CATHOLIC DIOCESE OF HEXHAM AND NEWCASTLE

Catholicism in Northumberland and Durham

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Catholicism in Northumberland and Durham: A brief account of our diocesan history 1500 - 1844

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1. Under the Earlier Tudors (1500-1558)

On the threshold of the 16th century the Catholic Church in England was far from being a rusting, obsolete machine ready for the scrapheap. For all its faults, it still engaged the minds and hearts of the nation. Reforms, which strengthened the Church in other European countries during this period might well have saved the English Church, too, had there been time to implement them. Instead, it found itself trapped in a whole series of political and religious upheavals occasioned by the determination of Henry VIII (1509-1547) to find a way of divorcing Catherine of Aragon. Far from having time to put its house in order, the Catholic Church in England soon had no house to speak of. Within three generations this national institution, this “world of monks and masses, of plainsong and pictures” disappeared, leaving the Catholic Faith the precious but publicly ridiculed preserve of a persecuted few.

Cuthbert Tunstall, bishop of Durham (1530-1559) lived long enough to experience most of the changes we need to relate here. Trained as a civil servant, as were most bishops, he was for long periods absent from his diocese on crown business. When, to solve his marital problem, Henry rushed through parliament an Act declaring not the pope but himself to be head of the Church in England, Tunstall opposed him but saved his neck and the necks of the other bishops by attaching the face-saving but meaningless clause “in so far as the law of Christ allows.”. Of the whole episcopal bench John Fisher alone protested. He died on the scaffold a fortnight before Henry’s Lord Chancellor Thomas More met the same fate rather than assent to something so contrary to Catholic tradition.

Henry’s newly acquired power over the Church gave him more than the right to dispense with several wives: it also led to the crown’s enrichment at the expense of the Church. Between 1536 and 1540 the 800 religious houses which peppered the land (on average one for every parish church) were suppressed after a perfunctory visitation. Most were located in the south of England, but even in this sparsely and war-torn area there was a surprising number, the most important of them by far the Benedictine abbey at Durham, which in addition to a school possessed several daughter houses and hospitals. Suppressed in 1539 it became the seat of a new cathedral chapter made up of its form prior as dean and 12 senior ex-monks as canons. Ex-monks also occupied lesser posts. The rest of the monks left to work in parishes or were pensioned off. At this time the region’s largest town Newcastle possessed four friaries, Franciscan, Dominican, Augustinian, and Carmelite. All were suppressed at the beginning of 1539, as was the sole nunnery, a Benedictine foundation.

The seizure of some of these properties in 1536 occasioned two armed insurrections aimed at restoring the former political and church order. The rising began in Yorkshire, but immediately attracted 5,000 men from Durham and 10,000 from Northumberland, nearly half the rebels’ fighting force. When treachery and dissension brought about an end to the rebellion, Henry wreaked terrible vengeance, targeting the poor commoners in particular.

In the city of Durham alone 16 were hanged. From Northumberland Thomas Percy of Alnwick Castle was taken to London for execution, and at York the leader Robert Aske met his death in full view of the Yorkshire gentry. As a result, a mixture of fear, bewilderment and apathy kept the northern Catholics quiet for the next twenty years, despite the growing attack on church doctrine and the ousting of the Latin version of the bible by English translations.

By the time of Henry's death in 1547 the Protestant reformation had swept through many European countries. The king had little sympathy for it, yet surprisingly he had allowed his young son Edward (1547-1553) to be brought up as a Protestant. Utterly convinced of the worth of the new religion, Edward encouraged his advisers to remove every trace of Catholicism from the realm. In an iconoclastic orgy churches throughout the land were stripped of their Catholic insignia. Altars, crucifixes, statues, vestments, plate, paintings and glass were removed. Much was wantonly destroyed, and what remains today probably totals no more than 5% of England's medieval heritage. Zealous Protestant pastors were appointed bishops, and a Protestant form of the Eucharist introduced in 1552. This region fared particularly badly as a result of the radical policy of the bishop who replaced Tunstall at Durham. The latter had blotted his copybook by voting against the less radical eucharistic liturgy of 1549 as well as by opposing a new measure to allow priests to marry. He ended up in the tower of London, spending much of his time writing a Latin treatise in which he vigorously defended Catholic belief in the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist.

A nation discontented with the self-seeking time-servers who surrounded Edward VI and particularly with the extreme radicalism of those now in charge of the Church at first welcomed the accession of Mary Tudor (1553-1558), Catherine of Aragon's daughter and a staunch Catholic. Her zeal to restore the Catholic faith alienated many people. Warned not to try to reclaim the lands and properties of the former religious houses, she turned instead to the revival of the latin Mass. In the north this work was entrusted to Bishop Tunstall, released from prison and re-instated in Durham. With surprising rapidity Mass books, vestments and church plate thought to have been destroyed re-appeared in the churches. The queen's happiest moment came when the two houses of parliament recognised once more the rightful claim of the pope to authority over the English Church after a lapse of twenty-five years. However, Mary, a simple but obstinate woman, again fell foul of public opinion over her desire to marry King Philip of Spain and even more so by her determination to root out the heresy of Protestantism once and for all. Many sincere Protestants were hideously burned at the stake, including Thomas Cranmer who as archbishop of Canterbury since the reign of Henry VIII had largely been responsible for England's twenty-five years of radical religious change. Tunstall assisted in the trials for heresy but did not stay to witness the executions, travelled back north, all too conveniently perhaps, to lead an attack on the Scottish army which was then marauding the border counties.

Much was expected of the new archbishop of Canterbury, Cardinal Reginald Pole. Long exiled on the continent of Europe where he had become familiar with its vigorous Catholic reform movement, he now drew up plans for an extensive and necessary overhaul of the English Church. But his early death - within twenty-four hours of the queen's - meant that much of his intended reform was left on the drawing board. Nevertheless, the relatively little he achieved stood Catholics in good stead during the dark days ahead.

2. During the reign of Elizabeth I (1558-1603)

The daughter of Anne Boleyn and brought up as a Protestant, the new queen had little liking for Catholicism except for its ritual. Politically astute and sensitive to the need to bring an end to the religious warfare which had afflicted England for so long, she attempted to settle matters in her own way. Her settlement of religion of 1559, superficially Catholic in its retention of bishops, vestments, candles and the like, was in reality profoundly Protestant, at the heart of it being a reassertion of the English crown's authority over the Church. After years of episcopal prevarication the Catholic bishops of Mary's reign stood firm. All but one had refused to assist at the queen's coronation, and now, apparently ,all preferred deprivation and imprisonment rather than go against their consciences. To ensure the loyalty of the clergy the queen then ordered a nationwide visitation. Many, following the bishop's example, refused to recognise Elizabeth as head of the Church and were deprived of their benefices. Here in the north resistance seems to have been the strongest. Of the 180 parochial clergy in Durham county 38 absented themselves from the enquiry. Others were deprived, including 6 of the Durham canons and the vicar of Gainford who held the post of regius professor of divinity in the university of Cambridge. He "obstinately refused" to take the oath, was put in prison and died there. In Newcastle the priest at St Nicholas who was also archdeacon of Northumberland lost his benefice and was restricted in his movements, though later he managed to escape to the continent. The short-fall created by these deprivations necessitated the re-instatement of priests who had married in the 1550s and had been dismissed by Mary Tudor.

Here in the always unsettled north isolated from central government the decade 1560-70 actually witnessed a resurgence of Catholicism. Deeply conservative and fearful of any change, people now began to appreciate their traditional faith. When they refused to attend services in the parish churches, they were quietly served by deprived Marian priests and some Scottish priests fleeing their own persecution.. In 1569, pressurised by the gentry, the earls of Westmorland and Northumberland raised the flag of revolt against political and religious change. The rebel army marched on Durham where enthusiastic crowds gathered in the cathedral to celebrate the latin Mass at its restored high altar. Similar scenes occurred elsewhere, for instance at Sedgefield where a crowd estimated between 30 and 80 people dragged the massive stone altar back into place and burned the English bible. The rebel force amounted to about 5,000 foot soldiers and 1,200 horse, a sizeable army but poorly equipped and lacking any clear plan of action. After initial success the rebels lost heart, retreated and disbanded. Westmorland escaped abroad, but Northumberland who had fled to Scotland was there betrayed, imprisoned and later executed. Determined to prevent further insurrection, the government made sure that there was at least one public hanging in every town and village sympathetic to the rebel cause, a total of 600, mostly from the poorer sort of people. In the city of Durham 80 were executed, and 201 from the county's other 109 implicated towns and villages. Noteworthy was the number of clergy cited before the court of high commission at Durham to account for their support of the rebels. Most repented, but some remained defiant, like John Brown, curate at Witton Gilbert. From his own pulpit he confessed publicly that he had consistently misled his congregation by preaching Protestant doctrine. He left the church saying: "Wheresoever you meet me... take me as a stranger." He was later caught and indicted.

An even greater threat to Elizabeth than this northern revival of the 1560s came from the initiative of the exiled Lancashire academic and later priest William Allen to make provision for the training of English priests abroad. His first college opened it doors at Douai in Flanders in 1568. Many of its students were products of the two English universities, and some of them converts to the Faith. In their secret mission to England they were later joined by compatriots who had studied at other English colleges abroad and those who had joined religious communities there, particularly the newly founded Society of Jesus. At first these missioners returned to England not only to minister to the hapless Catholic minority but also to reach out to the rest of the nation in an effort to re-establish the nation's traditional faith. So the clandestine printing and distribution of Catholic and anti-Protestant literature formed an important part of their work. Against these priests the government took an increasingly strong line, culminating in a statute making it treason for them to enter the country with the intention of saying Mass. Of the 450 priests (28 from Durham) which the college at Douai itself provided for England during Elizabeth's reign, it is reckoned that some 122 suffered the fearful fate of being hung, drawn and quartered, the penalty for treason.

Here in the north as elsewhere these missioners were first known as "riding priests", generally on the move and always in secret, consequently it is easier to record their deaths than to give a picture of their activities. Richard Holtby worked here in 1578 before joining the Jesuits. Richard Thirkheld and Richard Kirkman came the following year. The courage of such priests evoked a similar response from the laity. In 1585 a well organised underground network existed to guide priests arriving in the Tyne to different parts of the country. In 1590 its discovery by the authorities meant that four newly ordained priests who arrived by boat were picked up almost at once. Imprisoned at Durham, they were shortly afterwards executed there. Meanwhile the layman George Errington at whose house at South Shields the priests were to have found safe lodging was taken to York gaol where he languished until his equally cruel death in 1596. . John Boste, who was among the forty English martyrs canonised in 1970, worked in Durham and Westmorland from 1581 onwards. Described as the "greatest stag in the forest", he seems to have been a key figure in the distribution of Catholic literature. Furthermore, as he made several visits to Scotland, he may well have been privy to Catholic plans there to oust Elizabeth in favour of the Catholic Mary, Queen of Scots. Captured in 1593 at the Waterhouse (present Esh Winning), he was important enough to be transferred to London for questioning before being brought back physically broken by torture to face execution in Durham. Other priests who worked in this area and were similarly treated include Joseph Lambton and Edward Waterson (Newcastle), John Ingram (Gateshead) and Thomas Pallaser (Durham).

The zealous efforts of such men brought many Catholics to a better knowledge of their faith, and led to such absenteeism from the Anglican services that by 1586 a special exchequer roll, the recusant roll, had to be provided to record fines for non - attendance. The first of these contains as many as 150 Northumbrian Catholics, among them prominent landowners like the Collingwoods, the Greys, the Radcliffes, Widdringtons, Haggerstons, who were convicted in July 1592 and charged £20 for each month's absence from church, a hefty sum, which if paid regularly, could reduce even a wealthy family to poverty. Durham too had its recusants: for example Leonard Hartburn of Stillington., a relative of the priest who had celebrated Mass at Sedgefield during the rebellion of 1569. Also Robert Hodgson of Hebburn, twice mayor of Newcastle, who was convicted with his wife Anne. He died in 1634, his six children staunchly Catholic, two of them becoming priests. Another was William Blakiston, whose lands were seized. His son is known to have been a "church papist", that is, someone who occasionally put in an appearance at the parish church to protect the family's property, . John Claxton of Old Parke who had lost his estates after the 1569 rising was also convicted in 1592 but reported to be in hiding. He is known to have been in Sedberge gaol six years later.

Despite all this heroism - the fines, imprisonment , and execution on a large scale, Elizabeth's long reign ensured the defeat of every effort to restore the Catholic Church in England. Years of compromise, apathy and fear left only a remnant of a once Catholic nation loyal to the Old Faith. By 1603, given the subtlety of government propaganda and a rigorous enforcement of the law the English people had come not only to regard themselves as thorough-going Protestants, but also to hate the name of Catholic. Demonised, disorganised and dispirited, the country's 40,000 Catholics (about 2% of the population), clutched at the single straw available to them, the wild hope of toleration following the accession to the English throne of the son of Mary, the staunchly Catholic Queen of Scots.

3. During the Stuart period - James 1 (1603-25)

James I duly compensated the hard-pressed English Catholics for their support of his claim to the English throne by removing the main threat that hung over them, namely execution. But alarmed at the resurgence of Catholicism which followed this, he introduced new penal legislation, thus provoking a few Catholic hotheads to devise the plot of 1605 to blow up king and parliament.

Here in the north east one of the conspirators, Thomas Percy, a relative and employee of the Earl of Northumberland, was killed whilst resisting arrest, and the earl himself committed to the tower of London where he remained for several years. Some time later two other prominent northern gentlemen, Francis Radcliffe of Dilston and his son-in-law Roger Widdrington of Cartington (alleged to be the most dangerous recusant in Northumberland), were charged with having been accessory to the plot. The case against them was later quietly dropped.

The plot brought such further misery to the Catholic community that the priest Humfrey Sicklemore captured at Corbridge the next year expressed the fear that English Catholics might never be freed from persecution. Others agreed, including the Jesuits who in 1624 testified to continuing persecution especially of the poor.

However, in the rural heartland of the north it would seem that the laws were rarely enforced. None of the 33 Northumbrian Catholics, many of them well-known, summonsed between 1614 and 1617 to the court of the Ecclesiastical High Commission sitting at Durham ever bothered to present themselves. Indeed, we can go further and say that a biblical astuteness (which included the right marriage alliances) along with remoteness from central government and a closeness to those who counted in local government, allowed the Catholic gentry to live in a style to which they long had been accustomed, not only possessing vast estates, but also having the means to improve them.

Of the then leading 18 Northumberland families 12 were Catholic, including the Radcliffes at Dilston and their relatives the Widdringtons of Cartington. Both incurred considerable expense improving their properties during these years, Francis Radcliffe audaciously providing even a separate (and therefore public) chapel in 1615/6. It is said that half of the Northumbrian recusants during James' reign lived in this southern part of Tynedale.

But James' reign also witnessed a falling away of many wealthy Catholics, some of them certainly to prevent the loss of their property. Nevertheless, many remained Catholic at heart, despite their return to politics at national and local level. Sometimes they took steps to see that their children were brought up in the Faith. The pro-Catholic Howard's though mainly courtiers, acquired estates in Northumberland where the number of recusants increased from 150 to 358 during the years 1600-1620. Similar increases were observed in Durham.

However, despite this resurgence, Catholics remained a tiny minority, less than 2% of the total population of the two counties. Demographically they tended to group into pockets away from the towns, where the gentry could provide not only protection but also, in the absence of bishops, spiritual leadership. From Cleveland to Northumberland Catholic gentlemen helped to organise Mass centres. The priests themselves, tired of constant harassment as they moved from place to place, also gravitated to the rural retreats of the gentry to act as their chaplains. By way of exception the more populated region of Tyneside also possessed Mass centres about this time. Dorothy Lawson's new house of 1632 at St Anthony's was built to accommodate more than one priest. Some years later Gateshead House, the new home of the Riddells on the site of the medieval chapel of St Edmund in Gateshead High Street also housed priests. The same can be said of the area around and including Durham city.

Though King James must take some responsibility for the on-going persecution of Catholics, he continued to stop short of the death penalty, if only to further his plans for marriage alliances with the two great Catholic countries of Spain and France. When in 1618 the priest William Southerne who had been working in Newcastle from a room (which doubled up as a chapel) on the upper floor of a house on the quayside was tried and summarily executed, it was done on the orders of the anti-Catholic Lord Sheffield, president of the council of the North whom the king swiftly dismissed from this high office.

4. During the Stuart period - Charles I (1625-49)

Under Charles I (1625-49) Catholics continued to be exploited. In need of money, and faced with a loss of revenues resulting from the mounting arrears of recusancy fines and, in some cases, the impossibility of collecting any money at all, he introduced a procedure of composition. By this recusants were empowered to take out a lease on their forfeited lands and goods (which had not been permitted hitherto) at a reasonable rent. Backdated to 1610, the system continued until the outbreak of the civil war in 1642 and provided him with a regular income. At the same time it helped to lift the financial burden carried by the recusants. 44 Northumberland recusants compounded between 1629 and 1632.

But the hopes of Catholics for other measures of relief were immediately dashed by the parliament's demand in 1625 that the penal laws should be properly enforced. As a result William Richardson of Newburn was summonsed for keeping a Catholic priest in his house:and Richard Ogle of St Nicholas' parish, Newcastle, was brought before the court suspected of being a priest and charged with teaching children Catholic doctrine. At the same time 12 gentlemen, including Sir Edward Radcliffe of Dilston, Roger Widdrington, Richard and George Thirlwall, and Mark and Gilbert Errington of Ponteland, together with 65 other Catholics, had their goods distrained. There followed the capture of the Jesuit John Robinson on his arrival at Newcastle, and that of Henry Morse SJ and a student John Berry travelling together from Newcastle to the continent.

When Charles decided to do without parliament in 1629 the campaign against priests was suspended, the respite allowing an effort to bring order to a disordered community. Bearing in mind that the Catholic hierarchy had been deposed by Queen Elizabeth way back in 1559, Rome's appointment in 1623 of a single bishop to govern the whole of England, Wales and Scotland might seem rather belated, but opposition from the gentry, the Jesuits and some of the secular priests quickly led to the new bishop's departure. Nevertheless, he left behind him a Chapter (i.e. a priests' council) which functioned in practice as the governing body of the Church for many years.

The 12 priests (including 2 Jesuits) working in Northumberland and 16 in Durham came under the direction of a vicar-general for the north of England, Cuthbert Trollop of Durham. Though the secular priests for the most part continued to live in the houses of the gentry, following the creation of an

English province in 1623 and disillusioned by their treatment by the gentry, the Jesuits throughout the country preferred to work with the urban poor, many of whom they converted to the Faith. At the other end of the scale, the gentry's drift from the Church continued, despite the additional pastoral care supplied by the Benedictines and Franciscans. Here in the north the Ogles, Carrs, and Forsters, listed as recusants in 1607, do not appear in the 1627 list of compositions. Another northern gentleman who conformed at this time was Nicholas Thornton of Netherwitton.

Compositions did not protect Catholics from other offences, of course. To add to their burden, when civil war became imminent, they were required to make a donation towards the expenses of the royal army.

Despite this, when the war broke out, Catholics invariably supported the king, and many fought for him.Local casualties included Sir John Clavering who died a prisoner in London, his heir Robert who raised a regiment of horse and of foot, which he commanded with great success until his death from fever, his brothers who suffered imprisonment and escaped abroad. Gerard Salvin, lieutenant general of a regiment of foot was killed at Northallerton, Benedict Collingwood at Naseby in 1645. Sir Edward Widdrington, forced to leave his house at Cartington, returned to find that the invading Scots who had already wreaked havoc on Catholic property in 1640 had done a further £8,000 damage to his.

It was about this time that two Jesuit priests were captured in our region. In July 1644 Ralph Corby was taken at Hamsterley in Durham and executed at Tyburn. Of a very religious family, he had spent much of his life as chaplain to the Forcers of Harber (Harbour) House, Wearside. Henry Morse, returning from a sick call on the Durham-Westmorland border was arrested by parliamentary soldiers, shipped from Newcastle to London and died at Tyburn 1 February 1645.

5. The Protectorate 1649-1660

During this era of republicanism Catholics continued to suffer for their beliefs. The new Act of 1652 exacting an oath repudiating essential Catholic doctrines affected influential gentry in particular, threatening them with seizure and sale of their lands if they failed to take the oath, but those less well off could have a percentage of their property compounded and be ordered to quit the country.

In 1655 400 Northumbrian recusants, men and women, refused to take this oath. In 1656 over 30 recusants in the same county had their estates sequestrated, and some of them faced the further charge of delinquency, that is, having fought for the royalist cause. Most belonged to the area between the Cheviots and Rothbury Forest. They included Cuthbert Collingwood of Eslington, Sir Edward Widdrington of Cartington, and Edward Fenwick of Shortflatt near Capheaton.

The sole redeeming feature of this period seems to have been that after 1654 no more priests were executed. Surprisingly enough, Oliver Cromwell himself may well have seen to this, for he showed himself a lot more tolerant towards English Catholics than he did towards the Irish, whom he hated for political, not religious reasons.

6. The Reign of Charles II (1660-1685)

Already widely known in exile as a Catholic sympathiser and resolved on a policy of religious toleration, Charles II on his accession issued a declaration in favour of liberty of conscience for non-Anglicans. Anglican-Cavalier intransigence prevented this happening, and even ten years later when he tried again, hoping to stay the laws against the Catholics and allow them to worship in their private houses, orchestrated opposition led to the passing of the Test Act of 1673 which aimed to force Catholics, in particular the king's brother James, from civil office and military service by imposing on them an oath repudiating the doctrine of Transubstantiation.

In addition the old test of the refusal to attend the Anglican Sunday service as a basis for conviction for recusancy was revived,together with the £20 a month fine. There is a list for Durham County of some 1,200 people of all classes convicted in April 1674.

Worse was to come, however, when the untrustworthy Titus Oates made his allegations in 1678 about another Popish Plot. Massive hysteria gripped the land. The crisis led to the execution of 24 Catholics, including 17 priests and the Irish Archbishop of Armagh Oliver Plunket. Orders were given to compel all papists to take the oaths or give security for good behaviour.

The 1680 list of Durham County (excluding the city) names 362 of these, of whom 135 took the oath and 27 who were imprisoned for refusing it. Particularly targeted were the Jesuits, identified by Whig propaganda as the "political arm of Catholicism".

7. James II (1685-88)

Moderate opinion eventually prevailed, the Whigs fell from office, and following the lifting of the ban on James' accession, Catholic confidence began to recover. With his accession prospects were bright indeed, reflected in a spate of Catholic publishing and the return of the Latin Mass in all its splendour at the king's chapel in Whitehall and elsewhere in newly built churches.

Newcastle's first known Catholic chapel opened its doors in White Hart Yard (Bigg Market) in the first year of James' reign, and a public Mass was celebrated in the presence of the town's dignitaries in the course of 1688. This euphoria quickly evaporated in the face of widespread opposition to James' irresponsible attempt to resurrect a Catholic England overnight. Deaf to counsels of moderation even from Rome, he used his alleged dispensing power to admit Catholics wholesale to offices from which they were debarred by law.

When the Anglican bishops refused as a matter of conscience to have read in the churches a declaration granting full civil rights to members of other denominations, but plainly intended to promote Catholics, he imprisoned the archbishop of Canterbury and six other bishops in the Tower and brought them to trial on a charge of seditious libel. This action lost him the loyalty of even his natural supporters, the Tories, and encouraged the anti-Catholic Whig aristocrats to appeal to William of Orange to help rid England of its rightful ruler. James eventually abandoned resistance and fled to the continent, providing parliament with a tailor-made though probably illegal opportunity of declaring William III and his wife Mary, James’ daughter, joint rulers.

Though the king had acted in good conscience, English Catholics now paid for his excessive zeal. In the anti-Catholic rioting which followed James' departure both the Newcastle chapel and that of the Jesuits in Durham city were virtually destroyed. During the next ten years a host of measures passed through parliament excluding Catholics from the throne, from government, administration, and from the armed services. Other prohibitions such as owning or purchasing land and practising law were held in reserve should they step out of line.

Despite James' abysmal failure to restore their glory days, Catholics did reap one lasting benefit from his reign, which was a return of episcopal authority of a sort. He personally preferred a return to the old diocesan structure, but was persuaded by Rome to settle for a single vicar apostolic, a bishop appointed by and directly answerable to the pope in all matters.

The new vicar apostolic immediately conducted a thorough and arduous visitation of the whole English Catholic community. which bore fruit shortly before James' flight to the continent in 1688 in an increase of vicariates from one to four: London, Midland, Western and North, each governed by its own vicar apostolic, an arrangement which continued for 150 years.

8. The 18th Century (i)

Churchmen like Bishop Challoner of London who lived through this period thought it an age of stagnation and even regression. Certainly there were further defections among the Catholic nobility and gentry and on occasion horrendously violent outbursts against Catholics, but it now seems that the slight but steady growth in the Catholic community from the Restoration period onwards actually continued through that of the Hanoverians particularly marked in the new urban centres created by the century's passion for commerce and industry. It is true that the first half of the century witnessed two important rebellions in support of the Catholic Stuarts, but only the Catholic (and Anglican) gentry of Lancashire and north-east England took part, costing some of them their lives as well as their property, like the Radcliffes of Dilston.

It is also true that new anti-Catholic measures were introduced and old ones revived, but the pragmatic Hanoverian anti-Catholic Whig regime saw little point in enforcing them whilst the majority of the Catholic community refused to be drawn into rebellion. The nation was in fact at last slowly learning the virtue of toleration, a doctrine expounded by the philosophers of the day. This more liberal spirit, matched by a certain discretion among Catholics, seems to have given Catholics a chance to put down deeper roots. This is not to say that the nation as a whole had ceased to harbour strong anti-Catholic resentment. The 1715 and 1745 rebellions proved how easily it could be revived. But on the whole it remained below the surface. Given the changed conditions it is not surprising to learn that during the century Catholics in England increased from 60,000 to 80.000, many of them converts.

Though the time was ripe for Catholics to be relieved of their heavy yoke, the first step was quite unexpected, arising as it did from the need of the English government to recruit Scottish Catholic highlanders to fight against the American colonists. Indeed, it proved to be premature. Though the first Relief Act of 1778 merely repealed the penal laws introduced under William III, it led, as some had feared, to the 1780 violent outbreak of Protestant bigotry known as the Gordon riots, during which the London embassy and other chapels were wrecked and Catholic houses looted and destroyed. But the more liberal attitude won the day, and a measure of sympathy for Catholics brought about further easement for them in 1791 when they were allowed to have their own duly registered, unobtrusive chapels as well as their own schools. Catholic morale received a further boost when events in France forced their compatriots in schools and religious houses under French jurisdiction to seek sanctuary on home ground, benefiting from the enormous good will which Protestant England had already shown towards French Catholic émigrés clerical and lay fleeing persecution. The tide really had begun to turn.

In regard to our northern counties, Catholics probably numbered no more than just over 2,000 at the beginning of the century with concentrations in Durham (several Mass centres within the city and its immediate neighbourhood), Stella, and south Tynedale. Gateshead was provided for by the Riddell and other families, Newcastle, after the destruction of its 1685 chapel had its centre in the Nuns (again Riddell property). Though most missions were still tied to the houses of the gentry, as time went on independent missions were established, beginning with Newhouse (present Esh Winning) endowed by the Smythe family of Esh as far back as in 1651, but with no resident priest until the 1690s. Later important centres of Catholicism like Sunderland, Stockton and Darlington still depended (as did lesser populated places) on occasional visits from the established Mass centres like Durham.

9. The 18th Century (ii)

During the 1715 Jacobite rebellion no-one of consequence from Durham joined the rebels and very few from Northumberland. After its collapse one of the northern leaders, Lord Widdrington was transported, and an example was made of the other, the young Earl of Derwentwater, an unwilling participant, publicly beheaded on London's tower hill. Both lost their extensive estates.

Though public opinion prevented a mass slaughter of the other rebels, mobs ransacked several Catholic houses. Rioting mobs descended on Catholic chapels, those of the Jesuits in Gateshead, and the secular chapels in Newcastle, Durham, and Hardwick Hall were all savagely attacked as well as newly acquired property in Sunderland's Warren Street, where they pulled down the altar and publicly burned the service books.

The reasonably accurate 1767 survey of papists provided by the Anglican churchmen gives us the names and descriptions of 25 secular and religious priests (actually there were 28) working here. Between them they were responsible for the 2,100+ Catholics in Northumberland and the 2,700+ in Durham, a considerable increase on the estimated number at the beginning of the century. By this time Sunderland had a Mass centre and Birtley a new chapel (1746).

At Stockton thanks to an endowment Mass was provided from 1743 on three Sundays of the month and three days during the week. Newcastle acquired a Jesuit chapel in 1746 at the very time that rioters forced the removal of the secular mission from the Nuns into property in Bells Court off Newgate Street belonging to the coal-owning Silvertop family. Purchased by the Church in 1747, Mass was said there until 1798 when St Andrew's in Pilgrim Street was built. During these years Northumberland saw the opening of new missions at Cheeseburn Grange (1725), Bellingham (1741), Alnwick (1751) Thropton (1753), and Minsteracres (1765), the home of the Silvertops.

We cannot leave the 18th century without mentioning three developments, all important for the future. The first was in regard to Catholic schooling. Despite harsh penalties many post-Reformation Catholics were prepared to seek a Catholic education for their children, even sending them abroad, though that was against the law, too.

England itself saw the steady growth of clandestine Catholic schools from the beginning of the 17th century and by the 18th they were often openly tolerated. By mid-century a "select academy for youth of the higher class" existed somewhere in Northumberland, run by the Jesuits. In the same county a Catholic schoolmaster taught at Netherwitton in 1680. Under James II new schools opened at Durham (boarding) and in Newcastle. During the l8th century as many as fifteen Dames' schools flourished in the two counties.

The second development was the establishment in County Durham of the northern successor to the English College at Douai after its suppression by the French government in 1793. Initially housed at Tudhoe Academy (founded by Rev. Arthur Storey c. 1787), the Douai students were soon transferred to Crook Hall near Consett, from where a further exodus would take them in 1808 to Ushaw College, which still continues to train priests.

The third development involved the re-establishment of communities of women religious in our region after a lapse of over 250 years, until the end of the 18th century the only post-Reformation nuns in England were those belonging to the Institute of the Blessed Virgin Mary (Mary Ward Sisters) which had convents and schools at Hammersmith and York. From Lierre in 1794 came exiled Carmelites at the invitation of Sir John Lawson of Brough to a house in the vicinity of Bishop Auckland, from where they moved to Cocken Hall in 1804, then to Cockerton Hall on the outskirts of a much smaller Darlington in 1830. Darlington also attracted the Poor Clares of Rouen, who when they first arrived back from France had been given sanctuary by Sir Barnaby Haggerston in Northumberland.

Little need be said about the vast number of refugee priests whom the British government enthusiastically welcomed at this time. The staggering number who were settled here in the north merely reflected what was happening elsewhere in the country: between 150 and 200 in Sunderland (1796), 100 in Berwick, 30 at Heddon on the Wall (Frenchmen's Row), 15 in the half finished church house at Brooms. Their impact was however minimal. Most of them tended to stay in diocesan groups and kept to themselves. Yet the nine who remained behind when the rest returned to France in 1802 proved to be a valuable resource at a time of interruption to the usual flow of native priests.

10. The 19th Century

The first twenty-five years of the 19th century were marked by a fierce struggle, led by the Irish, for a recognition of Catholic civil and political rights. Almost every year of the new century the English parliament debated the issue before the Act of Emancipation was passed in 1829. The nine Catholic peers of the realm immediately took their seats in the Lords and five Catholic MPs won seats in the next year's elections.

Meanwhile, with an expanding Catholic population which included the first significant number of Irish, new chapels were being opened. Though a number of gentry took exception to the clergy deserting their country houses to work in the new industrial centres, most were very generous in raising money and creating endowments for support of the new missions.

In 1800 Catholics in the six northern counties numbered around 80,000, with well over half in Lancashire. By 1839 the total had increased to over 250,000 with 190 missions. By 1850 the chapels numbered 242. This rapid expansion in the north was mirrored elsewhere in the land, and it led in 1840 to a doubling of the four vicariates, the former northern district being split into three: Lancashire Yorkshire, and a new northern vicariate comprising Northumberland, Durham, Cumberland and Westmorland.

Our own relatively rural and sparsely populated region did not in general reflect the rapid growth taking place elsewhere. In 1830, Northumberland had 18 mission centres, and Durham 12. Nine years later the figures were 16 and 13 respectively, with new chapels in Newcastle St Andrew's (1798), Esh (1799), Brooms (1802), Croxdale (1807), North Shields (1821), Hutton House (1822), Darlington (1826), Berwick (1828), and a replacement at Durham (1827). Chapels built in the twenty years 1830-50 (many of them in continuity with an established mission) included Hexham (1830), Stella (1831), Houghton (1832/7), Sunderland (1835), Alnwick (1836), Cowpen (1840), Swinburne and Longhorsley (1841), Birtley (1843), Newcastle St Mary's (1844), Bishop Auckland (1845), Barnard Castle (1847) and Wolsingham (1849).

Not surprisingly, the existing machinery of Church government, even with a doubling of vicariates was seen by many as totally inadequate, and pressure mounted for a restoration; an organisation headed not by vicars apostolic but by bishops in charge of dioceses. When Rome gave in reluctantly and restored the hierarchy in 1850 its worst fears were immediately realised. Anti-Catholic bigotry, led by the London based 'Times' burst out all over the country in the wake of an insensitive letter addressed to the nation by the new archbishop of Westminster, Cardinal Nicholas Wiseman. Locally, the “Newcastle Journal” ranted on for months about "self-seeking" Romanism, but by 1852 passion was spent and the newly appointed bishops able to get on with the dull, grinding work of organising their new dioceses.

Bishop William Hogarth, who had been the vicar apostolic of the new northern district, became the first bishop of Hexham (Newcastle was added to the title in 1861). He continued to live in Darlington where he had built the church and because he disliked Newcastle looked to building his cathedral in Hexham, an ancient episcopal see. Better judgement prevailed, however, and the 1844 Pugin St Mary’s in Newcastle became the cathedral church of the new diocese, occupying what was to become a prime site facing the imposing railway station built a few years later.

St Mary’s Cathedral, built in 1844