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## Papists and Non-jurors in the Isle of Ely, 1559–1745

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*The Cambridgeshire Fens were one of the most strongly Protestant areas of early modern England, yet the incarceration of Catholic priests at Wisbech Castle brought into being a network of Catholic sympathisers in the area that allowed both priests and converts to escape. A small number of men from the Isle of Ely became (or tried to become) Catholic priests in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, and there is strong evidence that some families, such as the Prances of March, were at least crypto-Catholic in sympathy. In the eighteenth century Catholics and Jacobite Non-jurors owned extensive lands in the Fens, and while some were absentee landlords, others such as Simon Hake and John Pitchford were residents. In the light of the evidence, this article argues that the perception that Catholicism was virtually non-existent in the Isle of Ely is in need of reappraisal.*

In 1974 Margaret Spufford described sixteenth-century Cambridgeshire as ‘one of the least papistically inclined [counties] in the country’ (Spufford 1974, 270). On the face of it, her assessment seems an accurate one, especially for the northern part of the county (see the map in Figure 1). North of Cambridge there were no gentry families who held on to the Catholic faith, as the Huddlestones of Sawston, the Parises of Linton and the Barnes and Fryer families of Harlton did in the south of the county. Evidence for a continuous Catholic community in the Isle of Ely after the Reformation is elusive and ambiguous. Paradoxically, however, the Isle of Ely was at the centre of post-Reformation English Catholicism. Between 1580 and 1618, Wisbech Castle was used for the internment of captured priests and became a sort of ‘college’ of clergy (Pugh 1953, 4: 252–53). Inevitably, the prisoners came into contact with local people and converted some of them, creating a network of Catholic sympathisers in the Fens. This article is not about Catholics from elsewhere who were incarcerated at Wisbech and Ely, but rather about local people who became Catholics. As late as the 1670s, there were fears that ‘concealed papists’ existed in the area. These fears may not have been far off the mark, for there is some evidence of Catholics in the Isle as late as the eighteenth century.

Recusants (those who refused to attend services at the parish church) were first presented before the courts at the autumn assizes of 1559, since attendance at English services according to the Prayer Book be-

came compulsory in June of that year. Records of recusants in the Isle of Ely from this early period do not survive, but it seems unlikely that there were many of them. The strong spiritual and temporal authority exerted over the area by the Bishop of Ely made the Isle of Ely an unfriendly environment for recusants, in contrast to neighbouring Norfolk and Suffolk, where gentry recusancy was rife in the 1560s and ‘70s. Norfolk and Suffolk were a patchwork of ecclesiastical and secular jurisdictions, allowing recusants to evade the rigours of the law. A prelate of pronounced reformed views, Richard Cox, presided over Ely between 1559 and 1581 and ruled both his temporal jurisdiction and his diocese with a firm hand. His 1564 Visitation revealed only four cases of Catholic practice, none of them in the Isle of Ely (Wenig 2002, 162).

On the other hand, there is some evidence that Catholic practices lingered in the Isle of Ely, enjoying a degree of toleration into the 1560s. Catholic ‘survivalism’ was more than out-and-out recusancy, and many so-called ‘church papists’ attended church whilst clinging on to Catholic ideas. Churches also retained the trappings of Catholic worship, in case another change of monarch meant a change of religion. St Mary’s church in Ely did not dispose of its last Catholic vestments, items that had been outlawed by the Prayer Book since 1559, until 1570. An inventory of 16 May 1570 by the churchwardens included an ‘Auter clothe of blue velvett’, a ‘vestment of Red vellvet’ and ‘ij other vestements’ (probably chasubles) in addition to the surplices and copes permitted by law. Furthermore, the church owned ‘j stremar and iiij banarclothes’ that were disposed of at the same time as the vestments (Holmes n.d., 1). These would also have been survivals of the Marian period, since streamers and banners were typically carried during processions for Corpus Christi and other feast days, which had no place in the reformed Elizabethan church.

The earliest records of recusants for the Diocese of Ely, in 1577, reveal just one offender in the parish of Elm, close to the border with Norfolk. Francis Bastard seems to have been a recent incomer:

*Item, there ys one ffrancys Bastard late of Ellme within the Isle of Elye in the countye of Cambrydge, gentlemane, who refuseth to come to dyvine service, and ys in prysone in Cambrydge*

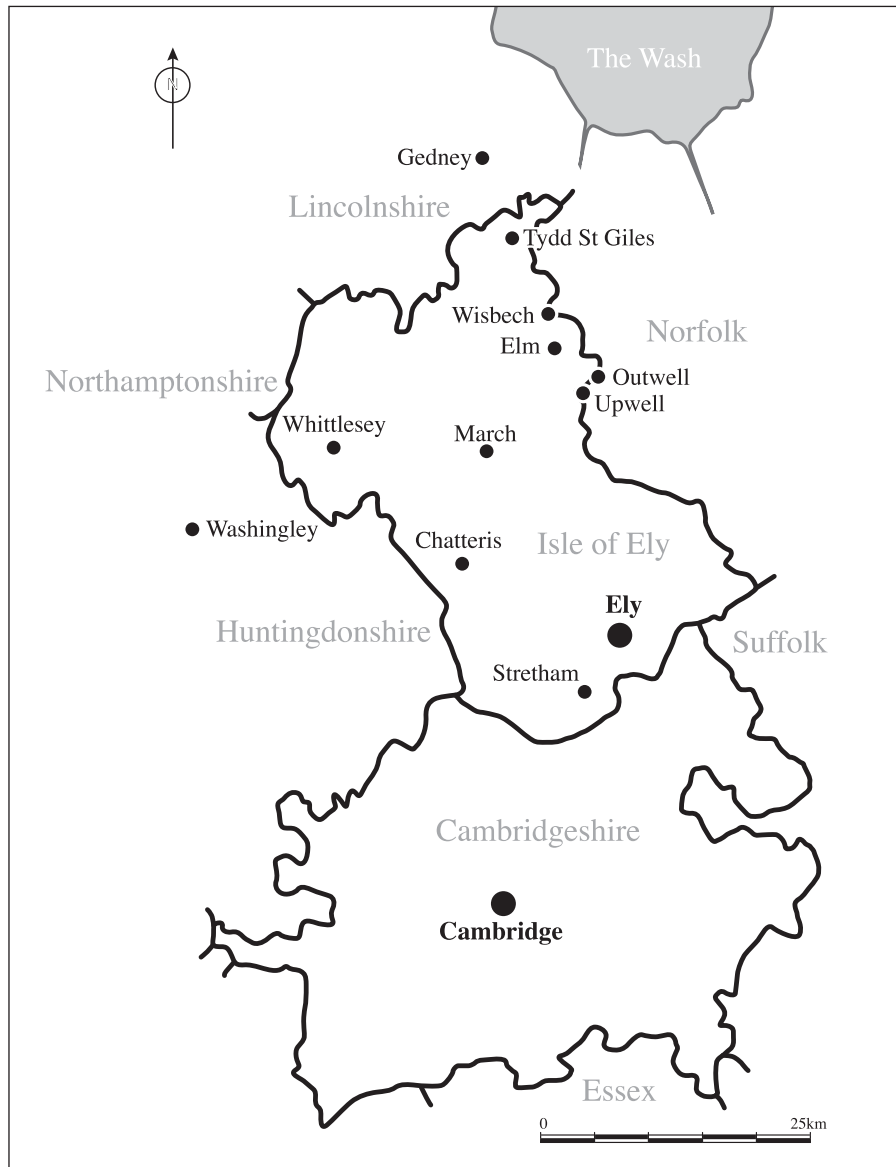


Figure 1. Places mentioned in the text.

*for his wilfull standinge in his errors, committed by me and twoe others her Maiesties Commissioners for ecclesiasticall causes. I can learne noe certeintye of his lands or goods, for that he ys but latelye cumme out of Northffolk into theyse parties, where he remained as a sojourner [i.e. visitor]. He hathe bene an Attorney in lawe ('Diocesan Returns of Recusants for England and Wales, 1577' 1921, 80).*

Bastard was clearly a Norfolk recusant who happened to have strayed over the border; his son Robert (1571–1633) would later become a missionary priest (Anstruther 1969, 1:26). By 1582, all of the native recusants in Cambridgeshire were concentrated in parishes south of Cambridge, and so it would remain.

#### Wisbech and Ely as prisons for Catholics

It was precisely because the Diocese of Ely had a rep-

utation for conformity, and because it contained some particularly inaccessible locations, that Elizabeth's government began importing papists in significant numbers. The internment of Catholic priests and bishops at Wisbech Castle, one of the properties of the Bishop of Ely, was first suggested by Lord North in 1572 but did not begin until 1580. The first Catholic prisoner in the Isle of Ely was John Feckenham, the last Abbot of Westminster, who was an unwilling house guest of Bishop Cox in his Palace at Ely between 1577 and 1579 (British Library, Lansdowne MS 27, fol. 16). From 1581 surviving senior clergy of the Marian era were joined at Wisbech by new 'seminary priests' and Jesuits trained abroad at the English seminaries and colleges in France at Rheims and Douai, as well as Rome and Valladolid in Spain.

In 1598, Wisbech became the centre of an internal controversy within the Catholic community

(known as the 'Wisbech Stirs') over the appointment of an 'Archpriest' with authority over the seminary priests, and the government took advantage of these divisions by authorising the printing of works by the Archpriest's opponents. It was in the interests of Catholics to exaggerate the hardships suffered by the priests interned at Wisbech, and gaining an accurate picture of what life was like in the Castle is difficult for this reason. However, like all sixteenth-century prisons, the inmates got the treatment they paid for, and their prison experience was partly negotiated with the gaolers, who ran the Castle as a private concern. No historian has compiled a complete list of the priests confined at Wisbech, but 42 priests listed in Godfrey Anstruther's *Seminary Priests* were incarcerated there. A list prepared for the Privy Council in 1595 featured 21 recusant gentlemen, one of whom brought his wife with him, and four servants (*Acts of the Privy Council*, 25:418). Captured Jesuits were sent to the Castle as well, and it is therefore likely that the highest number of prisoners at any one time was close to a hundred.

Wisbech was not the only prison for recusants in the Isle of Ely, and in 1588 a new prison was set aside for recusant gentlemen. Between July 1588 and the release of the last three prisoners on 3 December 1597, the empty Bishop's Palace at Ely played host to a total of 32 distinguished recusant laymen, including Sir Thomas Tresham, Sir William Catesby, Sir John Gage and Sir John Arundel. The author has given a detailed account of the Ely prisoners elsewhere (Young 2014, 195–218). The unusual environment of the Fens seems to have made a strong impression on foreign observers, who regarded the confinement of prisoners at Wisbech and Ely as a particularly horrible punishment. In 1667 the Italian Jesuit Daniello Bartoli (1608–85) vividly described

*Wisbech Castle, famous, and rightly so, for the horrible cells there, and for the blessed company of so many priests and noble confessors, commanded to rot in such marshy airs and in such a smelly (puzzolente), watery (lacunoso) country. For this Wisbech is a castle as if on a headland of the Isle of Ely (an island in the middle of the land, since the waters of various rivers enclose the County of Cambridge from the north, between Lincoln and Norfolk). And that land is so flat, that all the water of many rivers that run into it does not escape, but turning back without escaping, they stagnate and make marshes out of a great space in the interior. And there is added a narrow passage of sea, which puts and throws also much water inside, and thus fills the lowest parts with water retained from its first entrance, which there lies dead. The prisons are a very tough ruin, on a foundation of rock, and a palace [i.e. Ely] near to Wisbech, a thing most old, and for a long time abandoned and forgotten (Bartoli 1667, 60).*

It is possible that that, as Bartoli suggested, the Isle of Ely was chosen for its unwholesome climate, in the hope that the priests might die. However, the government was looking for somewhere remote and inaccessible, in a part of the country with no history of rebellion against the crown. However, the confinement of so many trained and highly-skilled

controversialists in one place had the inevitable consequence that some inhabitants of Wisbech were converted by the priests imprisoned there. In 1594, a paper detailing 'the ill Estate and Order of the Jesuits and Seminary Priests, &c. in the Prison of Wisbich Castle' bemoaned the fact that the priests

*... have compounded with their Keeper Gray, for their Diet and all Provision, and necessary entertaining Servants, as if they were in a free College, and no prison ... Great Resort and daily is there to them of Gentlemen, Gentlewomen, and of other People; who use to dine and sup with them, walk with them in the Castle Yard; confer with them in their Chambers ... And other Priests resort unto them. As Father Scot the Seminary Priest, did Anno 91 ... And they want no Money. The Townsmen and Women be so feasted and entertained, as they are far won to be theirs in Devotion, and further Disallegiance: The Town and Country seated over strongly for such People of Danger ... The Alms and Devotions they give at the Gate makes the Poor to esteem them for good and godly Men, and others to affect them ... Bakers, Brewers, Chandlers, Shoemakers, Taylors and their Wives resort to them for Payment of Money. And thereby won to Popery ... They keep eight poor Townsborn Children: and two Strangers of good Wit and Choice, besides their Cooks; and those Recusants ... They be all young and lusty people, disposed to Mirth and Viciousness with Women, known to attempt them, as well with Deeds as Words, with enchanted Almonds; as the Keeper's Maiden, and his two Daughters have been in whorish Manner: One of them run from thence, and hath had Children from her Husband; and overthrown in Popery, of a modest, fair young Wife (Strype 1738, 4:195).*

It is clear from this account that the economic activity generated by the priests confined at Wisbech was bringing them into regular contact with local people. This author seems to have been particularly concerned about the prisoners' contact with women, and his accusations of impropriety against the priests may mask his real concern that women were more susceptible to conversion. The keeper's daughter, 'overthrown in Popery', was Ursula Gray, daughter of Thomas Gray, whose case was recorded by the Jesuit William Weston (c. 1550–1615) in his autobiography (Weston 1955, 169–72).

Ursula was the wife of a prominent Puritan in the town, and came to the prison because her husband wanted to engage in debate with the priests. Over a long period, Ursula was convinced by the Catholic arguments, and eventually refused to go to church. Her father denied her the services of a midwife for her pregnancy and she miscarried, and when she refused to go to church for a major festival her father attacked her with a dagger. Ursula managed to escape unharmed, and 'an honourable and wealthy woman having pity on her took her in for the night'. Weston does not specify whether this woman was a Catholic, but later, 'with the help of Catholics, it was arranged for her to ride off on horseback as quickly as possible to a certain Catholic house'. This is the first indication that some sort of network of Catholics existed in the Fens to facilitate the escape of priests and others.

The priests in the Castle were allowed servants if they could afford them, and at least two of the boys who served in this role were converted. One of them, William Arton, eventually became a priest. Arton had a companion (whom Weston does not name) and at an unknown date both boys were put in the stocks in Wisbech marketplace by Thomas Gray when they refused to attend church. The other boy might have been William Dowlton, the 'poor boy of Wisbech' examined before the Mayor of Rye in June 1595 (Weston 1955, 242–44). The boys escaped from the stocks, and Arton got away, but Dowlton was recaptured and imprisoned. Phillip Caraman thought that he was imprisoned in the Bishop's Palace with the recusant gentlemen (Weston 1955, 159), but there is no evidence of this and it seems highly unlikely that a lowborn boy would have been incarcerated with recusant gentlemen.

Weston did not specify the charge against Dowlton, but he was probably presented for recusancy at the Ely Quarter Sessions in 1592 or 1593, in which case he would have been imprisoned in the town gaol. The Ely magistrates asked the boy why he was a Catholic, since he had never been to mass, and Dowlton replied that he knew that the Catholic church was the true church because of its great antiquity; the Protestant church, by contrast, was an upstart heresy. To prove his point he produced a page torn out of Holinshed's *Chronicles*, which described St Augustine's arrival in England in 597 accompanied by Catholic ceremonies (Weston 1955, 152–53). According to Weston, the magistrates were unsure how to reply to this, since Holinshed was himself a Protestant author. Weston also claimed that, because the assizes were sometimes held in Wisbech Castle itself, he and some of the other priests managed to convert two men and a woman who were condemned to death. The prisoners then publicly proclaimed their faith from the scaffold and were treated sympathetically by the crowd (Weston 1955, 154–56).

Another individual who was suspected of having been converted at Wisbech was Edward Hall, a servant of the gaoler William Medeley. On 21 December 1595 John Foxley, a local shoemaker, reported an alehouse conversation in which the butcher William Wagg asked Hall 'what all the babbling and great noise which the Papists made at dinner-time, and which he often heard as he passed by, meant'. According to Foxley, Hall replied that 'it was foolish to call it babbling, for it was all as good doctrine as had ever been read or was preached to us, it being in Latin the same as we had in English, and which he would justify'. Foxley also claimed he heard the word 'mutiny' mentioned. The next day Wagg was examined and claimed that Hall said the priests were reading the Bible in Latin, 'and that there was as good matter in it as we had either read, taught, or preached unto us, and it deserved a better term' (*Calendar of State Papers, Domestic Series, 1595–1597*, 142). The Hall affair rapidly escalated, and on 26 December several Privy Councillors issued a warrant for a pursuivant to be sent to apprehend Hall and bring him to

London (*Acts of the Privy Council*, 25:131). Hall was imprisoned in the Gatehouse at Westminster and the Council subsequently wrote to the Attorney General, informing him that Hall 'uttered certain speeches purporting his foreknowledge of som mischeivous and dangerous event' (*Acts of the Privy Council*, 25:250). The attention paid to an apparently trivial alehouse conversation at the highest levels of government testifies to the government's nervousness about the conversion of the local population by the priests.

The existence of a local network supporting the priests was confirmed in 1595 when an open warrant was issued, signed by the Archbishop of Canterbury, for the apprehension of 'suche persons ... as do repaire or give releif unto such preistes as are in prison, and especiallye to suche as remaine in the Castle of Wisbitch'. These included 'John Fyndiam of Well neere Wisbitch, one Atkins of the saide towne and one White thereabouts inhabitinge, and one Richard Nicholson, a collectour for Priestes and Recusantes' (*Acts of the Privy Council*, 25:418). The wording of the warrant suggests that White and Nicholson may have moved to Wisbech to help the priests, whereas Fyndiam and Atkins were locals. Ironically, Fyndiam and Atkins became prisoners in the very prison where they had been helping priests, along with another man who may have been local, Roger Pinchbeck of Newton, a village north of Wisbech on the border with Lincolnshire (*Acts of the Privy Council*, 25:418). As gentlemen, Fyndiam and Atkins were unusual, and most sympathisers with the priests at Wisbech were ordinary people.

The Council was evidently unsuccessful in suppressing the network of assistance, and in 1596 the secular priest Francis Tilletson persuaded a Catholic laundress, Mrs Ellis, to arrange his escape with the help of her husband. Tilletson was described by his gaoler, William Medeley, as 'A man of small learning or rather none at all nor of any other respect among the rest within the castle', and his reasons for escaping may have been rather less noble than those of his fellow prisoners: he was in debt to several citizens of Wisbech to the tune of £10 12d. Tilletson came over the Castle wall at midnight on 28 February 1596, where he was met by Mr Ellis, who rowed him as far as Willingham. Tilletson then walked to Rampton where another recusant called Mrs Alcock gave him two horses; he then rode to Bedford where he was recaptured (Anstruther 1969, 1:359–60).

Relatives of a former detainee were involved in another incident which occurred on 7 March 1599. According to Thomas Pigge (servant to Ralph Crow of Elderby) a son of the recusant William Price of Washingley was responsible for sending riders to carry off two of six priests who had escaped from Wisbech. Washingley was on the far northwest fringe of Huntingdonshire, southwest of Peterborough. It was within riding distance of Wisbech but was also close to the recusant heartland of Northamptonshire. William Price had been imprisoned at Ely in 1590 (Young 2014, 216), Wisbech in 1595 and was in prison in Huntingdon at the time of the rescue. The witness-

es, including the man from whom the riders bought their horses, were to inspect Price's sons and confirm whether the riders were indeed the suspects the witnesses saw (*Acts of the Privy Council*, 29:279–81). The Privy Council subsequently ordered the 'Overseers for Wisbeche Castle' to apprehend Price's son, as well as William Price himself, and send them to London. By this time it was clear that one of Price's sons had provided horses for all six priests (*Acts of the Privy Council*, 29:196).

Whilst some who facilitated the escapes of priests from Wisbech and helped them in other ways were committed recusants (such as Price), it is likely that others, like Hall and Ellis, were crypto-Catholics, or simply local people who felt sympathy for the priests. Some may even have been acting for financial gain. Either way, a support network for fugitive priests involving local people was an ongoing problem for the government, and the harsh treatment of Edward Hall for sedition may have been intended to nip sympathy in the bud in Wisbech. However, it also draws attention to a very real fear on the part of the government that the priests were converting locals. Although hardly an unbiased witness, Weston claimed that when news of the prisoners' scaffold profession of faith reached the Privy Council, 'a severe reprimand was sent to the keeper of the prison for allowing such an incident to occur in public' (Weston 1955, 156).

### Priests from the Isle of Ely

Boys and young men who came into contact with priests in Wisbech Castle represented a particular problem, because the priests could not only convert them but also encourage them to train for the priesthood themselves. A list survives of thirteen boys who were servants to the priests at Wisbech in the 1590s (British Library, Harley MS 6998, fol. 226), but many more were sent to the Castle to be instructed by the priests. William Arton was the earliest native of the Isle of Ely to train for the Catholic priesthood after the Reformation. He was probably one of the 'eight poor Townsborn Children' mentioned in the document of 1594, and certainly one of the two put in the stocks by Thomas Gray. When Arton was admitted to the English College at Valladolid on 30 October 1598, at the age of 22, he gave a brief description of his upbringing. He was born of 'honest parents' (*honestis parentibus*), and he declared that 'he lived for five years in the unity of the church before he was led into the way of truth by the priests who were detained in Wisbech Castle, for he was born here and was educated there up to that time' (Henson 1930, 50).

The fact that Arton was a Catholic for five years before he was educated by the priests suggests that his parents may have converted. Arton studied grammar (in other words the Latin language) for three years at the English colleges at St Omer in Flanders and Seville in Spain before he went to the English College at Valladolid. He left the college on account of illness in May 1600 and returned home to England, where he

was imprisoned. Arton left for the Continent again, this time for Douai in Flanders, where he resumed his training at the English College and was ordained on 28 September 1603. Arton was sent to England and arrived in September 1604, but he was arrested again and imprisoned, ironically, in his home town of Wisbech. In July 1606 Arton was banished from England and returned to Douai, but he came back to England in August 1607 and was in South Wales in 1610 (Anstruther 1975, 2:9).

William Arton was the first man from the Isle of Ely to train for the priesthood, but the first man from the area to be ordained was William Taylor, born in the parish of Holy Trinity, Ely on 1 November 1576 or 1577. He was the son of a Lincolnshire man, Rombald Taylor, and Anne Adam whose family held the copyhold of the old abbey vineyards from the Bishop of Ely (*An Indexed Transcription of the Parish Registers of Ely Holy Trinity* 2005, 1:20). In 1596 his uncle Phillip Adam left him ten shillings in his will (Public Record Office 11/91/144). Taylor was educated at Lincoln Grammar School and Magdalen College, Oxford and then entered the service of the Earl of Worcester. He left England in 1600 and enrolled at the English College, Rome on 24 October 1600, being ordained priest on 6 April 1602 (Kelly 1940, 120–21; Kenny 1962, 2:80–84). However, Taylor was dissatisfied with the life of a secular priest and left Rome, heading to the Benedictine monastery of San Giorgio Maggiore in Venice. Here he was professed on 28 October 1603 and took the religious name Maurus (Dolan 1900, 95). Taylor returned to England in 1607 and was one of the Cassinese Benedictines who arranged for an aged monk of Westminster Abbey, Sigebert Buckley, to pass the English monastic tradition on to two young monks. Taylor was touted as a potential candidate for a bishopric in the 1630s (Questier 1995, 132–33), but ended his life in Venice (some time after 1653) as superior of the few remaining English Cassinese Benedictines (Lunn 1976, 69). Throughout his life he used the epithet *Eliensis* ('of Ely') to commemorate the place of his birth.

One pupil of the Ely Grammar School ended his life as a priest. This was Christopher Walpole, the sixth son of Christopher Walpole of Docking in Norfolk, who was baptized on 23 October 1568. Christopher's father owned estates in the parishes of Docking, Anmer and Dersingham. He sent Christopher to study at Ely under James Speghte, and he went on to matriculate at Gonville and Caius College, Cambridge on 8 December 1587. By this time Christopher's elder brothers Henry and Michael had already left England to train as Jesuits; Christopher may have travelled to Coldham Hall in Suffolk in 1590–91 to hear the preaching of the charismatic Jesuit John Gerard, who converted many young East Anglian men at this time. He was certainly converted by Gerard, and left England for Spain in 1592. Meanwhile his brother, Henry Walpole, returned to England in 1593 as a Jesuit priest. Henry was captured, executed and later canonised as a saint in 1970. Christopher never followed his brothers to England,

and died at the English College in Valladolid in 1606 'to the grief of all, and to the loss of his country'. At the time, Christopher was confessor and 'spiritual father' of the College (Foley 1881, 6:188).

Thomas Green (alias Haberley) of Outwell, a village partly in the Isle of Ely and partly in Norfolk (but part of the Diocese of Ely), entered the English College at Valladolid in Spain on 27 August 1618. Thomas was born in around 1600, the son of Anthony and Mary Green, recorded as recusants in 1601, and his brother may have been the John Green who arrived to train as a priest in Seville in September 1616. In 1617 Thomas visited his uncle Thomas Haberley, also a priest, who was chaplain to a *béguinage* (semi-monastic community of consecrated women) in Antwerp, before going on to Spain. Thomas Green was in East Anglia 1643–49 and served as Archdeacon of Norfolk. He died in 1657 (Anstruther 1975, 2:138). Another man from Outwell, Richard Fincham (alias Barret), also became a priest. Richard was born in 1635, the son of John Fincham and Mary Vanow, who married at Fordham in 1627, and may have been recusants (it is possible that the Finchams of Outwell and Fyndiams of Well were one and the same). Fincham went initially to St Omer and then to the English College in Rome, which he entered on 24 September 1655. Fincham was ordained priest on 21 February 1660 and sent to England in April 1662. He became a missionary priest in Yorkshire, and was arrested during the Popish Plot scare. However, he was released when his brother, the Cambridgeshire JP John Fincham, swore that he knew Richard was not a priest. Fincham took refuge in Paris but returned to England in the reign of James II, when he was living in London (Anstruther 1977, 3:58–59).

One man who tried unsuccessfully to train for the priesthood was Jeremy Hackluyt, the son of the vicar of Stretham, Henry Hackluyt, and his wife Susannah Towers. On 8 July 1666 Hackluyt, who was then 24 years old, applied for entry to the English College at Rome. He had studied for seven years at Westminster School, and then at Cambridge, and had two sisters and one brother. On the death of his parents he had inherited property worth eight guineas (*aureis*) a year. He was converted by George Leyburn, President of the English College at Douai, and confirmed at Liege. Hackluyt was obliged to admit that there was an obstacle to his ordination, because he had served in the navy. Although canonists were divided on the subject, one opinion held that the shedding of blood was an impediment to ordination (Duggan 2013, 95, 142), and this may have been why Hackluyt was never admitted to the College.

Hackluyt declared that 'a year ago, with a commission from the King's Majesty, in a certain ship, the first of the fleet, commanded to go against the Dutch, I fired many cannonballs (*plurimas explosi bombardas*), which were thrown amongst the ships, and perhaps several men were killed, or something similar' (Kenny 1962, 2:608–9). It seems likely that Hackluyt was describing the destruction of the Dutch ship *Eendracht* in the Second Anglo-Dutch War. On 13 June 1665 the

English fleet, commanded by James, Duke of York, engaged the Dutch just off Lowestoft on the Suffolk coast. James' flagship was the *Royal Charles*, commanded by James Penn, which engaged *Eendracht* in a furious duel. The *Royal Charles*, armed with 80 guns, had an advantage over the 74-gun *Eendracht*, but the Dutch gunners still managed to kill three courtiers standing close to James with chain shot. However, at around three o'clock in the afternoon a shot from the *Royal Charles* hit *Eendracht's* powder room and the Dutch ship exploded, killing all but five of its crew of 409. This was the decisive event of the battle that turned it in England's favour (Burney 1807, 118–19).

The most prolific producers of vocations to the priesthood and the religious life in the Isle of Ely were the Prance family, who lived next to the common called the Mill Close, in the hamlet of Eastwood in the parish of March. Simon Prance and Anne Shepherd were married at March on 20 February 1626 and had at least five children. Simon Prance was probably a crypto-Catholic, but he was never presented as a recusant. The eldest son, Thomas Prance (alias Shepherd or Coldham) was converted to Catholicism by the priests at Wisbech, and entered the English College at Valladolid in 1649. He was ordained at Palencia in March 1655 (Henson 1930, 165). Thomas returned to England shortly thereafter, and was then Professor of Divinity at the University of Douai 1663–67. In 1669 Thomas Prance returned to England and he was made Vicar General of Warwickshire in 1672; in 1684 he was in Lincolnshire, and was Vicar General of Lincolnshire and Derbyshire in 1686 (Anstruther 1975, 2:254). Thomas's brother Charles Prance (b. 1646) was also a priest, and two of his sisters became nuns at Lisbon and Rouen. Charles Prance (alias Shepherd or Townsend) entered the English College at Douai to learn grammar in 1663, and took the missionary oath (to return and attempt the conversion of England) as Charles Shepherd on 25 March 1666 (Anstruther 1977, 3:175).

The youngest Prance brother, Miles, was apprenticed to a goldsmith in London. He rose to become a servant-in-ordinary to Catherine of Braganza, Charles II's Portuguese Queen, providing ornaments for the Queen's private Catholic chapel at Somerset House. Prance was thus a very public Catholic, living in Prince's Street, Covent Garden with his wife and family. In October 1678 the magistrate Sir Edmund Berry Godfrey was found run through with a sword on Primrose Hill, and Prance was one of those who was investigated. His lodger claimed that Prance had been absent at the time of the murder, and William Bedloe claimed he had seen Prance with the body of Sir Edmund, who was supposed to have been murdered at Somerset House and then moved. Prance was confined in Newgate and broke under the pressure of interrogation, fabricating a story of murderous conspiracy by Catholic priests connected to the Queen's chapel.

Miles Prance was manipulated by Titus Oates, the inventor of the 'Popish Plot', which took its inspiration from Prance's original perjury. He was rewarded

for disclosing Sir Edmund's murderers, and wrote two tracts in defence of his accusations. In 1682, after Oates's accusations had been exposed, Prance recanted in print, but too late to save him from retribution in the reign of the Catholic James II. On 15 June 1686 he was convicted of perjury, fined £100 and sentenced to be pilloried and whipped. Prance stood in the pillory, but his flogging was remitted at the intervention of the Queen Dowager, who insisted that Prance had returned to the Catholic faith and showed repentance. After the Revolution of 1688, Prance escaped to the Continent (Marshall 2004, 45:208–9).

Because Prance came from the Isle of Ely his accusations were especially noted there. On 23 September 1679 the minister of Crowland in Lincolnshire, Mr Perne, arrived at the Wisbech Assizes and announced that the Popish Plot had been exposed as a Presbyterian plot. Some of the jury received this news with great enthusiasm:

*One Mr. Scotrell, a Gentleman of the Grand Jury was thereby so transported, that ... he with a glass of Wine in his hand, invited the Grand Jury to drink the Popes Health, and being opposed therein, did say that the Pope was a Worthy Person, whereupon complaint being made to the Judge in the Court, Mr. Scotrell boldly owned the Charge, and justified his offering to Drink the Popes Health, and being reproved by the Judge for so offending, at a time when there was such a damnable Popish Plot discovered and carried on; he confidently replied, My Lord, is it a Popish or a Puritan Plot; this unparallel'd confidence created, as I conceive, a suspicion with the Judge, that there might be disguised Papists on the Grand Jury, and thereupon he put them to take the Oaths of Allegiance and supremacy in the Court. Afterwards, in that Evening Mr. Scotrell being in company with several Gentlemen, did again set on foot the Drinking the Popes Health. Upon the next day he was again charged in the Court, for drinking the Popes Health, and for having drank it at another time to two young Men of the Town of Wisbich, but he continued to justify himself, and said, my Lord, I know not but I may drink the Popes Health, as well as your Lordships (A Letter From a Gentleman of the Isle of Ely 1679, 2–3).*

It seems very unlikely that Scottrell was a Catholic, and his gesture was probably little more than a joke to reinforce the Tory view that Presbyterians and republicans, rather than Catholics, were behind the supposed plot. The judge took the matter seriously, however, and 'enquired of the Justices of the Peace, of the Religion and Conversation of Mr. Scotrell'. Scottrell was defended by a 'Mr. F.', who 'declared that there was not a known Papist in the Isle of Ely'. In an aside, the author of the letter detailing these events commented, 'but God, and I believe Mr. Prance know some concealed ones', a clear reference to Miles Prance's origins in the Isle of Ely (*A Letter From a Gentleman of the Isle of Ely* 1679, 2–3). The statement of 'Mr. F.' is thoroughly supported by the returns of papists that were regularly requested by the Bishop of Ely up to 1780, in which incumbents of parishes in the Isle consistently sent back a 'nil return' (Cambridge University Library (CUL), Ely Diocesan

Records (EDR), MSS G/1/12; B/5/4; B/7/1). However, the author's aside on 'concealed papists' reveals the gulf that existed between perception and reality when it came to Catholic numbers. Whether Catholics existed or not in the Isle of Ely, many Protestants were absolutely convinced that they did, and this powerful belief made Catholicism an issue even in an area where there were probably no Catholics at all.

### Papist and Non-juring landowners in the Isle of Ely

Popish recusants were defined by a series of statutes from 1559 onwards, but during the English Civil War and Interregnum (1642–60) and after the Revolution of 1688 overthrew James II, additional statutes defined Catholics as a political threat. From 1672, no Catholic could take the Oath of Allegiance because it contained an explicit repudiation of the doctrine of transubstantiation. Therefore all Catholics were *ipso facto* 'popish non-jurors', unable to swear. The Long Parliament made it possible for the government to confiscate the estates of Royalist 'malignants' but also popish recusants, whether they supported the king or not. In the reign of William and Mary, laws were brought in to alienate Catholics from their land and property, and some of these also applied to Protestants who refused to take the Oath of Allegiance to the new monarchs because they still considered James II to be king. These Non-jurors were high churchmen who continued to recognise James II and his son James Edward Stuart (the Old Pretender) as Supreme Governor of the Church of England. They refused to attend church, because prayers were said for the Hanoverian kings, but they were not subject to the same penalties as Catholics because they were able to take the Declaration against Transubstantiation which accompanied the Oath of Allegiance.

In 1643 Parliament established the Committee for Compounding with Delinquents, which forced 'malignants' (Royalists in arms against Parliament) and popish recusants to 'compound' for their estates (in effect a forced mortgage) or risk their confiscation. The major victim of this policy in the Isle of Ely was Anthony Pratt of Whittlesey, whose father Millicent had been a convicted papist. Pratt's lands were sequestered for delinquency in arms (being an active Royalist supporter) in July 1649 and he was fined £43 4s 4d; Pratt had discharged payment within a year, but in 1651 he still did not have possession of his estate. In response to his petition, in June 1651, the County Committee for Cambridge was advised to continue the sequestration if Pratt's father was a papist. This would suggest that Pratt himself was suspected of being a Catholic. The case was still ongoing in October 1652 (*Calendar of the Proceedings of the Committee for Compounding*, 3:2119–20). The only other inhabitants of the Isle of Ely 'sequestered as recusants' were much poorer. On 28 March 1656 Isabel Mason and a Mr Foster, both of Colne, had their rent of £1 11s 2d confiscated by the Committee (*Calendar of the Proceedings of the Committee for Compounding*, 1:740).

After the deposition of James II in 1688–89, Catholics were suspected not just for their religion but also for their loyalty to the reigning monarch. The Jacobite Rising of 1715 led to the 1716 Papists Act, which permitted two Justices of the Peace to tender the Oath of Allegiance to any Catholic they chose; it also obliged Catholic landowners to register their estates, along with all future conveyances and wills (Rowe 1996, 188–89). The rolls of papists' estates in the Isle of Ely produced by this act are part of the Ely Diocesan Records in Cambridge University Library (CUL EDR, MS B/5/3). They were first noticed by J. G. O'Leary in 1972 (O'Leary 1972, 76–78), but his interest was primarily in recusants from Essex who held land in the area, and these documents have never received a thorough examination.

The largest Catholic landowner in the Isle of Ely was Mary Crane, who was living at Gedney in the Lincolnshire Fens in 1715 but a year later was resident in the parish of St Giles in the Fields, Middlesex. According to Burke's *Extinct Baronetage*, Mary Crane was the daughter of Francis Crane of Woodrising, Norfolk and Mary Widdrington (Estcourt & Payne 1885, 167). According to Francis Blomefield, she was a daughter of John Crane of Loughton in Lincolnshire, a relation of the Crane baronets of Woodrising in Norfolk, who inherited the lordship of Woodrising in 1645. John Crane of Loughton was Clerk of the Kitchen under James I and Charles I; his mother was Mary Tresham, a daughter of Sir Thomas Tresham. Mary Crane and her brother William sold the lordship of Woodrising to Gabriel Bedle in 1668 (Blomefield 1775, 5:1239).

At the Ely Quarter Sessions on 8 October 1717 Mary Crane declared the property she had inherited from her brother William. In the parish of Manea she owned two farms of 105 and 50 acres respectively, and 18 acres in nearby Stonea. She owned another 30 acres of farmland in Manea and 91 acres of undrained fenland, as well as five small pieces of land and a tenement. Outside of Manea and Stonea she owned 230 acres and two small pieces of land in Doddington, as well as 100 acres in Little Downham, Thorney Farm in the parish of Ely Holy Trinity and Erith Farm. At the same Quarter Sessions Anne, Viscountess Carrington, declared her ownership of a farm called the Hermitage in the parish of Haddenham. At The Wisbech Quarter Sessions held on the same day, John Fincham of Chelveston, Bedfordshire declared 30 acres in Wisbech.

On 7 October 1718 Mary Crane declared more lands in the Isle of Ely, which had come into her possession following the death of her relative Ralph Widdrington. These lands were mostly undrained fen and included 60 acres of fen in the parish of Sutton, 90 acres of Hale Fen in the parish of Witcham, 96 acres of Byall Fen near Chatteris, and ten acres of fen in Sutton. Land of this kind is described in the rolls as 'adventure land', suggesting that there was some intention to drain it. Other lands were held by individuals with a more distant connection to the area, including Catherine, Lady Petre, Ann Shaw

of St Martin in the Fields, Francis Hinde of Corbey, Lincolnshire, and Phillip Waldegrave of Borley. All were absentees.

Under the Security of the Succession Act 1702, only office-holders were tendered the Oath of Allegiance and the Oath of Abjuration of the Pretender, as well as being required to take communion in a parish church. However, in 1722 (9 George II c. 24) Parliament passed 'An Act to oblige all Persons, being Papists, in that Part of Great Britain called Scotland, and all Persons in Great Britain refusing or neglecting to take the Oaths appointed for the Security of his Majesty's Person and Government ... to register their Names and Real Estates' (*The Statutes at Large* 1763, 5:465). The sole landowner resident in the Isle of Ely who declared his estates 'in pursuance of the late Act of Parliament Intituled an Act to Oblidge Papists to Register their names and Real Estates' was Simon Hake of Chatteris, at the Wisbech Quarter Sessions on 13 July 1725.

Hake owned the manor of Chatteris Nunns (sometimes called Chatteris Betts), which had been a house of Benedictine nuns before passing through several post-Reformation owners (Breay 1999, 3–33). In 1657 this house was owned by George Gascoyne, whose daughter Eleanor (d. 1719) married Michael Holman (d. 1673) (Pugh 1953, 105–6). The Holmans had two sons, Michael and George, who both predeceased them, so the estate was inherited by their nephew Simon Hake. At the time of the Revolution of 1688 the vicar of Chatteris was William Sclater, who refused to take the Oath of Allegiance to William and Mary in 1689. Consequently, he was ejected from his benefice and classed as a 'Non-juror'. Sclater seems to have remained in Chatteris at least until 1726, when he published 'a Friendly Letter to the Inhabitants of The Parish of Chatteris in the Isle of Ely' entitled *The Conditions of the Covenant of Grace Particularly Explain'd*. He also composed the Latin epitaph to Eleanor Holman, suggesting that she may have shared his religious views. Simon Hake certainly did, according to William Cole's description of him shortly after his death in 1746:

*Mr. Hake, who lives in the scite of the old Priory, & who has a good Estate here [in Chatteris], & also at Whittlesea ... has 2 Daughter ab[ou]t 20 y[ea]rs of age, unmarried. He is looked upon to be somewhat disorder'd in his Intellects. Mr. Hake died Lady Day 1746 & was buried on the South side of the Altar in this Church within the Rails: his Widow has sent to Holland for a large blew Marble to cover his Grave. Mrs. Hake is a very fine & prudent Woman; her name was Johnson & is of Pomfret in Yorkshire & Sister to the Chancellor, I think, of Llandaff. She told me that before Mr. Hake's Death she staid within the Walls of the Abbey for 7 years & never stirr'd out: for as they were Non-jurors they went not to Church: since his Death this Abbey & Presentation to the Vicarage has been sold (Sweeting 1901–3, 335–42).*

As the full title of the act reveals, it was not just Catholics, but also Non-jurors who were tendered the Oaths of Allegiance and Abjuration, who were



liable to register their estates in England from 1722 onwards. Consequently, Simon Hake was not obliged to register his estates in 1716, but that situation changed after 1722. Nevertheless, it remains unclear whether Hake was a Non-juror or a Catholic at this time. Cole's assertion that Hake was a Non-juror at the time of his death in 1746 does not preclude the possibility that Hake flirted with Catholicism in the 1720s, and it is striking that the form of words used for the registration of his estates in 1725 was identical to that used in the earlier registrations of 1717 and 1718. Hake's wife, Elizabeth Johnston, was the daughter of Dr Charles Johnston of Pontefract, second son of the Non-juring antiquary and Jacobite pamphleteer Dr Nathaniel Johnston (1629–1705) (Hall 1926, 1:xxxii). Her great-uncle was the Benedictine monk Henry Joseph Johnston (d. 1723). On 23 October 1746 Simon and Elizabeth Hake were named as legatees of Dr Henry Johnston of Stowmarket (Sheffield Archives, MS OD/48), another grandson of Nathaniel (Hearne 1914, 9:339).

Whatever his religious allegiance, Hake owned 'One Co[m]monable house called horseload house with a small Close adjoining in the parish of Chatteris', and thirty acres held by various tenants. He owned 'The manor house with the appurtenances at the yearly rent of fifteen pounds[,] A Small Mannor the quit rents p[er] Ann[um] at Eight pound four Shillings and nine pence[,] One Close Called horseload Close of six acres all in my own Tenure and Occupation at the yearly rent of six pound'. In Byall Fen in the parish of Witchford he owned a total of 170 acres, as well as four acres of farmland in Witchford and Wentworth. He owned a single lot in Sutton parish, but his major landholdings were in West Fen in the parish of March, where he owned no less than 499 acres in the occupation of various tenants.

The final registration of papists' estates at an Ely Quarter Sessions took place on 2 October 1744, in anticipation of a combined French and Jacobite invasion from France. In the end, this invasion never materialised, and in 1745 the Jacobites invaded Scotland instead. At this time only one papist (or more likely Non-juror) held lands in the Isle of Ely. John Pitchford of Tydd St Mary owned an estate that straddled the border between Lincolnshire and the Isle, although the parish in which he resided was just on the Lincolnshire side. Pitchford declared a messuage and cottage in Tydd St Giles, along with 82 acres of pasture divided between three tenants and 28 acres of fenland. In the parish of Newton he declared two messuages and 45 acres divided between two tenants, and five acres in Leverington. In the parish of Wisbech St Peter he owned a messuage divided into three tenements 'with a Coblers Bulk or stall thereunto belonging', as well as a cellar in the possession of Thomas Baker.

## Conclusion

The presence of a body of priests at Wisbech Castle 1580–1618 created a Catholic network in the Fens and led to a number of local conversions, and the existence of Catholic or crypto-Catholic families in the seventeenth century, such as the Prances of March, demonstrates that a tiny but enduring minority in sympathy with Catholicism existed in the Fens up to the end of the seventeenth century. Whether later individuals whose lands were registered under the Papists Acts (such as Simon Hake) were actually Catholics is more ambiguous, but even as high church Non-jurors they went against the political and religious traditions of Puritanism that permeated the area. Perhaps most tellingly, on 13 March 1791, James Taylor, the chaplain to the Huddleston family at Sawston Hall, recorded that he had been on a riding mission for three weeks, undertaking journeys of up to 160 miles to scattered Catholics in north Cambridgeshire (Jackson 2003, 49). In the government's 1767 Census of Papists, only seven Catholics were recorded in the Diocese of Ely, and six of them were members of the Huddleston household at Sawston Hall (Worrall 1989, 121). By way of comparison, the census recorded 512 Catholics in Suffolk and 767 in Norfolk (Worrall 1989, 129). Taylor's northern congregation could have been recent Irish incomers seeking work in the Fens. However, 1791 also saw the legalisation of public Catholic worship, and it is possible that some families descended from converts made by the priests at Wisbech Castle only began to practise their faith publicly at the end of the eighteenth century. This must remain speculation, but it is remarkable that there were any Catholics in the area at all, in the absence of any wealthier Catholic family to protect adherents. There is ample evidence to suggest that the influence of priests on local people in the period 1580–1618 was deeply feared by the government, suggesting that it was significant. Sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Catholicism in the Isle of Ely did not follow the conventional pattern of patronage by gentry families – it took instead the form of sympathetic crypto-Catholicism among ordinary people – but this does not mean it should be ignored.

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