

THE CITY OF LONDON'S ROLE AS THE 'SECULAR ARM' IN THE BURNING OF HERETICS

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This paper will concentrate on events in the City of London during the reigns of Henry VIII, Edward VI and Mary I, focusing on the years 1529 to 1558. Because this was the time of early Protestantism, it is inevitable that the majority of the victims of burning were themselves so-called 'reformers' or supporters of what was known at the time as the 'new learning'. But as 'heresy' was so closely aligned at this time with politics, and what constituted heresy was itself subject to constant change, a simple 'Protestant/Catholic' divide cannot be assumed and in many ways it would be anachronistic to think in these terms. The reality was more complex, as the few examples I am able to present in 20 minutes may help to make clear. And I must stress that, in this short paper, I can only skim over what is actually an enormous subject.

Of the burnings which took place in England between 1529 and 1558 by far the largest number occurred in one small area of London, specifically (West) Smithfield. Of the 288 people estimated to have been burnt for heresy during the five-year reign of Mary Tudor, 48 burned in Smithfield. Some 17 people suffered the same fate under Henry VIII, as did two 'Anabaptists' (extremists whom even Protestants regarded as heretics) during the brief reign of Edward VI.

On the wall of the Great Hall of Guildhall there is a commemorative tablet, headed: 'A list of some important trials held in this hall'. The very first entry on the list commemorates 'Anne Askew: a protestant martyr [who] was tried in 1546 for heresy. Afterwards she was tortured on the rack in the Tower of London, carried in a chair to Smithfield and burnt aged twenty-five.'

Anne, a young gentlewoman from Lincolnshire, underwent her so-called 'trial' at Guildhall on 28 June 1546 (so almost exactly 470 years ago). This was the culmination of a long sequence of questioning and the result was a foregone conclusion. She was arraigned for heresy before judges (there was no jury) comprising an overwhelming array of 'the great and the good': the Lord Mayor, the Duke of Norfolk, the Master of the King's Household, the bishops of London and Worcester, the two Chief Justices of the King's Bench and Common Pleas, the Chief Baron of the Exchequer, the Master of the Rolls and the Recorder of London.

On the day before the burning, the City Corporation approved the building of:

a substantial stage... against tomorrow in Smithfield for the King's Councillors,

*[the] Lord Mayor and [the] Aldermen to sit in at the execution of Anne Askew and the other heretics which shall then be burned at the costs of this City'*¹

The dignitaries who attended the burning, in addition to the Lord Mayor and Aldermen, included the Lord Chancellor, the Duke of Norfolk, other members of the Privy Council and a great number of lords and noblemen. Anne had been so broken on the rack that she was unable to stand or walk, and had to be carried in a chair to the site of her execution.

So why was the City of London Corporation involved in this, and other similar deaths? An enormous contributory factor to the motivation of everyone involved in the execution of heretics—from judges and officiating sheriffs to onlookers—must have been fear. This was a time when conformity was enforced, and to be seen to be, or even to be suspected of being, on the wrong side could be—literally—fatal. And then this was how heresy had been dealt with for centuries. In 1215 the Fourth Lateran Council, summoned by Pope Innocent III, passed a declaration that stated: 'there is one Universal Church of the Faithful, outside of which there is absolutely no salvation'². Canon 3 of this Council endorsed 'due punishment' for heretics to be carried out by the 'secular arm'³.

A word deriving from the Greek, 'heresy' originally meant merely 'choice', but by the Middle Ages it had come to mean 'wrong choice', especially in matters of religion. In England the death penalty for heresy was made official in 1401, during the reign of Henry IV, when Parliament enacted a heresy law, known as *De haeretico comburendo* ('On the burning of the heretic'). This statute stipulated that anyone accused of heresy could be arrested by officers of the law or by the diocesan bishop, examined by the Church and, if deemed guilty and refusing to abjure, or relapsing after abjuration, handed back to the secular authorities for punishment. That punishment was spelled out: the secular authorities should arrange for the convicted heretics 'before the people in an high place ... to be burnt, that such punishment may strike fear into the minds of others'⁴.

So it can be argued that, in being involved in the burning of heretics, the City Corporation was merely acting in accordance with the law. For in the City of London, the 'secular arm' was—and arguably still is—the Corporation, more specifically the Lord Mayor and the Sheriffs.

And then there were the political factors.

Under the reigns of the Tudor monarchs, heresy was always a matter not only of doctrine and belief but of politics. And one of the great difficulties for those involved in policing heresy, including the City authorities, was that political change invariably meant change in what actually constituted heresy. It is no exaggeration to say that what was judged heretical one year might be considered orthodoxy the next, and vice versa.

A particularly topical example is that of Thomas Becket, whose relic has recently been venerated at the church of St Magnus the Martyr. When James Bainham, a lawyer of the Middle Temple, was tried for heresy in April 1532, one of the accusations levelled at him was that he had declared St Thomas Becket to have been ‘a thief and murderer’ and he did not deny this, elaborating on his opinion that ‘St Thomas of Canterbury was a murderer, and if he did not repent him of his murder, he was rather a devil in hell, than a saint in heaven’. Only six years later, far from it being heresy to inveigh against Thomas Becket, it would become compulsory to do so. This example of an archbishop who in life had resisted his monarch’s authority and in death had continued to triumph over him could hardly be expected to find favour with Henry VIII after his split from Rome and his subjugation of the English clergy. In June 1538 Thomas Becket was posthumously put on trial, judgment being given against him that ‘in his life time he disturbed the realm, and his crimes were the cause of his death’. No longer was he to be called a martyr, his relics were to be publicly burnt, and ‘the treasures of his shrine confiscated to the King’. But in 1532, Bainham’s low opinion of this popular London saint could only contribute to his own condemnation.

James Bainham was burnt at the stake in Smithfield on 30 April that year, and prominent among the officers at the burning was the Town Clerk, William Pavier, who joined the onlookers in abusing the victim, calling him ‘thou heretic’ and crying out: ‘Set fire to him and burn him!’ A little over a year later, Pavier himself was dead, having hanged himself in his chamber, before an image of the crucified Christ, in May 1533. His reasons for committing suicide, thereby depriving himself not only of life on earth but of any possibility of salvation in the life to come (according to the beliefs of the time), are unclear. Highly conservative in his own beliefs, he appears to have been horrified at the signs that the king was proving sympathetic to certain reformist ideas; in addition, his official position as overseer of the burnings seems to have unhinged him.

Politics rather than, or at least as well as, doctrine as a motive for burning is also evident in the sad case of Friar John Forest who, at the age of 17, had entered the monastery of Observant Franciscans at Greenwich (the Observant wings of the various monastic orders being those which adhered rigidly to the letter of their Rules, rejecting the perceived laxity of modern times). By the early 1530s Forest was a senior figure at the community at Greenwich, as well as a regular preacher at Paul’s Cross, the outdoor pulpit in the grounds of St Paul’s Cathedral and a central stage for the religious arguments of the time.

Members of the Observant Franciscans, who had close links to the monarchy, were quick to become embroiled in the controversy over the king’s ‘great matter’—that of his desired divorce from Katherine of Aragon and how it might be achieved, a result of which was the English Church’s split from

Rome. There is a tradition that John Forest was Katherine of Aragon's confessor, though there is no reliable evidence to support this. But he, like a number of fellow Observant Franciscans, was—and was known to be—opposed to the king's divorce and for this he was denounced in a series of letters to Thomas Cromwell, and in 1534, the year the Act of Supremacy was passed, confirming the king as supreme head of the Church of England, Forest was banished to a monastery in the north of the country.

But four years later he was back in London, at the Greyfriars convent in Newgate Street, and again arousing the attention of Thomas Cromwell, this time through his conservative teaching in the confessional. By March or early April 1538 Forest was under arrest, and a decision was made to try him for heresy. The principal charge against him was that of identifying the Catholic Church of the creed (the line which says 'I believe in the holy Catholic church') with the Church of Rome. He was convicted and ordered to abjure his opinions at Paul's Cross. Despite initially agreeing to do so, when it came to it, Forest refused to read the recantation, thereby laying himself open to the fate of relapsed heretics, death by burning.

Forest's execution took place at Smithfield on 22 May, in the presence of a crowd of thousands, including the Lord Chancellor, Cromwell, Archbishop Cranmer, the Dukes of Norfolk and Suffolk, the Earls of Essex and Hertford, the Bishop of London, the Lord Mayor and the sheriffs. The elderly friar was dragged the short distance from Newgate to Smithfield on a hurdle, dressed in his Franciscan habit which by now was in tatters, and bound hand and foot.

There are various versions of Forest's death, during which he appears more or less heroic and saintly or abject and frightened, depending on the viewpoint of the reporter. Possibly he was all of these things at once. According to the Spanish chronicler Garzias, Forest crossed himself and said, 'Gentlemen, deal with my body as you wish.' He was then removed from the platform where he had been standing and led to where he was to be burnt. His habit was pulled off, a chain was tied around his waist, and he was hoisted up, suspended by the middle, pushed into a swinging position by soldiers with halberds. He had asked for his hands to be untied, and they were. Before being heaved into position, he is reported to have said: 'Neither fire, nor faggot, nor scaffold shall separate me from thee, O Lord.'⁵

The actual burning was indescribably excruciating, even those chroniclers wishing to emphasise Friar Forest's courage and sanctity unable to disguise the fear and contortions of the old man, his instinctive attempts to avoid the flames. 'Then,' wrote Garzias:

they began to set fire underneath him, and as it reached his feet he drew them up a little, but directly afterwards let them down again, and he began to burn. The

*holy man beat his breast with his right hand, and then raised both his hands to heaven and said many prayers in Latin.*⁶

A strong wind kept blowing the flames to one side, and the fire kept dying down. In the end the chain may have been lowered, so that the poor sufferer fell into the flames and finally died.

Friar Forest was an old man, but heresy cases very often involved the young, whether educated young lawyers who had first encountered the 'new learning' at the universities, or apprentices, for whom in the early years of the Protestant reformation, attending sermons seems to have been a particularly popular, if unlikely, form of entertainment. Such activities provoked as much suspicion among the authorities as, say, the Occupy protest camp did in our own day.

The dangers of loose talk and subsequent denunciation are well illustrated by the story of an 18-year-old apprentice, Richard Wilmot, whose misadventures occurred towards the end of the reign of Henry VIII, in the same summer as Anne Askew's trial and execution. Wilmot worked in a shop in Bow Lane, and was a supporter of the reformist preacher, Dr Crome, rector of St Mary Aldermary, who had pleased his Protestant friends by preaching a 'recantation' sermon in such an ambiguous manner that it served more to emphasise his beliefs than to abjure them. Wilmot ill-advisedly got into a heated discussion with a customer, when his master was out, over Crome's views, and was backed up in his opinions by another young apprentice, Thomas Fairfax. The upshot was that both young men were summoned to explain themselves before the Lord Mayor.

The complicating factor for the City in this case was that the two apprentices and their masters were connected to the Drapers' Company, and so the authorities found themselves trying to manage a delicate balancing act, needing to demonstrate to the higher authorities, such as the Privy Council, that they could control their own apprentices while avoiding damaging the reputation and commercial interests of an important Livery Company. The Wardens of the Drapers were therefore enlisted in the damage limitation exercise and they accompanied the Lord Mayor when he went to report on the case to the Privy Council and Bishop Stephen Gardiner. Kneeling before the bishop, the petitioners succeeded in getting permission for the two apprentices to be whipped in the Company's Hall, rather than risking the name of the Drapers being tarnished by the ignominy of a public punishment.

The whipping was itself horribly brutal and led to permanent injury, but at least the two young men had escaped burning. Some of their fellow apprentices, including Andrew Huet (an apprentice tailor burnt on 4 July 1533) and Richard Mekins (burnt at the age of only 15 on 30 July 1541), lacking such influential connections, had not been so fortunate.

Pressure was directly exerted on the City authorities to take action against heretics at various times throughout this period, and never more strongly than shortly after the accession of Mary I, in the summer of 1553. This was at the time of one of those reversals of doctrine and practice which must have so unsettled the population, not to mention the clergy and other officials who had to implement the changes. Mary Tudor was proclaimed queen at the Cross in Cheapside on 19 July, and the threat to the Protestant reforms that had been introduced during the brief reign of Edward VI (1547 to 1553) was apparent almost immediately, Mary being determined to reconcile the Church in England with Rome as soon as possible. For the public, the first signs that the old ways had returned were the release and reinstatement of the bishops imprisoned under Edward.

On Sunday 13 August the newly reinstated Bishop of London, Edmund Bonner, was present at Paul's Cross for a sermon given by the leading conservative preacher and one of Queen Mary's chaplains, Gilbert Bourne. The attack Bourne mounted on the reforms of the previous reign led to a serious commotion—it became known as the Paul's Cross riot—and a dagger was thrown at Bourne, missing him but hitting the post of the pulpit. Henry Machyn, the chronicler and parish clerk of Holy Trinity the Less, who recorded so many of the public events and ceremonies of Mary's reign, describes the 'great uproar and shouting at [Bourne's] sermon, as it were like mad people, what young people and women as ever was heard as hurly-burly, and casting up of caps.' The Lord Mayor and Aldermen, who were in attendance, had some difficulty dispersing the crowd, and Bishop Bonner had to be led through St Paul's to safety.

Following this event, there was much anger on the part of the queen and the Privy Council against the City authorities for having allowed matters to get so out of hand. The City was in crisis, as is clear from the chronicler Wriothesley's account:

This business was so heinously declared to the Queen and her Council, that my Lord Mayor and Aldermen were sent for to the Queen's Council to the Tower the 14 and 15 of August, and it was sore laid to their charge, that the liberties of the City had like to have been taken away from them, and to depose the Lord Mayor, straightly charging the Mayor and Aldermen to make a direct answer to them on Wednesday the 16 of August whether they would rule the City in peace and good order, or else they would set other rulers over them.⁷

Faced with such a threat, the City Fathers were galvanised into action (as one could imagine they might be today) and 'my Lord Mayor caused a proclamation to be made in the City, that if any person could bring knowledge who threw the dagger at the preacher on Sunday, at Paul's Cross, should have £5 for his labour'⁸. Steps were immediately taken against some of those held responsible for the uproar at Paul's Cross, including John Rogers, former vicar

of St Sepulchre without Newgate and a prebendary of St Paul's who was placed under house arrest and later became the first Protestant of Mary's reign to be burnt in Smithfield, and another City cleric, the rector of St Ethelburga within Bishopsgate, who was nailed to the pillory by his ear on 21 August.

After the burning of John Rogers on 4 February 1555, there were 47 more Smithfield burnings to come in Mary's reign. Though the mass burnings of heretics came to an end with Mary's death, burning for the 'crime' of heresy continued sporadically, the last such burning to take place in England occurring in 1612, when Elizabeth's successor, James I, had two Antitrinitarians burnt at the stake.

The account of the suicide of Town Clerk William Pavier, referred to earlier, given by the nineteenth-century historian James Anthony Froude ends with the reflection:

*God, into whose hands he threw himself, self-condemned in his wretchedness, only knows the agony of that hour. Let the secret rest where it lies, and let us be thankful for ourselves that we live in a changed world.*⁹

I think, looking back on the involvement of our City forebears with the burning of heretics, we can only echo that sentiment.

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General note: I have also made use of the excellent online resource of The Unabridged Acts and Monuments Online or TAMO (HRI Online Publications, Sheffield, 2011). Available from: <http://www.johnfoxe.org>