

CATHOLIC HISTORY OF LIVERPOOL

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Catholic history of Liverpool by Thomas Burke

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THOMAS BURKE

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CATHOLIC HISTORY

OF

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CHAPTER I.

No city or town in Great Britain, and few in Ireland, contains so many Catholics within its boundaries as the city of Liverpool. This is due to its close proximity to Ireland. Indeed, it may be said with truth that Liverpool would not have risen into prominence at such an early date had not successive English monarchs from Henry the Second to William the Third recognised the great convenience afforded by the Mersey for the conquest of Ireland. In turn the Anglo-Irish difficulty and its consequences filled Liverpool with an enormous Irish population, which carried into an essentially Protestant community the ancient faith, and renewed in some forty churches the ritual and devotions which for many centuries were practised and observed in the pre-Reformation churches of Walton, St. Mary's del Key, and St. Nicholas.

An Anglican weekly, commenting on the pageant festivities of 1907, observed that the Church of England did not figure as prominently as was desirable in the processions and tableaux; that there was too much prominence assigned to events and incidents connected with the Roman Catholic Church in and around Liverpool. The complaint was well founded, though, had it been otherwise, the pageant would have been shorn of much of its beauty, and, what is more important, would have been an untruthful representation of the past history of the town. Why, however, the Benedictine priory of Birkenhead was made so prominent a feature, and the ancient parish church of Walton ignored, puzzled many people who knew local history, to say nothing of no reference to the first church erected in the town, St. Mary of the Quay. Save for the beautiful banner of St. Nicholas,* the "old

* Worked by Mrs. Jacob and presented to St. Nicholas' Pro-Cathedral, Copperas Hill, by Councillor A. E. Jacob, J.P.

church" in Chapel Street was set aside as if it had never existed, unless it be that St. Nicholas' was not regarded as a parish church, as it was subject to Walton until the year 1699.

The church of St. Mary at Walton dates back to Saxon times. Domesday Book records its existence, and the possession by its resident clergy of an endowment of certain lands in Bootle. In the year A.D. 1094 Roger de Poitiers granted the tithes of Walton to the Priory of Lancaster, and a little later the church was added to the endowment of SS. Peter and Paul, Shrewsbury. Up to the reign of King Edward the Fourth, the presentation to the living lay in the hands of the monks of the interesting town on the Severn, elevated by Pope Pius the Ninth into a cathedral city in the year 1850. The head of the Molyneux family bought the right of presentation, and entailed lands in Nottinghamshire on his brother, on condition that there was paid the sum of forty shillings yearly to the priest who served at the high altar of Walton. In the valuation of Pope Nicholas, A.D. 1291, the value of the living is set down at forty-four pounds. It is related that "Roberte Fizacreley was priste incumbent" there of the foundation of John Mowbray, to sing Masses for the "sowle of him and his antecessors." This is a disputed point. One writer says that the chantry was founded A.D. 1470, by Father John Molyneux, rector of Walton, and third son of Sir Richard Molyneux, who won his knighthood on the well-contested field of Agincourt. The Molyneux family* had an intimate connection with the ancient foundation of Walton. We find a Molyneux rector in 1528, again in 1543, and 1557. Indeed the Molyneuxs remained faithful until well into the nineteenth century. When the dissolution took place, a grant of one pound fourteen shillings was ordered to be paid to the displaced priest, Robert Fazackerley,† and though the chantries were re-established by Queen Mary, the following reign saw them finally diverted from their original purpose.

The first chapel was that attached to the Castle of Liverpool, built early in the thirteenth century on the site now occupied by the Queen Victoria memorial. Sixty years‡ after the granting of the first charter by King John, August 28, 1267, the chapel of St. Mary of the Quay was in existence, and provided for the spiritual wants of the small population which then inhabited the town. It was built close by the water's edge, and the present Chapel Street takes

* Earls of Sefton.

† History of Walton, by John Wilson, St. John's College, Cambridge.

‡ Ramsay Muir.

its name from this ancient chapel, and not from the Church of our Lady and St. Nicholas as is commonly believed, which was not erected until 1355. The first chantry attached to St. Mary's was founded by Henry, Duke of Lancaster, in the year 1353. From the rent roll* of John of Gaunt, his successor, we gather that "Lyr'pulle is worth at ferme £38, whereof an allowance of rent was given by Henry, quondam duke, whom God assoil, to the chapel there, twelve shillings." This was the High Altar of Liverpool so frequently alluded to in documents referring to the town. John of Gaunt followed the example of his predecessor by founding the chantry of St. Nicholas, and Mr. John Crosse added the chantries of St. Katharine and St. John. In 1464, Charles and Elen Gelybrand granted lands in Gerston for the maintenance of a chaplain at this chapel,* and in 1529 Cecilia, widow of Ewan Halghton, bequeathed lands in Wavertree and West Derby for a chaplain "at a certain altar, called Our Lady's altar." There would appear to have been a special reverence for Our Lady's altar, judging by the various bequests for its support. Rector Crosse, of St. Nicholas', Fleshamble, London, in the year 1515 bequeathed a new common hall to the town, with the condition attached that the arcade beneath should be for the benefit "of the priest who sings before Our Lady, and shall pray for ye soules of John Crosse, Avice Crosse, John Crosse, Hugh Botill, and all their frendes soules." In the will of William, son of Adam, the first Mayor of Liverpool, an office which he occupied eleven times, we read—"I bequeath my soul to God and the Blessed Virgin and all saints, and my body to be buried in the chapel of Liverpool, before the face of the image of the Virgin, where is my appointed place of burial."† The worthy mayor died in the year 1383, and was laid to rest as he desired. His will ordered three quarters of wheat made into bread to be distributed to the poor on the day of his funeral, and the payment of fourpence to every priest in the chapel of St. Nicholas. In December, 1459, John Hales, Bishop of Lichfield, granted forty days' indulgence "to the penitents confessed and contrite who should expend, bequeath or give" towards the restoration of this ancient chapel, the names of the benefactors to be mentioned at every Mass celebrated within its walls.

St. Mary's proved too small to accommodate the increasing population, and the erection of a new building was decided upon by the Corporation, to be wholly maintained by

* Quoted by Mr. John Elton, Lancashire and Cheshire Historic Society.

† John Elton.

the burgesses. The Duke of Lancaster was requested to grant a piece of land upon which to erect the new church, which was dedicated to St. Nicholas, the patron saint of seamen, in accordance with the Norman custom. A grant of ten pounds from Duke Henry's rental served as an endowment for the "two conjoined chapels," or as a document signed by King Edward the Third on the nineteenth day of May, 1355, puts it, "to certain chaplains to celebrate divine service every day for the souls of all the faithful deceased in the chapel of the Blessed Mary and St. Nicholas of Liverpool."* A new burial ground was also resolved upon, and on the third day of February, 1361, Robert Stretton, Bishop of Lichfield and Coventry, wrote that he was "favourably inclined and consented that the church of St. Nicholas of Liverpool, and the cemetery contiguous to it in the parish of Walton within our diocese, may be dedicated by any Catholic Bishop enjoying the grace and union of the Apostolic See."

St. Nicholas' was essentially a Corporation church, as we may see from the directions issued by the local authority for its management. On June 3rd, 1558, the Corporation ordered: "the priest of the altar of St. John shall daily say one Mass between the hours of five and six in the morning, to the intent that all labourers and well disposed people may come at the said hour." This early celebration was in harmony with the general medieval custom known as the Morrow's Mass.

A year later Queen Elizabeth was the reigning monarch, and the two chapels ceased to be part of the Universal Church. The chantry properties were appropriated by the Duchy of Lancaster, and the Corporation purchased the now empty chapel of St. Mary for twenty shillings on the 31st March, 1554. It became the town's warehouse, and so remained until the early years of the eighteenth century, when it was demolished, a piece of vandalism quite in keeping with the commercial spirit of that age. At the dissolution of the religious houses the following priests were attached to the four chantries:—Sir Ralph Howarth, the chantry of St. Nicholas; Sir Richard Frodsham, Our Lady's; Sir Humphrey Crosse, Saint Katherine's; Sir Thomas Rowley, St. John's. The prefix "Sir" is equivalent to the modern title of reverend as applied to a secular priest. For over a century and a half from the Reformation the Catholic history of the town is almost a blank. The Benedictines ceased to enjoy their ancient privilege of ferrying passengers across the river, the modern "Monks Ferry" alone remaining to remind later

* Brooke's translation.

generations of an interesting historical fact. The Prior's house in Water Street, wherein was sold the produce of the lands of the Birkenhead priory, was closed for ever, and except in secret the sons of St. Benedict no longer ministered to the farmers and labourers of the Cheshire side of the Mersey. The accession of James the Second renewed the hopes and stimulated the faith of Lancashire Catholics, but Liverpool was then a Puritan town and disregarded his royal orders for toleration towards his co-religionists.

In 1687, the King interfered on behalf of one Richard Latham, surgeon, and his wife who carried on a school, two professions from which Catholics were excluded. The royal command was disobeyed, and in consequence the deputy-mayor and senior alderman were removed from office.* A few short years later the foreign troops of William of Orange encamped on the shores of the Mersey, en route for the Boyne, to summarily exclude from the throne the would-be defender of his Liverpool Catholic subjects. In 1613, "John Synett, an Irishman, born in Wexford, master of a barke, was excommunicated by the Bishop of Chester for being a Catholic recusant, and so dying at his house in Liverpool, was denyed to be buried at Liverpoole church or chapel," and again in 1615, "Anne, ye wyffe of Geo. Webster of Liverpoole, deyed a Catholicke, and was denyed burial at ye chappelle of Liverpoole, by ye Mayor and by Mr. More."

That Catholicism maintained a vigorous existence in the neighbourhood may be inferred from the sturdy faith of most of the families between Liverpool and Lancaster, and the number of Catholics to whom the devoted sons of St. Ignatius of Loyola ministered at the end of the seventeenth century. No one can ever know the full extent of the labours of the Jesuits in Lancashire for over one hundred years, but from the scanty records handed down to us we may picture for ourselves some idea of the results of the zealous missionary work of the great Society of Jesus. To them, under God, the Catholics of Liverpool and neighbourhood owe a debt which can never be repaid. The story of their heroism, self-sacrifice, courage and tenacity needs the pen of the author of a "Lost Arcadia" to do it full justice,† and even now, under new conditions and happier times, every Catholic Lancastrian feels his heart swelling with admiration at the mere recital of the outlines of the history of the Jesuits in Liverpool. Some light is thrown on the steadfastness of the old families to the Catholic faith by the communications from the Government

* Ramsay Muir.

† See Cunningham Graham, ex M.P., on the Jesuits in Paraguay.

in the year 1701, which warned the Mayor of the "disaffection" of the Harringtons of Huyton, the Blundells of Crosby, and the Scarisbricks of Scarisbrick, and many others,* whose adherence to the Church of their fathers spelled disloyalty to the Crown in the eyes of the English statesmen of that persecuting period, happily long past.

Further light is thrown upon this period by a document in the possession of the Historic Society of Lancashire and Cheshire. † It relates the story of the exemptions of Catholics in the neighbourhood of Liverpool from certain taxes ordered to be assessed upon property held by them in pursuance of an Act of Parliament passed in the ninth year of the reign of George the First. The title ran thus:—"An Act for granting "an aid to His Majesty, by laying a tax upon Papists, and "for making such other persons who shall refuse upon a due "summons, or neglect to take the oath above mentioned, to "contribute towards the said tax for reimbursing to the "public the great expense occasioned by the late conspiracy, "and for discharging the estates of Papists from two-thirds of "the rents and profits thereof for one year, and all arrears "of the same, and from such forfeiture as are therein more "particularly described." The amount to be levied upon the "Papists" is set down at £100,000, but this Act is comparatively lenient when compared with previous legislation, inasmuch as it prescribes certain grounds upon which exemption may be claimed. In the main an oath to preserve the Protestant succession or bona-fide alienation of the property to a Protestant, prior to a certain date, secured exemption from the proposed impost. The alienation of property simply meant that no Catholic could hold property, and in Ireland it was quite a common practice to secure the good offices of a friendly Protestant to whom it was "alienated," but who gave back the rents or profits to the rightful if not legal owner. That this confidence was only too often abused formed one of the greatest sources of Irish "disaffection" under the tyranny of the Penal Laws. The document referred to relates thirteen successful appeals for exemption heard at Prescot on the seventeenth day of September, 1723. One Percival Rice, owner of lands in Speke, Halewood, Fazakerley and West Derby, "takes the "oath and declaration," and so "evades" payment, as does Mr. Thomas Prenton of Garston, who thus saves himself an assessment of six pounds. Mr. John Lancaster, Rainhill, escapes the tax by having alienated his property before

* Picton's Memorials of Liverpool.

† See Volume 18. Paper by Mr. A. Craig Gibson, F.S.A.