



A Religious Census of the County of Berks in 1676.

WITH INTRODUCTION AND NOTES

By Walter Money, F.S.A., etc.

IN the Archiepiscopal Library at Lambeth Palace there is preserved a Manuscript of an unusually interesting character in connection with the history of Berkshire in the seventeenth century, which is not only one of the earliest returns of the population of the County in existence, but affords most valuable material for historical and antiquarian purposes. This document gives an account of Popish Recusants, or Roman Catholics in the Diocese of Sarum in 1676, who refused to acknowledge any authority save that of the Pope in religious matters, considering our Bishops and Clergy as mere intruding laymen. Their allegiance to the King was likewise dependant on the will of the same authority. It also contains a list of the Nonconformists, or "Separatists," as they were then called, a term now adopted for another party; together with the number of inhabitants in each parish. The balance left, after deducting the Recusants and Separatists, in the first and second columns, representing the number of Conformists or Church people within the deanery.

By way of illustrating the contents of this return it may be well to recapitulate briefly the principal legislative enactments and auxiliary statutes passed at this important era in the history of the Church.

The Corporation Act was passed in 1661—a religious test by which all corporate officers were required to have taken the Sacrament according to the rites of the Church of England within one year before their elections, and upon being elected to take the oaths of allegiance and supremacy.

In the following year, 1662, the Act of Uniformity was passed. By this Act the Book of Common Prayer, as recently amended in

Convocation and approved by the King, was received. Episcopal ordination was required of all persons holding ecclesiastical preferment, who were to declare their unfeigned "assent and consent" to the contents of the book; and they were beside (for a limited period) to formally renounce the Covenant and protest the unlawfulness of taking up arms against the King on any pretence whatever.

In 1673 was passed what is commonly called the Test Act, by which any one who refused to take the oath of Allegiance and Supremacy, and to receive the Communion according to the rites of the Church of England, was incapable of public employment, military or civil. In the interval between the passing of this Act and the Parliamentary Test, which was imposed in 1678, Seth Ward, Bishop of Sarum, which diocese until late years included Berkshire, in order to put in force the various penal laws enacted against the Nonconformist and Popish Recusants, issued orders to the official local authorities throughout the diocese to prepare a careful return of all the Popish Recusants, Separatists, and Conformists in their several parishes, together with the whole population, to be obtained by properly qualified persons by means of a house-to-house visitation.

It is to this edict that we are indebted for the following and other returns from the various parishes then comprised within the Archdeaconry of Berks,—the other deaneries beside that of Newbury, included in the MS., are Reading, Abingdon, and Wallingford, which are of equal interest in throwing a new light on a period very inadequately represented in our local histories.

LAMBETH MS. 639.

An Account of the number and proportions of the Popish Recusants, obstinate Separatists, and Conformist Inhabitants of Berkshire, under the Jurisdiction immediate of the Bishop of Sarum.

By SETH WARD (BISHOP OF SALISBURY) 1676 (fol. 252).

ARCHDEACONRY OF BERKS.

DEANERY OF NEWBURY.

Parish.	Minister.	Recusants.	Separatists.	Inhabitants.
V. Aldworth	Sam Woodward.....	10	06	172
R. Avington	Ed. Sylvester.....	00	01	019
R. Boxford.....	James Anderton ...	00	01	097

DEANERY OF NEWBURY— <i>continued.</i>		Recusants.	Separatists.	Inhabitants.
Parish.	Minister.			
V. Beedon	Alex. Kershaw	00	03	090
V. Brimpton	Tho. Worrall.....	04	04	143
R. Bright Walton	Wm. Howse (Cur.)	00	06	108
V. Bucklebury	Tho. Coward.....	07	20	400
R. Catmer	John Head	00	00	012
V. Chaddleworth	John Head	00	02	110
V. Chieveley	Ed. Sylvester.....	01	02	507
V. Compton	Richard Hazle	01	02	083
R. Enborne	Wm. Baron	02	02	133
R. Farnborow	Barth. Price	00	00	080
R. Ffrilsham	Wm. Elkes.....	00	01	072
V. East Garsdon	Tho. Elsing	00	08	160
R. Hamstead Marshall ...	Wm. Baron	00	01	154
V. Hampstead Norris.....	Arthur Abbott	21	61	283
R. East Ildesley.....	Robt. Barnes.....	06	12	130
R. West Ildesley	Edw. Ffalham	00	00	085
R. Inkpen	Fran. Brickendon ...	00	00	200
R. Kintbury	Bernard Hoareford..	00	00	354
V. Lamborne.....	Tho. Crosby	25	27	1186
R. Newbury	John Hinton	00	40	3000
R. Peasemore.....	Brian Alder	00	00	1150
R. Shefford Magna	Joseph Nixon	00	09	0125
R. Shefford Parva	Tho. Saunders.....	00	00	036
R. Shaw	Henry Pierce.....	06	01	0238
V. Speen.....	Joseph Guy.....	00	05	0885
R. Stanford Dingley.....	Robt. Howson	00	00	0110
V. Thacham	Bart. Springbatt.....	05	18	0865
V. Wasing	Thos. Worrall.....	03	00	0054
R. Welford	Dr. ffran Munday ...	00	02	0376
R. West Woodhay.....	Jo. Osborne	00	00	0120
R. Yattendon.....	Ffran. Sayer	00	02	0104

There are a few points in this return of which we must speak a little more in detail. One of the most noticeable facts in these lists is the small number of "Separatists," or Nonconformists, in the large parish of Newbury—only 40 out of a population of 3,000, and this being the head-quarters of so many dissenting congrega-

tions. It will also be observed that there was not one Roman Catholic in the town, and in the following villages there were neither any member of this Church nor "Separatists":—Catmer, Farnborough, West Ilsley, Inkpen, Kintbury, Peasemore, Little Shefford, Standford Dingley and West Woodhay. Bucklebury, on the other hand, had 20 "Separatists," half as many as Newbury, and 7 Recusants, no doubt members of the Winchcombe family. Hampstead Norris, again, had 21 Roman Catholics, and the large number of 61 "Separatists" out of a population of 283, or a third more than Newbury. The large number of "Separatists" in the parish of Hampstead Norris may be accounted for by the prevalence of Quakerism in the neighbourhood in the 17th century. So rapid was its spread in these parts that most of the farmers professed themselves converts, and in a secluded wood, near Oare Common, they erected a conventicle, where the founder of Quakerism, George Fox, frequently preached. This interesting old chapel was demolished a few years ago. The Recusants, or Romanists, in this parish principally consisted of the Braybrooke and Dancastle families with their dependants. At Lamborne there were 25 Roman Catholics and 27 "Separatists," while Speen had only 5 Nonconformists, and Thatcham 18.

The census, too, of the population reveals some curious statistics; for instance, Aldworth has only increased 94 in 220 years, and Chieveley has only just doubled its population in the same period. Farnborough has exactly followed suit, and Lamborne very nearly the same, whilst Hampstead Norris has increased from 283 to 1,240. Thatcham has done a little better, going up from 865 to 2,900, but West Woodhay has actually about 4 less inhabitants in 1895 than in 1676. But the most surprising fact of all is the population of the now little village of Peasemore in 1676, which then had 1,150 inhabitants against 270 of the present day. This remarkable diminution in the population can, in a great measure, be accounted for by the great fire which occurred there on 27th July, 1736, and destroyed the greater part of the village, there being a high wind blowing at the time. The damage was estimated at several thousand pounds, and "Briefs" were granted on the certificate of two Justices of the Peace, to enable the poor cottagers, through the parish officers, to ask for subscriptions from house to house within the county, but not a licence to the individual sufferers, they being so numerous.

(To be continued.)