

Bramfield, Suffolk, putting its head above the parapet or standing and being counted.

First, a little about where Bramfield is and why I have chosen the following three episodes in the very quiet and uneventful history of the parish of St Andrew's near Halesworth.

Bramfield is a small parish about 7 miles inland from the North Sea coast at Dunwich and to the west of the A12. It lies in a valley formed by a tributary of the Blyth, the church standing above the village on a spur of land.

St Andrew's is well known for several outstanding features. It has the only separate round tower in Suffolk as well as probably one of the country's finest rood screens. This and a 15th century wall painting where a wooden cross was erected, 'the good rood', the Coke memorial by Nicholas Stone and the sad ledger slab relating the tragic life of Bridgett Applewhaite bring visitors from far and wide. The church is mentioned in Domesday and was given to Blythburgh Priory by 1160 by the lord of the manor an under tenant of the Earl of Richmond.



BRAMFIELD CHURCH, FROM THE S. E.

London, Published by the Author,
Riverside Press, 1885.

This is a drawing by Alfred Suckling from his History of Blything Hundred in 1845 and shows the church much as it was (with the exception of the 17th century Town Houses by the tower) in the 14th century.

The three episodes take place in the mid sixteenth, seventeenth and twentieth centuries all concerning clergymen who found the people of Bramfield difficult, namely Antony Wilkenson the “popish cuerat”, Bartholomew Allerton, the man from foreign parts and the Rev Cyril Barker, a square peg in a round hole

This article is not a condemnation of these clergy for they were all men of their time, but although not part of the secular structure, because of their important and powerful position in the parish or as we would view it, village society, they were (certainly in the first two cases and mistakenly in the third case) the people who most closely touched the lives of ordinary individuals.

Generally speaking Bramfield has not tangled with authority, has behaved itself and has kept a low profile, but on three occasions that have come to my notice, through the manoeuvrings of the clergy assigned here, Bramfield people have chosen to stand their ground. Would we do it today? I wonder! There have been a few signs of people voting with their feet away from their parishes but as sanctions nowadays do not feature excommunication or burning at the stake the national press does not hear of it! The first case was during the 15th/16th centuries. It shows us some of the effects of the religious changes then taking place, as were the problems arising from the sequestration of ministers in 1644, which was the foundation of the second brush with authority. The third case was really a storm in a teacup but caused an uproar locally and happened in 1939.

1. The case of John Pryme and the “popysshe cuerat”

This is a long and complicated case concerning the payment of tithes, heard at Norwich Consistory Court in 1556 on the death of John Pryme during the reign of Mary I. It is immensely detailed but it demonstrates clearly (or not very clearly) the importance the membership of a parish and the clarity with which ownership of land was connected to the wealth of a parish and the parson. I have tried many times to condense and clarify all the ramifications of the relationships and I suppose the best way might have been to make a table of events, but that would be immeasurably tedious and boring, so here goes!

Until 1465 the chapel of St Margaret in Mells had been used as a parish church after which, no more services were held there except on the *‘Evene & daye of Seynt Margarete’*. At the time, John Cowper lived in a newly built farmhouse with land on the border of Mells and Bramfield. He considered that St Margaret’s was his parish church and he paid all his dues and tithes to that church for the use of Mettingham College to whom the manor had been given in about 1376¹ After the near demise of St Margaret’s, John Cowper, along with the people of Mells went *‘abroad’* to church, mostly to Halesworth, still paying his tithes to Mettingham College. For some reason he was ordered by the master of Mettingham College to attend church and receive the sacrament in Bramfield for the four offering days; after that he could go where he chose. As well as **attending** Bramfield he should pay the vicar there 5 shillings.

On John Cowper’s death his son Robert continued the payment. By 1478² Robert had bought a tenement, Howards (The Shorts) in Bramfield, and having repaired it, moved out of his farmhouse in Mells, moved into Bramfield, **but still owned the house and land belonging to the farm in Mells.**

¹ The History & Antiquities of the Hundreds of Blything & Part of Lothingland in the Co. of Suffolk by Rev. Alfred Suckling LLB. 1847

² HB26 371.71 SROI

For 11 years Robert Cowper had tenants in the Mells house and land, and the two holdings were considered as one; Robert, now giving his goodwill to Bramfield, caused the payment to be augmented by commodities. This started the entire ensuing squabble.

Robert Cowper died in June 1506 followed by his wife the next February, and his executors sold the five-year lease of the Mells tenement to Simon Toppesfield of Halesworth. This is important to the wrangle because neither Simon nor any of his family or dependents ever came to Bramfield nor paid any money to Bramfield, but remained in Halesworth and paid tithes to Mettingham College. Simon Toppesfield renewed the lease at the end of the first 5 years when he leased the Mells farm to John Wetynge who occupied it until he died in December 1516. His executors were two men from Halesworth and notably his supervisor, **Sir Robert Harryson, vicar of Bramfield**. Until the following Michaelmas the executors took possession of the Mells tenancy and the vicar according to the account in the registers, availed himself of the tithes.

When the new tenant, John Peck had been there one year, the vicar of Bramfield demanded the same tithes of him as when he (Sir Robert Harryson) had ‘occupied’ the farm and as John Wetynge had done in the past. John Peck *‘fell at lovinge & byddyn’* with the vicar who would not settle for just the 10s. a year that John Peck had agreed to pay. At the manorial court of Mettingham College the vicar was told in no uncertain terms that he should accept the 10s a year or he would get nothing, as John Peck and his dependents would be moved to another church.

If you remember this lessee was required to attend Bramfield only four times a year but this seems to have fallen in abeyance. John Peck paid his 10s. a year for the next eight years which brings us to 1524 when John Pryme came into the farm. After he had been there a year the vicar demanded that John Pryme should pay him for the past year and after another falling out it was agreed with John Pryme that he should pay 17s. Shortly after this settlement the vicar came to his house in Mells and desired that John Pryme should not disclose to the master of Mettingham that he was paying 17s. as **the vicar was accountable to Mettingham for only 10s.**

This situation pertained for 30 years until 1555 during which time Mettingham College had been dissolved in the Reformation. By now Antony Wylkenson was rector of Thorington and vicar of Bramfield. (Nicholas Thirling is in the registers as vicar and reappears again later until his death in 1562.) Antony Wylkenson demanded of John Pryme not only that he pay his tithes in full but also that he should attend Bramfield church every Sunday and holiday (holy day) arguing that, John Pryme *‘favored not the ould Relegion and thathe was not a good Catholleke man as thene he Called it, and w^t dyvers other thyngs Conterarie to the sayd John prymes Conssience’*.

This is of course now during the re-establishment of the Catholic faith after Mary’s accession. This could explain the absence of Nicholas Thirling as vicar since he had quickly taken advantage of the

opportunity to marry in 1550 during Edward's reign and his two children were christened in Bramfield in 1551 and 1553. Perhaps he kept a low profile, coming back only after the accession of Elizabeth. Or was he persuaded to make himself scarce? This is an interesting picture of the village life for the few years of Mary's reign.

To go on with the story of John Pryme, he refused to use Bramfield church, withheld all payments and sought all the means he could to be free of '*such a popyshe cuerat*'. Sadly John died on August 31st 1556 before he could achieve this and, in front of witnesses, John Pryme's widow on the authority of the Bishop of Norwich, was ordered '*to paye such dues or duties as are belonging to the Vicar and the Clerke for ii years last past... and also to have masse and deryge and to offer up the masse peny* And hereafter to do in all thyngs A p'yshon (parishioner) to do. The dirge was held in Bramfield Church on November 10th 1556 and she also had to pay 18s. for her tithes.

The significant point here is that the mass, the dirge (prayers for the dead) and the mass penny had all been relatively recently forbidden during Edward's reign. Did the congregation of St Andrew's welcome the reintroduction of ceremonies that they had grown up with? Or had they welcomed the simpler form of worship during Edward's short reign?

The parish church had been central to the everyday life and social round of village inhabitants and although they were not privy to the political machinations at court, the consequences were profoundly fundamental to the way ordinary people led their lives. Was John Pryme was admired for the stand he had taken against the re-established Roman Catholic church?

Even though this is not a full picture of the turmoil that the reformation impinged on the laity we can get a taste of the sudden changes that had been introduced and the reluctance of some people to engage with them. I think we can assume that the popyshe Antony Wylkenson moved on at the accession of Elizabeth in 1558, and masses, dirges and mass pennies would again become things of the past.

This account is taken from The Registers of Bramfield edited by Rev. Thomas S Hill. Rector of Thorington and Vicar of Bramfield. London: Mitchell and Hughes, 140 Wardour St. London 1894

2. Scandalous Ministers and the man from foreign parts (Bartholomew Allerton).

Charles I had been on the throne since 1625 and was married to Roman Catholic Henrietta Maria; feelings were running high against 'high church practices' and steps were being taken by certain parties to stem what they saw as creeping Roman Catholicism.

In Henry VIII's reign as part of the Reformation, changes were made to the liturgy in order to bring the people into a more meaningful celebration of the Mass; this meant that the medieval altar had been replaced by a communion table placed in the body of the church and the English language prayer book throughout the land. In 1552 there had been the eradication of every vestige of catholic liturgy;

confirmation now lacked the sign of the cross on the forehead, the priests could wear a surplice but not any form of cope, and had to celebrate mass at a table standing to the north; many images had been defaced as idolatrous. The Act of Uniformity 1559 abolished the mass and by 1571, Elizabeth having been excommunicated by the pope, the English Church by law was now Protestant. The preaching of the Word of God was to be central to services

Protestantism was one thing, but Puritanism was another. For some, the church, now lacked its former authority and mystical rites and was in need of withdrawing from some of the more extreme tenets of the Reformation.

Laud, made Archbishop of Canterbury in 1633, was one of, and, wishing to exalt the place of the Sacraments, insisted on the eastward position of the communion table isolated by rails, which then became in some people's eyes an altar. People were to kneel when receiving communion, and bow at the name of Jesus. The pulpit was no longer to be the main feature of the church, puritan lectures were to be suppressed, he supported the re-issue of the Book of Sports and no hats were to be worn in church.



This picture copied from a Victorian water-colour in Bramfield Church shows the 17th century style with an imposing pulpit on the south wall and the railings ordered by Archbishop Laud. A Communion table is mentioned in the 17th century accounts and a carpet to cover it. This was presumably still in use at the time of this painting. It is possible that this painting was done as a record of the earlier church furnishings before the re-ordering of the 1870s.

In 1644, having been vicar of Bramfield for two years, Thomas Wright was sequestered from the living. No reason was given, compared with the indictments against Thomas Ambler of Wenhaston; **he** was accused among other things of frequenting alehouses in the company of '*drunkerds and disordered malignant persons... defending the book of sports... bowing before the altar table...to preach in his surplice and refusing to deliver the sacrament of the lord's supper in any place but at the rayles*'.

At this time during the rise of anti-popery, anti bishops and the beginning of the movement against the monarchy the following attitude was taken by people who wanted ecclesiastical reform, e.g. Sir Simon D'Ewes, MP for Sudbury " *It would be the greatest glory of his majesty's reign if we change the greater part of the clergy from brazen, leaden - yea, and blockish - persons, to a golden and primitive*

condition, that their authority might be warranted by their godly example."³ Perhaps Thomas Wright could have matched such a description being a follower of the High Church liturgy and ceremonial favoured by Archbishop Laud,(1573 - 1645) a close supporter of King Charles I. Both the king and Laud were opponents of the pope, but the court was practising a form of worship which seemed very like the Roman Mass when viewed from outside by people who were increasingly separated from the monarch. Perhaps he was one of the "*brazen persons*" described above or did he try to interfere with the activities of the agents sent by William Dowsing on the 9th April 1643?

Entry 238. Bramfield, April 9. 24 superstitious pictures; one crucifix, and a picture of Christ; and 12 angells on the roof; and divers Jesus's, in capital letters; and the steps to be levelled, by Sir Robert Brook. For some reason, he was ejected from his living.

For the likes of Simon D'Ewes, parish priests who sometimes, at the behest of powerful local landowners hostile to the Parliamentary cause, carried on with popish practices and failed to rebuke parishioners who practised archery, played football or engaged in other rural sports on a Sunday, were the sort to be removed. Although Thomas Wright was not accused directly of carrying out any of these practices it can be seen that it would be very easy to offend, especially if some members of the congregation were determined to see him off. Bramfield was without a parson.

Bartholomew Allerton or "the man from foreign parts"

Worship in Bramfield now has an interesting aspect. The Committee for Plundered Ministers admitted Bartholomew Allerton as vicar, filling Thomas Wright's living.

Bartholomew Allerton was not just another more acceptable minister; he had an unusual background and how he came to be 'posted' to Bramfield we shall never know. He could have been living in the area as he had married Sarah Fairfax of Rumburgh in 1639 (connected to the puritanical Yorkshire Fairfax family) but how he met her I've yet to discover. Isaac Allerton, a London merchant is listed as travelling on the Mayflower in 1620 accompanied by his family among whom Bartholomew is listed. Isaac proceeded to make several crossings of the Atlantic, supplying the Plymouth settlement with cattle and provisions and trading up and down the eastern seaboard. Bradford, one of the leaders of the Pilgrim Company states that Isaac's son Bartholomew returned to England and died there. This may have been because his father's business dealings in the Colony were failing. A chancery suit of 1657 in which Bartholomew Allerton was a defendant relates to a property in Suffolk.

The Court Roll for 1651⁴ Bartholomew Allerton had 10 acres of land and one and a half acres of meadow. This is followed by evidence that the will of a Bartholomew Allerton, clerk of *Banfield*,

³ The Suffolk Committees for Scandalous Ministers 1644 - 1646 Ed Clive Holmes p.9

⁴ HB26 371/80 SRO.I.

probably Bramfield, was proved in 1659. It is almost certain then that Bartholomew Allerton served as parish priest in Bramfield, (and surely a more suitable man could not be found than someone who had been brought up in the New World), how did he get on here?

Were the parishioners of Bramfield agreeable that their vicar should be evicted? It seems from the minutes of the Proceedings of the Committee for Plundered Ministers who had undertaken to provide for the families of such men, that Bramfield had not, by 18th June 1646, accepted Bartholomew Allerton as their minister because they were not paying him the due tithes. He made a petition to the Committee in Bury St Edmunds which would determine the ‘*difference between the minister of Bramfield and the parishioners*’. In fact two letters addressed to Sir Phillip Perceval have come to light written from Bramfield by Bartholomew mentioning that

*‘I am (thanks bee
to god, from whom wee enjoy all wee have) in peace settled
here: but how longe this will continue I know not: for there
is at present a Counsell against mee at London, which arrived
there that very day in the evening upon which I despatched
my businesse: what hee intendeth or can doe against mee, is not
for mee to imagine: yet am confident that truth will defendeth
it selfe, at the hardest, against falsehood: I deserve noe ill:’*

I have not as yet been able to determine who was causing the trouble but it could have been Ralph Rabett probably supported by Edward Nelson, an avowed adherent of the old religion who were not likely to have been a supporters of a Puritan parson.

The dispute was not settled until the death of Thomas Wright in 1647 when the Committee recommended to the Commission for the Great Seal ‘*to present to Bramfield in their gift through the death of Mr Wright from whom it was sequestered, Bartholomew Allerton to whom it was sequestered in Mr Wright’s lifetime*’.

In many cases where clergy lost their living, persons bearing a grudge trumped up the charges. Whether this was the case at St George (St Cross?) South Elmham we cannot tell, but William Evans was accused of a plethora of sins, viz ‘*drunkenness: neglecting to preach Sunday afternoons & to observe fasts: presented parishioners in court for going elsewhere for sermons when he did not preach: in the pulpit he said those who contributed to Parliament were accursed: instead of a sermon read a royal declaration “concerning the Militia, the Ships, Fortes, and Towne of Hull”*’.⁵ In spite of these

⁵ Walker Revised Matthews 1948 p.333

shortcomings he was speedily restored in 1660 as... guess what? Vicar of Bramfield and Thorington in 1662 staying for the next 34 years!

That, together with the ease with which this 'scandalous' minister, William Evans, was accepted as vicar in 1660 and then stayed for thirty years, makes me think that there were influences at work in Bramfield that were not wholly in sympathy with the aspirations of the Grand Rebellion. This pressure came almost certainly from the Rabbet and Nelson families.

3. Bramfield attends the High Court.

An interesting episode in the life of Bramfield happened in the few years prior to the Second World War. The Rev. Cyril Barker was appointed vicar in Bramfield in 1937 a short while after a new Head Teacher had arrived at the village school. He immediately turned up at the school ready to take morning assembly and generally oversee the religious life of the school as he had in his last parish. Miss Smy, by repute a lady of strong character, who was not agreeable to this, forbade him from visiting the school and he had to apologize to her in the local press, writing a very contrite letter. He found that what he had assumed was a school closely connected with the church was in fact what we know today as "Voluntary Controlled" as opposed to a "Voluntary Aided" school .

Maybe in response to this, the Rev. Barker attempted to found a Grammar School in the Vicarage. A very elaborate prospectus was published with extravagant aims of Academic Scholarships, a Cadet Corps, games, athletics and all manner of subjects not found taught in schools in the locality. It is described as a "Private Day School for boys of 10 years and upwards" at a cost of 5 guineas a term. Recruits were few and the school only lasted a few weeks being closed by the Education Authority, as the whole thing was so irregular.

The Rev Barker however was not finished yet.

Although the he seems to be remembered with wry humour by the people who were children during his brief incumbency, going about the village on his bicycle with his kettle on the back seeking the best well water, (his own well being immediately below the churchyard!), he does seem to have caused an inordinate amount of trouble in the parish. He is described by a churchwarden in the ensuing dispute with the parishioners as an upsetting influence, turning all the grown-ups out of the choir, causing congregations to dwindle alarmingly and endeavouring to be "head man in the village"

He took the Church Council to the High Court in 1939, suing them for libel over a dispute about about 12s.1½d of church collections missing from a cash box in the church. The box had contained money for the Deanery magazine plus some church collections and the vicar had used the whole amount to pay for the magazines.

The churchwardens accused the vicar of stealing the church money and told him to leave.

Having heard the facts laid out by the prosecution, including other disputes, the judge remarked that the folk of Bramfield were very touchy people! The defence counsel for the churchwardens was Quentin

Hogg (later Lord Chancellor), at the time a brilliant young lawyer, who quickly demolished the character of the Rev. Barker who then lost the case. He left the parish soon after. The judge said the case, which lasted two days, should never have been brought.⁶

In conclusion, I am certain that most parishes have stories to match these glimpses into what amount to ‘storms in a teacup’ but I’m sure that when they happened the people of Bramfield must have been very disturbed by the turmoil and public notoriety that had upset their quiet and unremarkable daily life.

⁶ from East Anglia 1939 R Douglas Brown, pub Terence Dalton Ltd. Lavenham 1980