

BASSETLAW CHRISTIAN HERITAGE NETWORK

OUR UNIQUE CHRISTIAN HERITAGE – A SUMMARY - Adrian Gray(adrian.a.gray@btinternet.com)

A circle 30 miles in diameter drawn around Retford will encompass a small, rural area that has had an enormous global impact on Christianity. Every English-speaking nonconformist church in the World can trace its origins here and, if we include the birthplace of Thomas Cranmer in our region, then we could say every English-speaking Protestant church. This from a handful of villages and market towns.

Christianity can be traced from 627AD when Paulinus and Edwin – both future saints – baptised the people of Lindsey¹ in the Trent, probably at Littleborough. Saint Edwin was – briefly – buried in the forest near Edwinstowe after being killed in battle.

The Normans built churches and abbeys across our area such as Worksop and Rufford. These produced great medieval works like The Cloud of Unknowing or the 'Tickhill Psalter.' Then from 1534 Henry VIII engineered the English Reformation, but a local tendency towards radical re-interpretation of the Faith was emerging and John Lascelles, from a Gateford and Sturton-le-Steeple family, was an influential leader of this within King Henry's Court. Denounced by his enemies, he was burnt at the stake in 1546 for challenging the King's views on the nature of the bread and wine in the Mass.

In Retford and nearby villages a network of people wanted to further reform the Church of England. Families like the Denmans in Retford, Hercy family at Grove and Helwys family of Askham and Saundy, used their influence to place 'godly' clergy into local churches. Ordsall, Babworth, Headon and Scrooby saw a succession of curates and clerics who wanted to continue the Reformation. James Brewster was the puritan rector of Sutton-cum-Lound, but and his family controlled the curates at Scrooby and Bawtry in the 1590s.

By 1605 the area had produced some of the leading religious radicals in England. Richard Clyfton at Babworth was established as a great puritan preacher whilst two men from Sturton-le-Steeple, John Smyth and John Robinson, were becoming influential theologians. At Worksop, Richard Bernard was also a progressive reformer. All were disappointed by King James I's refusal to further reform the Church of England and in 1606 Clyfton, Robinson and Brewster left the Church to form their own congregation which met at Scrooby Manor – although Clyfton continued to appear in other local churches. John Smyth and his friend Thomas Helwys formed a congregation at Gainsborough. By 1608 almost all of these had gone to Holland to find greater freedom, mainly paid for by Helwys.

The Scrooby group settled in Leiden and in 1620 some sailed to America – the Mayflower Pilgrims included locals such as William Brewster (Scrooby), William Bradford (Austerfield), Katherine Carver (Sturton) and her husband John (origin unknown, possibly Sturton or Doncaster).

Smyth and Helwys became the first English Baptists before Helwys returned to England in 1612 to start the English Baptist Church. Helwys is also important for writing the first full argument in favour of freedom of belief for ALL – he was arrested and died in Newgate Prison by about 1615.

The Quakers started in Mansfield, Tickhill and the surrounding area. The first Quaker to die for his beliefs was a 20 year old from Retford, James Parnell, in 1656.

A century later John Wesley produced another radical change in the Church, preaching often in Clayworth, Misterton and Owston Ferry on his way to his home town of Epworth. Later missionaries criss-crossed the globe and, more recently, the Assemblies of God set up its national training school in Mattersey from where graduates spread out to all continents. The story isn't finished yet.

¹ Recent historians have identified the 'Kingdom of Lindsey' as the equivalent of north Lincolnshire and north Nottinghamshire today. Littleborough – where the Roman road crosses the Trent – and which was a Roman town, is the most likely place for the baptisms.