

The Reformed Parish Church, 1538-1689

The character of church life and personal religion changed fundamentally in the sixteenth century. One sign was that new building at St. Peter's ceased. As Margaret Dickins wrote in 1928, "Successive generations of worshippers made small alterations, such as partitions, seats, desks, or altar-tables, but the fabric itself remains as it was standing four hundred years ago" – or, for us, nearly half a millennium ago. But more fundamental was the divorce from European Catholicism and its replacement by the ideas of the Protestant Reformation.

The Tudor Reformation

Immediately after 1500 there were signs of possible religious decline in the parish. An episcopal visitation to Hook Norton in 1517 declared that "the chancel there is falling down. ... The churchyard is defiled by horses: There has been no distribution of alms there." Already Oseney Abbey was leasing to laymen the right to appoint the vicar and to collect the tithes that were paid for his upkeep and that of the church, and the men appointed as vicar were usually not well qualified. A visitation of 1530, however, thought "all is well", and there appears to be no evidence of demands for reform in this locality. The changes which soon came were entirely a result of the King's argument with the Pope over his divorce and the shift in royal favour toward the reformers who favoured the new religious ideas coming in from the Continent.



*The Stuart coat of arms,
now on the south wall.*

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The new Protestant dispensation of the second half of the 1530s - later reinforced under Edward VI and Elizabeth I - had visible effects on St Peter's. To emphasize the royal supremacy, the great Rood (or Cross) hanging above the Rood Loft at the chancel arch had to be replaced by the royal arms. (When the Stuarts succeeded Elizabeth, a new coat of arms was needed and that now – pictured left - hangs over the entrance door). To emphasise the centrality of God's Word, the

wall paintings had to be covered with whitewash because they distracted the congregation's attention from the Scriptures; worse still, they encouraged simple folk to pray to saints and other intermediaries instead of directly to the Lord. To remove formal barriers between the priesthood and ordinary believers, the stone altars had to be broken up and replaced by a wooden table, which was often moved out of the chancel and in front of the rood screen. The silver chalice traditionally used here in Mass was melted down in 1572 and recast as a "decent communion cup", since the consecrated wine was now taken by the communicants rather than just the priest. The silver lid of the cup was used for the ministration of the bread; both cup and chalice are still in use.

The dissolution of Oseney Abbey had little obvious immediate impact on the Hook Norton church. The abbey's property was shared by the Crown and the Bishopric of Oxford, which was created in 1542; unlike most church property, which went to the King and then on to laymen, the ecclesiastical manor of Hook Norton remained in Church hands. St. Peter's did lose to the Crown some lands which produced an income of six shillings and eight pence a year to pay for the saying of a yearly Mass for some departed soul, but such chantries were thought spiritually worthless by the reformers because human effort could not reduce divine punishment in the afterlife. Far more serious for the parish was the problem in securing decent clergymen under the new dispensation.

Hooky's Lay Patrons

Under Oseney the parish had been in the hands of the abbey's representative or "vicar", and the abbey had the right to appoint him, though increasingly they leased that right to laymen. After 1538 that right passed to the holder of the lease to the Abbey's manor, who was John Croker and his heirs. They also received the tithes - or one-tenth of all



The memorial portion of the Croker Stone, 1568
© David McGill

produce paid by the people - intended to pay the vicar. As Patrons, the Crokers stood high in the local church. In memory of that first John Croker the most



Low-side Window
©David McGill

impressive memorial in the church was erected in the north transept, and apparently several of the family “lye buried in a vault” near the memorial. They must have helped finance the changes to the church, notably the purchase of bells, including the oldest known, which are dated 1599 and 1600. It was possibly the Crokers who had the “low side” window inserted in the south chancel wall; the outline is visible only from the outside but appears to date from the period 1560-1640. As Patrons, they were allowed to sit in a privileged position within the chancel during service and they wanted more daylight on their seats. That would indicate that at the time the altar lay within the chancel.¹

Yet the Crokers also used their position to deprive Hook Norton of a proper Vicar. In a 1597 law case the second John Croker declared in court that, during the sixty years his family had held the lease, the vicar of Hook Norton had never been a proper Incumbent, holding the office in his own right and enjoying the full tithes; those appointed had been stipendiary ministers or curates employed by the Crokers. In other words, the Crokers took the income and paid stand-in priests at cut rates, allowing them part of the tithes. One elderly resident called as a witness said she never knew “since the plucking down of the abbey any vicar of Hooknorton but only the cure thereof served by such as those who were hired” by the Crokers. Those appointed were not always of the highest moral standard; apparently one hired vicar lost in a dice game the part of his share of the tithes that were raised in Southrop, the area south of the village stream!²

The deprived state of the Church as a whole was a major source of grievance in the country by the 1630s. As the historian Christopher Hill spelled out many

¹ Dickins, *Hook Norton*, 107-108; quotation, 118.

² Dickins, *Hook Norton*, 165-68.

years ago,³ the Reformation had first put the Church into the Crown's hands but then the monarchy, eager to win political support or to finance war out of capital rather than taxation, had granted away and sold much its church property to the landed gentry and aristocracy. In the process the right to appoint clergymen and receive tithes had been privatised. Many like the Crokers used the Church's resources for their own financial advantage, much to the chagrin of Puritans who wished to bring good preaching to every church in the land. But there were also many Godly laymen who used their control to appoint and pay decent clergymen, many of them of a reforming tendency, and these private, local initiatives made possible the great expansion of Puritanism under James I.

This situation aggrieved Charles I and his chief ecclesiastical adviser, William Laud, whom the king made Bishop of London and then Archbishop of Canterbury. Given that the pulpit was the main means whereby government and hierarchy could communicate with their subjects, the king and Laud had good reason to blame the constant political opposition expressed in Parliament on the breakdown of the state church and the passing of control into lay hands. Laud wished to re-establish the power of the Church's hierarchy, re-empower ecclesiastical courts, turn back the Puritan tide, and reintroduce traditional practices and ritual; in particular, he wished to regain control of parish churches and give them priests he approved of. It may be that when the Crokers at last appointed an Incumbent to the Living of Hook Norton in 1638, they did so because continuing favour at court depended on supporting the king's favoured ecclesiastical policy.

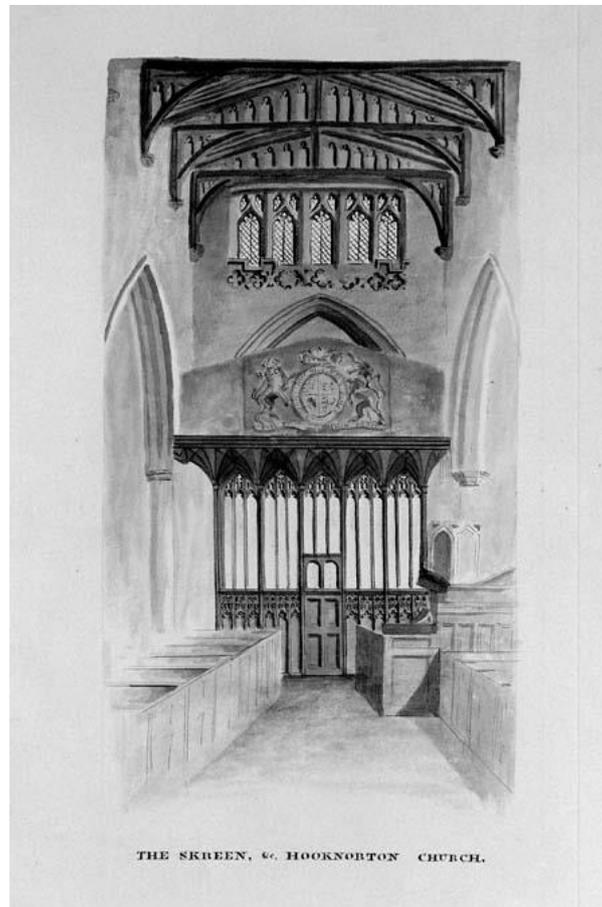
The Puritan Revolution

Such policies were widely suspected as designed to reverse the Reformation, and that suspicion fired the opposition to the Crown that was expressed in the Long Parliament in 1640-1642. The ecclesiastical powers Laud had used to enforce his will were abolished and Laud himself imprisoned. In Hook Norton the Crokers were clearly aligned with the Court but popular sentiment was with the parliamentary

³ Christopher Hill, *The Economic Problems of the Church: from Archbishop Whitgift to the Long Parliament* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1956).

opposition, and virtually all adult males in Hook Norton took the oath it requested swearing to support the Protestant religion in January 1642.

This division helped to produce the Great Civil War, though its impact on religion in Hook Norton is far from clear. Initially the Crokers used their military strength to keep the parish in Royalist (and presumably Laudian) hands, but military reversals put the Roundheads and Puritans in the ascendancy locally by 1644. In this period the Baptists established themselves in Hook Norton, but it is not clear who controlled St Peter's. By 1645 the bishops had been abolished, Laud beheaded, the Anglican Prayer Book banned, and Parliament was trying to find ways of pressing the work of religious reformation through the land. In Hook Norton by



The rood screen and rood loft survived the Reformation and Puritan Revolution in Hook Norton, though the rood (or cross) itself was removed. After the Restoration in 1660 the royal coat of arms was restored and the nave was filled with private box pews.

From a watercolour by George Clarke of Scaldwell, 1840,
in Alfred Beesley's extra illustrated copy of his *History of Banbury*, vol. 6, page 126.

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1651 the Vicar's title was changed to Minister, a term better liked by Puritans; it continued to be used for several decades. Under the Commonwealth and Protectorate the state church did not endeavour to produce uniformity as it allowed freedom of worship for all those "of tender conscience" who wished to gather in their own congregations, as long as they did not use Popish ritual or the Anglican Prayer Book. But throughout the Rood Screen and Loft continued to isolate the chancel from the nave, though that made little difference if the altar stood in front of the Rood Screen.

With the restoration of the monarchy in 1660, the Church of England was restored as the official state church, complete with its bishops and Prayer Book. It was valued for its contribution to political and social stability, but that was produced by making the church subordinate to its lay patrons. Attempts were made to eradicate the Dissenters who had appeared since 1640, but their numbers tended to increase in the parish. The Bishop of Oxford, John Fell, blamed their growth on the inadequacy of the local curate and in 1682 he replaced him with his own protégé. The next year the church was reported as needing "the pulpett, seates, pavement, and glass windows" to be repaired and rebuilt.⁴

Quite what works were done in St Peter's at that time is not clear, but in this period the appearance of the interior of the church changed with the introduction of private pews. According to Miss Dickins, "the richer people had large, square pews, some of them shut in with curtains against the draught of an unwarmed church"; the pews varied greatly in height and size, according to their occupants' rank.⁵ The period of turmoil had resulted in a reaction that respected social rank and authority and created a Church of England marked by bland conservatism. The years before 1660 were now remembered as a warning against the excesses of religious enthusiasm, and some peace was brought by conceding freedom of worship, though not religious equality, to Protestant dissenters in 1689.

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⁴ May Clapinson, ed., *Bishop Fell and Nonconformity*, Oxfordshire Record Society, vol. 52 (1980), xxviii, 38-39.

⁵ Dickins, *Hook Norton*, 118.

References:

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