

The Reformation and Bramfield

Throughout this “history” of Bramfield I am trying to give a flavour of how national events would have affected everyday life in Bramfield. Nothing would have had such a devastating effect as the Protestant Reformation starting in the 1530’s. In order to accommodate Henry VIII's divorce the Protestant movement already spreading from the Continent was embraced by the English Church or at least by the courtiers and ecclesiastics surrounding the King. The Catholic Church was exceedingly powerful and to many people appeared corrupt. In the beginning, Henry was firmly against the demise of the Catholic Faith in England but after 20 years his marriage to Catherine of Aragon had produced no legitimate heir and in order for him to achieve an orderly succession a divorce or annulment was needed imminently so that he could marry again and produce a legal heir. This of course was forbidden by the Catholic Church. By the mid 1520's, his eye having been caught by Anne Boleyn, a sincere Protestant, the usefulness of a break with Rome must have seemed a practical solution to the problem, particularly as by 1533 Anne was pregnant. Although the people of Bramfield would not have been privy to the ‘goings on’ at court they will have experienced a direct effect on their lives and the consequent changes in the way people practised their religion will have been felt keenly. Should Henry have married his brother’s widow but alternatively was the marriage between Arthur and Catherine consummated?

Archbishop Cranmer a dedicated Protestant and architect of Henry’s progress so far, crowned Anne, Queen in June 1533.

Early in 1534 the Act of Succession was passed making Henry’s marriage to Catherine null and void, Princess Mary illegitimate and any children of Henry and Anne, the legitimate heirs. Every man over the age of 14 had to take an oath accepting the provisions of the Act. We cannot tell whether the men of Bramfield were agreeable or not and maybe they didn’t think it would be of any significance but probably knew better than to refuse to obey the command of the king. So I can see them having to take time from their work and making the journey probably to Blythburgh to swear to accept the Act of Succession, causing the woman they had for 24 years regarded as Queen and a follower of the Catholic Faith, to be cast off and her daughter declared a bastard.

Also at this time the Act of Supremacy was passed declaring Henry VIII to be Head of the Church of England. Not of course that at this stage would they have realised the full import of this event and most probably, people in Bramfield would not have heard much of the new Protestantism, but they would have been familiar with the place the Pope held in their parish church and there could not be two Heads of the Church.

By 1535 the Pope’s name had been erased from the Mass Book and the congregation forbidden to pray for the Pope. Now this they **would** have noticed **if** the priest had obeyed the order promptly. We know nothing of the reactions of Robert Harrison, vicar at the time, though since he had been the

incumbent since 1514 it is likely that he would have been like many of the clergy, of a conservative turn of mind, and not all of them carried out the orders on time. One thing the parishioners would have been relieved about was that along with the disappearance of the Pope's name would have been the cessation of the payment of Peter's Pence. This was an ecclesiastical tax assessed in the parish by the value of your property which found its way eventually to the far off Pope in Rome. The clerics had to pay an innovatory tax to the Treasury of First Fruits and Tenths based on an extensive survey of the value of livings called the Valor Ecclesiasticus designed to make a new source of Royal revenue. Bramfield's vicar was exempted from this tax as the assessment for Bramfield was £40.5s. and thus under the £50 which would have made him liable.

Henry, at this time was conducting an expensive war with France and was underlining his position as Head of the English Church. The changes were beginning to be noticeable. 1536 brought further edicts banishing many Saint's Days because holidays were thought to be damaging the country's economy and keeping the workers poor. Remaining were the feasts of the Apostles, the Blessed Virgin, St George, Ascension Day, the nativity of John the Baptist, All Saints' Day and Candlemas. This was a fraction of the days when social events - processions, ales and games or plays would have been enjoyed. Bramfield was lucky to have a patronal festival outside harvest time and St Andrew being an apostle, the parish festival would have been allowed and possibly the feasting would have continued, though licentious behaviour and too much ale drinking became increasingly frowned upon.

So we can already see that the everyday life of ordinary parishioners was being upset and worse was to come. This will be unfavourable from an ordinary villager's point of view if they were not gripped by the puritanical reforming zeal. The complaints that the ordinary villager had were with greedy landlords demanding manorial work, enclosing common lands and in some cases the breakdown of the manorial system. This allowed the aggregation of smallholdings into large farms thus establishing yeoman farmers. Yeoman farmers were able to develop a more viable form of land management but it led to many cottagers losing small pieces of land on which they had depended for a subsistence form of farming. In general, there was dissatisfaction with the "establishment" and forces outside their control were more and more curbing the way people's lives. In some cases the cause of religious reform was an urge to get out from under the yoke of the power of both state and church, because, let us not forget that although the landlords might have seemed powerful they had their problems too in having to satisfy the continual demands of the Treasury for more taxes.

Another upheaval was to be visited upon the people of Bramfield. Due to the abolition of Catholic Institutions, Mettingham College, a religious establishment founded in about 1372 by descendants of the de Norwich family, holders of the Lordship of the manor of Bramfield, was taken by King Henry and sold to Sir Anthony Denny thus creating yet another change in the everyday lives of the villagers and landowners of Bramfield. Their landlord and controller of everyday working life would probably have installed their own man as steward who would run the manorial courts dealing with all matters

of inheritance, buying and selling of land, minor offences, collection of rents and fines for non attendance at court. The medieval importance of the lord of the manor had certainly declined during the two hundred years since the dramatic fall in population due to the Black Death in 1349 but nevertheless the lord still had duties and taxes to pay to the king, via the Hundred court at Blythburgh and so would need to ensure his income from his rented lands and farms.

However the social fabric of their lives was to be completely turned upside down.

Imagine; in 1540 St Andrews church looking much the same from the outside as it does today. I'm sure that the thatch would not look so smart, as temporary mending would take place most years and the grass would not be so neatly mown having been trimmed with a scythe, no Victorian grave stones, the tower, of course was there, but not with its present battlements. Inside it would have looked very different indeed. We are so used to the white-washed simplicity of St Andrews, relieved by the magnificent screen and flooded with light from the Victorian clear glass nave windows, that it might be difficult to envisage the rather dark but colourful, candle and lamp-lit interior. A very late chantry certificate granted in 1546 was for the use of *2 acres of land in Bramefilde, profits always to be used to find a lamp light in the parish church.....yearly value 12d* held by William Amell¹ The chancel with its 14th century windows glazed with stained glass and dominated by the "high altar" dressed with its sumptuous cloths, was resplendent with the shrines of St Andrew and the Virgin Mary, gilded and candle lit. We know of this from of the will in 1478 of Walter Dyke², the vicar who wished to be "*buried in front of the high altar or in front of the Lady chapel.*" This dark and sacred but mysteriously revealed province of the priest, was divided from the nave by the splendid, largely unrestored screen which still retains the original 15th /early 16th century paintings of, from l. to r. St Mark, St Matthew, (both repainted) St Luke, St John and St Mary Magdalene and was much more glowing both in colour and gold gesso work. The uprights are still decorated with lively depictions of delicately drawn stems, leaves and beautifully detailed, coloured flowers. The plain panels at either end show us two more important structures revealed by wills. I've already mentioned Walter Dyke who in addition to mentioning two alternative spots *image of the Blessed Virgin Mary or St Andrew within the chancel*". in the chancel where he wished to be buried "*or otherwise within the chapel of the Blessed Virgin Mary in the same church.*" A lamp burned constantly in front of the reserved sacrament.

The elaborate piscina in front of the south end of the screen and the host of tiny angels in the vaulting above the altar blank indicate that this was an important altar most probably the "chapel" of the Virgin. Lady chapels are commonly in a south aisle but in a simple single aisled church such as St Andrews, a modest enclosure was all that there was room for. The empty space to the northern end of the screen must have been the gild altar. Walter Dyke again mentions leaving 6s. 8d to the gild of St Thomas in Bramfield for Walter Langham to sing masses for one year for his soul. Gilds were parish organisations dedicated to the praying and saying of masses for the souls of the

1 Suffolk Archeology Vol X11 1906 p51

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departed. Others specified a “*St Gregory Trentall*” a complex devotion comprised of the saying of thirty Masses through one year.

(For further explanation of this see Duffy *The Stripping of the Altars* pp.293-294) There would have been rich hangings, candles and decorations on these altars, all subscribed for by the parishioners. Wax was obviously in great demand, so, as a source of sweetening and light, bees were kept in all villages in great numbers. We have just one reference for the provision of wax. In 1478/9 John Cabelowe leased copyhold, Hulvers (Holly) tenement from the church *to provide wax candles for the crucifix*.³ and again in the same extent Reginald Rabett had a field called *lampelond*⁴ indicating that the rent would provide oil for a lamp. In 1503 William Walpole left in his will among other things *a vestment, a pair of chalices, a mass book, a pax cruette, a sacring bell* indicating the accessories needed to serve the mass properly.

Above the beautifully carved and painted vaulting of the screen is the rood loft where the crucifix, normally flanked by the figures of the Blessed virgin and St John would have stood. This was an important part of religious life and the figures were often illuminated with candles and in some churches during important celebrations, singers would perform from the loft. During the solemn time of Lent the figures were covered with veils which were removed at Easter at a time of great celebration. In many churches it is still possible to see the very tiny doorways usually in front of the chancel arch with stairs leading up to give access to the rood loft but Bramfield’s has been blocked up. However you will notice that the southern pillar of the chancel arch is thickened and during replastering in 1998 the lintel of the door way was revealed on the eastward side.

The rather faded wall painting in its niche on the north wall would have been brilliantly coloured with a wooden cross, the Good Rood. In 1507 Edmund Clerke of Walberswick⁵ willed 10s *to the amending of the Good Rood and his angels in Bramfield Church*. There was a cult of “The Good Rood” when pilgrimages were made locally and this bequest rather indicates that the people of Walberswick had an interest in the upkeep of Bramfield’s special cross.

The walls were covered with more vivid decorations portraying saints and their legends and devotional pictures; sadly today we cannot see much of the colourful glory but William Dowsing’s journal tells us that in 1643 he or his agents destroyed “*24 superstitious pictures, a picture of Christ... and diverse Jesus’s, in capital letters*” and we can read of 19th century renovations⁶ that revealed more wall paintings.

3 Hb 26 371/71 f9v SROI

4 Hb 26 371/71 f18r SROI

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6 *East Suffolk Illustrated* p.64 ed. H.R.Barker 1908-9

Above the chancel arch was a portrayal of the last Judgement and on the north wall, opposite the south porch a fresco of St Christopher to greet travellers and one thought to be St Martin dividing his cloak with a beggar⁷.

Over all this splendour was a painted wooden roof bearing twelve angels, William Dowsing again "*and 12 angells on the roof*"presumably continuing the structure that we see now ie. tie-beams and kingposts only two of which remain. (The plaster ceiling of the roof was started in 1803 and completed by 1828 ⁸) Davy's Church notes⁹

This mystical place played a central part in peoples' lives, at once demanding their support and at the same time filling their precarious and anxious lives with some sort of structure and hope, with its round of festivals, plays, pilgrimages, masses and social events. Already, through the spread of Protestantism from the continent and for Royal convenience the rule from Rome had been broken, but now during the next few years the ordinary parish world would be turned upside-down creating in some measure the St Andrews church that we see today.

From 1537 onwards changes came trickling into their villages through various pressures. We know that in Yoxford, (jms) plays were put on supporting Thomas Cromwell's reforms and the local clergy ostracized them. Aside from any religious convictions they may have had about styles of worship and belief, the clerics would have recognized that their influence and status in the community not to mention their income, was in danger of becoming diminished and so they may have been slow to embrace these new ideas.

CHANGES IN PERFORMANCE OF MASS ENGLISH PRAYER BOOK PEOPLE TAKING PART 1549

In 1538 people were forbidden to perform pilgrimages. The villagers of Bramfield would not have been going off overseas, nor yet to Canterbury, this was the privilege of the wealthy though ¹⁰JMS p129 tells us that several boats sailed from Southwold to take pilgrims to Santiago de Compostela. It is possible that someone could have been a vicarious pilgrim ie be paid by a wealthy person to undertake a lengthy journey on behalf of them. They would, though have taken part in domestic jaunts, perhaps to local shrines like the other Good Roods at Beccles, Easton Bavents, Blythburgh Bridge, Theberton, Leiston and Southwold and they would have welcomed pilgrims to the Bramfield Good Road. This edict was designed to lessen the reliance people had in the magical and perhaps, imagined healing properties of popular saints, images or crosses. But just envisage the saving of money, the preparations, the anticipation and the companionship, generated on this

⁷ *East Suffolk Illustrated* .p64 .ed. H.R.Barker 1908-9)

⁸ FC66/A1/2 SROI Church Disbursements

⁹ microfilm J ? SROI p.146].

¹⁰ JMS p.129

release from the daily grind. I don't think that we can pretend that all the people of Bramfield were deeply religious but I expect that a trip to other villages along with the benefits that might be gained from the worship at a special altar was something that they would have felt the loss of deeply.

The same year it was decreed that offerings should no longer be made to images; this coupled with the last was to encourage people to direct the money previously given to the adornment of the church towards their own families or the poor of the parish. Previous to this the poor had been supported from proceeds generated by the worship at the various shrines, images etc.. Here was the beginning of social care coming from secular sources although still under the disposition of the church.

Within the religious life, the clergy were directed to preach on the Ten Articles of Faith recently published. Among these were instructions that changed the way in which people should *regard* images and saints, which were not yet forbidden but they were not to be seen as having any intrinsic sanctity but were representations of "virtue and good example" ie. there should be no idolatry. This was particularly unsympathetic to the cult of the piety connected with death, when guilds that had been supported in life were forbidden from helping families to carry out the common practices of singing masses and lighting candles for the soul of the departed. The clergy should also preach the acceptance of the Supremacy of the King as Head of the Church. There was a general tightening up of the teachings of the Christian Faith and children and servants were to be taught the Lord's Prayer, the Creed and the Ten Commandments in English not Latin. Every church was to buy an English Bible of the largest volume to be set up in every church in some convenient place for reading. Now, there still weren't many who would be able to read even if it was in English and bearing in mind this was how the clergy had been able to keep such a hold over their congregations as being the only interpreters of the bible and purveyors of the possibility of salvation, they would not have been in favour of this.

Quite what effect the dissolution of Blythburgh Priory would have had locally is hard to know because it had been in a poor state for many years, being worth only a mere £8 in 1538 and having only four canons when it was closed down. Until then, it had presented the vicar to the living, subsequently laymen such as Richard Freston, John Coke, and the Hopton family taking over the presentation to the Bramfield living in 1546.

Five important aspects of church and village life had now been changed - the abolition of the Latin mass, holidays, pilgrimages, the worship of images and saints and the availability of the Bible in English.

This did lead to serious unrest in many places and was encouraged by traditionally minded bishops and clergy. We have no record of what happened in Bramfield though we can be sure that some people would have found the changes hard to accept. Robert Harryson still addressed as 'Sir' in the medieval manner having been presented to the living by Blythburgh Priory in 1514 continued as

vicar throughout the religious upheaval, until his death in 1547 and may not have been enthusiastic about the new ways.

Towards the end of Henry's reign affairs quietened down and Protestantism seems to have reached a state of acceptability to the monarch who while being irreconcilable to the papacy did not wish to dispense with the traditional fabric of Catholicism

Edward VI.

His son Edward VI (1547 - 1553) who succeeded in January 1547 had been schooled by reforming Protestants and although only nine years old, was entirely persuaded by them to step up the pace of change. Archbishop Cranmer delivered a homily at Edward's coronation urging him to see "*God truly worshipped, and idolatry destroyed, the tyranny of the bishops of Rome banished from your subjects, and images removed.*"¹¹ This in Cranmer's terms would include - superstitious fastings, hallowed beads, palms, candles, fraternities, pardons and many other activities that he would have called 'trappings' which had made the people think they were honouring God. So what was left of their colourful, local centre of religious and social life was to be stripped away. This really meant that vicars who had not been timely in carrying out previous edicts were now under stricter orders to bring their churches into line.

To help to bring this about in 1547 Edward VI ordered an Inventory to be made in each church to find out if any of the trappings of the Mass were still in use. Here, we do have some documentary evidence for Bramfield and it goes like this.

CHURCH GOODS IN SUFFOLK

No. V111

[26]

iiiiith Novembris 1547

Brampffylde The true certiyate of John Ameble &
Nicholas Ryve churchwardens there

Saleffirst we certifye for truthe that we wt* the *with

Consente of thole Towne have solde a paxe¹²

A yeare agone for the sme* of XLVIs VIIIId *sum

Whereof

Imployments We have payde to the settinge furthe of

¹¹ Cranmer. *Remains from The stripping of the altars* Eamon Duffy p.448

¹² This will probably be the pax bell left by William Walpole in 1503 see page 36

Solders to srve* the Kynge at dyvrse* tymes XLVI^s VIII^d *serve
*diverse

Itm we had certeyne plate of the churche wch did lye in
custodye of the vycar for the shafwgarde* y'of, and certeine
same vycar, w'oute the consente of the psones under
named to ther owne occupyeinge / Therefore Nycholas
Gavylle gent, John Ameble, Nycholas Ryve churche-
wardens, Robert ffellowe the yonger, Thomas Veysey
thelder, Robert Clarke, wtother* solde into thandez # of *with
others

Robert Norton of hallesworthe gent, thsaide plate #the har
wch drewe LI uncys* at iiiis iiid the unce* Xil Xid *ounces

Itm bestowed of thsame* money for two
Coffers for the churche & the vestreye and
Repacions* of thsame churche wtin &wtoute# Vli Vis VIII^d 14
*repairs

The Reaste Remayneth still unpaid.

The vicar of Bramfield was quick to take advantage of the relaxation of the celibacy laws and on April 14th 1550 Nicholas Thirling married Christyn Cotwyn in Bramfield Church

I wonder if the worshippers of Bramfield complained among themselves about the changes in their involvement in the management of their parish church? They, of course did not expect to have much of a vocal answer to edicts from above as we like to think we do today with our Parochial Church Councils and Deanery this, Diocesan that, not to mention all manner of Synods. Nevertheless there was resistance to some of the changes usually led by a conservative parish priest and I believe that it is possible that Bramfield was inclined to drag its feet when required to throw out the old and welcome the new because of some of the clues left for the later iconoclasts of Cromwellian times to try to destroy.

1548 saw the suppression of chantries and gilds. Bramfield did not have any rich chantries with separate chapels as in Wenhaston but a gild in honour of St Thomas (a Becket) with an altar probably on the north side of the screen, to which everyone who could, would have contributed small amounts of money or decoration in order to have prayers said for their soul on their death.

¹³ It had been common for influential parishioners to manage to obtain these disused items and Eamon Duffy gives many examples of this happening. pp484 - 491

¹⁴ *East Anglian Notes and Queries* Vol11885 pp 114 - 115

All wakes and Plough Mondays were abolished, carrying of candles on Candlemas Day, ashes on Ash Wednesday, palm on Palm Sunday as well as the rites used on good Friday. Church Ales were stopped.

Church Ales

The Church Ale, proceeds to the Church.

For the church - ale, two young men of the parish are yearly chosen by their last forgoers to be wardens, who, dividing the task make collection among the parishioners, of whatsoever provision it pleaseth them voluntarily to bestow. This they employ in brewing, baking and other actes, against Whitsuntide, upon which holiday the neighbours met at the Church home and there merrily fed on their owne victuals, each contributing some petty portion tp the stock, which by many smalls groweth to a meetly greatness, for there is entertayned a kind of emulation between these wardens, who by his graciousness in gathering, and good husbandryin expending, can but advance the Church's profit. Besides, the neighbour parishes at these times lovingly visit one another and frankly spend their money together.¹⁵ Doesn't this sound remarkably like a church fete of today? All these suppressions were designed to further the cause of the protestant movement and purify the worship of the English Church but at the same time the income of each individual parish was being severely depleted which was not going to be popular with many of the clergy. At the same time the village people were deprived of the regular structure of the ceremonies which always brought some light and enjoyment into their arduous lives.

Mary Tudor 1553 - 1558

It is possible that some church furnishings, especially relating to the mass were taken 'for safe keeping' in the hope that they would come back into use, as indeed they did when Mary Tudor succeeded to the throne in 1553. Mary's accession is noted in the Bramfield Registers ¹⁶*"And the xxth day of Julie 1553 was p'claimed & began hir Raigh our moost gracyous Sou'aign Ladye and Quene Marie hir grace then being at fframyngh'm in Suff"*. Did Bramfield take to Catholic worship again and resume saying Mass in Latin? I have not found yet any nearby horrific tales of burning at the stake of obstinate protestants except in Laxfield.

Mary died in 1558, possibly of influenza during an epidemic. 33 people in Bramfield died, mostly in January and February compared the normal 2 or 3. Her death is noted as *"the xviith day of November In the yeare of our lord god A Thousand ffyve hundreth ffiftie & eight dep'ted this present lyf oure moost vertuouse & noble Quene Marie And was Royallye buryed At Westm' the xxi tie day of December in the same yeare whose soule god take to his Infynyte m'cye. Amen."*

¹⁵ from Fisher T. & Hackwood F.W. *Inns, Ales & Drinking Customs of Old England* Unwin 1909

¹⁶ *Registers of Bramfield 1539 - 1596 and 1693 - 1889* ed Rev Thomas Hill 1894

The establishment of the Church of England continued throughout Elizabeth's reign but with nothing of note happening in Bramfield .

For developments in the 17th century see the article about Bartholomew Allerton (Bramfield putting it head above the parapet...)