The Pilgrimage of Grace in Beverley and the East Riding

Report on the talks for Beverley and South Cave U3A Local History groups, 2019/20

“Lazy, arrogant, thin-skinned, autocratic, vengeful, paranoid, narcissistic... naturally fickle with a short attention span”. Not descriptions of a modern populist leader but of a Tudor monarch whose actions triggered the Reformation: Henry V11. The Pilgrimage of Grace was a rebellion in the North which is eerily reminiscent of the political cataclysms over Brexit in this country. A schism of nationalism versus internationalism, in which families were divided, where loyalties crossed class boundaries, and the English and Scots were at war as usual. The Pilgrimage of Grace was a battle not just for hearts and minds, but for people’s souls as well, in an age of social conservatism, deference and universal faith. The largest rebellion in Tudor times, it very nearly succeeded. If it had, it would certainly not have been the footnote in history it is today.

In years to come, historians may well be baffled about the variety of motivations and emotions that in our time is tearing us apart, over issues about which most people previously had barely a thought. Likewise, historians of the Pilgrimage are unable to agree on its causes, only that they were many, and varied from place to place, and family to family.

This presentation attempts to describe some of the events of these times in a local context, especially in relation to the effects of the Pilgrimage on the fate of Beverley and its surrounding landscape.

Why it happened, and why here

At the dawn of 1536, Thomas Cromwell’s astronomer told him it would be an uneventful year. How wrong he was. In January, Queen Katharine of Aragon died; Henry fell from his horse in a jousting accident, possibly causing brain damage which might just explain some of his consequent erratic behaviour; and this event could have contributed to his wife, Anne Boleyn, miscarrying her fourth child, a boy. By May she was dead too, beheaded after probably trumped-up charges of adultery, to make way for a successor, Jane Seymour. Henry was desperate to secure a male heir for the succession. One of the great ironies of Tudor times was that it was considered inconceivable and unnatural that a woman should rule, until two did. By October 1536 the North was aflame with beacons raising rebellion. And as Hull historian Helen Good points out, the harvest was over and the populace had ‘time on their hands.’

The tomb of Katharine of Aragon in Peterborough Cathedral

The year before, in July 1535, two notables had lost their heads for opposing the king’s divorce and his Acts of Supremacy and Succession of 1534. These declared him head of the church and his daughter Mary illegitimate. One notable was a son of Beverley, Bishop John Fisher of Rochester. He was made a cardinal by the Pope shortly before his death, the dispatch of the red hat probably sealing his death warrant. Fisher had been Henry’s tutor, his grandmother Margaret Beaufort’s close confidante and chaplain, and Catherine of Aragon’s confessor.
Fisher opposed the supremacy, although he was critical of corruption in the church, but implacably opposed the divorce, and died a martyr for his beliefs. He was beheaded and may have been spared hanging, drawing and quartering because Henry still held a modicum of sentimentality for his old tutor. His head, on a spike on Tower Bridge, was chucked into the Thames two weeks later to make way for another head of a ‘martyr’, the more famous Chancellor Thomas More.

Thomas More, by Hans Holbein (Ferens Art Gallery)

Both More and Fisher were sanctified in 1935 by the Catholic Church. One wonders why John Fisher is not more celebrated in Beverley today. His links with St John’s College, Cambridge, remain still, with local scholarships to the college, and he was an important figure in Tudor England. Erasmus said of him "He is the one man at this time who is incomparable for uprightness of life, for learning and for greatness of soul."

The site of John Fisher’s house in Beverley, Keldgate

Henry V111 was a spendthrift. He spent fortunes on foreign wars and displays of opulence and both taxed his people and debased the coinage to pay for these. He inevitably eyed up the wealth of the church. In the country as a whole about a quarter of the landed wealth lay with the church, but in Yorkshire and Lincolnshire the church held three times the land of the crown and nobility, reflecting not just the church’s power but its role in everyday lives and the economy of our region. Beverley was held by the Archbishop of York.

Tudor hold on The North was still tenuous. Loyalties changed sides regularly during the Wars of the Roses, which had ended just fifty years before, and the throne was insecure. “England had long been mad and scarred herself” wrote Shakespeare in Richard 111. With no standing army, kings needed the loyalty of the local nobility to keep order, and to protect the border against the Scots, with whom they were forever at war. The nobles were insecure too, and deeply resented Henry’s appointment of ‘lowborn’ men like Thomas Wolsey and then Thomas Cromwell to be his right-hand men. Both Henry and Cromwell held northerners in deep contempt. Likewise, the people of the North were distrustful of distant southerners and it’s unsurprising that one of the main demands of the rebels was for a parliament in the North. The North/South divide is nothing new.
And what of the common people? Why did an estimated thirty to fifty thousand of them, including probably at least five hundred from Beverley (between a tenth and a fifth of the total population of the town) rise up knowing their lives could be lost against a ruthless monarch?

The prosperity of Beverley had declined dramatically since its medieval heyday. The woollen industry had been overtaken by the East Riding; its port function had been overtaken by Hull; its local government was in disarray, and there was conflict between the governors and the Archbishop of York, who effectively owned the town. Pilgrimage was in decline, as were the populations of the friaries and local monasteries. But the church was still central to everyday life.

The spire of St Mary’s had collapsed in 1520 but had been swiftly rebuilt by local guilds, who felt ownership of the buildings and contents, as is evident from the money spent by locals on the new pillars and magnificently decorated ceiling. By October 1536, the smaller monasteries had already been dissolved, and the writing was on the wall for the larger institutions, especially as Cromwell had instigated the Valor Ecclesiasticus (Worth of the Church) survey. Commissioners were sent across the land to establish the value of church property and to ferret out evidence of immorality and corruption.

Then as now, fake news and rumour multiplied: all churches were to be demolished which were less than seven miles apart; church plate was to be confiscated; taxes were to be imposed on births, deaths and marriages. A real attack had already been mounted on saints’ days, some of the sacraments, pilgrimage and shrines, the so-called idolatrous practices.

The friaries and monasteries provided employment, alms (doles), healthcare, education and hospitality, not to mention maintenance of bridges, sea walls and dykes (vital in the watery world of
Holderness and the Vale of York). Some rumours came to pass and some didn’t but imagine how we would feel if our Bank Holidays, NHS and free education were under threat. As well as churches and monasteries being foci of community life, the friars were itinerant preachers and beggars whose fiery (and often rebellious) sermons entertained, terrified and consoled in probably equal measure.

Coltsfoot, one of the healing herbs still growing in the garden of the Friary

Much of the early Reformation was an attack on church property rather than doctrine, and essentially Henry was a religious conservative. He’d even written a treatise against Lutheranism in 1521, for which the Pope named him Fidei Defensor, a title still held today by our monarch. But attacks on doctrines of purgatory, sanctuary, relics and prayers to the saints to save souls, were felt as threats to people’s immortal life. And with an estimated average death age of 35 (less for women more for men), it’s unsurprising that death and the quality of the afterlife were major preoccupations.

The rebellions begin...

Such were the rumours that sparked off the first outbreak of revolt, the Lincolnshire Rebellion, which began in Louth on October 1st, 1536 at St James Church. Here, as in Beverley, parishioners had just built the magnificent spire and it was the vicar himself, and a local artisan, known to posterity as Captain Cobbler who set it off, on the eve of a visitation from the commissioners. The riot became bloody, with two officials killed by the mob.
Meanwhile, onto the stage by now had ridden Robert Aske, who assumed leadership of the revolt after being intercepted and sworn by rebels on his way to his law courts in London, having just crossed the Humber to Barton.

‘Foorth shall come a worme, an aske with one eye,
He shall be the chiefe of the mainye;
He shall gather of chivalrie a full faire flock
Halfe capon and halfe cocke’

This intriguing verse was from a ‘prophecy’ quoted by Wilfred Holme of Yorkshire writing in 1536 allegedly from the words of Merlin. ‘Aske’ was Old English for ‘lizard’ the emblem of the Aske family (seen here as carved on the tower of Aughton Church), and of the little we know of Aske, he had one eye. Perhaps the capons (castrated cocks) were the priests who flocked to join the pilgrimage. It’s hard to imagine now how powerful prophecy and astrology were in Tudor times, and how far religion and magic overlapped. Merlin was the go-to prophet for rebellions and for the powerless; prophecy could justify the end and the means.

The lizard (‘aske’) on the tower of Aughton Church

Meanwhile in Beverley ... discontent rumbled and messages of support were sent to Lincolnshire. On October 8th, a muster was held on Westwood Low Green (probably Archery Fields). By this time William Stapleton, who was here visiting his sick brother, Christopher, who languished ‘lame bothe foote and hande’ in the Franciscan Friary nearby (behind St Giles’ Croft), was ‘co-opted’ as leader. His sister-in-law Elizabeth had no truck with her sick husband’s pleas to be left alone. When asked for her husband’s whereabouts she said: They may be in the Friars – go pull them out by their heads! ... God’s blessing have ye.
Beverley Glover Roger Kitchen ignored the requests for restraint from Robert Aske and William Stapleton and set the beacons alight at Hunsley (or at least a haystack as the beacon was dysfunctional), rang the church bells (backwards as was the custom for muster) and rode off to raise Cottingham and Hessle. Pilgrim oaths were taken at Hall Garth by possibly five hundred Beverley men and the spark had been struck. Another character in the tale, a Carthusian friar known as Bonaventure, joined the rabble-rousing on Westwood (he later died of starvation in Newgate Prison), and Robert Eske of Knaresborough raised the North Riding. Aske had raised Howdenshire, Stapleton laid siege to Hull, while Aske met the hosts from Holderness and the Wolds at Market Weighton Hill, before proceeding to York. On the way he restored the nuns and monks to the already dissolved minor houses at Nunburnholme and Warter. It was on the way to York that Aske is said to have coined the term ‘Pilgrimage of Grace’ and assumed the ‘Badge of the Five Wounds’ as their emblem. What started as a rebellion had become a sacred mission in the eyes of the throng.

A view from the rear of Warter Church, showing the humps of bumps that are all that’s left of Warter Priory

At York little resistance was met, and by now Hull had succumbed and most of Yorkshire and much of Lancashire was ‘up’.

Stapleton and Sir Ralph Ellerker both tried to calm the mob, and it was probably for this that Stapleton was eventually pardoned by Henry. He left an invaluable record for historians in his confession. He claimed (but then he would, wouldn’t he, he was pleading for his life) that he had stopped the rebels sending barrels of tar down the River Hull to destroy the fleet. He claimed too to have saved Hull’s windmills, and to have prevented bloodshed and riot. He couldn’t stop the rebels stealing from the mayor some cattle, a crane and a peacock, but he did apparently punish a
Beverlonian ‘frithman’ (one who had stayed on after claiming sanctuary) for looting, by submerging him in the river until almost drowned.

Walkington’s sanctuary stone

What was the role of landed families in the Pilgrimage?

The Lincolnshire rising failed within a week because it did not secure leaders from the gentry. The Pilgrimage could have succeeded because it did just that. We know that deference to authority ran through society, but so did an expectation that those in authority had an obligation to serve those they ruled. Social and economic misrule was construed as moral and religious misbehaviour. What emerged throughout the demands and oaths of the pilgrims was a desire not to oust the king, but to rid him of ‘evil councillors’. The oath they swore was not to revolution but: to be true to God, to the faith of the Church, to the King and to the Commonwealth of this realm.

The legitimacy of Henry’s authority, however, was challenged more directly by the aristocracy, especially when he was so much influenced by ‘base born’ men, who had no ancient blood ties to the throne themselves and threatened the old landed classes in a number of ways.

Also, it was clear that many ‘leaders’ were bullied into supporting the pilgrims, and quickly changed sides when the opportunity arose. ‘It is abundantly clear that elites were very often terrified,’ says Hindle of the early moderns. And the method of using rioting was common, such as in enclosure riots, where organised mobs broke through hedges and conducted mass ploughing or livestock invasions to establish their rights to common land. No police, no army, why not? As historians have noted, ‘bargaining by riot’ was an established way of changing the status quo, particularly among the powerless, and not all revolt was punished as drastically as Henry was to punish the pilgrims.
Thomas Cromwell’s spy system rivalled that of the Stasi, but it was ineffectual in the north. Here was the country of the lords of the marches whose loyalty was tenuous, but whose support was essential for a monarch to resist incursions from the Scots and raise an army and taxes when needed. This explains why both retribution and reward were used in the aftermath of the Pilgrimage.

The Percy family were some of these marcher lords. Leconfield and Wressle Castles were their Yorkshire bases and they were undoubtedly the predominant family in the region, their Yorkshire property worth twice that of their lands in Northumberland. However, the first four earls had died violently, and the living Sixth Earl, ‘Henry the Unthrifty’, one-time suitor of Ann Boleyn, dangerous enough in itself, got into messy debts. He made Henry heir to his estates to cover these and to ensure he was left, childless and ill, in peace. His brother, Sir Thomas Percy, who would have inherited, became one of the leaders of the Pilgrimage. One of the hotchpotch of demands of the rebels was for the repeal of the Statute of Uses, a piece of Cromwell-inspired legislation that denied landowners the right to dispose of their properties to anyone but the eldest son. This was probably a way of closing a loophole which allowed them to tax dodge but was one of the reasons why propertied men were willing to rebel at yet another attack on their rights and privileges.

Thomas Percy was executed for his role in the Pilgrimage, and the fortunes of the Percy family in the East Riding never fully recovered. By 1621 Leconfield Castle, once with 83 rooms and a household of 42, including one member of staff employed solely for ‘answering and ridding of causes when suitors cometh to my lord’, was in ruins. Today there is nothing left but an overgrown moat. The lands went, but the titles were returned. Thomas’s son was restored ‘in blood’ and became the 7th Earl of Northumberland in 1557 under the Catholic Queen Mary but was executed for his part in the Northern Rebellion against Queen Elizabeth in 1569. A later Percy was also executed for his part in the Gunpowder plot.

When the statuary outside the Minster was destroyed by Protestant iconoclasts, the statue of the first Henry Percy was the only one left intact, apart from those of St John and Athelstan which are in any case out of reach above the east end. Vestigial local loyalty to an ancient family whose tombs are still one of the biggest draw of the Minster today?
The medieval statue of the first Henry Percy, Earl of Northumberland, by the North Door of the Minster

Sir Robert Constable from another local great family also joined the rebels and came to a sticky end. Hanged in chains from the Beverley Gate, his skeleton was still there when Henry and Catherine Howard made their triumphal entry in 1541.

His branch of the family owned Flamborough Castle, and he had many great roles in the region, including Steward of Leconfield castle for the 6th Earl of Northumberland. He owned fifty-one manors. But he’d always been troublesome. He’d made fifteen court appearances including two for kidnap, one of 10-year-old Anne Cresacre, a ward of the king from Bishop Burton, to marry her to his son for her money. He had already been dismissed from several stewardships by the time of the Pilgrimage, so probably thought he had nothing to lose. Even Lord Darcy, the hapless incumbent of Pontefract Castle, who having been forced to yield to the rebels after Henry refused reinforcements then joined them, called his co-rebel Constable ‘troublous and dangerous’.

Both ended up in the Tower, and Darcy was executed in 1537 on Tower Hill. ‘Hemlock in a good salad’ was no worse than Constable’s and Darcy’s presence in the north, said the Duke of Norfolk in a letter to Cromwell.

The Everingham branch of the Constable family survived and prospered while keeping their recusant Catholicism under the radar, but the Flamborough branch died out along with their castle. It’s now an insignificant ruin of a tower, latterly used as a cow byre. Recent excavations have revealed the extent of the ruins, including a large garden for private dalliance, presumably where Robert’s father Marmaduke, hero of Flodden, reputedly choked to death on a frog.

Sir Ralph Ellerker was another of the local gentry who managed to save his skin, and indeed ensure his family prospered mightily from the Pilgrimage. Involved with local government in Beverley, he’d fallen out with Archbishop Lee of York (a prevaricator who fled from the rebels to Pontefract Castle), which might have tipped the balance for his support of the pilgrims. When the rebels, now up to fifty thousand strong by the time they met the Duke of Norfolk in Doncaster, accepted Norfolk’s offer of a pardon and promises to consider their demands, it was Ellerker, with a fellow gentleman Sir Robert Bowes, who was sent to London to parley with the king. Here they were ‘turned’ by lures and threats, and eventually Ellerker himself was one of the commissioners appointed to examine and sentence the rebels whose side he had taken. A cunning but not uncommon ruse used by dictators to ensure there can be no turning back.

In Tudor times, the gentry didn’t hold back from blatant bribery and corruption, and there are many ‘begging letters’ of the period, where they lay out with florid flattery their loyalty and good deeds and are explicit in what they want in return. Sir Ralph asked Cromwell for the stewardship of Watton Priory, previously held by Robert Constable. He received the dissolved priory lands of Haltemprice and the land of the Grey Friars in Beverley and became a leading member of the Council of the North, Henry’s main arm of government here post-Pilgrimage. Sir Ralph got his comeuppance ten years later as Marshal of Calais and Boulogne. He was found dead on a beach there with stomach wounds after an ambush. He must have been a Protestant at heart, however, since there
were no provisions for masses for his soul in his will (unlike Henry who was a devout Catholic despite everything).

Today, Sir Ralph is named in the Ellerker family chapel in Rowley Church, the tablets recording Ellerkers from 1401 to 1804. This church itself tells a fascinating story of religious changes and priorities in its fabric. ‘Idolatrous’ doom paintings on the walls were covered up by whitewash, then replaced by admonitory biblical texts in English, these covered up themselves by an extravagant memorial to wealthy Georgian patrons, as revealed when the latter was taken down for restoration. The Puritans’ choice to leave to found Rowley in Massachusetts in the 17th century is remembered in a modern stained-glass window. In the New World they promoted old-world intolerance themselves through their enthusiastic involvement in the Salem Witch Trials. There is even a Tudor window in Rowley Church, its glory hidden now behind an organ in a locked side chapel. Rowley Church was heavily ‘restored’ by the Victorians, who some might think specialised in their own brand of church vandalism.

‘I had rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God than dwell in the tents of the ungodliness’ reads this fragment of text from the wall of St Peter’s Church, Rowley. Note the red underneath from the original wall painting removed post-Reformation. This fragment is now covered by a restored Georgian memorial.

All these families were divided in this troubled time. Greed or terror trumped family ties. Lord Darcy’s sons stayed loyal to Henry, one even writing to the king while his father was in the Tower asking to exchange his lands for some in the south as his was an area of ‘pestilent commotion’ and he couldn’t be happy there. Poor chap, for his suffering he got a huge grant of land in 1538 including three monasteries and twenty-five manors.

The Aske family were as divided as any. Robert’s two older brothers stayed loyal, one, Christopher, having been brought up in Skipton Castle by Lord Clifford, the hated overlord of the north west,
whose misrule was a leading cause of the uprising in the Dales. Christopher too was expected to examine his own brother in the trial. A curious inscription on the spire of the church at Aughton, rebuilt by Christopher in 1538, has been translated as *Christopher the second son of Sir Robert ought not to forget the year 1536*. Gratitude for his generosity or a reminder of his treachery? The remaining Askes certainly did well out of the Dissolution, gaining land from Thicket and Ellerton Priories, St Mary’s Abbey in York, and even some belonging to the Preceptory of the Holy Trinity in Beverley. A visit to the remote and evocative Norman church, the ancestral home of the Aske family with its adjacent motte and bailey castle, situated overlooking the Derwent, lapped by its floodwaters for much of the year, gives an insight into how strange a life Robert Aske must have led. A lawyer in the sophisticated Inns of Court in London, he was a child too of this far flung outlier of traditional rural life.

Aughton Church next to the motte and bailey of the original Aughton family, and figures of the monks and friars in the church, left from the annual memorial service still held there on the anniversary of his death on the 12th July 1537
The curious inscription on the tower

Aske, unlike others of the rebel leaders, never betrayed his cause or co-rebels, never allowed his men to pillage, and did not lie about his mission and actions. His greatest failing was his naivety perhaps, to believe the false promises of a tyrant, which ultimately cost him his life, hanged in chains on Clifford’s Tower in York.

Clifford’s Tower in York, where Aske was hanged in chains

The Collapse...

At Doncaster in October 1536 the pilgrim army of up to 50,000 faced the Duke of Norfolk with only around 8,000. This was the critical moment when all was lost. Norfolk could have changed sides. He was a devout Catholic, despised Cromwell, the king distrusted him, and Norfolk was furious that he had to use his own money for food and fodder for the troops and that Henry’s stinginess had reduced their pay by tuppence to 6d a day. But he was an astute politician too and must have weighed up his chances. The uncle of Ann Boleyn, he had been willing to testify against her when the wind changed. He had to perform acrobatics in his letters to convince Henry to accede to the rebel demands and promise general pardons but ensured nothing was written down for them. His letter to Henry stated the dire state of affairs for the crown: The pestilence is in our army. We want...
victuals and money. The country is theirs. They have made it desolate. These considerations have made us condescend to a treaty with them...

Despite all the odds stacked against him, Norfolk’s bluff paid off, Aske believed him, and the pilgrims dispersed.

Aske was summoned to London in December 1536, where he believed the king would grant the pilgrims’ main demands, for the restoration of the monasteries, the removal of ‘evil councillors’ and a parliament in York.

His followers were more suspicious, especially after he returned wearing a red silk waistcoat, a present from the king, and they thought he too would let them down. Suspicion of the gentry ran as deep as did respect for tradition and order.

By January 1537 two Holderness hotheads, John Hallam and Sir John Bigod, who were realistic enough to believe the king was lying and optimistic enough to believe the populace would rise up again in their support, planned to secure the royal bastions of Scarborough and Hull against what they believed would be Henry’s revenge attack. Aske had returned from London and met Hallam and twelve other plotters in Beverley, including two Beverley men: Roger Kitchen and Richard Wilson, a draper. Aske attempted to deter them, as did the Steward of Beverley Robert Creke, who allegedly told Hallam: I pray you stay the country about you...there be certain lewd fellows abroad who would stir the country to naughtiness again...

All the leaders of the original Pilgrimage: Aske, Darcy, Constable and Percy tried desperately to calm the situation. They failed. Aske even wrote to Henry VIII on January 12th saying that Beverley was pacified but spelling out the danger. The uprising failed too. Scarborough castle capitulated but the troops Bigod had sent did not choose to enter the castle to secure it. Hallam entered Hull in disguise but the rendezvous forces never arrived as the message had gone astray, and he was betrayed by his own men and arrested. Bigod arrived in Beverley with 800 men but was told by Thomas Percy’s chaplain that his master will not rise for any man living therefore it is but folly to send unto him for that cause.

Scarborough Castle, a royal stronghold, surrendered but not occupied
The next day, Old Sir Ralph Ellerker (Young Ralph’s father) attacked and routed the rebels in the town. Bigod escaped, was almost caught in North Yorkshire but escaped on his servant’s horse, without his coat, and was finally cornered in Cumberland three weeks later.

The king needed no further excuse to revoke the pardon, deny all the demands and exact vicious revenge on the plotters including the leaders who had tried to calm the commons.

Around two hundred people were executed. Some of the worst retribution came to those in the west of the country, under Henry Clifford, but many in our region died too. Margaret Cheney was the only woman executed, for her support of Hallam and Bigod. The punishment for women who committed treason was burning. William Wood, Prior of Bridlington was hanged along with many other monks, friars and abbots. Rank dictated penalty. Nobles were decapitated, knights hanged then axed, lesser men hanged, drawn and quartered. This was the barbaric punishment for treason. Victims were paraded on a wicker cart through the streets, stripped, hanged until almost dead, cut down, their genitals cut off, their intestines removed and their hearts burned. Finally, their limbs were cut off and their heads displayed on spikes.

Robert Aske was granted one small mercy from Henry: to be allowed to hang until dead on the gallows rather than be dismembered alive. His last reported words were a poignant understatement: that Cromwell had sworn that all northern men were traitors ‘wherewithal he was somewhat offended’.

Aftermath

Beverley didn’t recover from the blow of the Reformation until Georgian times. In 1599 four hundred houses were described as empty or decayed. By 1548 the Minster had been stripped of its collegiate status and made a parish church. Its staff were reduced from seventy-four to two, and by the end of Edward V1’s more fanatically Protestant reign it had lost its Chapel of the Virgin, most of its sixteen altars and the shrine of St John. Most threatening of all was the plan by its owner Michael Stanhope of Hull to demolish it and use the stone for a mansion. The burgesses of Beverley paid him £100 to save the building but they got their money back by demolishing the Chapter House and the Chapel of St Martin along with the ossuary below it, leaving the oddly truncated stairs and architectural evidence we see today.

Architectural evidence of the Minster sale

Much statuary was destroyed or defaced, and goods and plate seized (only one piece of pre-Reformation plate from Beverley Minster survives). By 1540 most of Beverley’s rights of sanctuary were abolished. The banning of shrines and pilgrimage diminished the tourist trade of the town with all its associated privileges and economic dependencies.

Most of the friary and maison dieu buildings were demolished. Excavations beneath developments around the Dominican Friary have revealed remnants of stained glass and lead, and hearths where
the lead was melted down. Local gentry who were faithful to Henry got some of the proceeds of the Dissolution, but much went to land speculators from London. A new landowner arrived in our area: Thomas Manners, 1st Earl of Rutland. A great favourite of Henry VIII and one of the leaders of his army, he was given church land in Beverley, Warter and Nuburnholme, and at this point entered the list of the top ten landowners of East Yorkshire for the first time.

All over the country priceless documents were destroyed or sold off as waste paper: ‘some to serve their jakes (toilets), and some to rub their boots; some they sold to the grocers and soap sellers and some they sent over sea to the book binders ... whole ships full ... a merchant bought the contents of two noble libraries for 40 shillings’ (John Bale in 1549).

Church of Mary Magdalene and St Helena, partly built from stone of the old church at Nunkeeling Priory, dissolved by 1540. Easy to miss on the road to Bewholme, it was rescued from demolition by the Parish Council in 1985.
The Bible in English became compulsory in every church in 1538, making its context accessible to all, and must have supported the increase in literacy throughout the 16th century. Its cover showed Henry dispensing the Bibles from his throne, cementing his new role as Supreme Head of the Church.

The growth of Hull at Beverley’s expense speeded up. When Henry VIII and his latest wife Catherine Howard visited York, Leconfield Castle and Hull in 1541 on a triumphal post-rebellion visit, when local dignitaries were required to beg for pardon on their knees, it became clear that Hull was to be strengthened and its military fortifications enhanced, including the North Bridge across the River Hull that exacerbated the decline of Beverley as a port.

Hull’s new fortifications showing the North Bridge and the fortifications on the east bank of the River Hull built by Henry VIII (Holler’s Map of 1642)

Medieval stained-glass fragments from a ‘doom window’ found under the floor of St Denys Church in York and now put back as a collage, giving a glimpse of the lurid and sensational way our ancestors would have been visually reminded of the wages of sin. Such windows were destroyed after the Reformation.
The surrounding countryside suffered too with all the monasteries and their granges (farms) sold off and many buildings falling into disrepair or simply disappearing, with agricultural poverty, enclosure, and dislocation following. The poor were left to fend for themselves if charity and the town governors didn’t help them.

The Archbishop of York relinquished control of Beverley in 1543 and by 1573 the town achieved full self-governing status. Literacy and the printing of books in English undoubtedly grew in Tudor times. But religious intolerance became rampant on both sides. After a brief return to favour in Mary’s reign, Roman Catholics did not gain full civil rights until 1829.

The people still believed in magic and the devil, as the persecution of witches proves. Perhaps the patriarchal nature of Protestantism, without its Virgin and female saints with their maternal and comforting intercessions, made the devil seem ever closer. Certainly, those who threatened the new hierarchy, mainly women, who might previously have been healers, midwives and harmless spell-weavers, were demonised. A Holderness widow, Mabel Brigge, was burned in 1338 for holding a ‘black fast’, allegedly to damage the king and the ‘false Duke’ for what they had done to the north of England.

The Duke of Norfolk was one of the great survivors of Tudor England. He remained a Catholic and conspired to see his arch enemy Thomas Cromwell done for in 1540. Despite being uncle to two beheaded queens, Ann Boleyn and Catherine Howard, he stayed powerful, probably because of his military prowess and cunning, until his luck ran out in 1546. He was imprisoned in the Tower for treason, along with his son, who was executed. In true Tudor fashion, most of his family, including his daughter, wife and mistress all testified against him. Sentenced to death, he was saved only because Henry V111 died the day before the sentence was due to be carried out. He stayed in the Tower throughout the fanatically Protestant reign of Edward V1, but was reinstated by Mary 1 and lived to 81, dying in 1554.

It could be said that the Reformation paved the way for the Enlightenment and the rise of science and industry, and perhaps modern capitalism, with its growth in urbanisation, the privatisation of land, and the growth of the middle classes and education. To most historians it represents the boundary between medieval and modern history. As Bruce Robinson has written of the dissolution: the greatest act of vandalism in English history but also an act of political genius, creating a vested interest in the Reformation.
History, of course, is always the story told by the victors.

Some useful sources (all online, available from East Riding Libraries or Beverley Civic Society)


*Insurrection, Henry V111, Thomas Cromwell and the Pilgrimage of Grace* by Susan Loughlin (2016)

*Confession of William Stapleton* in Vols 11 and 12 Letters and papers of Henry V111 Transactions of the East Riding Antiquarian Society Vol. 10

*Letters and Papers of Henry V111* (1536) at [https://www.british-history.ac.uk/letters-papers-hen8/vol10](https://www.british-history.ac.uk/letters-papers-hen8/vol10)

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*http://www.tudorplace.com.ar/Documents/PilgrimageofGrace.htm*

*The Pilgrimage of Grace walking Trail is at:*


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Helen Kitson 16/1/2020