CHURCH AND COMMUNITY IN BRISTOL
DURING THE SIXTEENTH CENTURY

by JOSEPH BETTEY

BRISTOL RECORD SOCIETY, UNIVERSITY OF BRISTOL
1983
Church and Community in Bristol during the Sixteenth Century is based on a Public Lecture given by Dr. Joseph Bettey in the University of Bristol in December 1982. This lecture was the second in a series of bi-annual lectures arranged by Bristol Record Society. The first lecture in the series was Radicalism in Bristol in the Nineteenth Century by David Large. Copies of these two Occasional Papers may be obtained from the Honorary Secretary, Bristol Record Society, University of Bristol, or from Dr. Joseph Bettey, Department of Extra-Mural Studies, 32 Tyndall's Park Road, Bristol BS8 1HR. The pamphlets cost £1.00 each (add 20p for postage and packing). Copies may also be obtained from the Porter’s Lodge of the Wills Memorial Building.

Bristol Record Society is at present publishing every year a volume of documents relating to the history of Bristol. The volume for 1983 will be The Port of Bristol 1848-1888. The volume is issued free to members.

The annual subscription is £3.00 for private members, £5.00 for institutional members in the U.K., and £7.00 for institutional members outside the U.K. Details of membership and list of publications may be obtained from David Large, Hon. Secretary, Bristol Record Society, The Department of History, University of Bristol.
It is the purpose of this paper to discuss the central, crucial position which the church occupied in the life of the community in Bristol during the early decades of the sixteenth century, and to go on to show the ways in which this position was changed by the dramatic events of the Reformation period. Evidence for the dominant position of the Church in late medieval Bristol was clearly to be seen on all sides in the town. The religious houses and parish churches were the principal land-marks on the Bristol skyline; the town was surrounded by monastic establishments, notable among them the priory of St. James, the four houses of the Friars, and the great house of the Augustinian canons whose church was later to be the cathedral. Eighteen parish churches were clustered in and around the town to serve the needs of its inhabitants, and there were hospitals and almshouses in various parts of the town, as well as numerous chantry and other chapels. In Bristol, as in other towns and villages throughout the country, the parish churches were at the heart of community life, and were the social, educational, charitable and cultural as well as the religious centres of the communities they served.

The destruction or secularisation of the rich annual pattern of religious festivals, ceremonies, processions, drinkings, bonfires and plays which occurred as part of all the manifold changes of the Reformation, represents a profound and abrupt break in the social as well as the religious history of Bristol and had a tremendous impact on the character of community and civic life.

Although it was one of the three or four most important towns and ports in England, an important trading and industrial community, Bristol during the sixteenth century was, by modern standards, a small town. Its population was probably no more than about 10,000 at the beginning of the sixteenth century, and it had not risen to more than about 12,000 by the end of Queen Elizabeth's reign. Most of the town was still crowded within the medieval walls, although there were busy industrial suburbs across the river around St. Thomas's, Temple, St. Mary Redcliffe and Bedminster. For ecclesiastical purposes, Bristol was on the extreme edge of the great diocese of Worcester, far from the supervision of the bishop, while parishes south of the river were within the diocese of Bath and Wells.

The monastic houses and parish churches of Bristol are listed and described in J. F. Nicholl and John Taylor, Bristol Past and Present, II. Ecclesiastical History, 1881, and also in Victoria History of Gloucestershire, II, 1970, 74-119.

For an instructive discussion of the annual round of civic ceremonies in Coventry, see Charles Presthes-Adams, 'Ceremony and the Citizen' in P. Clark & P. Slack (Eds.), Crisis and Order in English Towns: 1380-1700. 1972, 57-60.
The intimate link between the Church and the Community in Bristol can be illustrated very well from a royal visit to the town which has not previously been much commented upon by Bristol historians. This is the visit of King Henry VII in the early summer of 1487, and was part of the first great progress through England which Henry VII made after winning the throne at the battle of Bosworth in 1485. The King and his court had travelled from London through Stamford and Lincoln to York; there they turned south, travelling through Stafford and Worcester to Gloucester where the King stayed at the great Benedictine abbey which is now the cathedral. From Gloucester he came to the Cistercian abbey at Kingwood, and thence to Bristol. The chronicler’s account of the King’s reception in Bristol provides an admirable illustration of the total mixture of Church and Community in the lavish welcome which Henry VII received. He was met outside Lafford’s Gate by the Mayor and burgesses of Bristol, but then at the town gate he was greeted by processions representing all of the eighteen parish churches. As the King made his way through the town, past the Castle and on to the High Cross, he was welcomed by numerous pageants, many of them religious in theme. Certainly the most remarkable was the pageant which in the words of the chronicler, consisted of ‘An Olifante with a castell on his bakk curiously wroghte, the Ressurrection of Our Lorde in the highest tower of the same with certain imagerye, smyteing of bellis, and all went by weights, marvellously wele done.’

A cynic might suggest that this figure of a top-heavy beast carrying a clockwork representation of the Resurrection on its back could very well stand as the epitome of the welcome the King received in Bristol. Having admired the elephant and his clockwork burden, the King moved on across the Frome to College Green, greeted as he passed along a narrow street just over the river by a baker’s wife who threw a quantity of wheat out on to him from her overhanging window, crying ‘Welcome and Good Luck.’ On College Green the King was received by the solemn procession of the abbot and canons of St. Augustine’s where he stayed for the three days of his visit to Bristol.

All this is in marked contrast with the much better-known visit of Henry VII’s grand-daughter, Queen Elizabeth, who came to Bristol in 1574, but whose equally lavish reception was essentially civic and secular, and was paid for by the Corporation. Henry VII’s visit coincided with the popular festival of Corpus Christi, and the highlights of his stay consisted of his participation in the religious procession through the streets and attendance at an open-air sermon on College Green at which the Bishop of Worcester preached.¹

¹ The account of Henry VII’s visit in 1487 is in British Library, Cottonian Ms Jul. B vii ff 18-21.

There was also a close link between the Church and the Guilds in early sixteenth century Bristol. The guilds of merchants and the craft fellowships of Bristol contributed lavishly to the parish churches during the later middle ages, and also established numerous chantries and almshouses. Some of the guilds were primarily religious in purpose, most notably the Guild of Calendars, an ancient association of clergy and laity which existed to offer masses and intercessions for their brethren, living and dead, and to engage in charitable works towards those who were old or sick. The Guild of Calendars met in All Saints church.² Another essentially religious guild was the Fraternity of Mariners, which was founded in 1445 in the Hospital of St. Bartholomew and consisted of a priest and twelve poor mariners whose constant prayers were sustained by a charge on all cargoes coming to the port of Bristol and by a levy on seamen’s wages.³ Other religious guilds had a practical purpose, like the guild associated with the Chapel of the Assumption on Bristol Bridge, which in the words of its charter was charged with the duty ‘to keep and repair the Bridge of Bristol, piers, arches, and walls, for the defence thereof against the ravages of the sea ebbing and flowing daily under the same.’

A similar chantry established in Henbury parish church had the duty of maintaining the sea walls in the Severn estuary. Likewise some parish churches played a practical part in Bristol life. A few controlled the water supply for their respective parts of the town; for example St. John’s, All Saints’, St. Nicholas and St. Mary Redcliffe, all had conduits and taps and operated a public water supply.⁴ The clock at St. Nicholas provided the standard time for the town, and established the time at which services were to be conducted in chantries as well as in the other parish churches.⁵

In most guilds or craft fellowships the members combined to maintain a chantry in one of the parish churches. Thus the Weavers’ Guild had a chantry in the Temple church dedicated to their patron saint, St. Catherine. The Bakers’ Guild had a chantry dedicated to St. Clement in the Black Friars church; the wealthy Guild of Merchant Tailors had a chapel in St. Ewes dedicated to St. John the Baptist, which was richly furnished and expensively decorated with paintings, tapestries, screens and opulent furnishings.⁶ Civic and guild ceremonies alike centred around the parish churches and...
formed a colourful and repetitive annual round of processions, ritual and feasting.\textsuperscript{11}

It is important to emphasise that many of the guild processions and ceremonies involved only a limited number of Bristol inhabitants and not the whole population, except as spectators. Membership of the craft guilds was closely regulated, just as the government of the town was the preserve of the Mayor and the small group of forty-two burgesses. Civic and religious ceremonies therefore involved the predominantly masculine and prosperous elements of society. When the Fraternity of the Weavers and Cordwainers went in procession each year at Whitmasitide along the banks of the Avon to the chapel of St. Anne in the wooded valley near Brimington, they were not only taking part in a religious procession and indulging in a public holiday, they were also defining and advertising their own membership, just as in a later period the west-country Friendly Societies were to do in their traditional Whitmasitide 'Club-Walks.'\textsuperscript{12}

The early sixteenth century churchwardens' accounts for several Bristol churches as well as the surviving guild ordinances all provide abundant evidence of the scale and splendour of the Corpus Christi and other religious processions. At St. Nicholas' church there was a large pyx or receptacle to carry the Blessed Sacrament in procession and regular payments for the Corpus Christi procession included sums to the Sexton for bearing the cross, to men and boys for carrying torches, censers and candlesticks, and to children for singing and for 'beryng up of the priestes' copys.'\textsuperscript{13}

At St. Ewens' the cost of the procession included a breakfast and substantial dinner for those who took part and amounted each year to several shillings.\textsuperscript{14} The church of St. John the Baptist also provided a dinner for the priests in the procession; and the church possessed a fine pyx of silver and gilt 'for the Sacrament on Corpus Christi day' as well as a cross, banners, torches and vestments to be used in the procession.\textsuperscript{15} An inventory of the goods in St. Stephens' church included a silver image of the Blessed Virgin 'that the Sacrament is borne in on Corpus Christi day' which was valued at the very high figure of £40, and there were also six banners and two streamers for use in the procession.\textsuperscript{16}

\textsuperscript{12} For the Minute Book of the Bakers' Company starting in 1449 see B.R.O. 08135 (1-3).
\textsuperscript{13} W. J. Lamerton, Annual of Bristol in the Sixteenth Century, 1906, 3.
\textsuperscript{14} F. R. B. Masters, Bristol Craft Guilds during the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries, Bristol University unpublished M. A. Thesis, 1949.
\textsuperscript{16} The Church Book of St. Nicholas 1335-1727 was destroyed when the church was bombed in 1940.
\textsuperscript{17} B. E. Williams, op. cit., 71, 76.
\textsuperscript{19} B.R.O. Church Book of St. John the Baptist 1494-1581.
\textsuperscript{20} B.R.O. St. Stephen's Church Inventories 1494-1550.

\textbf{CHURCH AND COMMUNITY IN BRISTOL DURING THE SIXTEENTH CENTURY}

The Church was also totally involved in the civic life of Bristol: the annual round of ceremonies and processions established by custom for the Mayor and carefully recorded by the Town Clerk, Robert Ricart, towards the end of the fifteenth century, emphasises the essential link between the civic authority and the parish churches in Bristol. From the time of his oath-taking in September the Mayor embarked upon an ordered round of visits to the parish churches. At Michaelmas the Mayor and Council assembled at the High Cross and went in procession to St. Michael's church. On the Feast of All Saints the Mayor and Council attended All Saints' church, and from there walked to the Mayor's house for refreshments and wine.\textsuperscript{17} The next day, the feast of All Souls, the Mayor and the Town Clerk together with the Swordbearer and the four sergeants walked to St. Mary Redcliffe to enquire into the affairs of the chantries established there by William Canynges. This was only one aspect of the very close connection between the office of Mayor and the numerous chantries in Bristol since the founders of chantries, many of whom had been Mayors themselves, imposed upon the Mayor the duty of auditing the accounts of their foundations, overseeing the affairs and appointing the chantry chaplains.\textsuperscript{18} During the next few months the programme laid down by custom for the Mayor involved regular visits to the parish churches of Bristol, religious processions through the streets, listening to numerous sermons and attendance at many 'obits' or masses on the anniversary of the death of benefactors.\textsuperscript{19}

Perhaps the most interesting of all the ceremonies occurred on 6 December, the feast of St. Nicholas, patron saint of children, when the Mayor and Council walked to St. Nicholas' church to join in the ceremony of the boy bishop, to hear mass and to listen to the boy bishop's sermon and receive his blessing. Later they returned to St. Nicholas' church for the boy bishop's evensong. This ancient ceremony in which a choir-boy played the part of the Bishop for a day, was not unique to Bristol, although in many other places it formed part of the revels of the Christmas season. It was evidently taken very seriously in Bristol and accompanied by considerable ceremony for an inventory of the vestments at St. Nicholas' church in 1433 lists a mitre and crosier for the boy bishop, eight banners to be carried in his procession and a cloth of white to hang before the statue of St. Nicholas.\textsuperscript{20} These and many other ceremonies which regularly marked the progress of each year, were evidently regarded as contributing to the well-being of all citizens, and as 'laudable customs . . . to the honour and comen wele of this worshipful towne and all th'inhabitants of the same.'\textsuperscript{21}

Regular church attendance, worship and the hearing of sermons, together with inaugural ceremonies, public processions and the taking of solemn oaths by all civic
officials helped to confer authority on the mayor and council as well as setting limits to their own self-interest. The importance given to the position of the mayor by these ceremonies was also some reward for what was otherwise a laborious, expensive and time-consuming office. It was no doubt for this reason as well as for the social cohesion which regular ceremonial helped to foster, that the Council encouraged these occasions. Thus those taking part in the annual ceremonies of ‘setting the watch’ on the feast of St. John the Baptist (Midsummer) and the feast of St. Peter (29 June) were encouraged in attendance and spurred on in their efforts by the provision of no less than 114 gallons of wine, dispensed by the Mayor on St. John’s day and by the Sheriff on St. Peter’s day. The wine was divided among the various craft fraternities who were to send ‘their own servants and their own pottes for the wine.’ The Weavers and Tuckers were apparently the strongest guilds; they qualified for 10 gallons of wine each. The Tailors and Shoemakers came next with 8 gallons, and so on down the list of twenty craft guilds to the Bowyers and Fletchers who received the least — only 2 gallons. 

Other ceremonies which marked the passage of each year in Bristol included the hock-tide games, the rogationtide processions, the St. George’s day celebrations, all of which served to give formal expression to the social groupings in the town, and there were other occasions which provided an outlet and release for the inevitable tensions which built up in such a tightly-packed yet rigidly structured society as Bristol, where all classes lived closely packed together and yet where there were great differences in wealth and social status. One such occasion was the ceremony of the boy bishop on St. Nicholas’ day; another was the reign of the lord of mirule during the Christmas season. Another occasion when the accepted order was turned upside down with licence was on May Day when there are references in several Bristol churchwardens’ accounts to Robin Hood and Little John, to the payment of mistsrells and to the purchase of meat and drink for ‘for the King and Queen and all they company’ who took part in the May Day revels. Here again there is a link between these revels and the parish churches. 

Church and Community in the Bristol neighbourhood

In the district around Bristol there is also copious evidence of the active involvement of the parish churches in all aspects of community life. To take just one example, the late medieval church houses which were built as meeting places for parishioners and as venues where church ales and other money-raising activities and bucolic revels could be held, survive at Yatton, Long Ashton, Chew Magna, Chew Stoke, East Harptree and several other places. In Bristol a Church House was built in Broad Street by the parishioners of St. Ewens in 1493; sixteen people contributed money towards the project, including a woman who paid 2d a week during the building work; and dozens of other people contributed wood, stone, sand, lime, building materials and labour. 

It is impossible to read through the superb late medieval and early sixteenth century churchwardens’ accounts of the very lively parish of Yatton, and see the way in which the church was vastly enlarged with stone expensively and laboriously brought from the quarries at Dundry, and the interior enriched with screens, carved woodwork, paintings, lights, glass, statues etc., or to read the similar accounts which survive for several of Bristol churches, notably for All Saints’, St. Mary Redcliffe and St. John the Baptist, without being struck by the evidence of the real enthusiasm which existed for the parish churches. Whether this enthusiasm was engendered by an understandable desire to escape the fires of hell, or by rivalry with neighbouring parishes, or by genuine love and concern for the parish church makes no difference to the result of all this activity which was to produce superb churches full of the most elaborate and colourful furnishings. 

The Church Courts

Another and very different way in which the Church was actively involved with the life of the community in Bristol throughout the sixteenth century was through the activities of the Church Courts. The Ecclesiastical Courts exercised jurisdiction over a great many aspects of life—al! matters connected with heresy, morals, marriage, wills, probate, non-payment of tithes, slander, libel, evil living and non-attendance at church. The voluminous records of the Church Courts bring us closely into contact with all aspects of everyday life in Bristol and the surrounding district, especially since the proceedings of the courts and the evidence of witnesses was recorded in great detail, and often in the witnesses’ own words. Witness’ depoisions show very clearly the lack of privacy in sixteenth-century life; someone was always passing by, or happened to be looking through a window or peering through a crack in a door and happened to have witnessed the most intimate scenes taking place within. Some examples from the records of the Church Courts will serve to illustrate this aspect of Church life.

During the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries several people from Bristol, and especially clothworkers from the parishes of St. Thomas, Temple and Bedminster, which were in the diocese of Bath and Wells, were tried for heresy, and it is clear that Lollard beliefs and objections to many aspects of the Church’s teaching which had originated a century before with John Wycliffe and his followers, continued to find favour with a significant group in Bristol. Early in the sixteenth century, for example, there are references to the trials of dyers, weavers, smiths, carpenters, a carpet-maker, a wire-drawer and a bow-maker from St. Thomas and St. Mary Redcliffe for heresy.”
Much more common, however, were the trials of persons accused of mundane offences —adultery, slander, drunkenness, etc. and these are often extremely informative about everyday life in the streets of Bristol. In the records of the Church Courts we get closer than anywhere else to ordinary life and speech. For example in the records of the Church Courts we can read of the sort of pleasantries which were exchanged in the streets, such as in the case brought before the Ecclesiastical Court meeting in St. Mary Redcliffe in February 1540 when Elizabeth Corford was accused of brawling in the street at Bedminster with Agnes Morgan, and of saying to her:

"Thou art an arrant hore, a common hore, and every man knoweth thou art a naughtie harlott. I will tear thy hore's coat that all other bores shall be ware by thee.'

Elizabeth was duly sentenced to perform public penance. Likewise in 1556, John Butler, a physician, was standing at a doorway in Wine Street as Elizabeth Jones passed by, and was alleged to have called after her:

"Arrant whore, stronge whore and carted whore, saying that she was driven out of London for a whore ..."

There were numerous similar cases which were tried before the Church Courts in Bristol during the sixteenth century, and many others which involved testamentary disputes, immorality, drunkenness, non-attendance at church, working on Sundays and feast days and such like offences. For example, William Wilkins of Redcliffe was sentenced to public penance in St. Mary Redcliffe in June 1560 for adultery with Joanna Thomas, and was ordered to:

... repayer to the parish of Redcliff, havinge a sheet about him, barefoot and bare legged, with a white rodd in his hande, and to kneele penetently before the communion table all the time of morning prayere and the communyon, and at the time of the reading of the Homily to stande before the pulpit while the curate declare the cause of his penance doing ..."

Such public penance was commonly imposed by the Church Courts, and it must have been an extremely daunting prospect in a small community where each person was well-known to all the others. In December 1565 Robert Clepps, the captain of a Scottish ship The Paul, had to appear before the court to obtain permission to undertake urgent repairs to his ship on a feast day, even though the ship moored at Bristol quay was so leaky that she was "in peril both for herself and her cargo".13 During the later sixteenth century there are many examples of persons being sentenced to public penance for working on Sundays, such as the Bristol man who in 1592 had to perform penance "for carrying of six dozen of ale upon Sunday 16 July through the city"; or Robert Hoskyns of Mangotsfield who had made a hayrick upon a Sunday and was ordered to stand in the church during divine service and 'he shall signifie that he was very sorry that he gave any cause of offence by makeinge of the said Ricke and that he will no more doe the like ..."14

The clergy were also disciplined by the Ecclesiastical Courts, like Maurice Durrand, curate of St. Werburgh's, and Thomas Tyson, curate of St. Peter's, who in September 1592 appeared before the Court and were solemnly warned that: 'they have beene dyvers tymes drunken and that ... hereafter they doe not frequente ale howses or taverns, but behave themselves in such honest and decente sorte as becometh the estate and profession of a minister.'15

Most interesting of all the cases, however, was that of Margery Northoll who was tried in October 1539. Margery had been left a widow at the age of 26, and came to Bristol in August 1539 with the declared intention that in the town she would find another husband. She stayed first with a friend Matilda Blagdon in Bedminster, and later moved to a house in Temple Street. Wherever she went, however, there were always witnesses who could later testify to the court concerning her words and actions. All the witnesses agreed that she arrived in Bristol bringing with her bottles of sack, and that she had announced that in Bristol she could easily find three or four new husbands. Her first attempt was on an elderly, wealthy clothier, Thomas Butler, who lived in Redcliffe Street. But her attempt to interest him obviously failed, and Margery was heard to declare that she would rather have a young man even if he had had but one shirt to his back. Her friend Matilda Blagdon then suggested that she should try:

'an honest young man whose name is Thomas Jones, servant of Mr. Gorges' They therefore sent for Thomas Jones to come to the house. When he arrived Margery produced a bottle sack and witnesses reported that:

'they sat at the table drinking sack merrily together.' After a time Thomas Jones announced that he must go, for said he:

'I must goo home for I have harvest folks at home, and therefore I am sorry.'

Margery however refused to let him go but insisted that he should stay the night so that they might talk further. Witnesses then saw Margery produce another bottle of

13 S.B.O. Bath and Wells Diocese, Consistory Court, D/59/N/2/1, 1539-40
14 B.R.O. Bristol Diocese, Cause Book EP/3/1/1/1 1545-56.
sack. The next day witnesses saw Margery and Thomas walking hand in hand in the garden, and then sitting on a seat under a woodbine. They then heard Margery say to Thomas:

"Let us not go out, here is a good place, for there are many folks within". And then she set a clothe there a-ready and sett afore them wyne and ale and there they drank and were merry together. After some time Thomas again protested that he was sorry but he must go home to attend to his master’s affairs, and witnesses heard Margery say to him:

"What need you to be sorry, go ye home Thomas to your harvest, for I am your wife and you be my husband, and by my faith and trothe we will never be departed tylly Godd departe us."

Margery had met someone else and refused to accept the beads saying:

"God make him a good man, I will never have his tokens."

The new man in her life was a weaver from the parish of Temple called Thomas Hayward to whom Margery also solemnly plighted her troth. Following a complaint from Thomas Jones, Margery found herself before the ecclesiastical court, and was ordered totally to renounce the company of Thomas Hayward.

The common point of all these examples of proceedings before the Church Courts, and there are many hundreds of similar examples which might be quoted, is that they all illustrate very clearly the close involvement of the Church with all aspects of community life and the careful control exercised by the Church Courts over the thoughts, speech and actions of individuals.

Critics of the Church

The Church in Bristol during the early decades of the sixteenth century was not without its critics. As has already been indicated, Lollard sympathisers were to be found among the tradesmen and artisans in the town, and there were other critics who were concerned about various aspects of Church life and doctrine, at the expense of the religious processions and at the cost of the meals, wine and other refreshments for the participants.

It is of course impossible to gain any idea of the views of more than a very few of the 10,000 or more inhabitants of Bristol during the early sixteenth century, but the storm of controversy which greeted the preaching of ideas for changes in the Church during 1530’s indicates that some Bristolians were ready to welcome reform. Bristol was the one town in England where the early Reformation changes were heralded and accompanied by a violent pulpit debate and by vociferous public exchanges between advocates of the new ideas and supporters of the old ways. Reformers like William Tyndale and Hugh Latimer, both of whom lived for a time near Bristol, poured scorn on what they regarded as the abuses of pilgrimages, the cult of the Virgin and the saints, the veneration of images and many of the external trappings of late medieval Catholicism. Latimer, who was rector of West Kington near Castle Combe in Wiltshire, wrote in 1533 with genuine distress and indignation of the crowds of pilgrims which he saw passing along the Fosse Way near his home, on their way to the Cistercian abbey of Hailes in Gloucestershire:

"... ye shall also receive a bage of reliques, wherein ye shall se stranges thynges, as shall appeare by the scripture, as Godes cote, our Ladies smocke, parte of Godes supper in cena domini, Pars petre super qua natus erat Jesus in Bethlehem, belkye ther is in Bethelhem plentie of stones and sum quarrie, and makith ther maingierres off stone."

In 1533 Hugh Latimer was invited by the Mayor of Bristol, Clement Bays, to deliver three Lenten sermons in Bristol. It is interesting that the Mayor and his brethren should have invited a man who was already known for his criticisms of the Church and who was already a celebrated preacher against the abuses in the Church to preach in Bristol. Later in 1533 Clement Bays together with the Sheriff and various Bristol merchants were present at Iron Acton when another prominent reformer, John Erly, preached there. Erly was befriended by William Tyndale’s patron and benefactor, Sir John Walsh of Little Sodbury, and by Sir Nicholas Poyntz of Iron Acton. In Bristol during Lent 1533 Hugh Latimer’s forceful sermons, criticising numerous abuses and excesses in the Church, aroused a storm of controversy. Faced by Latimer’s powerful
oratory in favour of reform, several preachers in Bristol immediately sprang to the
defence of the established order in the Church, and the clash of rival opinions stirred up
great controversy and dissension in the town. Notable among the conservative
preachers was John Hilsley, Prior of the Bristol Dominicans, and William Hub-
berdyne, a notable supporter of the old order in the Church and almost as popular a
preacher as Latimer. Hubberdyne favoured a histrionic style of preaching and ach-
ieved his popularity as a preacher by his energy and dramatic actions in the pulpit. It
was this which was eventually to lead to his death, for he fell victim to a rare occupa-
tional hazard. While he was preaching he leapt about so much that the pulpit collapsed
beneath him and he fell heavily, breaking a leg and suffering other injuries from which
he died. The churchwardens when accused of negligence in not providing a sufficient
pulpit replied, very reasonably, that they had made it for preaching and not for dancing.40

In Bristol during the spring of 1533, however, the pulpit clash between Latimer and
Hubberdyne and their respective followers, set the whole town ablaze with religious
controversy, and created enough uproar for complaints concerning the ‘infamy, discord, strife and debate’ in Bristol to be brought to the attention of Thomas
Cromwell.41 Bitter religious controversy continued in Bristol for the next few years,
and reveals itself in many ways, for example in continued preaching and counter-
preaching in Bristol parish churches, in an apparent revival in Bristol and the
surrounding area of Lollard-type beliefs and heresies, and also in the appearance of
defenders of the old order like the eighteen year old Bristol boy John Scurfield who in
1536 got himself into trouble with the ecclesiastical authorities for his letters in defence
defenders of the old order like the eighteen year old Bristol boy John Scurfield who in
1536 got himself into trouble with the ecclesiastical authorities for his letters in defence
of the sacraments, or the vicar of Christ Church, Bristol, John Keene, who in 1537 was
reported by the Mayor and other leading citizens for saying that he despised the new
preachers and reformers. Keene was also accused of having called his congregation
heretics and new-fangled fellows, and of wishing to see Hugh Latimer, who was now
the bishop of Worcester, burnt for hereesy; significantly, Keene was also accused of
having preached in Bristol in support of the Northern Rebels during the Pilgrimage of
Grace in 1536.42

It was against this background of fierce religious controversy that the first steps
were taken during the 1530s which were to lead to the destruction of much of the ec-
clesiastical edifice which only a few years earlier had seemed so strong and secure.

It is not the purpose of this paper to deal with the stirring changes of the Reforma-
tion in Bristol, the dissolution of the monastic houses, the abolition of the chantries
and religious guilds, the establishment of the new bishoipcic and diocese of Bristol in

40 The story of Hubberdyne’s death is told by John Foxe, Acts and Monuments, ed. G. Toumend, 1847-8, i.475.
41 Letters and Papers of Henry VIII, VI, 799, XII, (1), 508, 1147.
42 G. R. Elton, op. cit., 122-23.
44 Former civic records and references concerning the religious controversies in Bristol during the 1530s show Gloucester City
Library, Blockley Abstracts, 425.
1542, the rush to purchase former monastic properties by private individuals and by
the Corporation itself.44 Nor are we primarily concerned here with the brief revival of
Catholicism and of the old ceremonial during the reign of Mary, but the intention is to
concentrate rather on the changes which affected the community life in the parishes of
Bristol and the surrounding district. There can be no doubt that the effect of the
Reformation changes upon the framework of community ritual and ceremony in the
district was profound and far-reaching.

The Church and Community Life after the Reformation

The Reformation brought to an end many of the ceremonies and processions which
had been such an important feature of the community life of Bristol. The Act for the
Dissolution of the Chantaries in 1547 and the confiscation of their endowments
expressly included that part of the funds of guilds and corporations assigned to what
were now regarded as superstitious purposes, all endowed masses for the dead, and all
funds devoted to lights and lamps, anniversary services and obits; this spelled the end
of the religious guilds and severed the intimate connection between the craft guilds and
the parish churches. From henceforward the activities of the craft guilds became
purely secular, and the endowments and valuations previously dedicated to religious
purposes were confiscated by the Crown. The ceremony of the boy bishop had already
been brought to an end by a Proclamation of July 1541 which alleged that:

. . . children be strangelig decked and apparyled to counterfeit priestes, bishoppes, and women, and so be led
with songs and dances from house to house, blessing the
people and gathering of money; and boyes do singe masse
and preache in the pulpitt, with such other unfitting and
inconvenient usages, rather to the derision than any
true glory of God, or honour of His saints . . .

In May 1548 the Privy Council formally abolished and forbade many ancient and
colourful rituals such as the ceremony of candles at Candlemas, palms and processions
around the churchyard on Palm Sunday, ashes on Ash Wednesday, creeping to the
Cross on Good Friday, the Easter Sepulchre and the Quem Quaeritis ritual, the use of the
‘holy loaf’ after Mass on Sundays and of holy water. The Council also ordered the
destruction of ‘all the images remaining in any church or chapel’. This order together
with the Act against Superstitious Books and Images which was passed by Parliament
in 1550 unleashed a great holocaust of destruction of medieval art — stone-carving,
woodwork, paintings, stained glass, service books and vestments — in the churches of
Bristol, as throughout the whole country.45 The great Corpus Christi procession, and

45 The establishment of the diocese of Bristol in 1542 with the former Augustinian abbey church as its cathedral
meant that all the changes of the next few years were supervised and enforced by the bishop of Bristol and his officials and
not from some distant diocesan centre.

For the destruction of the furnishings and decoration of the Bristol parish churches see J. H. Bettey, Bristol Parish
Churches during the Reformation, Bristol Historical Association, 1979.
the ceremonies and processions associated with the feasts of St. John the Baptist at Midsummer and St. Peter on 29 June came to an end, and with them ended the tradition of open-air ceremonies and religious processions through the streets. Religious observances were now confined within the churches; only the annual perambulation of the parish bounds at Rogationtide survived as a practical, open-air ceremony. The secularisation of community events can be seen in the ending of the religious plays and pageants such as those on St. Katherine’s day, and the substitution of secular entertainments in their place.37

These changes represent a more abrupt break with the past in community life than anything which was to be witnessed in Bristol until the coming of industrialisation and the massive population increase during the eighteenth century. There is no indication in the surviving accounts of either churchwardens or guilds of how these changes were regarded or whether the cessation of the ancient processions, rituals and annual ceremonies was viewed with relief or regret. The churchwardens’ accounts record the dissolution of the chantries, the confiscation by the Crown of the plate, books, vestments and valuables, and the destruction of altars, images, stained glass and wall-paintings in the churches during the reign of Edward VI with the same lack of comment as they record the restorations under Mary and the further destructions under Elizabeth. Similarly, the guild records make no comment upon the passing of the old ways, nor upon the confiscation of religious part of their endowments and valuables. The changes were of course enforced with all the authority of both Church and State, and most people no doubt felt it best to conform, if only for the sake of peace and because of the dangers of any opposition. Throughout all the religious changes of the sixteenth century the ruling class in Bristol was concerned above all with preserving stable government and with avoiding public disorder. Those who suffered martyrdom in Bristol for their refusal to change their opinions in line with the successive changes in Government policy were mostly drawn from the lower orders of society, from those who possessed little power to influence what happened in the services, furnishings or decoration of the parish churches or in the part played by the churches in civic and community life. Perhaps a single note of regret can be detected in the entry in the churchwardens’ accounts of St. Nicholas for Palm Sunday 1549 when the new Book of Common Prayer was introduced, ‘Paid to the prest and clarkes and children that sang the last of owr Lady mass iiij d.’45

Shorn of their chasubles and denuded of statues, lights, paintings, and ornaments the churches themselves took on a very different appearance.46 With the departure of the chantry priests and the end of the old round of daily services, the churches were far less used than they had been. An illustration of this fact comes from the records of the Consistory Court for 7 June 1558. Matilda Davis, a common harlot, told the Court that she had met with one Mr. Perks at the Sign of the Pelican in Bristol and that:

D. M. Leckie (ed.), ‘City Chamberlains’ Accounts in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries’, Bristol Record Society, xxxii, 1966, 34, 44.

...about midsummer last past he wold com unto the Sexton’s house windowe in Saint Thomas’ parish by the churche wheare she dwelled (as she saith) with her brother-in-lawe, and wold entice her to go with him to the churche wheare he used to meet her and thare, when he had shut the Churche dore he used her as she saith most ungodly and abominably in a pewe within the body of the Churche there, twice or thrice as before, and at every time he gave her as she saithe xii d at a time’48

A few years earlier, the regular use of the church by parish priests, chantry priests, and worshippers would have excluded the possibility of such misuse of the building; moreover, before the confiscation of all save a very few valuables of the church under Edward VI, the building would have been kept locked when not in use.

During the reigns of Edward VI, Mary and Elizabeth the Church was even more intent upon the suppression of heresy and the imposition of uniformity of doctrine and behaviour than the pre-Reformation Church had been.

Over-much stress has perhaps been laid upon the fact that it was artisans and tradesmen who suffered for their beliefs in Bristol and district during the religious upheavals of the mid-sixteenth century, and that the wealthy and prosperous, the merchants, burgesses and gentry do not appear amongst the victims of religious persecution. The wealthier classes have always been good at avoiding prosecution; it was they who had most to gain by the purchase of monastic and chantry lands and most to lose by civil, political and religious dissension and disorder. In this respect the picture in Bristol does not differ much from elsewhere, and the fact that merchants do not appear among the persecuted should not be taken to mean that they were indifferent to religious matters, but only that they were better at keeping out of trouble.49 In the district around Bristol there is no doubt that the radical changes in religion of Edward’s reign had been actively supported by many people, and that many found themselves in trouble before the Ecclesiastical Court for refusing to conform when the old ways and former beliefs were restored under Queen Mary. To cite just a few out of many examples, two men of Chew Magna found themselves before the Court in 1555 for openly declaring that ‘they will not believe the preacher, let him do what he will’; three others were accused of abusing the Blessed Sacrament, and Philip Fowles ‘doth openly say that the Blessed Sacrament is no better than other bread’.50 At Yatton, Joan Slythe ‘openly did say that she set not a poynte by the Pope’s holiness nor by her curate’, while two other people refused to believe that ‘in the Sacrament there is really the naturall bodye of our Lord Jesus Christ that was borne of the Virgin.’51 A servant girl from Camely would not hold up her hands nor kneel down at the elevation of the Host and was forced to run away to escape being brought before the Church Court.52 In

46 B.R.O. D/1/Ca 21, 1555-6.

17
Bristol the Mayor and Aldermen were apparently not enthusiastic about the restoration of Catholicism and had to be ordered by the Privy Council 'to conforme themselves in frequenting the sermons, processions and other publice ceremonies at the Cathedral Church . . . and not to absent themselves as they have done of late.'

Several of the clergy were in trouble because they had taken wives during Edward's reign and were now, with the return to Catholicism under Mary, ordered to put them away. Many in Bristol did so. Others refused, notably the Bishop of Bristol, Paul Bush, an ex-monk, who was forced to resign the see because of his marriage; some were like James Wilkesoun, parson of Chew Stoke who it was said 'do keep his wife and will do so who-so-ever shall say to him nay.' In Bristol itself some six men suffered the hideous death by burning for their refusal to subscribe to Catholic doctrines during the reign of Mary, and above all for their refusal to accept the doctrine of the Mass. All were tradesmen, craftsmen or artisans; among them William Saxton, a Bristol weaver who was condemned in August 1556, after many appearances before the Church Court, for steadfastly maintaining that 'the Sacrament of the Eucharist is nought else but material bread, and not the Body or Blood of Christ.' He was also said to possess the New Testament in English and divers other forbidden books. William Saxton was burnt at the stake on St. Michael's Hill in September 1556. John Foxe in the celebrated Book of Martyrs gives considerable detail about Saxton's execution, obviously obtained from an eye-witness in Bristol; Foxe includes the hideous detail that the Bristol sheriff had provided green wood for the fire which would have burnt slowly, giving the poor wretch an agonising death, and that various onlookers, out of pity and sympathy for the condemned man, went to a wood in Redland and fetched dry underwood for the fire, so that the poor man suffered as little as possible.

In view of the horrific penalty, it is little wonder that many people recanted and professed belief rather than suffer. The mental turmoil which this battle of conscience caused can be seen in the case of another weaver Richard Sharpe of Redcliffe. He was first tried for heresy in March 1556, but recanted and was released. Early in 1557 he made a bold declaration of his faith in the Temple church after Mass. He was again arrested and was eventually burnt on St. Michael's Hill in May 1557.

The Elizabethan Church
During the reign of Queen Elizabeth the Church was equally insistent upon conformity and the records of the Church Courts are full of persons who were fined or admonished for absenting themselves from divine service, for not receiving the Holy Communion, or for refusal to accept the doctrines of the new Church. For example, Hugh Grylls of Redcliffe was sentenced to perform public penance in Bristol cathedral at Midsummer 1564:

> Acts of the Privy Council. VI, 158.
> B. and G. A.

'bare-foot and bare-legged, with a white sheet about him, and a white rod in his hand during all the time of divine service.' He was also to confess his errors that he had doubted the resurrection of the body, had likened the soul to the light of a candle which was extinguished at death, and had also 'used ungodlie and erroneous talke' and had affirmed that 'certain chapters of the olde testaments were but fables and of no credit. Which things I doe confess that I have done for lacke of knowledge and the Grace of God.'

It is a sign of the ferment of religious opinions of the time and of interest in the English Bible that a man like Hugh Grylls who was unable to sign his name but had to mark his confession with a cross, was nonetheless involved in such deep theological discussions and biblical argument.

There is some evidence from the proceedings of the Church courts and elsewhere of the growth of Puritanism which was to present such a strong challenge to the established church during the early seventeenth century. John Northbrooke, who was employed as lecturer or additional preacher at St. Mary Redcliffe, was a prominent critic of the relics of Catholicism within the Church of England and was the author of various theological works including 'A Treatise wherein Dicing, Dauncing, Vaine Plays or Enterludes, with Idle Pastimes etc., commonly used on the Sabbath day, are reproved by the authorities of the word of God and auncient writers . . .' In 1576 Northbrooke became vicar of Henbury. We may suspect that it was Puritan leanings and objections to the 1559 Book of Common Prayer and to the Ecclesiastical hierarchy which brought no less than eight of the clergy of Bristol before the ecclesiastical court in 1592, when they were ordered: 'That they shall hereafter pray for the Queenes most excellent Majestie, Archbishopps, Bishops and other pastors and ministers, at the beginning and ending of their sermons. And shall in every point followe the order of prayer sett downe in the booke of her Majestie's injunctions.'

Also troublesome to the ecclesiastical authorities was George Holmes, vicar of Stoke Gifford, who adopted the classic Puritan objections to vestments, the sign of the cross, kneeling to receive the Sacrament, etc. He was frequently before the Church Courts during the late sixteenth century, and in August 1598, for example, was ordered by the Court:

> B.R.O. EP/J/1/9, f 77.
to resolve the points, whereof he now doubteth; viz.
to weare the surplice, to ministe the sacrament kneelinge,
to use the crosse in baptisme, to read the homilies
and the litany, and in any other things that he shall
doubt of."

The Church also continued to enter the life of the community in other ways. By an Act of 1511 all physicians, surgeons, schoolmasters, midwives, and apothecaries required episcopal licence to practise their professions. Although such licences do not survive for Bristol until the eighteenth century, the provisions of the Act were enforced and there are occasional references in the proceedings of the ecclesiastical courts to persons being punished for failing to observe them. For example George Johnson of St. Phillip's parish was fined in 1598 'for teaching the scholre being not licensed.' In 1601 Gilbert Gregrie and his wife of Henbury were brought before the Church Court because, it was said, they "... teach children without a licence and have not received the Holy Communion at Easter last nor sithens." At Winford, six miles south of Bristol, as at several other places, the school was actually held in the parish church. In 1625 during a case before the diocesan court of Bath and Wells diocese, elderly inhabitants of Winford testified that within the time of their earliest memory, (i.e. during the reign of Elizabeth), there had been no seats in one aisle of the parish church, but that seats had been installed in order that a school might be kept there.

The youth of the parish did usuallie stand there (i.e. in the aisle) to hear divine prayers, and the old men of the parish did there use to walke upp and downe and talke together before and after prayers . . . there was a schoolmaster who kept schoole in the churche of Winford, and because the schollers should have fitt places to sitt in to learme theire lessons, the formes and seates were erected and builte upp as well for theire use on the workinge daies as also for a convenient place for the schollers and other youth of the parish to sitt on the sabboath and holie days to heare divine service, who before that stooae, some in one place and some in another in divers places of the church."

An aspect of church and community life which showed a marked change at the time of the Reformation was the amount given in charitable bequests for religious purposes. Professor W. K. Jordan in his major study of this subject has shown that whereas in Bristol before the Reformation, in the period 1480—1540, 48 per cent of charitable bequests were made for religious purposes, after the Reformation, in the period 1561—1600 this proportion fell dramatically to 1 per cent of the total value of bequests, whereas very much more was given to education, for which the proportion rose from 8 per cent of the value of charitable bequests before the Reformation to 45 per cent during the period 1561—1600. There had obviously been a complete revolution in the causes which wealthy Bristolians thought were most worthy of their charity. Professor Jordan's work reveals both the great generosity and social concern of the Bristol merchants during the second half of the sixteenth century and also the fact that:

"this almost prodigal generosity was all but confined to secular causes, for in this long generation (1561—1600) gifts over the whole broad spectrum of religious needs practically vanished . . ."

Some ceremonies and rituals did of course continue in the parish churches after the Reformation, although many of these were confined within the churches and were no longer a vital element in the life of the community or a spectacle in the streets. The churchwardens' accounts continue throughout the Elizabethan period to record expenses for decorating the churches with holly and ivy at Christmas, with yew on Palm Sunday and with rosemary and flowers at Easter. Bell-ringing continued to be an important feature of church life and there are payments to the ringers on important festivals and on the anniversary of the Queen's accession (17 November). The pulpit assumed a much greater importance and there are numerous payments in many of the Bristol churchwardens' accounts to ministers and lecturers for additional sermons. The perambulation of the parish bounds at Rogationtide continued, and increasingly large sums were spent on the refreshment of those taking part. In many Bristol churchwardens' accounts of the later sixteenth century the greatest expense each year was in the provision of a feast on the day when the accounts were audited by the parish vestry.

It was in the country districts that the involvement of the Church in community life continued most strongly after the Reformation. Church ales continued to be held in country parishes and were a high-point of the social activities until they were suppressed by the Puritans in the seventeenth century. At Yatton, for example, the Church House continued in use, and church ales were held regularly during the reign of Elizabeth; the fine Church House at Chew Magna which had been built by the parish in 1515 also continued to be used by the parishioners for meetings and church ales. At Clifton although the Church House was being used as dwellings by 1626, the parishioners reserved to themselves 'soe often as they shall have occasion to meet there touchyng the parish busenesse the occupation of the same house accordinge to their ancient use and custom'.

---

66 Society of Merchant Venturers' Archives, Box 14B, Bundle 5/5.
67 I am grateful to my colleague John Moore for this reference.
The best example of the Church's continuing role in community life comes from Dundry. Here on the steep hillside overlooking Bristol the church with its fine tower, nearly 100 feet high, which had been built in 1484 was a prominent landmark for the whole of Bristol and far beyond, as well as for ships coming through the Avon Gorge to the port. The church was a chapelry of the parish church at Chew Magna. Beside the church there is an enclosure which was known as the Church Hay, and in 1635 the vicar of Chew Magna claimed possession of this enclosure; the inhabitants of Dundry objected on the grounds that it had always been used by them as a place of recreation, and the dispute came before the Ecclesiastical Court in Wells. Depositions were taken from elderly inhabitants of Dundry, all of whom stated that during all the time of their remembrance the enclosure had been used for recreations, and they gave a remarkable list of activities which still continued beside the church, and in the churchyard itself as well as in the disputed enclosure. The elderly witnesses all stated that, as in many Somerset churchyards, the game of fives was played at Dundry against the wall of the church tower; a fair was also held in the churchyard each year on the feast of St. Giles (1 September). One witness went to list the following diversions which had gone on in and around Dundry churchyard during all the time of his remembrance, which must have extended back at least to the 1570's. He stated that:

'the Church Hay of Dundry, a plot of ground by the churchyard, was used for sportes and playes of severall sortes, as setting up of Maypoles and Summer Luggs in the same, daunceing, sporting, kissinge, bulbayting, coyting, bowling, shootinge att butts, cudgleplaying, tennis playing, and divers other sportes and playes, and this deponent himself divers and sundrie tymes saw and was present att the said recreations, and mane tymes was an actor and player himselfe; and hath heeretofore divers and sundrie tymes seen heads broken att cudgells and fighting in the plott of grownd called the Church Haie of Dundry aforesaid."

Clearly the church at Dundry was still the focus of community life in the early seventeenth century, even though much of the former religious ceremonial had been abolished at the Reformation.