

How the Reformation came to Bicton

Current discussions about our relationship with Europe and issues of national sovereignty have echoes of events unfolding some five hundred years ago, when German monk Martin Luther challenged the authority of the Roman Catholic Church and set off the 'Protestant Reformation'.

At that time, King Henry VIII and his queen Catherine of Aragon were trying to produce a son and heir. Henry, in particular, was disappointed with just one daughter and so his eyes wandered to other ladies of the court.... the rest is history as depicted in many TV period dramas and documentaries.

He needed to divorce Catherine, but found negotiations with the Pope so difficult that he felt obliged to break away altogether from papal authority, which was clearly wielding too much power over the member states. By making himself head of the English Church, Henry could appoint his own archbishop, Thomas Cranmer, who promptly allowed that divorce.

Ironically, Henry had once written a treatise denouncing those European reformers, for which the Pope had awarded him the title 'Defender of the Faith'! (Succeeding monarchs still use it - see 'FD' on the coins in your pocket). He, therefore, still considered his English Church as part of the 'Holy Catholic' brand, but Cranmer had other ideas, as he distributed English translations of the Bible and a new prayer book.

Like many a modern dictator 'nationalising' branches of foreign companies, Henry closed down the monasteries and also priestly 'colleges' attached to parish churches, confiscating their various assets.

In this respect Bicton became involved, since from Saxon times, St Chad's Church in Shrewsbury had been a sort of feudal overlord for much of the present parish. Later, in the thirteenth century, Lilleshall Abbey had acquired Preston Montford, while Buildwas Abbey established 'granges' (Jul 2012) at Bicton and nearby Crowmeole in Meole Brace.

Although initially granges may have been worked by members of the monastic community, by now they were just let as farms like any other landed estate, so that sitting tenants merely experienced a change in landlord.

Locally, most of such monastic land was now granted to Edward Grey, Lord Powys, who was obviously in favour with the King. Edward, his son, then passed different parts over to other landowners. At the request of the town authorities, tythes and rents once due to St Chad's College now contributed instead to the foundation of a free grammar school, hence the school's continued interest in Bicton as shown by its splendid map made in 1812.

Meanwhile, church reforms continued, especially under Henry's son Edward, but they were then cut short by his death, which allowed Mary to reconnect the Country with Rome. However, the way in

which she pursued this policy probably alienated many people, who thus welcomed the death of this 'Bloody Mary'. Fortunately, there had been no public burnings in this region.

After 1558, when Elizabeth took over, reforms continued and at one stage she actually ordered the bishop to inspect Shrewsbury's churches to make sure these were being followed. Naturally, all this upset Catholic Spain, whose King Phillip had actually once married Mary and who was now wooing Elizabeth in order to bring the Country back into the Catholic fold. All this led to the well known story of the Armada in 1588.

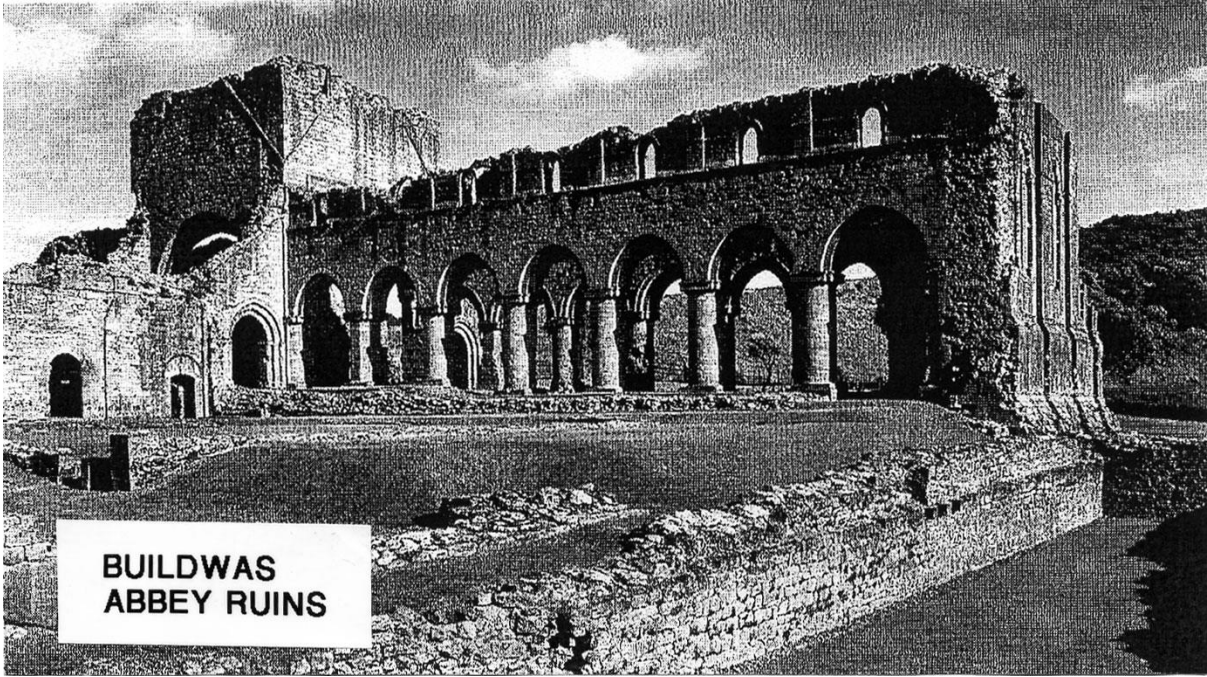
At such times, those who wished to remain Catholic posed a security risk, including Sir Francis Englefield from Berkshire. He had once been Princess Mary's secretary and rose to high office when she became queen, but now he was forced into exile.

The significance of all this to Bicton was his link to the Isle Estate, which an earlier Englefield had acquired through marriage to a Rossall. Here, principle tenant, Richard Sandford also acted as a sort of local agent, especially during his exile. Richard was therefore upset when the Queen confiscated the estate and granted it to more reliable supporters so that his descendents had then to spend the next hundred and fifty years buying it back to create a unified estate once more. They also handed down the story about the medieval chapel here which had been burnt down during the reformation to prevent it being used by Protestants.

Meanwhile, the Irish rejected the reforms and remained loyal Catholics, so that their rebellions against the English rule now became 'religious' as well as political. During such scattered warfare through the rest of her reign, Elizabeth demanded military contributions from English towns and thus in 1601 John Cob, a butcher from Montford Bridge, was sent to 'do his bit' in Ireland. All this was to go on into modern times, made more complicated by the involvement of Scots embracing more extreme versions of Protestant reforms....

The increasing availability of the English bibles now meant that they could provide the sole basis of religious thought, without the need for a hierarchy of bishops and priests. Such approaches are still represented in Bicton today. Meanwhile the national church had a middle way, offering a typically English compromise between extreme attitudes available.

Thus to sum this all up, the words of the late Helmut Kohl, post-war Chancellor of Germany, may be relevant: "If we do not know history, we cannot understand the present, nor plan for the future."



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