

Piety and Charity in a Berkshire Village 1520-1710¹

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The strength of popular piety in late medieval England is currently a topic of considerable interest to historians who have questioned the former contention that there was such scant enthusiasm for traditional religious practices that the protestant reformers had little difficulty in spreading the new ideas.² Some have based their assertions on detailed local studies where it is possible to find evidence for the activities of the ordinary parishioner in parish records, especially churchwardens' accounts. These are comparatively rare for this early period; in Berkshire there are only five dating from before 1547, two of which are from the borough of Reading.³ Most parishes have another source, namely wills which may shed considerable light on the faith of a community, even if, as many would now assert, it is unwise to assume they reflect accurately the beliefs of individuals.

This is true of Shrivenham, a large rural parish in the Vale of White Horse, Oxfordshire. Before 1974 it was in Berkshire, near to the county boundary with Wiltshire, and in the sixteenth century it was in the diocese of Salisbury. In addition to the parish church there were two chapels, one in each of the hamlets of Longcot and Watchfield; none of these has early churchwardens' accounts. However, there is a substantial collection of early wills, most of which were proved in the court of the Archdeacon of Berkshire.⁴

Table 1: Number and Distribution of Shrivenham Wills 1521-70

Date	Wills	Highest Annual Total	Year of Probate
1521-30	13	9	1529
1531-40	3		
1541-50	20	8	1544
1551-60	35	10	1559
1561-70	25		
Total	96		

Table 1 shows that the wills are not equally spaced over the period, the number increasing substantially after 1540. It is likely that in the mid-sixteenth century this was due more to the effect of epidemic disease than to local conformity to the Statute of Wills (1540). In each of three decades, 1521-30, 1541-50 and 1551-60, one year contributed especially to the number of wills proved. This is particularly true of the period 1557-59 when in successive years seven, six and ten wills (twenty three in all) made up 67% of the decadal total, and 24% of all wills for the half century. Clearly Shrivenham shared in the nationwide epidemics of influenza and other diseases which gave these years the highest death rate in the early modern period.⁵ It would also seem to have been affected by a summer epidemic in 1529, a year when the county generally showed increased mortality.⁶ Since the parish register does not begin until 1575, the wills provide rough, but very useful, guides to this aspect of Shrivenham's history. The steady growth and then consistently higher number of wills proved after 1600 is reflected elsewhere in the Archdeaconry. As yet this phenomenon has not been explained.

Their content, as shown in Table 2 (following page), is very revealing of the pattern of piety in the community during the period. The thirty four wills made before the reign of Edward VI suggest that Shrivenham people had a strong attachment to traditional religion. Many left small sums to the lights which burned before the images of the saints, on the rood screen or before the parish hearse at funerals. In 1529 Edward Povey left 20d. to the 'five principal lights' of the parish church, and John Hicks, William Heward, and Thomas Blagrove in 1544 all gave a bushel of barley to the rood light of Longcot Chapel, the rood lights being the most popular of the shrines. Only the hearse light attracted more bequests: Thomas Shepherd (1521), Roger Barnes (1529) and Thomas Day (1533) left money or corn to the one at Shrivenham Church, and in 1544 five testators each left a bushel of barley or malt to that in Longcot. Others remembered the shrine of a favourite saint: that of St. Andrew, to whom Shrivenham Church was dedicated, was given a bushel of barley by Roger Barnes; St. Christopher, St. Michael and St. George at Longcot all received 2d. from John Franklin in 1528, though others preferred Our Lady of Pity. John Bond (1529) asked to be buried before her statue.

As important to these pre-Reformation will-makers was the provision to be made for prayers to assist the soul to salvation. Many, like John a Powell, began with the traditional formula, leaving their souls to 'allmyghty god, to our lady Saynt marye virgin and to all the wholy companye in hevyn'. John was one of only three, the others being Margaret Hynton (1528)⁸ and John Bryte (1529), who specifically mentioned the 'month's mind', the mass said

Table 2: Type of Bequests Per Decade

Date	Sarum		Church/Chapel ⁷		Poor		Total Wills
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	
1521-30	13	100	13	100	1	8	13
1531-40	3	100	3	100	0	0	3
1541-50	16	80	16	80	2	10	20
1551-60	28	80	19	54	6	17	35
1561-70	17	68	9	37	8	32	25
1571-80	10	71	1	7	10	71	14
1581-90	14	70	5	25	10	50	20
1591-1600	7	30	7	30	11	48	23
1601-10	14	47	15	50	14	47	30
1611-20	8	26	13	42	12	39	31
1621-30	11	30	13	35	14	38	37
1631-40	15	39	18	47	18	47	38
Total	158	55	132	46	106	37	289

for the deceased a month after death. Bryte left 8d. to each of four men who would carry torches at the ceremony and black cloth to make them hoods. Margaret left 8d. each for fifteen priests to be present at her funeral, her month's mind and her year's mind. In addition she left eight marks to Sir John Codron to sing mass for two years for the health of her soul. William Hellyer, who died the same year, left a cow to pay for a yearly obit, or anniversary mass, to be celebrated by two priests. It is very unlikely that John a Powell had his month's mind, for although he had made his will in 1546 it was not proved until 1549, when the church was living under the new, reformed dispensation. The others may have relied on the prayers of their relations and friends: both John Bond (1529) and Thomas Day (1533) wished that, should their children die before inheriting, their inheritance should be used to hire a priest to 'sing' for the will-makers' souls. Others, like John

Green and John Cusse in 1544 and 1545, were more circumspect in the troubled years at the end of Henry VIII's reign, asking only that their legatees should dispose of some of their goods for the health of their souls.

In 1547 national legislation swept away all the shrines and chantries, and with them prayers for the dead. The following year Edward Seymour, Duke of Somerset, ruling for the new young king Edward VI, ordered all images to be removed from churches. In 1552 the government imposed the Second Book of Common Prayer with a reformed service in English and ordered the replacement of altars by tables, to be placed centrally in the chancel, bringing about a complete change in the appearance of churches and popular religion. No records survive to explain how quickly the Shrivenham churchwardens complied with the new order, but the few wills proved between 1548 and 1553 are markedly different from those of Henry's reign. Only one man, John Fewtrill (1549), left money to the high altar. None of the other four wills left anything to the church or to Sarum.

When Catholic worship was restored by Queen Mary in 1553, the testators of the parish no longer included all the former devotions in their wills. The high altar continued to attract bequests as did the church and the chapels generally. Yet only one of the nineteen wills made between 1553 and 1558 mentioned the lights: Margery Harris left 2d. and a bushel of barley at the year's end to the light of Shrivenham church. None mentioned the statues or the shrines. Only three, William Cusse, John Harris and William Lewis early in 1558, requested a month's mind. William Lewis wanted 'to have at my buryinge & at my monethes & at my xij monethes as manie prestes as my father hadde and my dirige every weeke for the monethe and my gossell for the xij monthes'. More persistent was the adherence to the old form of the 'soul bequest'. Ten wills began with the commendation to the Virgin and the saints, a practice which continued into the 1560s. George Green and Robert Auger used this as late as 1562, and even in 1565, when the Elizabethan Church had been established for six years, Robert Jackson asked his executor to 'do for my soul etc.', which could be interpreted as requesting prayers for his salvation.⁹ The same priest, Sir John Corbett, was vicar from 1522 to April 1564, which may help to explain the conservatism of some of his parishioners; he witnessed at least four wills between 1558 and 1562, two of which were framed in traditional ways. Much later, in 1585, John Blgrave, then living in London but subsequently buried in Shrivenham, his birthplace, hoped for salvation through the death and passion of Christ only, but gave his soul to the Blessed Virgin and all the holy company of heaven.¹⁰

However the balance was swinging towards the new ideas. Will formulae were increasingly used where the 'soul bequest' omitted reference to Mary and the saints. Jone Lewse's will made in February 1559 bequeathed her soul 'to

almightie god the maker and redemer therof'. Edith Hall in October 1560 was even more brief; 'my sowle to Almightye God'. Neither formula contains sentiments unacceptable to traditional teaching; some pre-Reformation wills are just as terse. However in July 1559 Edward Fabian, gentleman, made very specific arrangements for his funeral which left little doubt that he had embraced the reformed faith. Trusting in 'Jesu, my whole sufficient Mediator and Redeemer', he elected to be buried in the parish in which he died. He wished 'no such solemnitie to be vused as to have my boddie kept longe above the grounde to the entente to congregate together a number of people to one place moch more to the solace of the quick then to the Comforte of the Deade'. Instead he was to be interred as soon as he was cold by whatever priests were available; he hoped for four or five. They would receive 8d. each and the clerks 4d., as well as dinner. There was to be a sermon and the burial service would be conducted using the Book of Common Prayer. On the following Friday, the clergy of Shrivenham, Compton, Ashbury and Uffington were to say the appointed service in each of their churches, to be attended by 'all and everie such poore howseholder with their Wholl Howsholde as have neither plowe no handiecraft to lyve on' 'there to occupie themselves in godlie contemplation and prayer', for which each householder would receive 4d. and each member of the household 2d.¹¹ Though he was very careful to exclude any possible interpretation of his wishes as implying a request for prayers for his soul, he intended his funeral to be as impressive as any under the old dispensation.

Later, perhaps as the prayer book services came to be accepted and even treasured, the churches and chapels again began to attract bequests. From a low point in the period from 1560 to 1590, the number of donors rose to an average of two in five of all willmakers in the early seventeenth century, rising to nearly one in two in the decade before the Civil War. Thereafter it fell off almost completely to an occasional bequest, ending in 1690 with a final gift of five shillings from William Fairethorne to repair the church.

Post-Reformation gifts to the churches and chapels were also differently phrased from earlier ones, being small sums 'to the church' rather than for a particular part. The last of the old style gifts was never implemented; there was no high altar in Shrivenham church to receive the bequest in William Perry's will made in January 1559 but not proved till 1565. His was one of twelve bequests to the altars of the church and the chapels before 1559. Thereafter only one post-Reformation will, that of Arthur Green (1583), mentioned the communion table; he left buckram cloth to make a covering for that of Longcot chapel. Perhaps he was one of those for whom the new rite had some attraction born of custom and use.

Bells were an expensive necessity whatever the religious regime, rung for

feasts and tolled for funerals. Yet they ceased to be supported by will-makers in Shrivenham after 1598. They had not attracted much charity even in the pre-Reformation period compared with bequests to lights, the most being six out of twenty wills in the 1540s, all in the reign of Henry VIII. The pattern in the chapels of Watchfield and Longcot was similar, although the last bequest there was later than in Shrivenham when in 1634 twenty shillings was given by Christian Richards, spinster, for a new bell.

Despite all the religious changes, a small donation of 2d. to the 'mother church' at Sarum (rarely referred to as Salisbury) was almost universal before 1560. Only three times was this sum exceeded: 4d. was given by two testators in 1557 and 1558 and a magnificent 6s.8d. by John Bryte in 1521. Throughout most of the sixteenth century, Sarum was remembered by a consistently high, though declining, number of testators but in the following century the cathedral church no longer attracted so many gifts. Between 1601 and 1640, when the bequests effectively ceased, the proportion of testators in any decade leaving money to Sarum never exceeded 47% and from 1611-20 dropped to 26%. In addition bequests generally remained at 2d. despite inflation, which reduced their 1520 value to about a halfpenny by 1600.¹²

This was in complete contrast to the pattern of giving to the poor. Up to 1560 the number of wills with bequests for the relief of the poor never exceeded 17% in any decade, and was only 32% in the ten years after this. Thereafter the proportion increased rapidly, remained above 45% until 1610 before declining to around 40% before the Civil War. During those thirty years the levels of giving to the poor and the church were almost identical, many will-makers including both in their bequests. After 1660 the number of gifts to the poor fell, reaching the low level of those in the first half of the sixteenth century.

It is difficult to explain the motivation behind this changing pattern of charitable giving. The obligation to care for the poor was just as much emphasised by Catholic moralists as by the reformers, yet will-makers before the Reformation responded far less frequently. Only four Catholic will-makers made provision for the poor before 1550, one of whom determined that it should be paid in meat, bread and drink at the funeral and another at the month's mind as well. It must be supposed that at these services the recipients of the charity would pray for the benefactors' souls. Though only one of the five will-makers in Mary's reign (1553-8) linked a bequest to the poor to their attendance at a church service, the connection between the good deed and the personal salvation of the testator was still present; William Peach (1557), with no immediate family to pray for him, made the connection explicit when he left the residue of his goods to the poor of Shrivenham 'that it may be for the salvation of my soul'.

The greater frequency of charitable giving was perhaps a response to the growing numbers of the poor and to the legislation on poor relief. The Injunctions of 1536 urged charity to the poor in wills as more meritorious than gifts to adorn images; the law requiring a 'common box' for donations to the poor to be set up in every parish was passed in the same year. The bad harvests and the consequent high food prices of the 1550s created widespread hardship, and in 1563 it became compulsory to contribute to the upkeep of the parish poor; those who refused could be reported to the bishop. The first reference to a gift to the poor men's box in Shrivenham was by Richard Lewis in 1562;¹³ six further such bequests were made before 1600.

Rather more common were the gifts to every poor household in one or more of the villages in the parish. These were the settled poor, worthy of help for reasons perhaps known to the benefactor. Edward Fabian left 4d. to 'everie such poore howseholder with their Wholl Howseholde as have neither plow no handiecraft to lyve on' living in the parishes of Shrivenham, Ashbury and Uffington, and 2d. to every poor person in their households, provided they attended his funeral 'in godlie contemplation and prayer'. Richard Lewis (1562) and Thomas Blagrove (1581) also made bequests to households without a plough or part of one, although without imposing conditions. Edward Prestwood (1628) and his widow, Joan (1638), left 6d. to all the poor widows of Longcot. Richard Povey (1577) and Marian Thatcher (1581) each chose six unnamed poor folk in Watchfield and Shrivenham respectively as the objects of their benevolence. A century later John Blagrove (1662) and Thomas Clarke (1700) left five shillings and one shilling respectively to each of forty poor. The former named them all, working perhaps from an overseer's list or possibly from personal knowledge.

By far the most common bequest was a lump sum to the poor of a named community. In the 1570s and 1580s this was more likely to be in kind than in cash: a quarter of barley from William Gunter in 1571, one and a half bushels of grist corn from Joanna Povey in 1589. (Bequests to lights and shrines in pre-Reformation wills were also usually in kind.) This method of giving occurred until the Civil War, although it became very infrequent, falling to one or two every decade. Increasingly popular were money gifts. These varied in amounts from a few pence to several pounds, although it is difficult to calculate exactly how much would be involved where the bequest was to every poor household. Nevertheless it is clear that some Shrivenham will-makers were aware of inflation. Between 1550 and 1580 sums given to individuals or households were either 2d. or 4d. with only one of 6d.; between 1600 and the Civil War the amount was normally 6d. with only one example of 4d. There were only two bequests after 1660 to individuals and they were of an entirely different order of magnitude from previous examples. John

Blagrave's ten pounds to forty poor would have given each of them five shillings (60d.), and Thomas Clarke left 12d. to each of his forty poor. Since in general prices rose between two- and three-fold over this period, it is clear that Shrivenham charitable giving easily kept pace.¹⁴

When the form of the bequest was a lump sum to be divided among the undifferentiated poor of the parish, comparisons of its value are easier to make. The overall picture is similar to that of the bequests to individuals, with the amount rising in the course of the period. In the late sixteenth century the most common was half a mark (6s.8d.) or a quarter of a mark (3s.4d.). In the forty years after 1600 the most common was twenty shillings, with only a handful falling below five. Again allowing for inflation, the bequests were about the same in value over the period.

In the forty years after the Restoration, i.e. 1661-1700, the number of wills with bequests to the poor dropped sharply to 23% compared with 38% in the same period before the Civil War. Yet the value of the gifts was very much greater. The most common amount was twenty shillings, with some donors leaving four, five or more times that amount. There was nothing below 2s.6d., which was quoted on only three occasions. Yet this was not a period of inflation, nor of severe poverty. When the study of the village economy is complete it may be possible to see what factors, other than philanthropy, can be found for this phenomenon.

Already it is clear that the social status of the will-makers of Shrivenham changed during the seventeenth century, a period of social polarisation in England.¹⁵ Between 1551 and 1640 there were twice as many husbandmen as yeomen; in the fifty years after 1660 yeomen outnumbered husbandmen eight to one. The proportion of gentry wills increased five-fold. These wealthier men would be paying a major share of the poor rate in the parish; many may have felt that they need not make further voluntary contributions to a system of poor relief; others may have seen continuing need in the community and had greater means to help than their predecessors.¹⁶

As the to general attitude to the poor among those with sufficient wealth to give some to the needy, there is very little evidence. However, one striking bequest in 1635, that of John Pleydall, gentleman, gives some indication. He left £12 10s. to remain as a stock 'unto the world's end' and the interest to be paid to the poor by the churchwardens on Good Friday and the feast of St. Thomas, but nothing was to be given to those known to be breakers of hedges, stealers of corn from the fields 'or otherwise vehemently suspected to be a Burglar or privy stealer of Corn out of barnes'. The juxtaposition of what may be opponents of enclosure and small scale thieves, possibly driven by poverty, raises interesting, if unanswerable questions about the social problems of the village in the difficult years before the Civil War.

By 1700 the parishioners of Shrivenham were living in a very different world from that of their forebears in the early Tudor period. The parish had come through the changes of the Reformation and the Civil War, the growth in population and the rise in prices. The evidence of the charitable impulses of the will-makers reflects some of those changes. When they could no longer leave some of their wealth for the good of their souls or the adornment of their favourite saints, some of them gave it instead to their poor neighbours, fewer to the parish church, denuded of its images, colour and light. Only John Pleydall in 1635 diverted some money to the repair of the roads. There had been a 'revolution' in giving, as well as ones in church and state.

REFERENCES

1. This is part of a larger study of the society and economy of Shrivenham between c.1520 and c.1720. An earlier version of this paper was published in *Berkshire Old and New*, 11 (1994).
2. C. Haigh, *English Reformations* (1993) is the most recent of such studies. A recent volume of *The Local Historian*, 24 (Feb. 1994), pressed for more work on this theme.
3. Parishes of St. Giles and St. Laurence (Berkshire Record Office P/96 and P/97 respectively). Those of St. Giles from 1518 to 1546 are in print as W.L. Nash (ed.), *The Churchwardens' Account Book for the Parish of St. Giles, Reading* (1881); Rev. C. Kerry used those of St. Laurence extensively in his *History of the Municipal Church of S. Laurence, Reading* (1883).
4. Unless otherwise stated these are in the B.R.O. under the general catalogue reference D/A2/... Where a date is given in brackets it refers to the year of probate.
5. E.A. Wrigley and R.S. Schofield, *The Population History of England 1541-1871* (1981), p.333. The value of wills in studying epidemics was shown by F.J. Fisher, 'Influenza and inflation in Tudor England', in *Econ. Hist. Rev.*, 2nd ser., xviii, No.1 (1965).
6. P. Slack, 'Mortality crises and epidemic disease in England 1485-1610', in C. Webster (ed.), *Health, Medicine and Mortality* (1979).
7. These totals include all gifts to lights, altars, shrines, bells, etc. in the church as well as general bequests left 'to the church' or 'to the chapel'.
8. Will of Margaret Hynton (Public Record Office 27 Porch).
9. The scribe registering the will probably abbreviated this phrase. Where it occurs in full in other Berkshire wills of this period, it reads 'my executor to do for my soul as God shall put in his mind' (will of William Spenser of Reading, 1550).
10. Will of John Blagrave (P.R.O. 38 Brudenell).
11. Will of Edward Fabian (P.R.O. 16 Crymes).
12. After the bishoprics were restored in 1600, there were just two bequests to Sarum

- by Shrivenham testators, both in 1662. For details on inflation see note 14.
13. Will of Richard Lewis, yeoman (P.R.O. 30 Streat).
 14. Figures for the price rise can be found in several calculations including the Phelps-Brown index in J. Burnett, *A History of the Cost of Living* (1969), pp.60-1.
 15. K. Wrightson, *English Society 1580-1680* (1984).
 16. We owe this suggestion to Dr. Ralph Houlbrooke.