

Aughton and the Pilgrimage of Grace

A talk for All Saints' church, Aughton, 28th June, 2002. Very slightly adapted for 2003.

We should begin by trying to imagine a little of what Aughton and Ellerton might have been like in the 12th and 13th centuries, because that is really where this story began, a story that came to a dark and uneasy conclusion three hundred years later. It was both a shocking and an inspiring conclusion, in which a son of this modest place played a crucial part. It brought to an end several important aspects of life in mediaeval, rural England.

Aughton in the early middle ages consisted of a small castle - at first probably of wood, later of stone - its keep raised up on a still-surviving earthen mound, or **motte**, surrounded by a palisade, within which the animals (and perhaps some of the present inhabitants' ancestors) took refuge in time of trouble. Nearby, probably in a huddle of wooden cottages, stood a small stone church - parts of it can still be seen in the present building - carefully sited where the land rose above the level vastness of the fens. Here lived the de la Haye (or Hay) family, who perhaps came over from France during or after the Norman conquest. They were among the patrons of a small Gilbertine Priory established c.1203, one mile north at Ellerton.

By the 1330s, the windows of Ellerton Priory church already contained rich stained glass which included the shields of arms of families connected with the Priory (including de la Haye) and of their powerful, well-connected friends and kinsfolk. The Priory was a charitable house of canons, founded to care for the elderly poor in an age when those without children, money, land or family, or too frail to work had no means of keeping body and soul together. It was a source of employment, both on its lands and in its buildings, and it will have offered hospitality to strangers and care to the sick. The canons were pious Gilbertines, austere vegetarians who wore rough black habits under their white cloaks with hoods lined with lambs' wool. They were priests to the local communities, would have understood at least church latin - still an important official language - and were probably among the few people in the area able to read and write.

Just across the River Derwent, a small community of nuns lived withdrawn from the world at Thicket Priory. In the late middle ages, unmarried women without money, property of their own or families to support them had few choices. The Church gave them shelter, and in turn they gave work and support to local people. In an age of faith, these religious communities offered comfort to the living and prayed for the dead, including the dead de la Hayes, whose ledger stones are probably among those remaining in Ellerton churchyard and where there can still be seen the grave-slab of John of Wyntringham, a canon of Ellerton and, apparently, 14th century vicar of this church*.

In 1365 Richard de Aske married Elizabeth, sole heiress of Sir Roger Hay, and the castle and lands at Aughton passed to a branch of a family who came originally from Aske in North Yorkshire, where today the Marquess of Zetland lives. Over the next hundred years the defensible castle gradually became less necessary, and was succeeded by a comfortable moated manor house with its gardens, orchards and farms. It stood where Aughton Hall still stands, just east of the church, and visitors to the church still walk beside its now-dry moat. Larger windows and a wide north aisle, probably containing screens and altars at which masses were said or sung daily for the dead, were added to the church, and the chancel may have been re-built.

This was the place to which Sir John Aske brought his well-born bride, Elizabeth Bygod of Settrington, in the late-fifteenth century. She bore him many children, and her children bore many others in their turn. One of those grand-children was called Robert Aske, as at least one son in each generation seems to have been. This Robert was educated in the law, and grew to be a respected professional lawyer, an eloquent advocate and barrister. He practiced in York and London, but certainly spent time on his family's lands at Aughton. He will often have walked through the door by which people enter the church today, and will have stood in the same nave - admittedly under a different roof - seeing the same chancel arch, the same aisle arcade and some of the same walls. He will have looked over the fens from this churchyard, and seen a landscape very like the one with which you are familiar. He will have known the monks of Ellerton, and probably met them about the lanes of the Derwent valley. In his mid-thirties, Robert Aske would die a terrible death after three months as a reluctant hero, leading a vast army of the common people to voice their discontents and to plead with their king, Henry VIII.

* The inscription *Johannes de Wyntringham Canonicus* is still perfectly legible. He died in about 1340.

Early in the 1530s, a series of Acts of Parliament and royal edicts were passed which many ordinary people felt went against their interests. They concerned such things as: the dissolution of the religious houses (to weaken power of the Church and influence of Rome), which were central to the structure of religious and social life in England; declaring the supremacy of the king in religious affairs in England; making treasonable all words written or spoken against the king*; enabling the royal succession to be willed without consulting parliament or people; an insistence that legal cases could be forced to take place in London. In addition, many significant feasts and holy days, which the common folk regarded as central to their religious observance and allegiances, were no longer to be declared in church.

In August 1536, among the abbeys and priories announced for closure **in Yorkshire alone** were Nunburnholme, Haltemprice, Holy Trinity and St. Clement's in York, North Ferriby, Warter, Drax, Sinningthwaite, Healaugh, Armathwaite, Nun Monkton, Ellerton, Grosmont, Rosedale, Keldholme, Moxby, Arden, Baysdale, Easby, Coverham. Similar lists were drawn up for Cumberland, Westmorland, Lincolnshire and elsewhere. Within weeks, the townspeople and monks of Hexham and Lanercost rose up to prevent the confiscation of their Priors, and Newminster Abbey was re-claimed for the monks.

On 1st October, the townspeople of Louth rose up to defend the treasures of their parish church from confiscation by the king's commissioners. The following day, parts of Lincolnshire were roused by church bells, summoning great assemblies of discontented people to capture and imprison the commissioners and send a letter of complaint to the government. On 4th October, Robert Aske rode from Aughton to the ferry at Hessle, where he crossed the Humber and joined the rebels. Next day he was appointed Captain of the West Ancholme cohort and rode with them to join the Louth assembly.

News of the uprising spread fast. The Archbishop of York wrote to those governing Beverley, Ripon and York, exhorting them to anticipate and to suppress the rebellion. But even as he composed his letters, small rebellions were breaking out in the North Riding, the West Riding and parts of Lancashire. Aske rode back into Yorkshire, to discover not only that the Sheriff was pursuing him, but also that the bells of Howdenshire and the great Marshlands of Humber and Don were being readied to summon the people.

Great assemblies from Louth, from Horncastle and from Lindsey rode and marched on Lincoln. The first of several huge musters was held on the Westwood at Beverley, and a message of support was sent to the Lincoln gathering. By now the countryside was inextinguishably alight, and passionate rebellion was spreading like flame in brushwood. The Sheriff of Yorkshire took refuge in Pontefract castle, where he would soon be joined by many of the gentry and anxious leaders of the county.

Within days, beacons were fired to alert the lowlands of Holderness and bells were sounded in Howdenshire. Robert Aske ordered great assemblies of the men of Derwent at Skipwith Common and Kexby Moor where he addressed them as 'pilgrims'. The suppressed religious houses at Easby, Nunburnholme and Warter were all snatched from the King and re-occupied by their ousted communities.

The city of York was soon given up to Aske and his men, perhaps because the governors knew they could not hold out long against so many. The pilgrims nailed a proclamation to the door of the Minster and the York priories of Holy Trinity and St. Clement were restored and re-occupied. The Counties of Westmorland and Northumberland began to rise up, and on 19th October Hull fell to the rebel army - and Hull, remember, is 'King's town'-upon-Hull.

By now the pilgrims had formulated the demands they wished to have set before the king, including a general pardon to be granted to all pilgrims, without exception; a parliament to be held at York or Nottingham or some convenient place; that no man living north of the river Trent should be forced to attend court except at York; that the suppressed monasteries should all be restored, the authority of the Pope re-established and all Acts of Parliament grievous to the common people repealed; that certain of the king's advisers should be removed from his Privy Council and that the commissioners visiting monasteries and deciding on their suppression should be prosecuted for bribery and extortion.

Vast hosts from the north and north-west - some led by the great northern families of Percy and Fairfax - marched to join the men of Yorkshire and Lincolnshire, and Robert Aske, now recognised as their leader,

* Usually a sign that the head of state feels insecure; Robert Mugabe in Zimbabwe for example.

declared: *In all parts of the realm men's hearts are much grudged with the suppression of abbeys*. The great pilgrim army began to march on Pontefract castle.

At the height of their pilgrimage, Aske and the other leaders are known to have had call on at least 40,000 men, and some accounts even suggest as many as 60,000 - an immense number. This vast band of pilgrims saw itself as representative of 'the commons', the commonwealth of the ordinary, loyal citizenry of England. It was no rabble, but a principled and would-be disciplined army. Altogether perhaps 10,000 were on horseback, most of them kitted-out with metal or leather helmets (**sallets**), with leather flaps at the back to protect their necks. They wore oiled linen or leather sleeveless waistcoats (**jacks**), and their arms or knees were protected by simple metal armour. Tens of thousands more went on foot, each with either sallet or jack, but rarely both, and every man carried a bill-hook or a bow. The gentlemen and nobles had bright lances, and here and there in the crowd could be seen staves, swords, daggers, and even a handful of guns. All who were able wore on their sleeves the pilgrims' badge, showing the five wounds of Christ: two bleeding hands, two broken feet and a pierced heart. At the head of each great company, walked priests bearing tall banners brightly painted with St. Cuthbert or Christ crucified above chalice and host, fluttering before the gleam of horse-trappings, helms and weaponry.

Every pilgrim swore an oath on the bible, its text composed by Robert Aske himself: ***You shall not enter into this our Pilgrimage of Grace for the Commonwealth, but only for the love that thee do bear unto Almighty God his faith, and to Holy Church militant and the maintenance thereof; to the preservation of the King's person and his issue, to the purifying of the nobility, and to expulse all villein blood and evil councillors against the commonwealth, from his Grace and his Privy Council of the same. And that thee shall not enter into our said Pilgrimage for no particular profit to yourself, nor to do any displeasure to any private person, but by council of the commonwealth, nor slay nor murder for no envy, but in your hearts put away all fear and dread, and take afore you the Cross of Christ, and in your hearts His faith, the restitution of the Church, the suppression of these heretics and their opinions, by all the holy consents of this book.***

It is rewarding to look closely at this oath, which indicates that the pilgrimage was intended to be seen as a protest borne of love and loyalty, carefully designed to resist so-called 'evil councillors' and 'villein blood' - not the king himself, who was God's anointed, or 'his issue'. The pilgrims were for the good of the commons, not any personal profit, and intended no violence without utmost provocation. Their goal was the protection of ancient traditions and the continuity of familiar ways around which the pattern of their lives had been woven and upon which they believed their security and their immortal souls to depend.

When they reached Pontefract, Robert Aske sat in state in the castle between the Archbishop of York and Lord Darcy, and addressed a list of the pilgrims' demands to Duke of Norfolk's emissary, hoping they would be taken to the king and parliament. These were rejected as unfit, so Aske and his host of 30,000 men swept on to Doncaster, where Norfolk - Lord President of the North and commander of the royal army - nervously awaited them with as few as 5,000 troops, the rest of his army having yet to arrive. Here triumph might easily been the pilgrims' without a battle, but the bridge was defended by Norfolk's cannon and the Don, swollen by floods, was impassable to so great an armed force of horse and foot. They were forced by circumstance to camp on its marshy banks and to parley with the king's man.

They were met by Norfolk himself, who deliberately slowed the pace of negotiation in the hope that his army would arrive before the pilgrims dispersed. He had been empowered by Henry to offer a free pardon to all but ten of their leaders, after which he would take their demands to the king. No doubt one of the ten would have been Robert Aske, but this offer was rejected by the pilgrims, who instead proposed a battle to settle their demands. Norfolk was rattled. He knew he had insufficient men to win an all-out fight, and begged the king to let him negotiate a new settlement. Eventually an amnesty was reached on terms which included a General Pardon for all, the promise of a future parliament in York at which the pilgrims' grievances would be discussed, and the re-occupation of the religious houses.

On 9th December the great pilgrim army was dispersed, and sent home across the vast bleak wastes and waterlands of Don. Their leaders rode over the bridge into the town, and yielded to the duke and the king by tearing the pilgrim badges from their sleeves.

Having apparently accepted this settlement with men he regarded as rebels, the king then issued a proclamation which reveals, perhaps unsurprisingly, that he was both very angry and insincere: *And we, with our whole council, think it right strange that thee, who be but brutes and inexpert folk, do take upon you to appoint us who be meet or not for our council; we will, therefore, bear no such meddling at your hands, it being inconsistent with the duty of good subjects to interfere in such matters.*

For several months Henry did nothing to address the demands of the pilgrims, so early in 1537 groups once again assembled and attempted to capture Hull and Carlisle. By now, however, Norfolk and the king had had time to prepare and the pilgrims were repulsed. Seventy-four of their officers were hanged from the walls of Carlisle.

Robert Aske and the other pilgrim leaders went to London in April that same year, having been assured of their safety. However, the king considered that this second uprising had constituted a breach of his amnesty, and he had them arrested. Aske was tried for high treason and sentenced to death. After being paraded through the towns and the countryside of Yorkshire he was hanged in York, and his body was displayed from Clifford's Tower as a terrible warning. The other pilgrim leaders suffered a similar fate, regardless of rank or of the merits of their cause.

Ironically, this vicious suppression of the Pilgrimage of Grace ended popular resistance to the king's plans, and hastened the dissolution of the religious houses, with huge social consequences: poverty, unemployment, vagrancy, the loss of social support systems and centres of learning. On top of all these were the terrible destruction of a huge corpus of magnificent works of art and craft: of the greatest architecture and religious sculpture; of decoration and furnishing; of almost the entire literature and music of the mediaeval church. It was virtually the end of a complete culture: a way of life based on five hundred years of tradition and practice. In Yorkshire alone one hundred and six religious houses were suppressed, ranging from huge and mighty institutions like Fountains and Rievaulx, Byland, Kirkstall and York St. Mary with their hundreds of monks and thousands of lay-brothers and dependants, to tiny isolated houses like Thicket, Ellerton and others, each with a handful of religious and a modest, local community of needy souls.

Ellerton Priory was finally dissolved in December, 1538, when the Prior and his brother monks, whom Robert Aske would certainly have known, were pensioned off and given pocket-money to abandon their vows. With what must have been calculated cruelty, the lands of the Priory were granted to the Aske family. With this bitter harvest of wealth they were able to add a handsome tower to Aughton church as a memorial to their brave, shamed son. It rises still, warmed in the evening by glorious raking light from the ings, above a curlew-haunted landscape managed now much as it was when Aske grew, lived and prayed there. And so that none mistake the meaning of this tower, a newt - locally called an Aske or Esker - is carved at its foot and an inscription across its south side, beneath a display of heraldry, facing toward London and the king. It may be translated as: *Christopher, second son of Sir Robert Aske, ought not to forget the year 1536.*

Despite all this, or perhaps in reaction to it, the spirit of rebellion continued to smoulder deep within the family. Three hundred years later, another Robert Aske led a great march on London at the time of the repeal of the Corn Laws.

Aughton church and its massive tower still stand. And if we can keep Aughton's sacred space alive, and can restore something of the generous spirit of Ellerton Priory, those 40,000 and more pilgrims will have marched to some purpose. Brave folk like Robert Aske of Aughton, will not have died in vain. Some resonant symbols will then survive as witnesses, to tell those who come after of a great and terrible sacrifice made to preserve treasures of the spirit and the imagination more valuable to the common people than the greed, vanity and pride of Princes.

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