

A LATE MEDIEVAL VISITATION— THE DIOCESE OF NORWICH IN 1499

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ON 15 FEBRUARY 1499 Bishop James Goldwell died after an episcopate of 26 years, and according to custom the administration of the diocese passed into the hands of the archbishop of Canterbury, Cardinal John Morton. The vacancy, which lasted only five months, resulted in the production of a remarkable documentary record, for the 120 folios of the *sede vacante* register provide perhaps the fullest account of the administration of any English diocese over a short space of time.¹ The register includes a full account of receipts, the returns of the visitation of the archdeaconries of Suffolk and Sudbury, a summary of judgements resulting from the visitation of the churches of Norfolk, and copies of those wills and testaments proved before the Official and his commissaries. From this information it is possible to derive some picture of the state of the church in East Anglia, and particularly in Suffolk, at the end of the 15th century, and this is all the more valuable since Norwich, alone among English dioceses, has not yet found an editor for an episcopal register.

The metropolitan was not free to act entirely as he wished during the vacancy. As the aftermath of a jurisdictional dispute between Archbishop Walter Reynolds and the prior and convent of Norwich in the early 14th century, Reynolds' successor Simon Meopham had in 1330 arrived at a compromise with the cathedral chapter in a composition which stipulated that the archbishop should nominate the Official *sede vacante* and keeper of the spirituality, but that visitation of the diocese and the correction of faults detected during visitation should be excepted from his commission; within fifteen days of the beginning of the vacancy the prior and convent were to nominate three persons, from whom the archbishop was to choose the visitor (Churchill, 1933, 164-9). On 26 February Morton issued a commission to Mr Roger Church, Doctor of Canon Law, to act as his Official in the diocese, and on 8 March in the consistory court at Norwich Church formally commenced his duties (f.1). On 4 March the archbishop commissioned as visitor Roger Framingham, Doctor of Divinity and monk of Norwich, one of the nominees of his brethren, but a week later, claiming to be burdened by various arduous business, Framingham delegated his powers to Mr Church and Mr John Vaughan, Doctor of Civil Law (ff. 79-80). Thus in effect there was in 1499 only one jurisdictional authority in the diocese, as in the majority of sees where *sede vacante* administration was not regulated by composition.

One reason for the insistence of successive archbishops of Canterbury on their rights of *sede vacante* jurisdiction must have been the considerable extra income which they received as a result of vacancies. In the case of Norwich, one third of the profits of visitation, consisting of the procurations paid by every church in lieu of one night's accommodation for the visitor and his servants and fines levied as a result of various misdemeanours, was allocated by the Meopham composition to the prior and convent; there is no record of any such payment in the 1499 accounts, but the omission of any procurations from religious houses may indicate that these were paid to the chapter. In any case this loss to the archbishop was balanced by the payment by new incumbents not only of the normal fees for their institution, but of the first fruits, or first year's income, of their benefices. This custom was unique to the diocese of Norwich, and in 1499 this source of income added over £267 to the archiepiscopal income. Over £53 came from pensions payable by religious houses for parish churches which they had in the past appropriated by episcopal licence, £29 from Easter synodals, over £52 from pro-bate fees and £181 from the procurations of the rural deaneries. Between 31 December and

20 February 1500 the Official's registrar paid into the archbishop's coffers £572 7s. 5d., the revenues of the spiritualities of the diocese over half a year (ff. 63-74v).²

Mr Roger Church, who was entrusted by Archbishop Morton with the administration of the diocese, was well equipped for this responsible task, which entailed the exercise of all the administrative, as opposed to sacramental, functions of the diocesan. Educated at Winchester and New College Oxford (Emden, 1959, 420), whence he had proceeded Bachelor of Civil Law in 1485 and Doctor of Canon Law in 1493, he had undergone that form of legal training which in the later middle ages was increasingly essential for administrators in church and state. He had received his first benefice at the collation of the archbishop, and by February 1495 was acting as commissary general and vicar general in spirituals to Morton. Before arriving at Norwich he had already acted as Official *sede vacante* in the dioceses of Bath and Wells, Coventry and Lichfield, Rochester and Worcester between 1495 and 1498; in each diocese he had conducted a visitation, and he was more experienced in this aspect of episcopal activity than any contemporary English bishop. He was subsequently to return within a year to Norwich following the death of Bishop Jane, while the sees of Canterbury and Norwich were both vacant, but there was no place for him in the Canterbury administration of Archbishop Warham and, unlike many of Morton's servants who moved on to senior administrative posts in secular government, he ended his career as vicar general to the absentee bishop of Bath and Wells, Cardinal Adrian Castellesi, with whom Church must have formed an acquaintance while he was papal collector in England.

Church was assisted in his administration by Mr William Potkyn, notary public, who had frequently been associated with him in earlier commissions as his registrar. Potkyn served as deputy to the archbishop's registrar, Mr John Baret, but due to the predominance of *sede vacante* material in Morton's register, he has left a far greater imprint on the records of the pontificate than his superior. In 1499 Potkyn was rewarded for his loyal service by the grant in perpetuity of the office of registrar of the consistory court of Norwich, a sinecure which he was empowered to exercise by deputy, since his services would soon once more be required at Lambeth (f. 8). In March 1500 Potkyn farmed this office to Mr Edmund George, notary public, for £13 6s. 8d. *per annum*. Unfortunately George abused his position and after Morton's death Potkyn was forced to appeal to the equitable jurisdiction of the Chancellor of England.³ George, he alleged, had failed in his duties under Bishop Jane, and had admitted his faults to Cardinal Morton, who had ejected him from his post, but he had since reassumed his duties, had begun a legal action against Potkyn for his deprivation and had refused to pay the annual farm of his office. Potkyn successfully requested a writ of *subpoena* against him, but in the meantime a well-intentioned plan to provide extra remuneration for a valued servant had adversely affected the administration of the diocese of Norwich and had caused the beneficiary a great deal of trouble.

The administration of a large diocese such as Norwich was a formidable task, and the Official did not have at his command the large staff at the disposal of a diocesan bishop; moreover, he was expected to conduct immediately a visitation of the diocese which the bishop might postpone for many years. Mr Church presided regularly in the consistory court at Norwich, examined the suitability of clerks presented to benefices before instituting them, instituted a new prior at the Augustinian house of Weybridge, Norfolk (f. 5), held Easter synods at both Norwich and Ipswich (f. 9), granted probate of numerous wills and supervised the collection of revenue due to the archbishop. At the same time as dealing with this routine administration, he personally visited 21 religious houses and the rural deaneries of the archdeaconries of Norwich and Norfolk. Visitation was certainly the most demanding aspect of ecclesiastical government (cf. Hill, 1968, 1-5), as is evident from the itinerary of Church's colleague as visitor, Mr John Vaughan, who undertook the visitation of the two southern

archdeaconries. Between 8 April, when he sat judicially in the chapter house of the priory of Bungay, and 17 May, when he examined the clergy and certain selected parishioners of the deanery of Stowe, Vaughan was constantly on the move in Suffolk, visiting ten religious houses, three colleges and fifteen rural deaneries containing 478 churches and chapels, from which over 700 clergy were summoned. Then, between 17 May and 27 June he once more perambulated the county, holding 27 court sessions in 23 different locations, where he heard the confessions or pleas of those whose sins had been reported to him during the visitation (ff. 87v-112v).

The visitation appears to have been conducted with admirable efficiency. Unfortunately only the most formalised record of the visitation of the religious houses was transcribed in the register (ff. 79v-93); the *comperta et detecta*—the faults observed and elicited by questioning—have not survived, and there is no information comparable to that recorded for the monastic visitations of Bishops Goldwell and Nix. The one notable fact is that Church, who had had ample opportunity in other dioceses to appreciate that the great weakness of the monastic order was its financial instability, was insistent that superiors should within a specified period produce a detailed inventory and statement of account. This demand was enforced by threatened sanctions varying, presumably in accordance with his assessment of the superior's character, from a fine payable to the fabric fund of Christ Church Canterbury to deprivation of office.

The account of the parochial visitations is, on the other hand, remarkably full. The *comperta et detecta* for the rural deaneries of Suffolk are recorded in full, parish by parish; this is unusual for these ephemeral records, and is perhaps due to the relative inexperience of Mr William Curtes, the registrar accompanying Mr Vaughan. The cases from Norfolk are recorded only in the form of judgements delivered by Mr Church following his visitation or in the consistory court at Norwich (ff. 75-78v). While this deprives us of valuable information available for Suffolk, this form of registration does have the merit of emphasising the unity of the judicial process. Visitation and consistory were two closely interrelated components of the machinery designed for the supervision of morals and religious observance, while the threat of a citation before the archbishop in his court of audience stood as the final sanction against recalcitrants.

The method of enquiry during visitation was the interrogation not only of the clergy of each parish but also of two or four trustworthy parishioners, including the churchwardens, who testified according to their own knowledge or reported common rumour in the locality. Nearly two hundred charges were brought against lay persons in the diocese, some three-quarters of these from Suffolk, and a quantitative analysis of the types of accusation may be useful.

Sexual Offences:

Adultery	55
Living in adultery	1
Fornication (both parties single)	32
Incontinence (pregnant by an unknown man)	7
Promiscuity	6
Prostitution	4
Incest	3
Bigamy	3
Sexual relationship with priest	2
Fostering immorality	10

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Other offences:

Breach of marriage contract	1
Desertion of spouse	5
Detention of testator's goods	11
Failure to attend church	26
Chattering in church	8
Blasphemy	1
Sowing discord among neighbours	3
Use of superstitious arts	9
Subtraction of tithe	3
Theft of a mortuary	1
Fouling churchyard with horse	1
Illicit farming of church lands	2

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The range of business reflects the concern of the ecclesiastical authorities with the preservation of the privileges and dues of the church and with the maintenance of the purity of the faith. But the emphasis is upon breaches of sexual morality, which was closely regulated by canon law and was, of course, of perennial interest to the community as a whole. In many instances it is not possible to trace the final decision in cases, but there is some indication that malicious prosecutions were a rarity. Of those accused, 88 confessed their faults and a further seven were convicted after an initial denial, as against 20 acquitted on various grounds.

Both visitors showed perception and humanity in their decisions. Margaret Perry of Thorpe, Norfolk, for example, who was accused of fostering immorality, was allowed to purge herself single-handed, because she was a poor woman who might have great difficulty in finding oath-helpers (f. 75v). A married couple who had failed to attend their parish church of Aldeburgh were dismissed *in forma pauperis*, although normally penance was imposed for this offence as stringently as for sexual immorality (f. 101). Margaret More of Dunwich was denounced for maintaining prostitution in her house, but because she was very sick Mr Vaughan delegated the examination of her case to her curate, with instructions to admonish her, if guilty, under threat of future penalty if she failed to mend her ways (f. 99). But John Pynnes, who had previously been corrected by the Official of the archdeacon of Norfolk for fornication with his mother's stepdaughter, was not only sentenced to public penance and the payment of 5s. to the fabric of his parish church and the cathedral, but was instructed to maintain his maidservant, whom he had made pregnant, until her purification, to then pay her a further 40s. and to maintain the child from its birth (f. 76v).

The effects of the visitor's attentions might be persuasive rather than punitive. At Lowestoft William Wylton, who was denounced for fornication, was declared to have had the banns called three times, but now to refuse to marry the woman because he alleged he had been coerced into marriage by physical intimidation. No penance was imposed, but he was ordered to marry her by 1 August (f. 97v). At Kelsale John Bakeler was sentenced to penance on three successive Sundays for fornication, but after one humiliating Sabbath he appeared again in court and promised to marry the girl, whereupon the remainder of his penance was remitted (f. 101v). At Wattisham the threat of a harsh penance persuaded Robert Reyner to offer monetary compensation to the girl he had seduced, whereupon his penance was reduced in severity (f. 120v).

Indeed, the penances imposed by the two judges appear in general to have been lenient. The 13th century practice of corporal punishment had apparently gone out of fashion,⁴ and of

more than eighty penances recorded in the register, only four included a beating around the churchyard, with the threat in one other case if the offender persisted in his misdemeanours (ff. 95 *bis*, 111v, 120, 102). The normal penance was to go before the cross in the Sunday procession in the parish church, and sometimes on successive Sundays in neighbouring parishes, with bare head, feet and legs, carrying in the hand a candle of a specified value to be offered either to the celebrant or to the principal image. The exact specifications of the penance were apparently prescribed with regard to the wealth and state of mind of the penitent. The richer offender was awarded a higher monetary penalty than his poorer neighbour, and the obdurate, the recidivist and the man who had hardened his heart against God and rightful authority was subjected to greater humiliation than the patently contrite sinner. There was, however, some effort to make the punishment fit the crime. The man who persistently and irreverently swore by the limbs of Christ was to offer a candle to the honour of His Body (f. 100v); the common reviler of her neighbours had publicly to seek their forgiveness as well as that of God (f. 117v). Edmund Hubberd, rector of Willingham St Mary, who had insulted Mr Vaughan and impugned the validity of his jurisdiction, after he had been brought to heel by excommunication, was compelled to enter the pulpit on successive Sundays at Beccles and Pakefield and preach publicly on the scandalous error of his assertions (f. 96).

No general principle appears to have protected the dignity of those clerics who had fallen short of their vows. In the consistory court a stiff monetary penalty was perhaps more frequently imposed upon clerks than upon laymen, the fine frequently being divided between the fabric of the offender's parish church and the cathedral, and a payment to the Official or his registrar to be disposed in pious uses. Suspension from the celebration of mass, moreover, especially in the case of unbeneficed chaplains, represented the deprivation or curtailment of earnings for a specified period, during which the offender might be enjoined to recite each day the entire psalter. But clerics were also sentenced to public penance. Thomas Welbench, chaplain, found guilty of incontinence, had to proceed penitentially on five successive Sundays, thrice in the cathedral and then in the parish churches of Upwell and Hellington (f. 76), while for a similar offence the rector of Winfarthing was required to proceed bareheaded and barefoot from his hospice in Norwich to the cathedral before performing penance during high mass (f. 77v). Both these penances were obviously designed to draw attention to the offence and contrition of the priest.

The Norwich register throws some interesting light on the process of compurgation, whereby the accused might clear himself by producing a specified number of oath-helpers to testify that they believed him to be innocent and of good character. The logic of compurgation was that it provided a safeguard against malicious accusation by personal enemies; but the process was also a check on continual antisocial behaviour, for the man who had offended the whole of his local community had little hope of successfully purging himself. There was a danger, however, especially in the case of clergy, that compurgation might become an empty formality, as was the case in the diocese of Salisbury in 1498, when the same oath-helpers testified to the good character of six accused from different localities.⁵ This certainly was not the case in the diocese of Norwich in the period of Mr Church's administration, and four cases in the consistory court reveal the conscientious application of the process. The rector of Reymerston failed to produce three neighbouring priests and three honest parishioners to testify to his innocence on a charge of adultery; after his failure he went to Mr Church in his residence and the Official extracted from him a confession of further offences (f. 76). The vicar of Swardston purged himself sevenhanded of incest with a spiritual daughter, but Church induced him to confess that he had enjoyed intercourse with her before he was ordained priest (f. 77). On the same day John Brychemor admitted his incontinence after he had been offered purgation, no doubt realising that he could not clear himself if the process was to be

taken seriously (f. 77). The rector of Winfarthing managed to find two priests and four laymen to testify for him and to get them to the consistory court, but the Official was still not satisfied, examined him in secret and obtained a confession (f. 77v). Conscientiously and efficiently managed, as it was in these cases, compurgation could provide a safeguard against malice while not serving to protect those who had in reality transgressed the law of the church.

Despite the general leniency of the ecclesiastical authorities in their imposition of penance, the prospect of their inquisitions caused panic among the sinners of East Anglia. The approach of the visitors concentrated the attention of parishioners upon the offenders in their midst, and like the progress of the royal justices in an earlier age, drove away antisocial and criminal members of the community (cf. Poole, 1945, 82). This might be a salutary process; the more respectable citizens of Newmarket can have suffered little from the departure of the Tapst sisters, who had established a monopoly of prostitution at two inns in the town, but when Mr Vaughan arrived were reported to have left the neighbourhood (f. 116v). But against such instances must be set the hardship caused to those who, having sinned perhaps only once, were terrified by the malice of their neighbours and the rigour of the canon law, and consequently abandoned their homes. Such was Joan Agas of Barningham: 'she was denounced as being pregnant, by whom is not known, and because of this lapse she has fled' (f. 111v). Seventeen persons who were denounced to Mr Vaughan in Suffolk, mostly for moral offences, were reported to have taken flight, while in many other cases the laconic *necessit* entered in the register, or even failure to appear when cited, implies that the offender had deemed departure from the locality to be prudent. The visitation therefore, although it was no part of its purpose, caused a great deal of social disturbance.

Those who had transgressed did, indeed, have good reason to fear the denunciation of their neighbours, who often seem to have been determined to leave no possible suspect in peace. In four cases before Mr Church defendants on moral charges were able to demonstrate that they had already been corrected for their sins by the diocesan or archidiaconal authorities, yet their fellow parishioners had denounced them once more to the visitor *sede vacante* (ff. 75, 77, 78 bis). Twice in Suffolk Mr Vaughan allowed the accused to purge themselves on their own oath because he considered that they had been presented to him out of pure malice (ff. 99, 117v). Matilda Suffolke was denounced for incontinence because she had borne a child twenty weeks after her marriage (f. 76), and on two occasions women confessed to fornication with one man which had been inflated by their neighbours into a charge of promiscuity (ff. 77, 97v). John Lenne of Beccles was accused of bigamy, but was able to prove that his wife had deserted him ten years before and was now dead (f. 95), and a charge of incest at Brancaster, Norfolk, was immediately countered by the production of a dispensation for marriage within the prohibited degrees (f. 75). Newcomers to an area were regarded with special suspicion; the inhabitants of Yaxham would not believe Robert Heyde when he told them his previous marriage had been dissolved by the commissary of the bishop of Lincoln, and denounced him for bigamy (f. 77). Parishioners also showed a marked curiosity about the earlier career of their priests; at Helmingham they had discovered that the parochial chaplain, against whom they had no other complaints, had been ordained priest a decade earlier well below the canonical age. In consequence he was suspended from celebration of the sacraments until he had obtained a dispensation for this irregularity (f. 107v).

Despite the vigilance of neighbours and the efficiency of the visitor, however, the visitation was far from completely effective in dealing with faults. Some 150 lay persons were denounced to Mr Vaughan during his perambulation of Suffolk. Many immediately confessed their faults, 43 dutifully performed the penance assigned to them, while there are 15 cases where performance is not specifically noted, but may be presumed to have taken place. Less than twenty accused denied the charges against them and attempted to purge themselves, but 45

accused failed to appear before the visitor to answer for their faults, either because they had fled, left the locality or simply failed to appear. A further three, having appeared once before Mr Vaughan, failed to come to a second session to which they were summoned. In all these cases the visitor could do little but suspend them from divine service until they did appear before the court, or very occasionally excommunicate them. In the case of those who had moved their home or taken refuge with distant relations, this would have been of little practical effect. The parish had rid itself of the offender, but the soul of the sinner remained in jeopardy.⁶

Yet if with regard to enforcement the picture is bleak, the offences which were delated to the visitor would not give cause for serious concern, except to the moralist. The vast majority of sins were of a sexual nature, transgressions of divine and canon law, certainly, but not corrosive of the fabric of church or society. There were only three cases of the avoidance of tithe, and one of these was settled amicably before it came to court. Most cases of non-attendance at church imply only laziness in those who preferred to lie in bed, or greed in the case of those who plied their trade on a Sunday, rather than any doubt as to the efficacy of the sacraments.⁷ The use of superstitious arts, although described as heretical, was a manifestation of primitive folk beliefs which had existed alongside Christianity since the Conversion—credence in the ability to cause harm, to heal or to discover wealth by magic—rather than any organised movement against sacerdotalism or sacramentalism, and although such offenders were punished with more than customary rigour and publicity, they represented no threat to the establishment of the church. Certainly in Suffolk in the late 15th century there were no Augean stables to be cleansed.

The Suffolk returns also provide a great deal of information about the parochial clergy of the county. The visitation of 478 churches and chapels is recorded in the register; of these, 164, or 34%, were appropriated to religious houses or other bodies. A total of 754 individual clergy were summoned to appear before the visitor, and of these 398 were beneficed incumbents—rectors, vicars or the chaplains of perpetual chantries. Of these beneficed clergy, 107, or 27%, were graduates, and eight religious. 22 incumbents, of whom 16 were graduates, held two benefices within the county, while 16 incumbents also served as stipendiary chaplains in other parishes. Of the 356 unbeneficed clergy, 15 were graduates and 20 religious, while seven held simultaneously more than one stipendiary position.

The most common complaint made by parishioners against their rector or vicar was non-residence, a perennial problem of the late medieval church. It was traditional that sublime and literate persons should be dispensed by the papacy to hold more than one living, and that licences for non-residence for other reasons might be obtained from the diocesan authorities. It was necessary to provide for scholars, and both church and state required the services of trained clerks. Parishioners might resent the payment of tithes and other dues to an absentee who performed no services for them, but ecclesiastical officials were concerned only to pursue those who breached the canon law of the church by failing to obtain authority for their absence.

From 478 churches visited in 1499, 38 rectors and two vicars were denounced by their parishioners or noted by the visitor as non-resident.⁸ Twelve of these were known to be serving as parochial chaplains or stipendiaries in other churches within the county, presumably to supplement their incomes. Rather than irresponsible neglect, this may often indicate a desperate effort to make ends meet. The rectors of Uggeshall and Dallinghoo, for example, were serving as parochial chaplains in the larger centres of Blythburgh and Orford, but the only complaint raised by their parishioners was their non-residence, and both employed other clergy in their own cures, whom they presumably paid less than they themselves earned by their supplementary employment (ff. 101, 98, 102). Mr John Ovy, rector of Uggeshall, possessed a copy of John de Burgo's pastoral manual *Pupilla Oculi*, which suggests that he was

not unaware of his responsibilities (Emden, 1963, 439). Rather more doubtful were the motives of the rectors of Ellough, Endgate and Weston who were reported to be living in London or Kent, and who had in fact abandoned all responsibility for their cures. Mr Robert Saluse, rector of Worlingworth, was in 1492 serving as parochial chaplain in St Olave's, Southwark.⁹ Some beneficed clergy were absent through other employment; the rector of Woolpit was reported to be with the earl of Oxford (f. 115), and in Norfolk the rectors of Lopham and Raynham St Mary served the duchess of Norfolk and Lady Eleanor Townshend (ff. 26, 37v). Such private service cannot have been uncommon. Yet of the 40 Suffolk churches where non-residence was noted, only six were not served by other clergy, and in a further two the parochial chaplain, although employed, failed to appear.

A further 44 rectors and seven vicars failed to appear before the visitor. Seven were described as sick or decrepit; the remainder, if present at all in their parishes, may be presumed not to have maintained continual residence. Flagrant examples of abuse were rare. The only obvious case in 1499 was that of Mr John Burton, who failed to appear for his church of Wixoe or his vicarage of Bures, and who was cited in the consistory court at Norwich for his absence from his church of Little Snoring, Norfolk, in which he was ordered to reside within seven days on pain of deprivation (f. 76v). Some incumbents, however, had excellent reasons for their non-residence. Mr Simon Driver, Decr. D., rector of Gisingham, was Official of the archdeacon of Norfolk, Mr John Irby, rector of Norton Subcourse and Great Whelmetham, was Official of the archdeacon of Sudbury, and Mr Reginald Calle, rector of Westerfield and vicar of Wickham Market was Official of the archdeacon of Suffolk (Emden, 1963, 196, 327). The archdeacons of Norfolk and Suffolk, Mr Oliver Dynham and Mr Nicholas Goldwell, were, like the majority of their counterparts in other dioceses, notable pluralists, sublime and literate persons for whom an archdeaconry was an appropriate and lucrative additional income, and who paid scant attention to their office; their Officials, highly trained lawyers, bore the brunt of routine administration and jurisdiction. Mr William Duffield, Decr. B., rector of Rougham, and William Cooke, Decr. L., rector of Bildeston, had left the diocese in which they received their early benefices to become respectively Officials of the bishop of Coventry and Lichfield and Durham, while Mr William Robinson, Decr. D., rector of Wetheringsett and Official of the bishop of Ely, was frequently at Rome where he had represented Cardinal Morton in litigation at the papal court (Emden, 1963, 158, 197, 484).

An academic career was another legitimate reason for absence. Mr John Smith, rector of Badingham, was vice-chancellor of the university of Cambridge (Emden, 1963, 535), while the rector of Dennington, Mr John Colet, was delivering at Oxford a series of lectures which were to revolutionise biblical exegesis in England (Emden, 1959, 462ff). Mr Thomas Appleton, who in 1499 was renting a room at Peterhouse, left a parochial chaplain in his church of Alpheton, and at Lavenham, where he was also rector, he employed a parochial chaplain and four stipendiaries (ff. 118-9; Emden, 1963, 14). His benefices were adequately served, there was no complaint from his parishioners, and he was close enough to Suffolk to exercise some supervision over both his cures. In those cases where a rector held two churches within the county, the parishes do not appear from the visitation records to have suffered any ill-effects. Even Mr Paul Gayton, canon of St Mary-in-the-Fields, Norwich, who contrary to canon law combined the vicarage of Exning in the gift of Battle Abbey with that of Mildenhall, to which he had been presented by the abbot of Bury, attracted no adverse criticism from the representatives of his flock and provided parochial chaplains in both benefices (f. 116). Those rectors such as Mr Edmund Brigette of Campsey Ash and Bacton, and Mr John Parman of Chevington and Ickworth, who held two benefices but no discernible official position, could quite easily obey the provincial decree of 1486 and reside in each benefice in turn (ff. 102v, 110, 113v, 114; cf. Wilkins, 1737, III, 619 *et seq.*).

A few members of the clerical élite of the late 15th century, those men who attracted widespread patronage, were beneficed in Suffolk. Colet was a canon of St Martin-le-Grand, London, and a prebendary of York. Mr Robert Kent, former fellow of All Souls and rector of Lackford, was a canon of Howden and precentor of Hereford (Emden, 1959, 1037), and Mr John Argentein, former dean and future provost of King's College Cambridge, physician to prince Arthur and dean of the chapel royal, held in addition to his Suffolk rectory of Cavendish the church of St Vedast in London, prebends in Lichfield and Wells and the hospital of St John, Dorchester (Emden, 1963, 16). Humphrey de la Pole, whom the registrar described as *reverendus*, an epithet normally reserved for bishops, the son of the duke of Suffolk and rector of Thorndon, had begun, as befitted his status, the accumulation of benefices which was to be terminated by his family's rebellion three years later (Emden, 1963, 180ff). But such men, whose interests and benefices spanned the whole of England, were rarities, in a way which they were not in the dioceses of Canterbury, London or Winchester. The interests and employment of the vast majority even of the graduates centred upon East Anglia. Of the 122 graduates recorded as incumbents or stipendiaries, 76 can be traced with some certainty in Emden's biographical registers. Of these 76, 66 were graduates of Cambridge, and 54 had no known benefices outside the diocese of Norwich. Within this area their interests were not, of course, focused exclusively upon their parishes. The services of Mr Thomas Audele, vicar of Hoxne, for example, must have been in demand, for he was a notary public who had until 1498 held the church of St John Maddermarket in Norwich (Emden, 1959, 76). Mr Bartholomew Northern, rector of Blickling and Rollesby in Norfolk, was until his death acting as advocate in the consistory court of the diocese (ff. 1, 38v; Emden, 1963, 427). The highest realistic ambition for such men, whose connections were essentially local, would be to obtain a lucrative position in a collegiate church; such was the good fortune of Mr Ralph Danyel, rector of Bradwell, who had since 1476 been precentor of St Mary-in-the-Fields, Norwich (ff. 96v., 83; Emden, 1959, 541).

It is perhaps surprising to find 15 graduates, 12% of the total number recorded in the county, among the ranks of the unbeneficed, at a time when the provision of churches for graduates was no longer the major problem which it had been at the beginning of the century (cf. Jacob, 1946). Many of these men are obscure, but when their careers can be traced it is evident that a degree was not an automatic passport to prosperity. Mr John Hardy, for example, graduated in civil law at Cambridge in 1494 and was ordained priest in 1498. The following year he was serving as a stipendiary at Thelnetham, where the rector was also a graduate, but he did not acquire a benefice, the vicarage of St Ives, Hunts., until 1508 (Emden, 1963, 286). Mr John Hedge, parochial chaplain of Bildeston in 1499, had graduated in Arts three years before, but only obtained his first church, Burnham Thorpe, Norfolk, in 1506 (Emden, 1963, 296). The presence of such men in parishes, however, rendered the absence of the rector of no practical consequence in terms of pastoral standards.

Non-residence cannot therefore be considered a major scandal. Where necessary, the Official and the visitor were prepared to take definite action, as at Little Snoring and at Burnham Deepdale, where the rector, who had abandoned his cure for his studies at university, was ordered to obtain a valid licence, which would stipulate the provision of a suitable deputy (f. 76). In general, however, the system of non-resident incumbents, which was essential for the support of secular and ecclesiastical administrators and of scholars, and which was the price paid by the church for its extensive landed endowments, was not abused. Against the examples of non-residence may be set others of devoted service to a parish, such as Mr Thomas Leke, who after graduating from Cambridge served his only church, Beccles, for 38 years until his death in 1505 (Emden, 1963, 361). The few wills of incumbents which were enregistered in 1499 also reveal a desire to contribute to the parishes which had provided their livelihood.

Richard Purdy, rector of St James, Icklingham, left to his church his new processional with one mark towards the repair of the bells (f. 11v), and the rectors of Easton Bavents and Thelnetham left £20 and 10 marks to their respective churches (ff. 47, 58v), while in Norfolk the rector of Shimpling bequeathed the residue of his estate to the poor of the parish, and Thomas Weston left fourpence to every household and a penny to every child and servant in his parish of Caister (ff. 37, 19).

The main danger stemming from non-residence was, in fact, that the rector might have little idea of the state of affairs in his parish. If he employed a conscientious parochial chaplain he would be little missed, but an unscrupulous or lax curate might be left untroubled for many years. John Colet, for example, despite his subsequent views on the obligations of the clergy, employed at Dennington the non-resident rector of Ashby, who was denounced in his own parish for allowing the rectory and chancel to fall into ruinous disrepair, and who failed to appear before the visitor to certify that he had remedied these defects (f. 96v). Humphrey de la Pole's parochial chaplain at Thorndon failed to appear at the visitation (f. 111), and at Lidgate, where the rector did not appear, the parochial chaplain was suspected of consorting with a woman and was found by the visitor unsuitable to serve a cure (f. 117v). 36 parochial chaplains and 21 stipendiaries failed to appear before the visitor when summoned, and a further 41 were unable to produce their letters of ordination. Yet the clerical proletariat of unbeneficed priests certainly did not hold a monopoly of neglect or wrongdoing. The only truly scandalous case in Suffolk in 1499 was that of John Springe, rector of Pettaugh, who had celebrated mass while excommunicate, was accused of immorality and divulging the confessions of his parishioners, and was judged by the visitor to be defective in the knowledge necessary for a priest (f. 107v); while at Elmswell the rector was found to lack sufficient knowledge for the administration of the seven sacraments and was ordered to procure the services of a suitable chaplain for his parish (f. 111v).

A high proportion of churches were appropriated to religious houses, and this too might lead to lack of adequate supervision. Many of the unbeneficed priests who failed to appear before the visitor were from such parishes. In 67 out of 164 appropriated churches visited no vicarage had been established, so that the curate lacked security of income and of tenure. Distant appropriators had small influence. The abbot of Battle in Sussex, for example, could exercise little control over the non-resident vicar of Bramford (f. 106), and the prior of Christ Church, Canterbury, was probably unaware that the vicar of Ashbocking left the church unserved on Sundays (f. 107). Fourteen churches appropriated to the prior and convent of Butley were visited by Mr Vaughan; only five of these were served by a vicar. Three of the nine unbeneficed clergy employed by the priory in its other churches failed to appear, and a further two could not present their letters of ordination. At Ashfield and Ramsholt the priory had allowed the chancels to fall into disrepair, and this was probably due as much to the poverty of the convent, which like many small East Anglian houses was dependent on the income from churches, as to the negligence of the prior (ff. 103v, 106).

One third of the chaplains styled *frater* or canon did not appear at the visitation. This need not indicate laxness or irresponsibility greater than that of the secular clergy, but may be a reflection of confusion with regard to Premonstratensian canons and mendicants, who as religious were exempt from diocesan authority, although the parishes which they served were subject to the bishop (cf. Heath, 1969, ch. 9). Those who did appear did not present a scandalous picture. Two canons were accused of consorting with women, but one proved, and the other alleged, that it was his sister (ff. 96v, 97). One was accused of wearing a secular habit without dispensation, one of celebrating without licence, one of failing to make his confession (ff. 97 bis, 115). Their record was certainly no worse than that of their secular counterparts. More serious, perhaps, was the discovery of four monks employed outside the cloister, but here

the visitor exercised his discretion. The parochial chaplain of Ellough was a Cistercian who did not wear the habit of his order; he was ordered to reform this irregularity, but not to return to his house (f. 95v). Neither was the monastic chaplain of Little Glemham disturbed (f. 101v), but the visitor learned also of two monks who were not regularly employed in any parish but were noted as occasional celebrants. They were obviously gyrovagues of the type so obnoxious to St Benedict, who deemed it safer to disappear as the visitor approached (ff. 99v, 100v, 102v; cf. McCann, 1952, 14 *et seq.*).

Apart from non-residence there were remarkably few complaints against the parochial clergy. From 478 parishes there were eleven cases of neglect of the chancel or rectory,¹¹ five allegations of immorality, of which only two appear to have been well founded, while three priests were found unsuitable because of their ignorance to exercise pastoral care. While the rector of Ringsfield, accused of trafficking in simony and fostering the immorality of a neighbouring incumbent, judged it wiser not to appear in consistory and was suspended, the accusation levelled at the rector of Horningsheath that he did not maintain hospitality but chose instead to eat at Bury was surely prompted by rancour, and the farming of the church of Hartest to a layman was doubtless regrettable, but was an increasingly common practice in many churches where the parishioners did not think to complain (ff. 96, 114, 119). The total of 34 complaints against 28 individual clergy is very small for so wide an area, served by over 700 priests. The situation in Norfolk was comparable; eleven priests were cited to appear in the consistory court after the visitation of the northern archdeaconries. Two of these cases concerned non-residence, the remaining nine were charges of immorality.

There are only two recorded instances of contempt by the clergy of the visitor's jurisdiction. On 9 July Mr Church ordered Mr Nicholas Goldwell, master of St Mary-in-the-Fields, Norwich, archdeacon of Suffolk and brother of the late bishop, to appear before him the next day to receive penance for his contumacy in not appearing before him during his visitation. Goldwell had been one of his brother's three commissaries for the 1492 visitation of the diocese, and obviously had not reconciled himself to the loss of personal influence occasioned by the death of bishop James (f. 83v; Emden, 1963, 623). Edmund Hubberd, kinsman of Sir James Hobart, the king's attorney, and rector of Willingham, to which he had been presented by the crown, publicly impugned the authority of the visitor, exclaiming, for some reason, that he might neither suspend nor excommunicate him. He failed to answer for this contempt in consistory at Norwich and was excommunicated, but two days later prostrated himself at Southwold and sought absolution (f. 96).

The responsibility of Mr Church for the administration of the diocese of Norwich came to an end on 20 July, with the provision by the pope of Mr Thomas Jane, a distinguished canon lawyer who had served as Official of the bishop of London and was king's counsellor (Emden, 1959, 1013 *et seq.*). His episcopate was to last only fourteen months, and after his death Church was to return to the diocese to act once more as Official *sede vacante*. The conscientious endeavours of Church and Vaughan are perhaps typical of the work of many diocesan administrators of the period, who were in much closer touch with parochial life than most bishops. The two registrars produced in 1499 a superlative documentary account of their activities. Yet such registers, however comprehensive, do not invariably present a rounded picture of the state of the diocese.

The most cursory examination of the records of the secular courts reveals an ominous tension between clergy and laity which is not apparent in the register. In the 1490s John Robertson, vicar of Guestwick, complained to Morton as Chancellor of England that the justices of the peace at Little Walsingham had unjustly determined against him in an action of trespass resulting from his own efforts to secure the payment of tithes.¹² John Crawford, parson of Gisleham, similarly complained of harassment and extortion, under threat of indictment, by

the under-sheriff of Suffolk.¹³ These complaints are balanced by the fact that Thomas Byngle, rector of Ellough, who in 1499 was reported to the visitor to be living in London, was in 1503 and 1510 accused of rape and robbery,¹⁴ while in the same year that neither Mr Vaughan nor his parishioners found any fault in him the vicar of Offton was indicted for assault and rape.¹⁵

Far more momentous in its consequences than such isolated cases of clerical criminality or petty anticlericalism was the sustained campaign against ecclesiastical jurisdiction mounted, after the removal by death of Cardinal Morton's moderating influence, by Sir James Hobart, the king's attorney and a justice of the peace in Norfolk and Suffolk. He instituted *praemunire* proceedings and encouraged East Anglian defendants in the church courts to make charges at quarter sessions, and his campaign culminated in a concerted attack on the probate jurisdiction exercised by Bishop Nix and his officials (Storey, 1972, 30). The threat to the church represented in the register of 1499 by those who resented its moral jurisdiction or by the few rustics who were confident of their own magical powers was minimal. An attack on the ecclesiastical courts originated and stimulated by an influential member of the king's council was a different matter. The records of the diocese of Norwich in 1499 have an additional value as an illustration of the old order which was about to pass away as the church became increasingly circumscribed by that official hostility which was to lead, within the lifetime of several of Morton's associates, to the English reformation.

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NOTES

- ¹ Lambeth Palace Library, MS register of Archbishop John Morton, vol. II. All bracketed folio references in this paper refer to this volume.
- ² The Norwich account is the best organised and most complete in the register. This is probably due to the existence of the *Domesday Book of Norwich*, which has been described as the finest extant example of an English *matricula* or *scrutinium*. It is a late 14th-century production, probably made for Bishop Henry Despencer, and contains an account of all livings in the diocese with procurations, synodals and other payments due; cf. Cheney, 1950, 112.
- ³ P.R.O., Early Chancery Proceedings, C1/244/88.
- ⁴ Cf. Hill, 1951, 213-26. The decline of the discipline has also been noted in the diocese of Lincoln in the early 16th century (Bowker, 1967, xv).
- ⁵ Lambeth Palace Library, MS register of Archbishop John Morton, vol. 1, ff. 195-7.
- ⁶ This was a general problem; cf. Bowker, 1967, xv and the remark of Prof. A. Hamilton Thompson (1940, liii): 'The study of such cases brings with it a strong sense of the purely mechanical and formal action of a system which might put a temporary check upon sin, but possessed no power to effect a spiritual change or foster the fruits of repentance'.
- ⁷ One possible exception was William Mouse of Great Worlingham, who contrived to be absent on Easter Day so that he did not receive the Sacrament (f. 95v).
- ⁸ The rectors of Endgate, Ellough, Weston, Barnby, Lound, Frostenden, Uggeshall, Dallinghoo, Eyke, Kettleburgh, Martlesham, Burgh, Mickfield, Denham, Ashby, Brome, Rickinghall Inferior, Wattisfield, Little Horningsheath, Hengrave, Lackford, Little Saxham, Bradfield St Clare, Drinkstone, Little Whelmetham, Woolpit, West Stow, Brandon Ferry, Herringswell, Tuddenham, Chedburgh, Bildeston, Cockfield, Cavendish, Hartest, Kettlebaston, Shimpling, Stanstead; the vicars of Earlham and Ashbocking.
- ⁹ Lambeth Palace Library, MS register of Archbishop John Morton, vol. I, f. 79v.

- ¹⁰ Calle was a graduate, but his university career is not traceable. He was probably the same Bachelor of Canon Law who in 1481 was appointed registrar to the bishop of Hereford (Bannister, 1920, 67).
- ¹¹ Ashby, Barnby, Lowestoft, Frostenden, Little Glemham, Saxmundham, Ramsholt, Ashfield, Wortham, Fornham St Genevieve, Herringswell.
- ¹² P.R.O., Early Chancery Proceedings, C1/221/83.
- ¹³ P.R.O., C1/195/35.
- ¹⁴ P.R.O., Chancery Miscellanea, C244/159/23, C244/152/42.
- ¹⁵ P.R.O., C244/148/17.

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