

THE LENHAM VICAR WHO WENT TO SEE HENRY VIII

by Henny Shotter

The start of the Reformation in England had probably more to do with Henry VIII's loins than with his faith. Even if we acknowledge that he, in his time, had the justified, desperate wish for a male heir, he caused havoc for his people and the country, or to put it more bluntly: "Henry VIII was a wrecker." (i) Some changes in society, such as printing, teaching in schools and higher profile of royals in churches had helped the Reformation on its way but 'they could have been accommodated with an evolving Catholic Church'. (ii) As we know, in older age Henry reconsidered his religious stance and reverted in many aspects to his 'Catholic faith' without the Pope and Purgatory.

A Compromise? The change in religious practice and doctrine, and Henry's wavering on several aspects, affected the church and its flock deeply. It was down to people like Archbishop Cranmer to try to 'smooth' things over. One example of this was the appointment of six clergymen from Kent as cathedral preachers who could preach in any church of the diocese as well as Canterbury Cathedral. Three were conservatives with catholic tendencies and three progressive reformists, three Oxford men and three from Cambridge. Cranmer had hoped that the conversation between them would lead to a form a compromise but instead a war of the words broke out, followed by intrigue.

The Lenham Vicar and his Church One of these preachers was Robert Searles who was also vicar in Lenham (from 1535) . He held traditional Catholic views and was an Oxford man. In the context of Searles it is relevant that he was very much in favour of retaining images and statues of saints in churches. Before the Reformation, St. Mary's church looked very different from today. There were no pews, and no pulpit. The chancel was screened off with a rood screen, a gallery above, in the centre of which was a cross. One altar, facing the nave, was dedicated to "The Holy Cross". The walls were painted with images which told stories from the bible or were inspired by traditional Christian imagery, such as "The Weighing of the Souls", a 14th century painting which still can be seen in Lenham church above the South Door, and reminded the congregation that their eternal destiny hangs in the balance.



The Pieta at St. Severin in Cologne
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In medieval wills, it was a frequent practice that the testator stipulated that a light, a candle was to be lit at a saint's shrine. From such wills, we know (IV) of 'lights' in Lenham being lit for St. Christopher, St. Catherine, St. George, St. Erasmus, St. Edmund, St. James, St. Lawrence, St. Margaret, St. Michael and St. Nicholas. These saints could have been depicted on a panel on the rood, on a pillar or on the wall. However, most prominent in Lenham were the altars to Mary. There were several in the church, one being a 'Pieta', a statue or image which showed a distraught Mary holding her dead son. This was the most important statue as it was near the High Altar in the chancel area. The image shown here is from the 15th century and therefore stylistically closer to the image which could have been in

Lenham. Albeit the Lenham sculpture might have been less skillfully carved!

There was another "light" to Mary which showed her in her pregnancy. This image was especially important for women who sought in prayer an ally for a safe pregnancy and delivery, and there was another image of Mary going to heaven (The Assumption of Mary).

The practice of praying in front of shrine to the saints, asking for their help etc. was considered idolatry in the reformation.

Taking down of monuments

In 1541, after the destruction of the shrine of Thomas Beckett in Canterbury, Henry gave Archbishop Cranmer the order for a *“due search to be made in his cathedral churches, and if any shrine, covering of shrine, table or monument of miracles, or other pilgrimage, do there continue, to cause it to be taken away, so as there remains no memory of it.” (V)*

It seems that the Lenham vicar Robert Searles was most aggrieved by this order. He very much worshipped Mary and in his sermons, he considered her almost equally divine to Jesus. He, for example, claimed that her suffering was equal if not more than that of Jesus. In contrast, some of the Reformists defamed Mary (albeit a bit later), as a 'saffron bag': A saffron bag smells of saffron but is nothing but a bag! The idea was, that just as a cloth bag that has been filled with saffron will ever after "savour and smell of the sweet saffron," the Virgin Mary retained the essence of Christ, even after his birth, but was not 'holy' herself.(VI)

Searles never gave up his devotion to Mary. His will, written in the reign of Elizabeth I, is one of only two wills which still shows devotion to the virgin Mary. The sample of 22 other wills does no longer mention Mary. (VII)

A Journey to Hull

In 1541, after the order had been given for the destruction of shrines and tables, Robert Searles went to see Henry, who was in Hull. What he didn't know is, that Henry was annoyed with the slow progress of the Reformation which he had observed on his travel to Hull. Searles' visit came at exactly the worst possible time.

Henry took note of Searles' concern and handed him a letter to Archbishop Cranmer. In this letter he asked Cranmer to send this vicar from Lenham to prison. Searles was not sent to prison on this occasion but, was later imprisoned for a sermon which did not fit in with the new teaching.

No rule without exemption

Henry's order of 1541 also *'probably brought about the destruction of the tombs and monuments of the early archbishops, most of whom had been officially canonised, or been at least enrolled in the popular calendar, and were accordingly doomed to have their resting-places desecrated.'* (VIII)

One place of worship which was spared such destruction was Peterborough Cathedral, which was at that time an abbey and the last resting place of Catherine of Aragon, Henry's first wife. Perhaps respect for her played a role in saving the abbey but the abbey also had a very wise abbot who became the first bishop of the newly created cathedral.

Peterborough Cathedral therefore can congratulate itself for having one of the largest collection of tombs of their former abbots.



The
Peterborough
Abbots tombs
All of these
tombs are on the
floor and have
always been on
the floor.



You will find a similar tomb of a clergy man, oddly, not even straight, placed in the north



wall of the chancel in St. Mary's, Lenham.

'Mysterious figure in the wall tomb'

are the words with which the church guide describes the effigy. The Official List Entry by Historic England describes it as follows: *Stone effigy of robed and cushioned priest in open coffin with bar across, inset in north wall of chancel. Traces of paint. Said to represent rector who died 1327.*

The 'rector' of Lenham would have been before the reformation the Abbot of St. Augustine. However, there is none who died in 1327.

Locally in Lenham the effigy is named as Thomas de Apulderfelde, who seemingly went to the Holy Land. The effigy is clearly of a priest. However, the list of clergymen issued by the Diocese of Canterbury doesn't contain the name of a Thomas de Apulderfield.

The identity of the figure will remain for the time being a mystery. However, is this tomb originally a 'wall tomb' or was it put into the wall to save it from destruction?

Richard Oldfield in his dissertation mentions one other Kentish example of a tomb being 'walled up', the tomb of John de Sheppey in Rochester. Was the Lenham tomb walled up too?

Out with the Old.... It is important to note that Henry's order included the removal of tables. Altars are tables. Before the Reformation altars were stone slabs. They were symbols of the stone slab at Jesus' grave which was miraculously moved at the Resurrection. These stone altars had a cross in each corner and most had a cavity to hold relics of a saint. It was believed at the time that, from the relic, powers of the saint would be transferred to the worshipper. As such, these stone altars fell into the category 'tables' of pilgrimage and miracles. The cult around relics had flourished in the Middle Ages and these relics were subject to pilgrimage which brought in money for the churches. Lenham being close to several long-distance routes such as the 'Pilgrims Way' will have benefitted from people travelling that route and calling in for a spiritual refreshment on the way.

It is widely assumed that stone altars were removed during the reign of Henry's son, Edward VI or that of Elizabeth I. Many were smashed up, others discarded. We don't know when the Lenham Altar was removed as tabletop.

However, it remained in the church. It was cleverly placed underneath a wooden altar and disguised as a floor slab.



For anyone, such as Robert Searles, who was possibly keen to retain the reliquary, this location would have been almost as good as when the slab was the tabletop. The specific circumstances in Lenham, as alluded to later, could suggest that the Lenham altar was hidden in the reign of Henry VIII following the king's order in 1541 and not later. The Lenham stone altar was re-discovered in the 20th century and restored in its

original place. It is not reported whether the reliquary was empty. However, the cut-out for the reliquary was not repaired, filled in, like in other places e.g. Ulcombe, but is still there today.

In with the new....In the same year, 1541, when Robert Searles went to see the king, Cranmer appointed a curate who made life difficult for Searles and the Lenham congregation. The appointee was Thomas Dawby or Cawby, who was, when it came to the destruction of images, the 'most glaring offender in that matter'. *As for Dawby, he took down most of the images in the church, deprecated fasting and various ceremonies, and arranged for his supporters 'to read the Bible even at the quire door where divine service was sung or said'.* (IX)

Thomas Dawby was a radical reformist and the Lenham congregation pleaded with Dawby that in other churches they still replaced rood screens, and he should leave them their statues and images. Dawby left to become vicar in Wychling where he took down eight or more images. After he had left Lenham, he asked his successor to break in the churchwarden's house and steal the key to the church of St. Mary's. After gaining entrance they dragged out a statue of the Virgin Mary, 'Our Lady of Pity' and smashed it up.

War of Words The presence of Dawby led to a war of words between preachers of different convictions to the extent that a reformist preacher came to Lenham to preach about a bible chapter which Searles had covered the Sunday before from his more conservative outlook. This war from the chancel took place in several churches in the diocese and was of great concern for the church authorities as they feared a schism in the congregation.

The plotters In 1543 a group of prebendaries (clergy men) at Canterbury Cathedral plotted against Archbishop Cranmer. Cranmer's adversaries included one of the Six Preachers, Robert Serles, who was 'in the thick of the Prebendaries' Plot in 1543. (X)

One of the other plotters was the prebendary Richard Parkhurst who was previously vicar in Ashford. Although we cannot establish the link between Richard Parkhurst in Canterbury and the Parkhurst family who held the Manor of East Lenham, it is very likely that there is a connection. Indirectly involved was Anthony St. Ledger, who held the manor of Hollingbourne and Ulcombe. He also held the vicarage of Lenham in the early years after the Dissolution and passed it on to his son Wareham St. Ledger.

Cranmer is quoted to have said to Anthony St. Ledger: "you be there knit in a bond among you which I will break." (Xi) In modern English this means: 'You are involved in a ploy with them, and I will break it.'

The plot against Cranmer came to nothing as Henry VIII put Cranmer himself in place to investigate the accusations against himself!

Robert Searles stayed in Lenham until 1546. He was deprived of his position as priest in 1550 and later restored. He died in 1571 at Whitchurch.

Although he was heavily involved in plotting against Cranmer, he was spared major retribution. It seems, however, that Searles was not that kind to Cranmer when he was in trouble during the reign of Mary I. That however will need further research.

The article was inspired by talk by Dr. Sheila Sweetinburgh which she gave for Lenham Heritage Society. I am grateful to David Carder for pointing out the Ulcombe stone altar to me. Thank you to Dr. Richard Oldfield for sending me a copy of his interesting dissertation. I quoted from:

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