

AROUND HAWKESYARD BEFORE EMANCIPATION

WAS there ever such a benighted stretch of railway as the Birmingham, Cannock and Rugeley Line, L.M.S.? The grime, the smoke and reek, the glimpses of dumps and the offal of modern industrial conditions, the gloomy, forbidding-looking stations, and the dank fields in between are so depressing that we instinctively bury ourselves in a book so as not to see the spectres.

Yet if we knew it, if we could but lift the veil of two hundred years, we might be conscious of spectres of a very different type. For we are on hallowed ground, even though now so defiled and besmirched that nothing seems further from it than romance. But here is the romance. In the British Museum there is preserved a list of convicted Recusants in the reign of Charles II. This list has been compiled from the returns made by the clerks of the peace in twenty-three counties during the years 15, 16, 17, 19, 20, 21, 22, 26, 28 and 29, of Charles II. In it we have enshrined the names of 10,236 people who, rather than conform to the Church by law established, preferred to pay a fine of £20 a month for each grown-up person thus absenteing himself, though only £10 for a wife.

The comment of the Commissioner on these lists is eloquent :—

‘ Seeing by law the penalty of £20 a month runs on for ever after the first conviction till conformity, it may be worth the labour to compute how much money the convictions certified do amount to as they now stand upon Record, and from thence wee may reasonably conclude that there is more than Twenty times so much due to the King few convictions being less than 2 yeres old, most of them three, four or five yeres standing or more.’

The annotator then adds up the total of sums received from the counties whose lists of recusants he has. It amounts to £13,854 for 10,236 people, ‘ so that,’ he con-

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cludes, ' by this Computation there should be no less coming to the King than between 4 & 5 millions from the Convictions of 23 Countyes. Which is more than all the Recusants Nobility & Gentry in England are worth all together. And yet none of the Nobility & very few of the Gentry are here mentioned.

' In those Countyes where I have been able to make enquiry as in Yorkshire the persons are unknown or so poor they are scarce worth the penalty of one £20 much less responsible for the growing penalties of 2 or 3 yeres . . . Upon the whole matter, without question, a considerable summe might be raise (*sic*) by putting these laws in execution. But what disorder it might produce in his Majesties affairs is worthy consideration.'¹

The vast majority of these are poor folk, set down as weavers, husbandmen, labourers, etc., when their vocations are given at all; sometimes they are 'farmers' or 'yeomen,' rarely do the letters 'gent' stand after their names. Only such minor counties as Berks, Bucks, Hunts, Hants, Dorset and Essex figure for the most part in this list, yet Lancashire and Yorkshire, Middlesex, Surrey, Suffolk and Kent are included. Lancashire, as we might expect, heads the list with the imposing figure of 5,496, or more than half the total; Yorkshire comes next with 1,855. But far ahead of all the others is Staffordshire with 678. These, of course, are mostly in such famous Catholic centres as Brewood², 41; Leigh, 17; Sedgeley, 44;

¹ Printed in Vol. VI of the *Catholic Record Society*, p. 77.

² 'The neighbourhood (of Boscobel) is now, as it was at the time of King Charles' escape, a nest of Romanism. They have built themselves a little church at Brewood, under Pugin's auspices, so small, that it looks like a plaything, but very pretty. All the persecutions that these people of the old-fashioned creed endured in those times, even under the Stuarts, could not erase the loyalty from their bosoms; for it was by the members of this communion alone that the head of the Church of England, and representatives of the triple royalty of these realms, was faithfully succoured, at the risk of life, in the hour of his direst distress.'—*From Blackwood's Magazine*, December, 1857, *Payne, Non-jurors*, p. 244.

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and Wolverhampton, once known as 'Little Rome' by reason of the number of Papists who lived there, and here heading the Staffordshire list of Recusants with seventy-five names.

Now, with a renewed interest in our hitherto dull and unprofitable journey from Birmingham³, let us look out of the window at the names of the stations. The first that concerns us is Handsworth Wood, where lived and suffered some twenty Recusants, among them three spinsters named Summerford.⁴ The next is Perry Barr, nowadays with very mundane associations indeed. Fifteen persecuted Catholics lived there in the days of Charles II; most of them returned as husbandmen, though some are 'websters,' others naylor and locksmiths. Then comes Great Barr or Barre Magna with seven names, among them figures that of Thomas Spurrier, a blacksmith,⁵ five of the same name being given under Perry Barr. After this we come to Wirley Magna, the Church-bridge or Cheslyn Hay of to-day, and here there were eight Recusants whose avocations are not given. At Cannock

³ At Birmingham we have but few notices, but the two following are not without interest :

John Reeve, of Edgbaston, yeoman. Freehold house at Studley, £52.

Philip Loxley, sen., of Edgbaston, yeoman. Two houses at Tanworth and Solihull. £37 2s. 6d.

Philip Loxley, jun. m of ditto, gent. 'Two chambers in the butchers' shambles, a butcher's shop under the shambles, and a stall and ground in Birmingham,' £6.

Given by Payne, *Non-jurors*, p. 273.

⁴ Among the Catholics who had to register their estates in 1715 we find William Davies, of Handsworth, yeoman, land in fee at Segley, £10, also two freehold houses at Erdington, £28. —*The English Catholic Non-jurors of 1715*, pp. 247 and 276.

⁵ In 1715 Robert Freeman, of Whetstone, co. Derby, gent.—Freehold estates at Oscott, Great Barr, £25 13s.—*Ib.*, p. 252.

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there are only four Recusants, Charles Coleman, gent; Edward Chamberlane, gent., Richard Wilkes and John Chamberlaine.⁶

Nor are the Recusants confined simply to the district marked by the present railway line. If we get out at Rugeley we can turn to the right and walk to Longdon, a small village with certainly no Catholic associations now; yet here there were four Recusants convicted, Kesterton, Hill, Welch and Browne.⁷ If on another day we turn to the riverside—the Trent—we can reach Pipe Ridware,⁸ where ten Catholics are named as convicted Recusants, while further on we come to Hampstall Ridware with its pre-Reformation church, and here we find the names of Katharine Kyrke a widow, and Richard Kyrke, a husbandman. The more one ponders these lists the more one is impressed by the fact that it is in the tiny, now forgotten, villages that we have to look for vestiges of Catholic life. Thus on the Watling Street, between Shenstone and Tamworth, lies a little-known village called Hints. Here there were twelve Recusants, among them, Robert, Mary, and Elizabeth Fitzherbert. Robert's son, Ralph, married Grissel, a daughter of Erasmus Wolseley, of Wolseley. If we go north from Hints we reach Comberford, where were ten Recusants.

⁶ In 1715 Thomas Johnson, of Moseley, has a house at Cannock; also Ursula Kempson, of Wolverhampton, has a jointure house at Cannock.—*Ib.*, pp. 24, 241. Similarly, John Styche, of Birmingham, has an estate at Cannock.—*Ib.*, 241.

⁷ At Boldesert Park, Richard Holmes, yeoman, has an estate there and at Tanworth.—*Ib.*, p. 279.

⁸ Sir Edward Simeon, of Aston, near Stone, had a manor at Pipe charged with an annuity of £50 payable to Christopher Hevengham—*Ib.*, p. 249. A little north of this lies Hoar Cross, now the site of a beautiful Protestant church built by Mrs. Meynell Ingram. Here Mary Anne Howard had a life estate worth £352 10s. od.—*Ib.*, p. 249.

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Now these sturdy Catholics do not date from the early days of persecution but from the latter half of the seventeenth century. They must, therefore, belonged to families which had, for more than a century and a half, kept the faith despite the really terrible privations they had to undergo.⁹ But the cruel system of fines did its work. How could those families be expected, humanly speaking, to persist decade after decade when reduced to penury? They probably lasted as long as they did for the simple reason that—as the Commissioners said—they could not pay and were therefore disregarded. But with those who could pay, it was otherwise. To take but one instance out of many: Christopher Anderton and his wife 'were put to much privation by the forfeiture of Lostock and other estates. Indeed, after her husband's death, Mrs. Anderton, who went to reside at Clitheroe, had scarcely sufficient to maintain herself and her children, of whom she had fourteen. To make her cross heavier, three of her children were forcibly taken from her to be brought up Protestants, a son and two daughters.'¹⁰ Even more dreadful was the case of Thomas Blackburne, falsely accused of conspiracy against King William, and left to rot in Newgate for fifty-three years without trial.¹¹

The following account of the chapel at Horton Court, Gloucester, is worth preserving: 'There is an old man still living (1855), who remembers Mass being said in the chapel at the manor house at Horton in the time of William Paston, Esq. In 1833, I (Fr. R. M.

⁹ 'June 10, 1681, a true bill was found against Mary Coates, of Morpeth, for high treason, for sending her son John, to school at St. Omers.'—Foley, *Records* v. 701, quoted by Payne, *Non-jurors*, p. 201.

¹⁰ Gillow's note on the Lancashire Recusants, *Catholic Record Soc.*, vi, p. 143.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 160.

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Cooper, O.S.B.) went to see this chapel with Sir Henry and Lady Paston Bedingfield. The manor house was not inhabited. We gave 5/- to an old woman who kept the key of the old hall door, to let us in. The chapel door was barred; but finding an opening in a lath-and-plaster wall, we crept in, all covered with cobwebs, dust and lime. Here we stood in the chapel sanctuary, with its moth-eaten, green-baize carpet, a well-carved oak altar, a mahogany tabernacle, two old candlesticks, and a little bell on the altar steps, on the epistle side, with Ave Maria round the rim. The tabernacle was locked. I shook it; but evidently it was empty. A beautiful framed triangle adorned the sanctuary, circling with rays of glory. The communion rails were quite perfect, as also the family pews. A Gothic window terminated the west end of the chapel with beautiful tracery. *O quantum mutatur!* The beautiful window was torn down in 1849. The chapel itself is turned into the village school, and every remnant is gone, except the triangle, to tell its melancholy story of bygone days.' Quoted by Payne, *Non-jurors*, p. 73, from Oliver, *Western County Collections*, p. 116.

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