

A Prayer Book Problem in Restoration

Bury St Edmunds

When the post-Restoration revision of the Book of Common Prayer was published on 19 May 1662, the two Bury St Edmunds parish churches had been without settled clergy for nearly two years.

In 1645 Parliament abolished the Book of Common Prayer and replaced it with the Directory of Public Worship. During the Commonwealth, the Independents and Presbyterians used the two parish churches, while those who remained faithful to the Church of England, led by a clergyman called Boldero, met in private houses. A book of hymns was written by Dr Thomas Stephens, headmaster of the grammar school, for this 'underground' congregation; he persuaded his friend John Jenkins, the well-known composer of the day, set them for a chamber consort. When Stephens was removed from his place as headmaster in 1645, the Parliamentary authorities described him as 'a notorious malignant'.

When Charles II returned from exile in 1660, Dr Stephens was delighted. He put his boys into red gowns and marched them in procession from the school in Eastgate Street to St James's to give thanks for the restoration of the king. Soon after the Book of Common Prayer was reinstated but Mr Claggett at St Mary's and Mr Slater at St James's, the ministers who had been appointed during the Commonwealth by the corporation, were not prepared to use it.

In the summer vacation of 1660, Mr Justice Hyde (who later became Lord Chancellor Clarendon) and Mr Justice Archer rode into Suffolk to hold Assizes at the Shire Hall. Following the normal custom, the Alderman (roughly equivalent to the Mayor) and corporation members as well as the two clergymen, met the judges and accompanied them to St Mary's church for the assize service and sermon.

However, on this occasion, the then Alderman, Samuel Moody, a noted non-conformist, and the clergymen, did not go into church and accompany the judges to their seats. They remained in the Churchyard while the liturgy was read, only going into church when it was time for Mr Slater, the minister of St James's church, to preach the sermon. In the Chancery case which considered the state of the churches and other matters in Bury St Edmunds, Mr Claggett was reported to have said in a sermon that the Book of Common Prayer was a sprig of Rome's garden which ought to be abolished. Other witnesses testified that the 'better sort' much disliked the conduct of the two ministers. Dr Stephens said that the corporation members who supported these ministers were in the habit of wearing their hats in church. For their refusal to read from the Book of Common Prayer, both clergymen were indicted and deprived of their livings.

Both St James's and St Mary's were without settled clergymen for some time after this. Dr Stephens helped out at St James's - on 4 August 1662 the corporation ordered that he should be paid £5 as a gratuity for preaching and officiating there. As late as 12 October 1663 the problem persisted, and it was agreed that the Alderman should be reimbursed for his expenses incurred in finding ministers and for giving them 'and their attendants fit and necessary entertainment for the time they stay in town'