

**THE EDWARDIAN  
INVENTORIES  
FOR BEDFORDSHIRE**

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The Edwardian inventories for Bedfordshire by F. C. Eeles & J. E. Brown

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**F. C. EELES & J. E. BROWN**

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Gt. Brit. Commissioners on seizure of church goods,  
1552-1553.

*Alcuin Club Collections*

VI

THE EDWARDIAN  
INVENTORIES FOR  
BEDFORDSHIRE

EDITED

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## PREFACE.

THE political exigences of Henry VIII's breach with the Pope caused him to suppress the English monastic houses, with the twofold end of crushing that part of the body spiritual which was the strongest bulwark of papal power in England, and of obtaining lands to grant to the nobility, so that he might secure their favour and support. Begun in 1535 under the pretext of suppressing some of the lesser houses on account of their corruption, this policy of sacrilege went on until every religious house was gone, and in 1545 it was extended to colleges, chantries and free chapels, although it seems that the seizure of the plate and ornaments of these latter did not take place until early in the reign of Edward VI. It is easy to see that this work of sacrilege and confiscation was not likely to stop short of the parish churches, and it began to be extended to them at the very beginning of the reign of Edward VI. Enquiries as to the goods of parish churches were made of the bishops in 1547, and early in 1549 a commission for making inventories was issued to sheriffs and justices of the peace. On 3rd March 1551 it was ordered by the Privy Council "that for as muche as the Kinge's Majestie had neede presently of a masse of mooney, therfore Commissions shulde be addressed into all shires of Englande to take into the Kinges handes suche church plate as remaineth, to be employed unto his highnes use."<sup>1</sup> This however was not done immediately. On 29th January 1552 a letter was addressed to each *custos rotulorum* requiring the delivery of the inventories which had been made under the commissions of 1549. A commission to make new inventories and stop all private embezzlement was issued on 16th May 1552,<sup>2</sup> and it was under

<sup>1</sup> *Acts of the Privy Council of England*, N.S. iii (1550-1552) p. 228.

<sup>2</sup> For full text see below, p. ix.

5 years 50 1552: 1551 & 1552

this commission that most of the inventories now at the Public Record Office were taken, including those printed in the earlier part of the present volume. A new commission was issued on 16th January 1553 directing the actual seizure of all the valuables, only the barest necessities being left for the use of each church.<sup>1</sup> The result of this was that the plate was sent to the Jewel House in the Tower of London and melted down, the vestments and the inferior metal work were sold locally, the linen given to the poor. Thus the sacrilege was complete. The lead and bells do not seem to have been actually taken.<sup>2</sup>

A necessary accompaniment of this wholesale seizure of ecclesiastical property was of course the taking of careful inventories of it. A great number of these still remain, ranging in date from 1536, when those of the religious houses begin, until 1553—the date of the latest Edwardian returns for parish churches. This great series of 16th century inventories, despite its shameful origin, is of the highest legal, historical and liturgical importance. No other country can show the like. Notwithstanding their obvious value, little more than half the inventories have hitherto been printed, and some of these are in comparatively rare publications which are not easy of access.

Until all such inventories are printed accurately and published in an accessible way, it is impossible to form a just estimate of their contents, or to write a detailed history of the spoliation of our churches by Henry VIII and Edward VI, or indeed to deal properly with the subject of church furniture and ornaments in the 16th century in England as a whole. This the Alcuin Club

<sup>1</sup>This commission has often been printed: see *Seventh Report of the Deputy Keeper of the Public Records*, London, 1846, Appendix II., p. 307, or *Surtees Society* vol. 97, p. 4, or *Book of Common Prayer* with notes by A. J. Stephens, London 1849, vol. i., p. 356, or *Church Goods in Berkshire*, by Walter Money, Oxford, 1879, p. xxxii.

<sup>2</sup>By far the best account of the spoliation at present available is that written by Mr. Page and prefixed to his invaluable book of *Inventories of Church Goods for the Counties of York, Durham and Northumberland*, Surtees Society, vol. 97.

intends to do as soon as it is practicable, but it is obviously impossible while half the material is lying scattered in MS. at the Record Office. The Committee therefore is first addressing itself to the work of getting all the material transcribed, and printed in an accessible form. In some cases it is hoped that the inventories may be printed by local archaeological societies: where nothing else is possible the club will endeavour to do it, but from the expensive character of the work it is doubtful how much will be able to be done unless financial help comes in from outside.

As a first instalment the Edwardian inventories for the county of Bedford are now published. The transcripts have been made by the Rev. J. E. Brown, and collated with the originals by Mr. F. C. Eeles, who is also responsible for the introduction.



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