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KIRK GATE HOUSE, NEWARK

NEWARK IN THE SIXTEENTH CENTURY

By M. W. BARLEY

ON the 21st December, 1549, the borough of Newark-on-Trent was incorporated by royal charter, following an exchange between the crown and the Bishop of Lincoln by which the bishop gave up, besides Newark, the manors of Thame, Dorchester, Banbury, Woburn, Sleaford and Stow Park, and received in return some thirty-six rectories formerly appropriated to religious houses. The four-hundredth anniversary of this significant stage in its history may be marked by a description of the town in the sixteenth century. All too little is known of it before then, but from this period material is plentiful, and a good deal is available about the men who were responsible for the change of status.

Newark stands on a gravel spit extending to the Trent immediately below the entry of the Devon, at the point where a prehistoric trackway known as Sewestern Lane approached the Trent. On this gravel site a town had grown up which was described as a borough in Domesday Book. When, during the middle ages, a main road to the north developed to the east of the older north road through Nottingham, this new highway crossed the Trent at Newark. That crossing was encouraged by the bridge which the bishop of Lincoln made across the Trent at the time the castle was built in the 1130's. By the sixteenth century, Newark had become a town with an estimated population of 2,700,¹ thriving on trade in the products of an agricultural area, such as wool, hides and leather, the manufacture of cloth, the traffic in coal and other commodities on the Trent, and the business brought by the growing use of the great north road. There is no evidence of the economic decline which was marked in many medieval towns at the end of the middle ages.

One reason for this steady prosperity was that the pre-Conquest soke, of which Newark was the centre,²

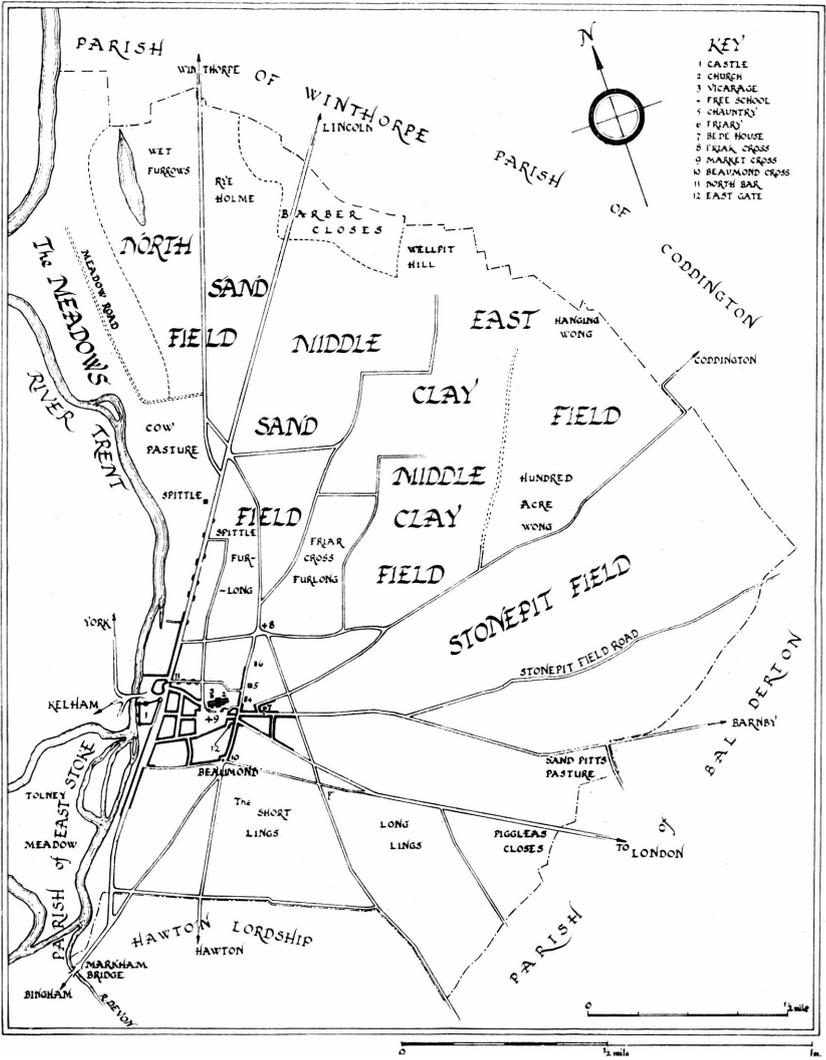
¹ A. C. Wood in *Transactions*, 1937, p. 20.

² The extent of the soke may best be seen from Domesday Book. See V.C.H., *Notts.*, I, p. 257.

was still a real entity. The manor court rolls for Newark are extant from the second half of the sixteenth century,¹ and they show that the court was still meeting every three weeks and controlling the open field agriculture of Farndon, Balderton, and most of the villages north of Newark except the Collinghams. In addition, the wapentake court met twice yearly, bringing in freeholders from all the villages of the wapentake. These meetings, along with the weekly market, helped to build and maintain Newark's importance. Further, the town was not so large that the agrarian side in its life was overshadowed by less stable elements such as cloth-making, which no doubt declined in the sixteenth century. The lay-out of the open fields can be recovered from the court rolls and the inclosure award; as might be expected, the meadow and pasture lay on the river side, and the arable fields included Sand Field, Clay Field and Stonepit Field. The arable and pasture fields south of the town cannot now be named. Newarkers used the meadow known as Tolney, across the river from the castle, though it was not in the parish. Some time in the sixteenth century, if not earlier, the Barber Closes, on the Langford boundary of the parish, had been enclosed, but there is no evidence of other encroachment on the medieval fields except for the case which will be mentioned later.

The town was still mainly confined to the spit of high ground on which it had been originally established, though there were some buildings along the North Gate towards Lincoln, relics of the hamlet of Osmundethorp. The higher ground had at some time been surrounded by stone walls, which followed the square of Castle Gate, Lombard Street, Carter Gate and Appleton Gate, and, on the north side, Mount Lane and Slaughterhouse Lane. Within this square, Newark, like many medieval towns, was laid out with a regularity that can be called planning. It is not known whether the walls were still standing in this century. The drawings of the North Bar and the East Gate, made in the late eighteenth century after they were pulled down, are quite unconvincing unless they are

¹ The rolls from 1575 have been translated by R. J. B. Hodgkinson whose MS. volumes are in the Gilstrap Library, Newark.



NEWARK IN THE 16TH CENTURY.

regarded as romantic versions of the side arches for pedestrians. Nothing is known of the remaining gate, which stood at the entrance to the town from Mill Gate, beyond its mere existence in the fourteenth century.¹ The importance of the walls in the later middle ages may be doubted because, apart from the difficult question of the relation between the walls and Carter Gate and Appleton Gate, both of which are mentioned in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, a number of important buildings lay outside the circuit of the walls.² These were the Chantry House founded in about 1365 by Alice Fleming as a common residence for chantry priests serving in the parish church ; the house now known as the Friary, established in 1499 as a house of Friars Observant, and the grammar school, founded in 1531 by Thomas Magnus. All these lay east of Appleton Gate. The site of the friars' church is not known, but they must have used as a preaching spot the Friar Cross, which stood in the angle of Appleton Gate and Sleaford Road, where the "Newark Arms" now stands. A guildhall stood in Guildhall Street, though whether it belonged to one of the religious guilds, such as the large and important Trinity Guild, or to a craft guild such as the tanners, whose hall is mentioned in 1577, we do not know. There were certainly houses in Barnby Gate, Balderton Gate, and in Mill Gate, which was particularly important because of the corn and fulling mills which stood there. From some time in the middle ages the water of the river Devon here had been increased by the diversion to it of some of the water of the Trent, for the benefit of the mills.³ In spite of the spread of building outside the walls, the area within was not closely built up ; there were many large gardens, such as the Warburton Hotel

¹ Items of evidence used here, such as the medieval references to a bar in Mill Gate, will be found in Cornelius Brown's *History of Newark*, and no detailed references to his work will be given.

² It may be that the walls enclosed a relatively small area because they were built on the lines of the earth rampart of the tenth century *burh*, the new work which gave the town its name ; but this rampart is not visible anywhere to-day and has never been noticed in excavations.

³ See *Notes on the History of the Navigation of the River Trent*, by J. T. Evans, Nottingham, 1945, for the best discussion of the complicated history of the course of the river.

in Carter Gate still possesses, and the long narrow properties, typical of medieval towns, had not yet been filled up with cottages, maltings, stables and the like.

Newark to-day is probably the best brick town of the east midlands, but that is a character which it only acquired between 1660 and 1830. At this time it was a town of timber-framed houses. The old "White Hart" must have been fairly new when the century opened ; it is of special interest because its facade is much more ornate than any other surviving building in the town, or for that matter in the east midlands, where work is less rich than in the west midlands. The plaster figures in the niches of the front show that the plaster industry had already developed, and the lime-plaster finish of the side of the inn shows that something which may be called pargetting was not unknown in the county. Among buildings erected in the sixteenth century, Kirk Gate House is perhaps the most interesting (see frontispiece). Its plan, in spite of alterations, is discernible: a door on the street opened on a passage which ran alongside a chamber fronting in the street and past the spiral staircase to the hall, which was the main room, and was lit by a six-light window in the side wall. Whether there was a kitchen is doubtful ; it has not survived. Upstairs a small chamber has still a fragment of wall-painting.

Among such homogeneous and low-roofed houses, the stone buildings must have stood out more clearly than they do now. The castle was still habitable, though not regularly used. In November 1536, when military action against the Yorkshire Pilgrimage of Grace was being mounted, the town was garrisoned with 700 men, but the castle would only hold 100, and there was no water supply. When the castle became crown property it was leased successively to Sir Francis Leeke, the earl of Rutland and Lord Burghley. The Leeke family succeeded to the Markham property in the Newark area, and acquired the Chantry House and the Friary as well as the castle; they probably rebuilt the Friary during Elizabeth's reign. The earl of Rutland was also looking for points of influence in this part of the county ; in 1534 he was

granted by the bishop the office of "constable and chief seneschal of the castle, town and wapentake of Newark."¹ In 1581 he secured the lease of the castle, but when his family stayed at Newark, as it frequently did between 1580 and 1590, it was very often at the St. Leonard's Hospital, on the Lincoln road where the railway now crosses it.² The condition of the castle was deteriorating; both the earl of Rutland and Lord Burghley took towers down—the latter in order to use the material to rebuild another.³

When the century opened the rebuilding of the eastern end of the parish church had only just been completed, and the new chancel was being furnished by wealthy citizens. In the first ten years the chantry chapels founded by Sir Thomas Mering and Robert Markham were built. The finest piece of furnishing was the provision of a rood screen, with returns on the north and south sides, the quire stalls and the benches in the aisles of the quire. The screen was made by Thomas Drawswerd of York, the most famous firm of carvers of the day, and the benches probably came from the same workshop, because the gabled treatment of the front members of the bench ends is in the Yorkshire style. Stained glass windows were given by such well-known persons as Sir Thomas Mering and William Phillipot.

By 1549 many changes had taken place in the appearance and use of the church. The most striking was that after 1547 there were no longer some thirteen or fourteen chantry priests, most of them elderly men and "unlerner", saying masses in the various chapels. The vicars were no longer canons of the priory of St. Catherine's, Lincoln, as most of them had been for two centuries or more, and the patronage became vested in the crown. The church must quite suddenly have become the peaceful and empty place to which we are used—and the less colourful, for

¹ *Lincoln Chapter Acts* (Lincoln Record Society), I, p. 190-1. In 1547, when much church property was changing hands, the earl's bailiff reported to him, after mentioning the possibility of the bishops "forsaking their temporalities", that he could hear of nothing else save the bailiwick of Newark. Hist. MSS. Comm. *Rutland*, I, p. 32-3.

² H.M.C., *Rutland*, *passim*.

³ *Op. cit.*, IV, p. 392.

in 1538 a window depicting the martyrdom of St. Thomas of Canterbury was removed, as being idolatrous. We know of no other glass being destroyed at this time ; some of the heraldic windows, such as one containing the figures of Sir Thomas Mering and his wife, survived until after 1641, when they were drawn by Dugdale.

The main addition to the public buildings of the town in this century was the grammar school endowed by Thomas Magnus between 1529 and 1531. The medieval school had probably been in North Gate, but Magnus acquired a site next to the Chantry House in Appleton Gate. His building, now obscured by a front added in 1817, is of local limestone (perhaps from Stonepit Field), with a tiled roof and chimneys of brick and Swithland slate. See Plate facing p. 34. Internal partitions are of timber and plaster. The chapel in Bedehouse Lane, all that survives of the bedehouse built by William Phillipot before his death in 1557, is also of local limestone, roofed with Swithland slate.

Newark was generously endowed in this century by Brown, Magnus and Phillipot. We may take first Robert Brown who, in the 1520's, was the wealthiest man in the town. Like many townsmen before him, he found his opportunity in the service of the Bishop of Lincoln ; he was agent or receiver to Bishop Longland, steward of the liberty of Newark, farmer of the bishop's demesnes in the parish, and lessee of the rectorial tithes, the lease of which he purchased from St. Catherine's. Before he died he gained the greatest civic recognition—election to the office of alderman of the Trinity Guild. All these facts are recorded on his tomb in the church—distinctions in the eyes of posterity, and unequalled opportunities for him. He was farmer of the tolls taken on the Trent on behalf of the corporation of Nottingham ; in 1530, as Wolsey's agent in the county, he prepared the palace at Southwell for the cardinal's visit. Wolsey, while spending the night at Newark castle, borrowed £400 from him, which, needless to say, Brown did not get back. He was a justice of the peace, sheriff of Nottinghamshire and Derbyshire (1516-17), and a member of several commissions named by Henry VIII for such purposes

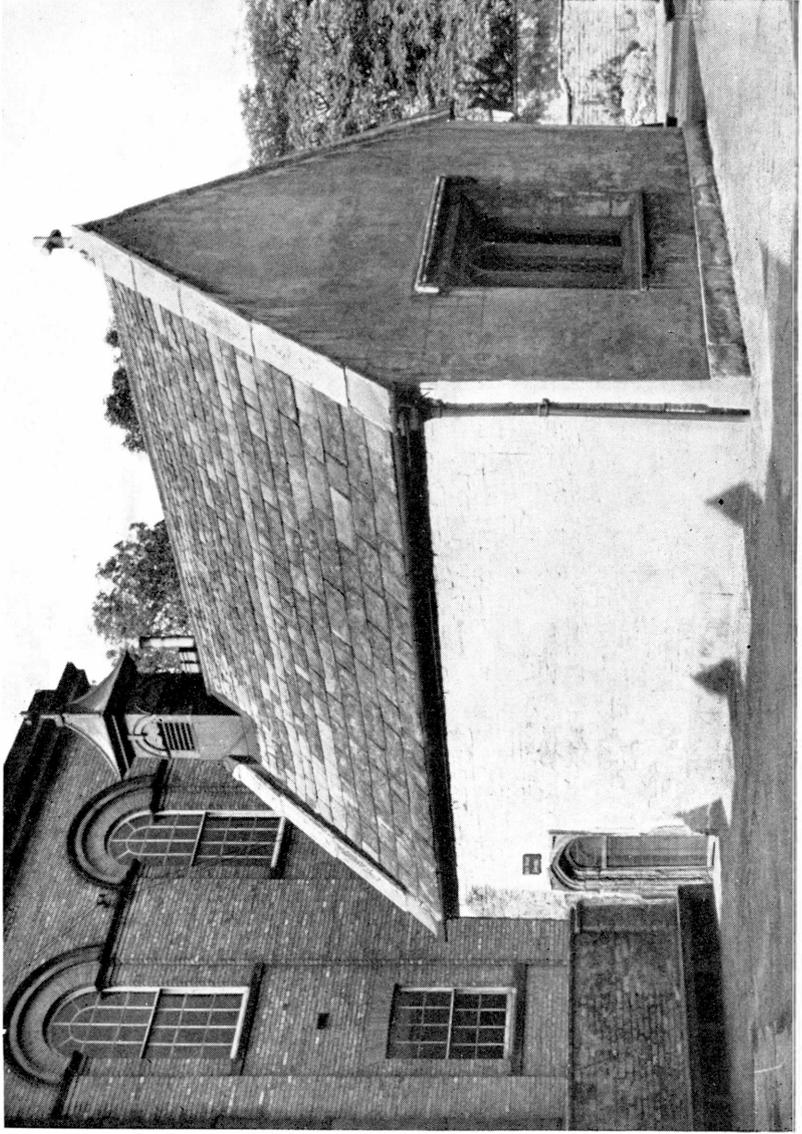


Photo by National Buildings Record

BEDE HOUSE CHAPEL, NEWARK

as collecting loans. In his will, after gifts to his god-children and to his eight servants, he left the bulk of his estate "for the use of the commonwealth of the town of Newark". His most permanent monument is the town hall, built in 1773 out of the sale of a large portion of his estates and those of William Phillipot.

His successor in many of his positions was Anthony Forster, but before describing his career we may deal with two well-known churchmen: Thomas Magnus and Henry Litherland. The history of Newark-born Thomas Magnus is well known and need not be repeated. Our concern is to note his position and his attitude to the religious changes of his time. He was one of the last of the medieval civil servants and diplomatists whose income was provided from the church, and he has been called a "singularly successful pluralist".¹ His gross income from such preferments as archdeacon of the East Riding of Yorkshire, master of St. Leonard's Hospital at York and of the collegiate church at Sibthorpe, a deanery and three prebends, a canonry, four rectories and one vicarage was at least £769 per annum. After the suppression he kept some of the property of St. Leonard's and bought that of the college at Sibthorpe. It is not surprising that he personally suppressed Bridlington priory and preached in his archdeaconry concerning the "usurped jurisdiction of the Bishop of Rome". Nor is it surprising that, as a member of the council of the north, he signed the report on the session of the assizes at York at which the leaders of the Pilgrimage of Grace were condemned to death. Among them was Henry Litherland, vicar of Newark. We cannot, unless we are ready to condemn a whole generation, regard Magnus as a time-server. Rather, Litherland was one of the very few who was not in tune with his time. As treasurer of Lincoln cathedral (Litherland too was a pluralist), one of his last duties was to draw up the long inventory of treasures taken by Henry VIII. This, together with his disapproval of the removal of images and of the English translation of the scriptures, led him

¹ A. H. Thompson, *The English Clergy*, p. 122, n.

to join the rebellion in Yorkshire, for which he perished in 1538.¹

It now remains to describe the two most important men in the town in the critical period from 1535 to 1550. They were William Phillipot and Anthony Forster. Forster was a local man, though his origin is unknown, and there is no memorial to him. He succeeded to most, but not all, of Brown's appointments; the constablership of the castle went to the earl of Rutland, and some of the smaller crumbs from the bishop's table fell to Richard Bevercotes, another Newark man who, although he had a house in the close at Lincoln, continued to take part in Newark affairs.² Forster's main success was that in 1534 he was granted, for a rent of £96 *per annum*, a lease of all the bishop's properties and manorial rights at Newark, which included five corn and two fulling mills, fisheries under the castle, the Tolney pasture, the courts and tolls of the town and wapentake and the manor of Balderton. The Tolney pasture he used for fattening cattle, and at one time he had 723 sheep in Newark fields. He maintained a large establishment with eight servants in his house in the market place.

He must have made himself remarkably unpopular, judging from the number of complaints recorded against him. He offended Leeds and Nottingham merchants by the tolls he collected from them, and by putting them in the stocks when they objected. He took pains to enforce suit at the bishop's mills; to maintain the exemption of the liberty from the entrance of the sheriff; and to enforce his rights as steward of the soke. This last must have been a ticklish business, because in many of the villages of the soke, such as Balderton, there was another manorial court functioning, and jurisdictions threatened to overlap, or manorial officials to collide. In all such cases Forster could argue that he was only enforcing the bishop's rights, and it may be that the local feeling which arose was really directed against his lord. As early as 1539 a local informant told Cromwell

¹ *Lincoln Chapter Acts*, I, p. 192 and n.; II, pp. x-xi.

² For Bevercotes see *Chapter Acts*, I and II, *passim*.

that "the inhabitants of Newark complain of the Bishop of Lincoln's tolls and would have it the King's town."¹ On the other hand, Roger Greves, a prominent Newark man with whom Forster had a wordy quarrel in the parish church which would have ended in bloodshed but for Phillipot's intervention, accused Forster of "wanting to have an oar in every man's boat"—a telling phrase which marks him as an unattractive character.

At least two cases against him went to the court of star chamber, and the depositions there give us the lively details quoted here. The most serious dispute concerned his attempt to enclose the Pigsleys, two wongs or pieces of meadow on the south side of the London road, and part of the bishop's demesnes. Brown had tried to do the same in 1528, and the town had secured a verdict against him at the assizes. Forster tried again, and clearly resented the opposition which this provoked as part of an attempt to wrest the bishop's demesnes from him. An emergency meeting in the church was summoned by ringing the bells backwards (the usual way of sounding an alarum), and a party set out on the London road to the Pigsleys. There they met Forster and his servants, and at some point Forster challenged "the proudest churl of them all to try it with him" in single combat, but later he was chased beyond Balderton, taking no notice of the cries of "tarry, traitor, tarry!" The party returned to Phillipot's house in the market place, where Sir John Markham, Sir William Mering and Richard Bevercotes asked all those who would support them to sign their names in a book. Many were frightened at being asked thus to commit themselves, but the case went forward. It is an anticlimax to have to admit that we do not know the verdict. This episode, apart from the fact that the leaders tried to secure legal redress of their grievance, is very reminiscent of the Lincolnshire Rebellion a year later, which was provoked in part by the same cause, and was marked by the same emergency bell-ringing.

In spite of these marked divisions among the leading men of the town, none of whom appears to have been

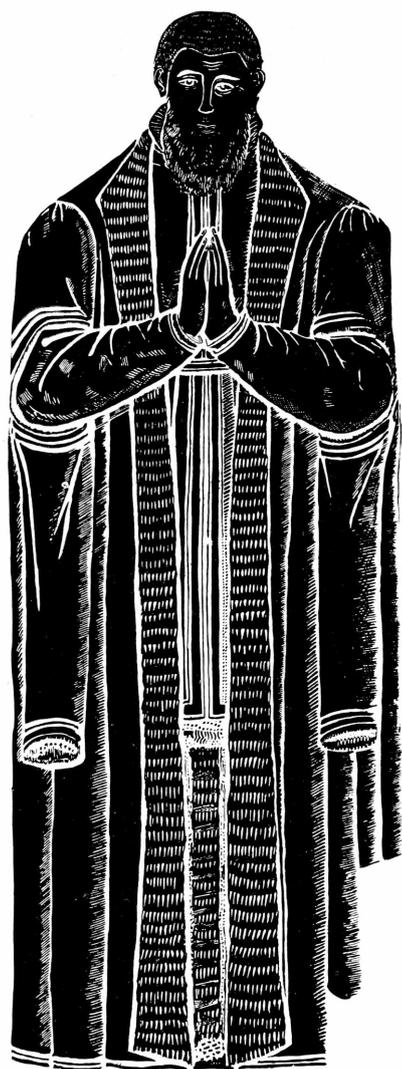
¹ *Letters and Papers of Henry VIII*, XIV, Pt. I, p. 392.

Forster's friend, we are next presented with the fact that two years after Newark became the king's town, the charter of incorporation named Forster as the first alderman, or mayor. Among the twelve assistants, or councillors, were Phillipot, Hugh Kelsterne and Robert Howyse, who had all taken part in the riot of 1535. It is not likely that Forster's temper had sweetened. It is significant that he was alderman of the Trinity Guild in its last year, and Newark historians have regarded the guild as, in a general sense, the predecessor of the new corporation. At such a critical juncture in the town's history Forster, because of his position as steward of the manor and soke under the bishop and the crown, was the person most likely to be able to help the town to realize its ambitions. This must have been enough to make the members of the ruling group swallow any personal dislike they may have felt. Forster himself presumably advised the crown on the local conditions and indicated suitable names for inclusion.

Forster's interests were not confined to Newark. The *Lincoln Chapter Acts* contain evidence of the way in which he profited from Bishop Longland's willingness to "grant away reversions of all manner of gifts and preferments in the bishop's patronage to the advantage of his own personal estate".¹ Thus Forster acquired, on his own behalf or with others, the lease of the prebends of Stoke and South Scarle, of the demesne at Stow Park and of the next nominations to the prebends of Biggleswade, Farndon, Liddington and Norton Episcopi, to the church at Wyntwick, Northants, and to St. Leonard's Hospital, Newark. It is doubtful whether many of these grants took effect, but Giles Forster, Anthony's son, did get the reversion of the office of steward of Newark after his father's death in 1556. Giles was, one suspects, as over-bearing as his father. He married the daughter of Sir William Mering, and he disappears from history with a letter he wrote to the earl of Rutland in 1586, in which he blamed the earl for the fact that his wife had left him.²

¹ Cole in *Chapter Acts*, III, pp. xxiii-xxiv.

² H.M.C., *Rutland*, I, p. 192.



Here under this stone hath buried the Bodie of
William Phillipot merchant and Elizabeth his
wyfe which dyed the xijth day of maye in
An^o dⁿⁱ M^o cccc^o lxxij^o whole deathe deservyng pouer
all to haue yn Remembrauns calling to God for xij^o

BRASS OF WILLIAM PHILLIPOT.

It is a relief to turn from such a family to William Phillipot, who was no less typical of his age, but less offensive. He was the third generation of a family of Newark drapers, with a house and a shop in the market place. He became a general merchant ; he sold claret, malvesy, sack and white wine to the earl of Rutland in 1542, and in the next year provided the white satin of Bruges to make a cross on the same earl's pall.¹ His brass in Newark church shows a dignified old man with a long beard and lined brow. He belonged to the rank of those who were called on to execute the details of Tudor policy ; in 1553, as deputy commissioner for church goods, he took up to Edward VI's jewel house 97 oz. of broken and damaged plate collected from the churches of the county.² In 1554 he bought a miscellaneous collection of chantry property ; it is these lands which he left to the town in his will for the endowment of the bedehouse he had already built in Coddington Lane.

Such men as these made the Reformation. As far as personalities are concerned, we may note that when the twelve assistants had their first chance to *elect* an alderman, they chose Phillipot. But it is more important to remember that after 1549 the domestic history of Newark settled down at a quiet level, disturbed by no such riots as that against Forster. The twelve assistants were a close corporation, electing the alderman from among their number and filling vacancies by co-option. There was no one to question their control of the town, and it is symptomatic that by 1591 the Pigsleys had been enclosed by the corporation without provoking further protest.

¹ H.M.C., *Rutland*, I, p. 62 ; IV, pp. 320, 341.

² V.C.H., *Notts.* II, p. 65.