THE ENGLISH REFORMATION AND PAROCHIAL OBEDIENCE:
The Churchwarden Accounts of Louth, 1500-1559

Rosalie Malham

Situated at the mouth of a small valley on the eastern edge of the Lincolnshire Wolds, Louth was described in the mid-sixteenth century as a ‘fine market town’. The manor was held by the bishop of Lincoln and with no substantial resident gentry the communal life of the town was dominated by the mercantile elite through both parish and gild. The early sixteenth-century parish of Louth, with an estimated population of around 1800, was a hive of religious activity. An ambitious program of church re-building underscored their fervour; the building of the new steeple for the parish church of St James occupying both parishioners and clergy alike for the first fifteen years of the sixteenth century. Enthusiasm directed at the enhancement of the exterior of the church and its surroundings was mirrored by zeal towards the embellishment of interior furnishings. Louth’s parishioners, both the living, through various parish funds, and the dead, through bequests, actively and passionately provided for the maintenance not only of the buildings themselves, but also of the ornaments and paraphernalia required for the services. By all accounts traditional late medieval religion in Louth flourished. It was these facets of late medieval religion, the public manifestations of piety, both personal and collective, that were to be hardest hit by the English Reformation.

The Reformation in England was sparked by a political altercation between Henry VIII and the papacy, culminating in the 1534 Act of Supremacy, effectively creating the Church of England, with Henry at its head. Henry’s break with Rome and the passing of the Act of Supremacy in 1534 formed the core of his nationalistic Catholicism. Late medieval religion permeated almost every aspect of late medieval life and as the Henrician Reformation progressed it struck deeper and deeper into its very soul. Almost from the moment of birth, through the rite of baptism, until death and the administration of the last rites, religion was an unavoidable aspect of life. While the daily offices, in which the Mass played the central role, provided avenues for daily celebrations, religious feasts and holy days dominated and dictated the yearly cycle.

1 John Chandler, John Leland’s Itinerary (Gloucester: Sutton, 1993), 304.
3 The plethora of religious experiences during the later Middle Ages is reflected in the historiography surrounding the study of religion and devotion in this period. Recent decades have seen the publication of studies ranging from heresy, the cult of saints, relics, and pilgrimages. The scope of these texts range from general texts to the highly localised, both geographically and thematically. For a general survey see Eamon Duffy, The Stripping of the Altars (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992). R. N. Swanson, Church and Society in Late Medieval England (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989). For more localised studies, see Norman Tanner, The Church in Late Medieval Norwich 1370-1532 (Ontario: Pontifical Institute for Mediaeval Studies, 1984). Andrew Brown, Popular Piety in Late Medieval England. The Diocese of Salisbury 1250-1550 (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1995).
4 For further discussion of late medieval liturgy see Duffy, Stripping of the Altars, 12-52.
tangible experience, late medieval religion utilised both the visual and auditory senses, encouraging conformity and orthodoxy in belief, while permitting for variances in expression through a myriad of devotions. Marian and Christocentric devotions acted as a focal point for pious practices. The cult of saints proliferated and was accessed through images, relics, pilgrimage, and devotional readings. Iconography stressed the intercessory powers of Mary, Christ and the saints, who were venerated through the burning of lights before altars and images and invoked through prayers and bequests. The focus of medieval religious activity was on the maintenance of a bilateral relationship between communities of the living and the dead, inspired by Purgatory and enacted through commemorative ceremonies. Late medieval Catholicism was an active faith, requiring active participation, and people lived out their Christian lives in a number of realms, personal and communal. Through the 1530s Henry’s policies began to take on the reformist ideology of influential courtiers, and while the rites of baptism, penance and the Eucharist had been affirmed, and a return to orthodoxy towards the end of Henry’s reign placed a restraining hand upon further reshaping of the English Church, the traditional role of the saints as intercessors had been questioned, the majority of feast days that fell within the harvest period abolished, and perhaps most profoundly, the belief in the ability of the prayers of the living to assist the souls of the dead through the trials of Purgatory was no longer officially approved.

Though the English Reformation is often laid at the door of Henry VIII it is not until the reign of Edward VI, that the ‘local Reformation proper’ begins in earnest. The death of Henry VIII in 1547 saw the English crown pass to his young son, Edward VI. Under the influence of ardent Protestants Edward’s policies were overtly reformist in nature. The reaffirmation of the 1538 Injunctions by the Edwardian regime in 1547 additionally banned processions and images and by the end of the year Parliament had dissolved all chantries and gilds. Edward’s reforms focused on the churches and the services. The Act of Uniformity in January 1549 prescribed the use of a new Prayer Book and redefined parochial worship. The replacement of the altars in 1550 and the confiscation of the church plate and the introduction of the second Prayer Book in 1552 marked a more radical break with traditional religious practices. The Marian Reaction of the mid-1550s re-established the majority of practices that had been made redundant under the Edwardian regime, and then these were again revised upon the ascendency of Elizabeth in 1558.

The role of Englishmen and women in the English Reformation, and the extent to which they instigated, embraced or rejected the reforms of Henry VIII, Edward VI and Mary I, has been fiercely contested. In 1964 A. G. Dickens presented the English Reformation as a movement ‘from below’; a rebellion against Catholic superstition and corruption. Forty years after the first publication of Dickens’s pioneering study,
Reformation studies finds itself in a state of revisionism. Revisionist historians have dismantled Dickens’s theory of the English Reformation as being motivated by Protestant anti-clericalism and distaste of Catholic piety, projecting instead an image of late medieval Englishmen and women fervently attached to traditional Catholic religion. As Christopher Haigh has noted, Revisionist historians have tried to ‘understand how the impossible happened and people learned to live with it’. Most recently, the concept of the ‘long Reformation’, arguing for an extension of the chronological bounds of English Reformation studies, has come to the fore. Necessitating the consideration of how England became Protestant, not just how it stopped being Catholic, the ‘long’ Reformation approach seeks to track the spread of Protestantism through the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. Reflecting on this broadening of the parameters of English Reformation studies, Patrick Collinson has remarked that there is a danger of such works concerning ‘not at all with where it came from but with where it was going, and how long the journey took’. This study of the parish of Louth seeks to examine not how Louth became a Protestant parish, but to explore how and why it ceased being Catholic. It proceeds on the basis that the parishioners of Louth were indeed deeply traditionally religious, and the chronological bounds are limited to the reigns of Henry VIII (1509-47), Edward VI (1547-53), and Mary I (1553-8). It is the intention of this article to demonstrate that the reformation of the parish of Louth can be observed through the responses of the parish to the religious reforms of these three Tudor monarchs.

Although Dickens’ view of a rapid Protestant insurgence no longer dominates Reformation historiography, Dickens brought to the Reformation debate a hitherto largely neglected aspect of Reformation studies, the English people. In the last few decades a large body of scholarship has accrued examining the phenomenon of the English Reformation at the local level, taking the focus away from the central mechanisms of Tudor government, in its place exploring the microcosms of counties and towns and parishes. The truism that we cannot make

---


windows into men’s souls holds today just as it did during the sixteenth century, but nevertheless facets of sixteenth-century religious beliefs and practices can be illuminated through communal religious activities. With the parish serving as the principle collective in the sixteenth century, it is in the parishes that the collective response of Englishmen and women to the Reformation can most clearly be seen. Studies based on parochial sources provide an aperture into the religious and social lives of parishioners and can prove particularly informative for charting social and religious changes through the Reformation at the local level. Exchanging the monolithic for the particular has revealed the complex and fascinating nature of the English Reformation.

Pre-Reformation Lincolnshire was a religiously orthodox county, with Lollardy and other heresies failing to have made much of a presence. A study of Louth in the sixteenth century, which was a conservative parish before the Reformation, offers the Reformation historian an opportunity to examine the responses of a parish steeped in traditional religious mores to the religious upheavals that characterise sixteenth-century England. Through an examination of the responses of Louth to the successive religious Reformations, we can explore just how a parish that embraced the spiritual and ritual facets of late medieval Catholicism adapted to the nationalistic Catholicism of Henry VIII, the Protestantism of Edward VI and the Counter-Reformation Catholicism of Mary I.

This study is based on two sets of Louth churchwarden accounts. The first set (1500-1525), which coincides with the building of the spire, was edited and published in 1941. The second set (1527-1559) survives in manuscript form. Thirteenth-century ecclesiastical regulations, placing the burden of the upkeep of the nave onto parishioners, effectively created the office of the churchwarden, through whom the collective responsibilities of the parishioners were fulfilled. Churchwardens were responsible for administering property, raising funds and maintaining the ornaments, and acted as representatives of the parishioners in any collective endeavours. In order to fulfil their many and varied duties it was necessary for churchwardens to keep records of their activities. Typically, churchwarden accounts record income and

---


Lincoln Archive Office (hereafter LAO), MS Louth St James 7/2 (hereafter St James 7/2). The religious life of Louth in the early and mid-sixteenth century is illustrated by other sources. The accounts of the gild of the Blessed Virgin Mary, Louth’s most influential gild, cover the last few decades of the fifteenth century, beginning in 1473 and ending in 1505, LAO, MS Monson 7/1 (hereafter Monson 7/1). The accounts of the Holy Trinity gild cover the period from 1489-1523, LAO, MS Monson 7/2 (hereafter Monson 7/2).


For an overview of churchwarden accounts and their contents see J. Charles Cox, *Churchwardens’ Accounts From the Fourteenth Century to the Close of the Seventeenth Century* (London: Methuen, 1913). For a discussion on the significance placed on churchwarden accounts by historians see Andrew Foster, *Churchwardens’ accounts of early modern England and Wales; some problems to
expenses related to the upkeep of the nave as well as those funds received for burials, commemorative ceremonies, and legacies. The accounts were generally written up on a yearly basis and audited at a meeting of the parishioners. At Louth four parishioners shared the office of churchwarden each year, and were elected annually. It is in these records that the primary concerns of the Louth churchwardens, and thus collectively of the parish, are reflected.18

So how did the parishioners of Louth respond to the increasing doctrinal changes that constituted the English Reformation? The Louth churchwarden accounts of the first few decades of the sixteenth century exhibit little sign of the doctrinal changes that were to come. Nonetheless, religious discontent is clearly evident in Louth in 1536 after the introduction of Henry VIII’s first set of Injunctions. In September and October of that year visitations from subsidy commissioners, commissioners for the suppression of the monasteries, and men charged with enforcing the Ten Articles and subsequent Injunctions, provoked feelings of resentment and insecurity among the Lincolnshire laity and religious alike. It has been asserted that Bishop Longland, who had ordered John Rayne to enforce the order of abrogation of holidays in September 1536, ‘let loose in the shire a dangerous amount of episcopal and governmental activity’.19 Peter Effard, a well respected citizen and ex-mayor of Lincoln, who had been travelling ahead of the commissaries proving wills, is reported to have spread rumours about the commissaries, proclaiming that the chalices were to be taken from the parish churches and that there should be only one parish church within a radius of six or seven miles of another.20 These rumours, combined with the destruction of the monasteries, provoked further feelings of unease and a looming sense of uncertainty regarding the changes Henry had been actively enforcing in the lives of his subjects.

The events of the 1536 Lincolnshire Rising are well established.21 The extent to which the driving forces of the rebellion were religious continue to be debated, but it is clear that there were elements of religious uncertainty involved in the initial disturbance at Louth. Undoubtedly Louth’s vicar, Thomas Kendall, felt the old faith needed defending against the tide of reforms emanating from Westminster. Under examination by Henry’s commissioners, Kendall stated that he believed that the ‘immediate cause of the insurrection was the saying that “men of

---

20 Ibid., 198.
Hull hath sold their crosses and jewels of the church at York to prevent the King’s commissioners’. And that men:

begrudged the King for being Head of the Church and the dissolution of the monasteries and the putting down of holydays...[and that] it was said that the sacrament was ‘irreverently taken down’ by the King’s officers at the suppression of Hawnby...everyone grudged at the new erroneous opinions touching Our Lady and Purgatory.22

A number of other witnesses reported to Henry’s commissioners of enquiry that on the Sunday preceding, there had been a disturbance where several of Louth parishioners had gathered at the choir door after evensong, and the keys to the church were taken from the churchwardens and placed in the hands of Thomas Melton, a shoemaker, ostensibly for the ‘saving [of the church jewels].’23 When questioned, Thomas Foster, a Louth yeoman, reported that the trouble began when Robert Jonson, smith, at procession on Sunday after Michaelmas Day shouted, ‘Go we to follow the crosses for and if they be taken from us we be like to follow them no more’.24 Foster also reported that during the rebellion all English books of the New Testament were burnt.25

Thomas Kendall was seen as one of the ringleaders of the rebellion and was executed at Tyburn in 1537 along with ten other Lincolnshire men and the abbot of Barlings.26 A number of other Louth men were also found guilty of treason. Some were lucky enough to be pardoned; a few, however, were sentenced to death and their executions were publicly carried out on a busy market day at Louth.27

Although the Injunctions issued by Cromwell in 1538 reiterated those issued two years previous in a harsher tone, such an organised and violent response was not to be seen again from Louth. In fact, the Louth churchwarden accounts demonstrate that the parish complied with all future Reformation mandates, conforming to the directives issued after the 1536 disturbance.

Although the Louth Rebellion had strong religious overtones and rumours had indeed been circulating that promoted an atmosphere of uncertainty, the Act of Royal Supremacy and the dissolution of the monasteries had not greatly impinged upon the lives of Louth’s parishioners within the confines of their daily worship. The later Henrician reforms of the 1530s were not emphatically Protestant, but they did impose significant changes to the ways in which the people experienced their religious lives, as they targeted parish life more directly. The 1538 Injunctions warned that the people should not

22 Letters and Papers Foreign and Domestic of the Reign of Henry VIII, vol. 12, part 1, no. 70.
24 Ibid ii.
25 Ibid. iii.
26 Ibid.
27 Ibid., no. 764.
28 Ibid., no. 639.
repose their trust and affiance in any other works devised by men’s phantasies beside Scripture; as in wandering to pilgrimages, offering of money, candles or tapers to images or relics, or kissing or licking the same, saying over a number of beads, not understood or minded on.  

Henry’s 1538 Articles had been aimed at the cult of saints, who worked as intercessors and protectors, and the veneration of images. Medieval churches had been adorned with images of the holy. Saints were represented in stained glass, carved statues, manuscript illuminations and wall paintings. Rood screens contained brightly coloured paintings of saints and carved images of the Virgin Mary, St John and the crucifix. Devotion to the saints can be measured by the flourishing of lights before images. In the early sixteenth century the parish of Louth supported numerous lights, including ones dedicated to Our Lady, Our Lady of Pity, St Christopher, St Anne, St Katherine, St Michael, and St George. Lights also burnt before the Sepulchre and before the images of the rood. The accounts kept for the various lights within the church have not survived and the impact of the 1538 Injunctions, which prohibited lights before images, is difficult to ascertain. However, it is known that among the images in the church were those of St Thomas, St Peter, St John, and Mary, as well as an image of the five wounds of Christ, and it is in this period that the accounts record the removal of an image of St George and his horse from within the church. The removal at this stage coincided with the looting of Thomas Becket’s shrine at Canterbury and the removal of the Bexley Rood and Our Lady of Walsingham. The accounts do not record that fate of other images, but those central to traditional piety, those of St Mary and St John, remained in the parish church, the wardens paying to have them cleaned in 1540-1. 

The publication of the vernacular bible in 1539 was accompanied by a directive that every parish should purchase one. Louth’s churchwarden accounts record the purchase of a new folio-sized bible, which was to be set up in the church for all to read. In 1538 the churchwardens had commissioned the making of a lectern to hold the new bible and in the following year the accounts state that they had purchased a new bible of the ‘largest volume’. Ronald Hutton has noted that across England the level of parochial compliance on this particular Injunction was relatively low, stating that it was in fact ‘widely flouted’ due to the lack of an effective penalty. The churchwarden accounts also record that in the

28 Quoted in Duffy, Stripping of the Altars, 407.
29 St James 7/2, f.46v. For a more detailed discussion of images and the English Reformation, see, Margaret Aston, England’s Iconoclasts. Vol. 1: Laws Against Images (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988). For images during the Late Middle Ages, see, Kathleen Kamerick, Popular Piety and Art in the Late Middle Ages. Image Worship and Idolatry in England 1350-1500 (New York: Palgrave, 2002). Images of St George at Ashburton in Devon, Stratton in Cornwall and at Ludlow were not removed until 1547-8. Duffy, Stripping of the Altars, 480.
30 St James 7/2, f.54.
31 St James 7/2, f.50.
same year the wardens purchased a register book, as prescribed by the Injunctions.

A decade after Henry’s Injunctions, in an effort to subvert lingering superstitious beliefs, the Edwardian authorities set into motion the seizure of what were now considered superfluous church ornaments and furnishings. These new Injunctions removed any ambiguity that might have arisen from Henry’s earlier reforms. Hutton contends that towards the end of Henry’s reign most parish churches had retained most traditional rituals and ornaments. All processions were now forbidden, the rosary, imagery, and all lights, except two on the high altar, were banned. Processions were one of the defining communal aspects of late medieval religion, and the rosary, images and lights were integral to devotions directed towards Mary, Jesus and the saints. Their loss was yet another blow to sustaining traditional links with the holy.

With these Edwardian reforms, elements of Protestant worship begin to surface in the Louth churchwarden accounts. In concurrence with government wishes, in 1547-8 Louth’s churchwardens removed the rood and the images of Mary and John that it housed. Rood screens separated the chancel and nave and supported images of Mary and John and the Crucifix, serving as visible reminders of the Passion of Christ. On the screens themselves were more images of saints. Duffy describes them as a ‘complex icon of the heavenly hierarchy’. Most English parishes are thought to have conformed to this mandate and removed their roods. In London most churches had complied with the requirement by the end of 1547. There is little evidence of the fate of the other images that St James was known to have accommodated, but there is a record of the churchwardens receiving a payment for the sword of St George in 1551-2, while brass metal was bought by a parishioner in 1553. Also in 1553, the accounts record the receipt of £3 5s. 4d., which are the proceeds of the sale of the ornaments. The churchwardens of St James followed a common trend of selling off what the Edwardian regime had determined were superfluous church furnishings and ornaments.

Again in accordance with Edwardian mandates, in 1549-50 the churchwardens purchased a book of the new service as well a book of the service done in the church. The First Prayer Book issued in 1549, which was the result of Cranmer’s revising and simplifying the services and commemorations, was largely achieved by reducing the daily offices to two, rearranging the readings from Scripture and by reducing the

---

34 Hutton, The Rise and Fall, 78.
35 St James 7/2, f. 81
36 Duffy, Stripping of the Altars, 158.
37 Hutton, ‘The Local Impact’, 121.
38 St James 7/2, f. 95.
41 St James 7/2, f. 86.

38
number of variable portions in the mass. Perhaps the most significant of Cranmer’s changes was the switch to the vernacular. Matins, Mass and evensong were retained by the First Prayer Book, preserving the basic pattern of worship, but the emphasis on Eucharistic piety during Mass, which had been a defining feature of traditional religion, was all but eradicated. Erasmus’s Paraphrases had also been deemed a mandatory volume and Louth’s churchwardens purchased a copy in 1548-9. According to Hutton’s sample, out of ninety-one sets of churchwarden accounts examined, only fifty-three parishes purchased the English translation of Erasmus’s work by the end of Edward’s reign. Nine Psalters for the high choir were also bought by Louth’s churchwardens that same year and the high altar was removed in 1550-1.

Cranmer’s Second Prayer Book, issued in 1552, contained further changes, particularly in regards to the Body and Blood of Christ. According to Duffy, the Second Prayer Book ‘represented a determined attempt to break once and for all with the Catholic past, and to leave nothing in the official worship of the Church of England which could provide a toehold for traditional ways of thinking about the sacred’. Clergy were now required to wear plain surplices in place of the more ornate mass vestments. Other outward changes included the replacement of stone altars with wooden tables and the use of household bread as opposed to the traditional wafers. The substitution of stone altars for wooden communion tables was accompanied by a refashioning of the notion of the sacrament. The communion table was placed within the congregation and the concept of consecration dismissed entirely. The replacement of the altar at Louth at this stage coincides with the campaign organised by London’s new Bishop, Nicholas Ridley. As authorities at Westminster issued amendments to English worship, Louth’s parishioners, through (their elected representatives) the churchwardens, acted accordingly, fulfilling the material requirements of the Reformation.

The churchwarden accounts detail the palpable impact of the Edwardian mandates on the parish, the liturgical and material manifestations of the Reformation. The ascension of Edward saw also a radical break in the reality of religious practices. With the destruction of sub-parochial organisations such as the religious gilds and chantries, making obsolete a number of traditional modes of pious expression, there were fundamental changes to the tangible religious lives of Louth’s parishioners.

The Chantries Act of 1548 condemned Louth’s gilds to the same fate as the monasteries. Until their dissolution Louth’s religious gilds had served as communal chantries, offering those less wealthy the opportunity to pool resources and endow perpetual prayers on a corporate level. It was not uncommon for these gilds to hire a gild chaplain, whose duty it was to celebrate services for gild members on feast days and to perform

---

43 St James 7/2, f. 83
prayers and masses for both the living and the dead. The account book of the gild of the Holy Trinity at Louth contains several obits performed on the behalf of deceased members. Obits involved the repetition of the burial service, placebo in the evening, dirige and requiem mass the following day. Bell ringers and bedemen often announced the imminence of the service, and the maximum number of intercessors was sought, including priests, poor people, parishioners, churchwardens, gild members, and civic officials. Among their other duties, Louth’s gilds also provided aid to the poor. The gild of St Mary had supported six poor men and women, providing board, livery and fuel, in addition to a house called ‘Our Lady’s Beidhouse’ for their common habitation. Likewise the gild of the Holy Trinity had also maintained six poor men and women, providing fuel and board. The poor who were attached to these houses were often mentioned in funerary provisions of gild members. Richard Lyndsay instructed that money be paid ‘to 12 pore folks of beed house sittyng at said [hearse]’, while the obit of Thomas Alderton provided to the ‘trenete bede hous to pore folks 6d., to our lady bede hous to pore folks 6d. And the remnant to be disposed after the discretion of the olderman or his depute to poor pepull’. Before their dissolution Louth’s religious gilds had absorbed some of the pressure that the community faced concerning the relief of the poor. As traditional outlets for religious devotion such as the gilds, disappeared through the Edwardian reform process, so too did traditional means of charitable provision.

Throughout the Reformation charity persisted as a significant act of faith. The embryo of the Christian notion of charity can be found in the Bible: the book of Mark states that ‘thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself’. As Claire Schen has noted, before the Reformation, parishioners ‘understood that salvation came through good works, including charity, and the intercession of priests, saints and Christians who prayed for the souls of the dead.’ During the late medieval period this notion of charity helped forge notions of community, and could be expressed through many avenues. Communal parish activities, such as church building, gilds membership or involvement in other sub-parochial groups all served to strengthen the bonds of Christian charity.

Edward’s reform agenda incorporated the concept of charity, the Edwardian Injunctions requiring not only church attendance, but also

---

46 Monson 7/2, ff. 89; 211v.
47 Ibid., f. 111v.
48 Ibid, f. 211v.
49 Mark 12:31.
50 Schen, Charity and Lay Piety, 1.
51 W. K. Jordan contends that charity, through an increased awareness of poverty throughout the sixteenth century, became increasingly secularised under the Tudors. He sees the period defined by the desires of the governments to ‘secure control and relief of poverty’ and that it was towards the parish that ‘legislation and policy was directed’. Jordan, Philanthropy in England 1480-1660 (London: Allen and Unwin, 1959), 77-80. Claire Schen argues that charity was not only stimulated by a desire for social order, but that it continued to be religiously inspired throughout the sixteenth century. Schen, Charity and Lay Piety, passim. For further discussions of poverty and charity in Tudor England see John Pound, Poverty and Vagrancy in Tudor England (London: Longman, 1971). Paul Slack, Poverty and Policy in Tudor and Stuart England (London: Longman, 1988). For a review of medieval attitudes to charity see Miri Rubin, Charity and Community in Medieval Cambridge (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987).
sober and charitable behaviour and visits to the poor and the sick on holy
days.52 The parish poor box attempted to bring bequests and donations in
line with reformed religious doctrine, supporting the needy rather than
‘superstition’. According to Claire Schen, ‘Protestant reform reaffirmed
the nexus between charity and piety by equating the goods of the Church
with those of the poor, although reform altered some forms of
almsgiving’.53 While the Reformation altered the ways in which
Christian charity was expressed, religion, Catholic and Protestant,
continued to fashion parishioners’ opinions of both poverty and poor
relief throughout the sixteenth century. Through the Reformation both
Crown and parishioner alike pursued substitute avenues for charitable
 provision.

Stepping into the charitable void at the collective level was the
newly established Corporation of Louth. A charter guaranteeing the
continued existence of the Louth Grammar School set up a closed
Corporation known as The Warden and Six Assistants of the ‘Town of
Louth and of the Free School of King Edward VI in Louth’.54 Aside from
the school, the Corporation of Louth was to maintain twelve poor
persons, previously maintained by the gilds of the Holy Trinity and the
Blessed Virgin Mary. A provision in Edward VI’s charter ordained that
Warden and Six should ‘sustain, feed and maintain…twelve poor
persons, to continue for ever in like manner and form as they were
hitherto or heretofore sustained, fed and maintained’55 by the said two
gilds. With the dissolution of the gilds, the continuing support of the
poor by Louth’s two great gilds also ceased and the onus for their
continued support placed on the shoulders of the Corporation. The
income needed for the Corporation to sustain the poor came partly from
the gild lands and partly from the manor. The managing of these funds
was undertaken by Louth’s parishioners (but outside the bounds of the
parish itself), and the administrators of the Corporation’s charitable
resources continued to be drawn from the same group of influential urban
elite that had dominated Louth’s gilds. While the parish and community
of Louth remained intrinsically as one through the Reformation, and the
notion of charity remained perpetually religious in character, through the
dissolution of Louth’s gilds, and through the institution of the
Corporation, the Reformation effectively preserved the maintenance of
those poor previously maintained by the gilds. The communal relief that
had been provided for Louth’s poor by the gilds survived the Edwardian
Reformation through a restructuring of the administrative unit.

The ideology of the Edwardian reforms removed the ‘superstitious’
elements attached to philanthropic activities, but the reciprocal
characteristic that had traditionally defined charity, and had served to
maintain the link between communities of the living and the dead,
remained. The benefits reaped by the eternal soul through charitable

52 Schen, Charity and Lay Piety, 107.
53 Ibid.
54 R. W. Goulding, Old Louth Corporation Records, Being Extracts from the Accounts, Minutes, and
Memoranda of the Warden and Six Assistants of the Town of Louth and Free School of King Edward
VI in Louth (Louth: J. W. Goulding, 1891), 2-7.
55 Ibid., 6.
provision had been a fundamental aspect of the charitable relief of religious gilds. The overtly reciprocal nature of pre-Reformation charity had been purged, at least in theory, by doctrinal revisions, the focus shifting from escaping Purgatory to assisting fellow Christians as an act of Christian love. Although the motivating factor of avoiding Purgatorial punishment was extirpated from Protestant notions of charity, and although these notions were somewhat diluted, they still maintained that charity could still be beneficial for the soul, and was a fundamental element of living a Christian life.

The acquiescence of Louth’s parishioners to this ideological shift is clearly illustrated through the charitable endeavours undertaken by them, both on a collective and individual level. As with other matters of doctrine, the Louth churchwarden accounts chart the cooperative attitude of the parish, at least in their official responses, toward changing notions of charity. This demonstrated their ability to adapt traditional measures of aid: there are elements of both continuity and change in the ways in which Louth’s parishioners responded to the Protestant interpretation of Christian charity.

It has been well documented that as individuals men and women organised their own charitable benefactions through their wills in pre-Reformation England. But where did this money go after the dissolution of the monasteries, chantries and gilds, the traditional recipients of such bequests? In 1536 an aborted Act attempted to provide for regular collections for the poor and laid the burden of this collection directly at the feet of the parish, instructing that alms were not to be given to individuals, but to the common box of the parish. A later statute issued under Edward VI in 1547 specifically targeting vagabonds also contained a provision for the care and relief of the aged, infirm and impotent poor, who were to be prevented from wandering outside their own districts.

There was a tradition in Louth prior to 1547 of organised parochial aid. While the gilds provided accommodation and some financial aid, the wider community, through the parish, assisted the poor in various other ways. In 1538 the churchwarden accounts record a payment to the bellman and clerks for their acts of office in respect to the burial of three poor folks. Similar payments were made in 1539-40. The spiritual needs of the poor were also catered to. In 1540-1 the clerks received payment for ‘their service doing about sick folks’. Royal Injunctions of 1547 encouraged testators to leave money to the parish poor box rather

---


57 See Rubin, Charity and Community, 97; 128-9, for the role of the parish in poor relief in medieval Cambridge.

58 St James 7/2, f. 46v.

59 Ibid., f. 49v.

60 Ibid., f. 54.
the to the high altar. Alms to poor people were initially mentioned in the Louth churchwarden accounts in 1546-7, and in the following year first reference is made to the common box. The Injunctions prevented testators from endowing chantries or commemorative services designed to speed the soul through the perils of Purgatory, but bequests to the poor were protected. In 1548-9 a payment was made by the Louth churchwardens for a poor woman’s burial. The churchwardens again paid for the burial of a poor child in 1551-2. Provision of a Christian burial was an act of Christian charity, and the living were also cared for through the same funds and the same sense of Christian duty. In 1552-3 Robert Kyrkby received money for maintaining a sick child. A few years later John Anderson received a payment from the churchwardens for burying a boy who came from Tattershall. The boy had been cared for by Anthony Milner, who received compensation for the boy’s keeping. Charitable bequests to traditional institutions, such as gilds and chantries, ceased in the mid-sixteenth century. However, following the introduction of the 1547 Injunctions the pattern of provision, organised through the churchwardens and already well established at Louth, continued unabated.

While there was a strong sense of continuity throughout the Reformation in the ways in which Louth’s parishioners performed charitable acts, some changes to the pattern of charity did occur. Much of the money that had previously gone to the endowment of obits and for the upkeep of the gilds now worked towards the establishment of local charities. In 1551 Thomas Spencer, a draper, left money to buy 221 chaldrons of coals to be laid up in the summer and sold in winter at a halfpenny a strike to the poor, and gave a shop and chamber in Mercer Row, with a little house at the back, for the better support of charity. In 1574 Richard Wright established a charity, known as Wright’s Coal Charity, providing coals for those of Louth’s poor and needy who were nominated by the Warden and Assistants, with input from the vicar and churchwardens. Arthur Gray, mercer, who died in 1556, left £20 to the poor of Louth. The bequest was later integrated into Wright’s Coal Charity. Education also benefited from such charitable foundations. In 1556 John Bradley acquired a property and granted it to the Grammar School. In 1575 the property was used as a poor house, having superseded the Lodge for Poor Men. Richard Hardie also made provisions for educational purposes, providing funds for the education for the children of poor men at Louth. While corporate forms of charitable expression largely continued unchanged, the Edwardian reforms did

---

61 Ibid., f. 77v.
62 Ibid., f. 83.
63 Ibid., f. 98.
64 Ibid., f. 102.
65 Ibid., f. 120.
67 Goulding, Old Louth, 178.
68 The Lodge for Poor Men was first mentioned in the churchwarden accounts in 1528-9. St James, f.
69 Goulding, Old Louth, 180.
impact on individual charitable strategies, altering markedly the means through which individuals performed charitable acts.

After Edward’s death in 1553 his Catholic half-sister Mary succeeded to the throne. By all accounts Louth embraced Mary’s accession. Bread and wine were consumed upon the her Proclamation and that year saw the reacquisition of the books required for Catholic worship, the churchwardens acquiring nine song books, a mass book, manual and dirige book. After years of obediently adhering to the Protestant reforms of Edward VI, the Louth churchwardens again demonstrated the compliant nature of the parish, responding to the religious policies of the new monarch. Continuing attachment to traditional religious practices is an unquantifiable element in the Louth churchwarden accounts. The level of obedience regarding Mary’s re-establishment of Catholic worship may well demonstrate a strong desire on the part of the parish to return to the familiar, yet the level of obedience mirrors that of the years under Edward.

Mary reinstated observations and celebrations around the Sepulchre for Palm Sunday, Good Friday, and Easter, but there was no revival of the religious gilds or the cult of saints. The necessary apparatus for celebrating the restored Catholic services and feast days were swiftly purchased by the churchwardens of Louth. New candle sticks for the altar were obtained in 1553-4, along with a pair of censers, and a cross made of copper along with a cross cloth, a surplice for the curat and a number of altar cloths. A new altar was installed and the burning of lights was obviously embraced. Robert Kyrkby received a payment in 1553-4 for wax making and that same year the churchwardens purchased twenty-one and a half pounds of wax and butter for drying the wax. The churchwardens also bought a Sepulchre and three painted clothes for it. A new rood was constructed and painted in 1554-5, a pyx belonging to the high altar was mended in 1556-7, and images painted in 1556-7.

While Mary hastily repealed Edward’s doctrinal changes, there was a sense of continuity through these years in regards to charity. Edward’s measures enacted on behalf of the poor were left largely intact and continued to be embraced by Louth’s parishioners. An entry in the 1555 churchwarden accounts records the payment for the writing of a book of the poor men’s names, and a list documenting the names of the poor relieved by the churchwardens is first recorded that year. While embracing the reintroduction of traditional forms of worship, Louth’s parishioners continued the pattern of charitable practices established under Henry and adapted under Edward.

The churchwarden accounts of Louth record a striking degree of obedience towards the religious mandates endorsed by successive Tudor monarchs in the mid-sixteenth century. They illustrate the willingness of...
the parish to acquire and divest as required, but they do not reveal the practical application of the reforms imposed by Westminster. Examining the evolution of the notion of charity and the attitude of Louth’s parishioners to these ideas clearly demonstrates the adaptability of the parishioners and illustrates how they implemented the reforms. Before Edward VI’s Injunctions the link between the poor and testators was overtly reciprocal and regarded by Protestants as superstitious in nature. In return for their ‘pious provisions’ testators anticipated prayers from those who received the alms, aiding not only their journey through Purgatory, but commemoration of their memory within the community. The Reformation, with its attack on the Catholic doctrine of Purgatory, re-shaped rather than destroyed notions of charity, although it continued to be seen as an act of Christian love. The objective remained the same, but the means through which it was achieved changed. Louth’s parishioners adapted their charitable deeds in accordance with Tudor statutes: as new avenues opened they were embraced. At Louth the relief of the poor simply became more corporate in nature, organised and administered through the parish and the newly established Corporation.

A fundamental question that continues to shape Reformation studies concerns how England’s parishioners responded to the implementation of the officially sanctioned reforms. Doctrinally England became Protestant and stopped being Catholic through a series of reforms and counter reforms. For the Reformation to be successful however, these mandates needed to be accepted and implemented at the parish level. For revisionist historians this question has been superseded by the paradox of why parishes, in which traditional religion flourished, did so little to preserve themselves in the face of official hostility. While this question continues to perplex Reformation historians, the case of Louth and its reception of changing ideas of Christian charity shows that there was an element of the familiar within the reforms, and with some tweaking to the established pattern of charitable provision, Louth’s parishioners were able to continue their charitable activities.

The example of Louth goes some way to explain how the Reformation in England was achieved, and reveals that the parishioners were able to adapt some of their traditional religious practices in order to conform to new Protestant doctrines. However, the acceptance of the religious reforms of Henry, Edward and Mary cannot be fully explained by continuity between traditional and Protestant doctrines. The pre-Reformation parish of Louth had been a vibrant centre of traditional religious practices. By the end of the sixteenth century the parish church of St James had been stripped of its patently Catholic trappings.77 Gone were the richly adorned images and furnishings that had been lavished upon the church by generations of parishioners. Gone too were the traditional services and liturgy.

Studies have shown that the reformation process was not only variable from county to county, but from town to town, and that the rate

---

77 The churchwarden accounts record that in 1561 the parish once again removed the rood loft and began purchasing the various publications required for the services. In 1566-7 the parish sold off handbells, censers, chalices, holy water fatt, candlesticks, and cloths. LAO, MS Louth St James 7/3, f. 11v; f. 46.
at which Englishmen and women accepted and embraced the new religion was dictated by a wide variety of factors. Determining whether or not Louth was exceptional in its level of obedience is a task hindered by a lack of localised case studies. There was certainly early opposition to the reform process at Louth, as evidenced by the 1536 Rising, but the churchwarden accounts display no active resistance to the reform campaigns, making no references to the 1536 rebellion or its aftermath. The accounts demonstrate that the parish of Louth, as a collective, readily adopted the religious policies of successive Tudor monarchs throughout the mid-sixteenth century, complying with the official doctrines of the Tudor reforms as they were prescribed.

It should be noted that there is no evidence of Louth’s parishioners pre-empting any of the Tudor reforms, suggesting little or no overtly Protestant influence in Louth. The question then arises, why was there such a level of obedience at Louth? Part of the answer lies in the fact that Tudor machinery was well organised. G. R. Elton observed that at the time that Thomas Cromwell went to the scaffold in July 1540, the realm ‘was, for the moment, obedient as instructed’. But that is not to say that there was no real opposition to the Reformation during this period. What resistance there was had been effectively quashed by the Tudor administration. The acceptance of the Tudor reforms by the greater part of the country was due in part to the promulgation of Tudor propaganda. Networks of informers and commissaries acted as checks throughout the realm. Active, or even passive resistance was simply not a practical option.

Eamon Duffy’s recently published study of the Devonshire parish of Morebath, which presents a picture of another parish deeply entrenched in traditional religious practices on the eve of the Reformation, demonstrate that there was a similar pattern of conformity in Morebath, at least until 1549. Caught up in the Prayer Book rebellion of that year, the parishioners of Morebath sent five young men to join the uprising. The rebellion was crushed and the pattern of parochial compliance established at Morebath, before the Prayer Book rebellion was once again actively pursued by the parishioners. Louth had encountered the full might of this Tudor machinery in 1536. Their aborted rebellion that year ended in the execution of their vicar and other prominent men. Later uprisings

78 Broad generalisations about England and reactions to the Reformation that have been presented over the last few decades, and which are noted for their religious conservatism during this period, include Hampshire, Sussex, the Welsh marches, and the northern counties. These were especially slow to incorporate Edward’s Protestant reforms. D. M. Palliser has noted that Devon, Hampshire, Lancashire, Yorkshire, were perceived by Edward’s regime as capricious regions and were targeted by itinerant government preachers in 1551. Kent and Essex, on the other hand, produced popular disturbances upon Mary’s ascendency. Such studies can mask the religious divisions that occurred within regions, and even within individual communities. D. M. Palliser, ‘Popular Reactions to the Reformation during the Years of Uncertainty 1530-70’, in Church and Society in England: Henry VIII to James I, ed. Felicity Heal and Rosemary O’Day (London and Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1977), 41.
around the country were met with similar, rigorously brutal responses from the Crown. The memory of this failed revolt acted as potent reminder of the price paid for rebellion. Having experienced the repercussions of their insurrection, Louth’s parishioners were keen to be seen as obedient and readily complied with the religious policies of Henry VIII and his children. Sir William Parr, who oversaw the executions of the Louth men, observed in March 1537 that the people of Louth appeared to be sorry for their behaviour and that no shire was ‘in better quietness’. This quietness was to last well into the seventeenth century.

*University of Tasmania*

---

83 *Letters and Papers*, vol. 12, part 1, no. 639.