townsfolk were no better off. Then began a struggle that continued for forty years, being undertaken by William Rede the younger after the death of his father, and Thomas Gresham, his brother in law.

In Beccles town archive, a document survives entitled *Complaints against Mr Rede*, dating from c.1550 and it is a memorandum 'concerning damages done to the Town of Beccles by William Rede'. *Mr Rede hath greatly decayed the town of Beccles in that he hath letten falled down about thirty butchers shambles whereby the market is decayed. Item a sessions house which he ought to have maintained whereby the town is much hindered. Item he hath placed there a brabling farmer in his house which he hath hurt and killed divers of the neighbours cattle. And put divers pore men from their eel sets being the chief stay of their living. And the great expense he put the town unto by suits in the star chamber and other ungodly suits and vexations to their damage above £100. He, and now his farmer, would yield almost nothing to the collectors for the relief of the poor.*¹⁵

In 1562 the townsfolk brought an action to get their hands on the deeds, and finally they sought a fresh grant of incorporation (MacCulloch, 1986, 326). Rede claimed that the fen was concealed Crown land and took the case to the Exchequer, but by now some of the Suffolk justices were championing the townsfolk who, in 1584, received their charter from Elizabeth I. The Town Land archives survive from the seventeenth century, from which time their annual income ranged from £47 to £94. This all derived from their land holdings and was spent in poor relief, repairs to public buildings, paying taxes, paying masters to take apprentices, maintaining property. The religious drive

had gone but the charitable purposes were fully exploited – and still are. The alderman is now called The Collector, and the poor are still allowed to pasture cattle on the fen on very easy terms.

William Dowsing visited Beccles on April 6 1644 and went to St Michaels church, the former home of the Holy Ghost gild. Here he found 'Jehovahs between church and chancel; and the sun over it; and by the altar the words *My meat is flesh indeed, and My blood is drink indeed*. And 2 crosses we gave order to take down, one was on the porch; another on the steeple; and many superstitious pictures, about 40. Six several crosses, Christ's, Virgin Mary's, St George's and 3 more; and 13 crosses in all; and Jesus and Mary, in letters, and the twelve apostles' (Cooper 2001, 291).

THE MAISON DIEU, DUNWICH

In 1754 Thomas Gardner published *An Historical Account of Dunwich*, anciently a city, now a borough (Gardner 1754). In the preface he allowed himself to recount what the oldest inhabitants had reported to him. This was that in 'antient' times, Dunwich had been a walled city, with brazen gates, a king's palace, a bishop's seat, a mayor's mansion, a mint. It had had fifty-two churches, chapels, religious houses and hospitals, also a forest that extended south-east from the town seven miles, but then covered by the sea. In the reign of Richard I, Gardner revealed that Dunwich was fined over 1000 marks compared with a fine of 200 marks imposed on both Yarmouth and Ipswich, and he adds 'this inequality may be adequate to the commerce of these towns at that time' (Gardner 1754, 7-8). He confirmed that King John granted Dunwich its charter of liberty, making it a free borough at the same time as Ipswich was so honoured, and furthermore granted the Dunwich corporation a mayor and four bailiffs.

By 1400 Dunwich had already lost four of its identifiable seven churches to the sea (Middleton-Stewart 2001, 19-20). The worst storm had occurred in 1286, but in 1328 the port was put out of action and half a century later four hundred houses, shops and windmills were washed away. At this time St Leonard's church was destroyed. It was quickly followed by the churches of St Martin and St Nicholas, whose destruction can be roughly dated by the last institutions to their cures: to St Martin's in 1335, to St Nicholas in 1352. This left three medieval churches of which the market church of St John was pulled down by the townsfolk in 1540 rather than see it go over the cliff. The two friaries and several chapels suffered the same fate. In 1702 St Peter's church was stripped of its furnishings by the parishioners before it slid into the sea. All Saints was abandoned as a place of worship in the eighteenth century and succumbed to the waves in the nineteenth.

Fourteen hospitals in East Anglia had included women on their staff, of which eleven fell in the suppressions of the mid 1530s and 1540s. Only St Mary Magdalen in Beccles and the leper hospitals of St James and the Trinity in Dunwich, known as the Maison Dieu, survived and continued to serve as almshouses for women in the seventeenth century (Gilchrist 1993, 69). The chapel of the Leper Hospital of St James, the Apostle, is possibly the oldest fabric now to be seen in the village, for that is what the town of Dunwich has become. The hospital was said to be founded by King John, when earl of Moreton, and confirmed by him when he became king of England. A combination of the writings of Gardner in 1754 and Richard Taylor, the author of *Index Monasticus* in 1821, provide a reasonably informed account of the hospital, also known as the 'Stepill Hows'. The building originally consisted of an apsidal chapel, the nave serving as the hospital ward, each part distinguished from the other by a spacious arch. Overall it was 38 yards long and 20 feet wide, and, as it was originally founded to cater for lepers, was well outside the town gates where its eastern apse can still be seen, described by Taylor as 'worthy of the inspection of the curious' (Taylor 1821, 115). The hospital was substantially endowed, owning properties in East Suffolk as well as possessing a repository for relics; and there was a multitude of bequests made to the hospital and also requests for burial in the hospital churchyard throughout the fifteenth century. Leprosy had begun to decrease early in the fourteenth century and many leper hospitals went through a process of decline or change. It is not known whether St James still catered for lepers, but those inmates who left wills showed them to be men and women of

substance. According to a nineteenth century account, it was reported that the greater part of the hospital's extensive possessions were lost through the encroachments of the sea and the rapacity of successive masters.

The *Maison Dieu*, known also as *Domus Dei*, was endowed with tenements, houses and rents in the vicinity. Taylor described it as being honoured with masters of good repute and a place of great privilege with 'a very little proper house, and a proper lodging for the masters of the same to dwell in'. A chapel, for the use of the hospital community which consisted of a master and six brethren, adjoined the hospital. The *Maison Dieu* at that time catered for both sexes, as did St James. John Hopton, son of the lord of Blythburgh manor, was master there in the late fifteenth century; and William Bakke, referred to as 'master of the spital', set up working-day Masses there for a term of ninety-nine years at the start of the sixteenth century, relating it closely to chantry practices. In 1596 Robert Aleyne, a schoolmaster, was paid 20s to teach the poor of the hospital. The old hospital was still an almshouse in 1821, and in a sketch made by Hamlet Watling later that century, it is shown as a timber-framed and jettied building.

Neither hospital appears in the Chantry Certificates of 1548. On 21 April 1550, Edmund Rous, esquire, of Dunwich, a member of one of the leading families within the area, complained to Sir Richard Sackville, chancellor of the Court of Augmentations, that there were two chantries founded and established in the parish church of Dunwich, one called *Maison Dieu*, the other St James' chantries, their lands and tenements valued at £16 a year.¹⁶ He wrote that these lands had never been surveyed or seized to the king's use; but remained in the hands of two of the Dunwich bailiffs, John Harrison and George Saxmundham 'who have taken and received all the rent, issues and profits to their own proper uses to the disinheritance of our said sovereign lord the king'. John Crane, a clerk of sixty or more, was called and John Proctor, parson of Buckenham Carlton in Norfolk, was also called. His statement revealed that he had been master of *Maison Dieu* for 2 years, having been presented to the position by the burgesses and bailiffs of Dunwich.¹⁷ Proctor also gave the names of the successive masters from Edward IV's reign through to 1550, and said that he had taken all the profits to his own use and while there he had taught children and had sung weekly masses. He recounted that in about 1547, Robert Copping and John Hutcheson, the current bailiffs at that time, had come to ask him to give up the common seal and the documents of the house, but this he refused to do unless they could show him the king's authority. The bailiffs departed but returned later and took all the evidence, including Proctor's contract, by force from one of the brothers at the *Maison Dieu* called William Newman. Robert Copping, the bailiff responsible for forcefully removing the evidence, was called and said that issues and profits had been spent on the reparations of the houses which were much decayed – and that the house was a hospital for the poor and had been as long as he could remember – that the bailiffs took no profit nor ever did. Other witnesses said that the bailiffs had appointed Nicholas Hasborough to receive the profits but how they had been spent they did not know – but supposed they had been bestowed upon the repair of the houses and a distribution to the poor.

Both St James and *Maison Dieu*, described as charitable foundations devoted to the poor, escaped suppression. Finally, at an unspecified date, both were consolidated as one charity under the governance of a master for the support of ancient widows and poor persons of Dunwich and particularly those afflicted by insanity, loss of speech or who laboured under any peculiar affliction. In 1899 the Pension charity was founded to administer endowments of the charity known as The Hospital of St James and *Maison Dieu*. The objects of the charity were to relieve persons resident within the parish in need, hardship or distress, but not in relief of rates or taxes. The assets now consist of what little is left of the land, the largest area of which supplies the greatest return to the Dunwich Town Trust, being the car park for the famous Dunwich Fish and chips. Somewhere in the middle of the car park is the site of the *Maison Dieu*, putatively under the control of English Heritage.

Dowsing's visit to Dunwich on 9 April 1644 left the hospitals untouched. If only he had known. - but St Peter's church, despite its perilous position on the edge of the cliff, lost 63 cherubims: 60 [inscriptions] of Jesus, written in capital letters on the roof: and 40 superstitious pictures – and a cross on the top of the steeple. All Saints lost 30 superstitious pictures, 28 cherubims and a cross on the

chancel. Within a few years they had both gone under the waves.

There is no pan-parochial end to this investigation. The emergence of the new interpretation of the Gospels was a prolonged and painful parturition. It is understandable why the changes took place but at what cost! A more enlightened approach would have been preferable and yet these detailed examples may help us to understand the vicissitudes of the changing parish – and perhaps in two hundred years time, students will look back with as much wonderment and confusion at what is being experienced in parishes today.

NOTES

1. SROI, FB 106/D1/1.
2. PRO, PCC Holder 20, Edmund Daundy.
3. LP Henry VIII, 1, 381 (69), c. 1510.
4. LP Henry VIII, 13, pt 1, 477.
5. LP Henry VIII, 11, 1309. This letter was probably dated 1538 although it appears in the 1536 volume.
6. LP Henry VIII, 13, pt 2, 453.
7. SROI, HD 1528/ 49.
8. *The East Anglian; or Notes and Queries*, 1(1885-1886), No.68, pp.252-253.
9. BL., Add. Ch. 17634.
10. SROL, 994/A1/1. Those named were Edwarde Birde, Robert Bacon, Gilbert Sherman, John Bottiswayn, Thomas Ingott, Thoms Camell, Osbert Deryng, John Gatys, John Wakefield, Laurence Legient, John Woodward, Robert Towar, Henry Bottyswayn, John Cave, Robert More and Thomas Murdok.
11. NRO, NCC Jekkys 222, John Chevers.
12. NRO, NCC Hubert 67, Margery Pareys.
13. SROI, IC/AA2/2/139, Edmund Crowe: NRO, NCC Popy 162, Robert Quynte.
14. PRO, PROB 11/43/10, John Thorne.
15. SROL, 1227/A4/31.
16. PRO, E 315/128/82.
17. PRO, E 315/128/83.

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