

William Dowsing who was he and did he visit Bramfield?

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There was a distinct feeling by the third decade of the 17th century that the reformation started in the reign of Henry VIII had lost its way, that High Church practices were being introduced and that many ungodly reminders of the catholic past were still in parish churches.

William Dowsing (1596-1668) was born in Laxfield, the younger son of a prosperous yeoman farmer. In his mission to amend the ways of the ungodly in Suffolk he first appears in 1642 signing a petition down in Stratford St Mary against the practices of the church. He was living in a distinctly Protestant area and allied himself to various prominent godly ministers. He was against the execution of Charles I and refused to take the oath of Engagement, the solemn, signed promise to ‘ be true and faithful to the Commonwealth of England without a King or House of Lords’. In 1643 he was appointed under a warrant from the Earl of Manchester to pursue the demolition of the superstitious pictures and ornaments of churches etc.

Did Dowsing visit Bramfield? Yes! He or one of his agents came and this is the account in his journal of what they did in the Spring of 1643.

Entry 238. Bramfield, April 9. 24 superstitious pictures; one crucifix, and a picture of Christ; and 12 angells on the roof; and divers Jesus's, in capital letters; and the steps to be levelled, by Sir Robert Brook.

Sir Robert Brook of Cockfield Hall Yoxford, had been appointed to see that the steps, presumably those to the altar were to be levelled. Brook belonged to a set of local gentry much persuaded by the Puritan Eastern Association in its early form. His second wife Elizabeth, was something of a religious fanatic.

Before the beginning of the 19th century the roof was not covered and plastered as we see it today. It is described as painted by Davy which could have been where the “angells” were but it is a very high roof to have been attacked in that way. The main desecration would have been accomplished by ordering white washing of the religious pictures on the walls that had escaped the 16th century reformation zeal.

In 1644 4 pieces of memorial brass were taken up from the gravestones and sold in 1649 to mend the windows which may have been smashed by Dowsing’s men in order to eradicate the “superstitious pictures”. Just to the north of the font a big slab shows from where one piece of early brass was taken. These may already have been defaced in the 16th century to take away the references to the spirits of the dead in the dedications.

It is amazing that the recess containing the 15th century painting of angels around a space for a cross survived. Again Davy described that space being covered by a linen curtain with religious texts on it.