





THE THAXTED HISTORY PROJECT

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POWER, CHARITY & BROTHERLY LOVE

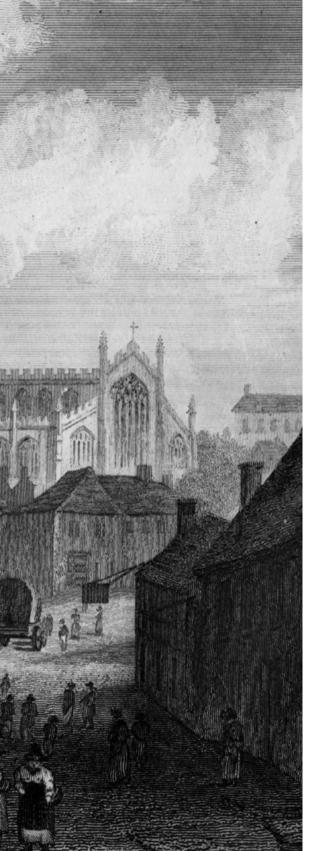
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THAXTED HISTORY PROJECT





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INTRODUCTION

he Thaxted History Project is a long-term endeavour to research and publish volumes on the major historical milestones in this extraordinary town's unlikely history. Commissioned by the Thaxted Society in association with Leicester University and, under the guidance of historian Richard Till, the project will be on going whilst there is still untold history to reveal.

Relying on primary sources, with some entirely new discoveries, myths and legend will be dispelled in the face of rigorous and robust academic research telling Thaxted's story in a new and revealing light.

This first part: POWER, CHARITY & BROTHERLY LOVE by Lucy Brown, examines the complex politics of Thaxted's charities and the extraordinary influence the Charities exerted, not only on governance and power, but on everyday life and how the Charities were often indistinguishable from the town itself and its development. It is hard to imagine Thaxted's importance and wealth at a different time when today it is a near idyllic backwater to the bigger world, and yet in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, Thaxted was one of the most prosperous and valued towns in England.

Further parts to follow will detail the impact of THAXTED CUTLERS on Thaxted, their rise and fall and how national events affected the town and the growth and demise of an early industry. The Cutlers provide an insightful view of, not only economics and industrial development, but also immigration and skill development for a brand new industry.

Thaxted's religious importance, as it was on the pilgrim way to Bury St Edmunds or Walsingham, forms another part of the town's rich history. As the birthplace of a branch of CHRISTIAN SOCIALISM, Thaxted and its magnificent church have contributed in diverse ways to Christian changes over the ages, from the reformation and demise of the great Abbey at Tilty, to the extraordinary upheaval of both First World

War and gradual demise of a rigid class system which paved the way for incredible changes and even revolt at Thaxted.

To this day, there remains contention as to Thaxted's status as a 'town' or 'village'. Whilst this argument may never now be resolved, truth is that Thaxted was once a 'borough'. In 'THAXTED A BOROUGH', the emergence of the borough is traced through its growing importance and strategic position in Essex to its eventual and unhappy demise. Thaxted as a borough provides a rare glimpse into the complex working of both politics and finance and comes with an abundance of records and documentary evidence which illustrate perfectly what Thaxted as a Borough meant.

Somehow the relative importance of near, overlooked places fades without attentive care. It is in this cause that the Thaxted Society, with subscribers and supporters, is engaged. For Thaxted that importance remains very much the legacy of the place and these volumes will make that clear to the interested reader, researcher, and any forward-looking planner.



PREFACE

THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE SURROUNDING LANDSCAPE

or all but the last few decades, the relationship between the town of Thaxted and its surrounding countryside has been symbiotic. It was a source of wealth, work, food and festival. The imprint of the relationship can be found throughout the town in roads, buildings and outbuildings. In short, the character of the one determined the character of the other.

THE LANDSCAPE

Late Bronze Age to Norman Conquest, 2000BC-1086AD

he undulating landscape that surrounds Thaxted has been progressively tamed and cultivated for millennia. Its chalky boulder clay soil was deposited by the Anglian Ice Sheet and originally covered with trees. Clearance began in the late Bronze Age and proceeded apace into the Iron Age. The heavy Celtic plough pulled by oxen was perfectly capable of removing roots and exposing the fertile soil, so much so that tree cover was less in pre-Roman Britain than it was in the 18th Century.

Farming was mixed and required field boundaries to separate the pastoral from the arable. These usually took the form of ditch and mound, something typical of the area to the present day. The growing of cereals was especially important. Coins of King Cunbelinus (d.46AD) showed sheaves of corn on the obverse. This was the dominant export and a source of great profit to the Trinovantes tribe that dominated the local area.

Successive Roman and Anglo-Saxon conquests did little to change the pattern of agriculture, though a severe decline in population in the late Roman-early Anglo-Saxon period led to the abandonment of some areas under cultivation. This was the situation that confronted the Normans post-conquest. The Domesday Book illustrated the position clearly. The land in and around Thaxted was controlled by the thegn, Wihtgar (sometimes Wisgar). Arable land extended to some 1400 acres, mainly down to wheat, with associated meadow for grazing and sufficient woodland for 1000 pigs. However, as John Hunter explains, there was a considerable amount of unclaimed land within what is now the parish boundaries, despite the evident wealth of the town.

Normans to Tudors, 1066-1601

ur next glimpse of the land about Thaxted comes in 1348, the year of the Black Death. The Norman lords of Clare had established a presence in a complex of buildings to the south-east of the church. Their cultivated lands had been extended beyond Monk Street in the south, Cutlers' Green in the west and Bardfield End Green in the east. Water meadow for grazing extended down the Chelmer Valley. Two areas of parkland were in place, presumably for deer and hunting.

One lay due south of Park Street (the Little Park), the other, more substantial (the Great Park) was north-west of Richmond Green. Surrounding the town were five great open fields, demarked by hedges. This was the arable core of the estate, worked collectively and down to cereal crops. The arrangement was unusual for Essex. It followed the Midland pattern of strips and open fields.

From the late 14th Century the landscape began to evolve in ways that are more familiar to us. The framework of roads was already in place and had been since at least Anglo-Saxon times. The burgus or borough of Thaxted was evolving thanks to the arrival of the cutlers. However, the decisive event took place at the manor. Successive legal disputes led to a decision to lease out its lands. The impact of this decision can be seen in relation to the complex of buildings around the manor. These were the barns and storehouses of a centralised estate.

Their decay and replacement by private houses along the south-eastern side of Town Street marked the end of unified control. In its place came the farm houses of the lessees, punctuating the roads of the town and projecting

outward into the countryside with a further ring of farms and the remaining manors on the periphery. Together they worked the lands of the manor and it is probable that some early consolidation of farming land took place. This was aided by the alienation of the parklands in 1587 and 1596 and their being brought into cultivation.

Eighteenth Century to the Twentieth Century

he 18th Century was a golden age for agriculture. The population of Britain was growing, the industrial revolution was under way and trade was flourishing. As a result the demand for food increased as did incomes from farming and its allied occupations. To meet demand, improved farming methods were needed; new systems of crop rotation, selective breeding and better agricultural machinery. Much of this passed Thaxted by, though a local resident, Thomas Knight, did develop a new and improved plough for the working of heavy soils. Drainage too was improved through the use of the "mole" plough, a plough that cut narrow drainage channels into the fields. Some rationalisation of farms also took place; the open fields around the town were enclosed by agreement. Farmers prospered. The town too became more prosperous. Many of the old houses were re-fronted in the Georgian style. But, as with the farms and the fields, progress was modest.

The main reason for this state of affairs was land ownership. In 1599, Sir Edward Smyth of Horham Hall bought out the manor. For a short time he was active in its improvement buying out Armigers Farm, Blunt's Farm and a farm at Monk Street from the Maynards at Easton Lodge in 1632. Thereafter the family became non-resident, living at Hills Hall Estate in the south of the county and leaving the administration of Thaxted to his steward. Some of its land was further sub-let to City interests from London in 1655. Priors Hall, meantime, remained in the hands of the Maynards (and with it the advowson of the church). Much of the rest was leased out by the two great charities, Hunts and Yardley's. To maximise income and minimise inconvenience most farms were let by copyhold (a form of inherited rental). Love's Farm at Cutler's Green was one such. Another was William Smith's farm, off Newbiggen Street, held part by

copyhold, part by freehold. Given the uncertainties of copyhold, few of the farmers were prepared to invest in the sort of improvements that guaranteed their financial well-being. The larger farmers worked hard and made the best of their circumstances. The smaller farmers scratched an existence.

White's Directory of 1848 shows these developments clearly and, in doing so, tells the story of the town and its environs. There were twelve named farms, farms of some significance. A further 23 heads of family described themselves as farmers but were, in fact, small scale farmers or smallholders. Farming accounted for 24% of all occupations. A further 41% depended on farming, ranging from maltsters, brewers, inn and tavern keepers, through butchers, tanners, fellmongers, saddlers and boot and shoe makers (all 12 of them), millwrights, millers, corn dealers and bakers, whitesmiths, blacksmiths and farriers, wool dealers and wool merchants, to wheelwrights, carpenters and building and repair services. Thus, 65% of all named occupations relied on local agriculture and much of the economy of the town rested on it and its profits.

The fall-out came in the second half of the 19th Century. The passing of the Corn Laws, allowing foreign wheat free access to the British market, drove down prices and led to a prolonged agricultural depression. Rents stayed low and many great estates had to sell out. There was an end to copyhold. It was abolished as a form of legal tenure and existing copyholders were allowed to lease or buy back the freehold. The cumulative effect locally was damaging. Daisy, Countess of Warwick sold off their Thaxted estates in 1912. Farms were largely unimproved and held on yearly tenancies. The Horham Hall estate and its unimproved farms and smallholdings were sold off in 1925. The agriculturally dependent local economy suffered badly, and had it not been for the arrival of George Lee's sweet factory, conditions would have become very difficult.

There was a modest recovery between the wars and some of the larger farms became profitable once more. The impetus came from outside the town with farms sold off and consolidated into larger holdings. This could not have been better illustrated than in the film "Ripe Earth" (John & Roy Boulting, 1938). The film was set at Rails farm in Bolford Street and showed a traditional farm at its best. It was, however, a swan song for an isolated and self-contained town. War, and the communications revolution which followed, changed the character of Thaxted and the fields that surrounded it.

Conclusion

ow did these changes affect the landscape of the parish as we now see it? From very early on the landscape was planned. The persistence of local lordship, pre-and post-invasion, ensured that this would be the case. The framework was ancient; its roads and byways, its boundaries, even many of its field names. Centrally imposed enclosure rationalised the open fields and created new field boundaries. The divisions froze and became semi-permanent as a result of conservative estate management. Further diversification and consolidation had to await the 20th Century. Once Easton Lodge and Horham Hall sold out, farms became freeholds and many of the smallholders sold out. The move from mixed to arable farming led to the removal of hedgerows particularly to the south of the town ("the prairie"). Many remaining hedgerows, including those that had traditionally underpinned the system, remained and there are signs of improvement in management of late. The old planned landscape persists with its criss-cross of path and bridleways providing access. The area is still dominated by its pre-18th century fields, some "of medieval origin, some... even older, interspersed by the occasional common field which had been later enclosed by agreement."

As much a part of the social landscape as the actual landscape of Thaxted, the Thaxted Charities have, over hundreds of years, contributed to the evolving narrative that is Thaxted's history. Within these Charities lay much of the local power base, and, as a direct result, the overweening nepotism that undoubtedly influenced the social landscape of the day. Thaxted is, in so many ways, a rare survivor. The question has to be, as it always is, if what history reveals is a lesson for today, is it a lesson learned?

¹ John Hunter, The Essex Landscape; A Study of its Form & Structure (Essex Record Office, 1999) K.C. Newton, Thaxted in the Fourteenth Century, (J.H. Clarke, 1960) Uttlesford UDC, Landscape Character of Uttlesford District, 2006. Uttlesford UDC, Landscape Assessment of Thaxted, 2009. Essex County Record Office: Deeds of the Manor & Borough of Thaxted and Great Eastern Estate. Sale Posters of the Great Easton Estate (courtesy of Bruce Munro)

A BRIEF HISTORY OF THAXTED AND BRAINTREE

he appearance and architecture of modern Thaxted is reminiscent of the town's potted fortunes over the last thousand years of settlement. The Doomsday entry for 1086 records the value to the lord as fifty-six pounds which, according to K.C. Newton, placed Thaxted amongst one of the most valuable lordships in the country.² This sizeable wealth was later eclipsed in the fourteenth century by the cutlery industry which saw the rise of specialist trades within the town, which became a centre of the England's knife-making industry.³ This industry was a significant factor in the creation of Thaxted's borough status during that period and the consequential rise of the town's burgesses, with wealth accumulated independently of the Manor of Thaxted. The borough rents reveal this rise as having been significant⁴ and the town therefore attracted skilled craftsmen and traders to work in Thaxted, whilst its manor began the slow progress of decline. The impact and wealth of these early burgesses can be seen by the impressive buildings from that period which remain standing today, such as the Parish Church and Guildhall. The trade seems to have continued until the early sixteenth century, when Sheffield's better-resourced industry began to take over national markets under the rule of the Earls of Shrewsbury.⁵ Dyer has argued that towns in the later middle ages were very vulnerable to competition, especially from rural and informal markets, which may explain the decline of Thaxted's cutlers despite its proximity to the London market. ⁶ As had been attempted elsewhere in the country, Thaxted tried to introduce the alternative industry of clothweaving in order to combat the town's

² Newton, Thaxted in the Fourteenth Century 1960, p.6

³ Essex Records Office (hereafter E.R.O.), -1349, pp.535-540 LIB/CAL 6/30, Calendar of Close Rolls 1346 4 In 1348 rates were £3. 4s. 6 1/2d and in 1405 they were £7. 9s. 6d. See E.R.O.: C.C.R., PP. 525-540 and D/DHu M18

⁵ Smithurst, Cutler Industry, 1987, p.15

⁶ Dyer, The Consumer and the Market in the Later Middle Ages, 1989, p.324

economic downturn: the evidence for which can be found in the weavers' cottages of Newbiggen Street.⁷ This effort towards reigniting Thaxted's trading prospects failed to lift the town out of economic difficulty and, as a result, the burgesses petitioned for the town's incorporation in 1556.8 Incorporation introduced a formalised system of parish governance under the leadership of a common council, which consisted of 24 burgesses, various bailiffs and the mayor. This structure of local government continued into the late seventeenth century and was aided in its rule by the feoffees of the charity known as Yardley's. This charity had been established in the fifteenth century and its primary function was to benefit the town through the payment of tax, the maintenance of public buildings and the endowment of the grammar school. 9 By the late sixteenth century, Yardley's and the Corporation were both controlled by the same burgesses, with duties, traditionally undertaken by the parish office holders, becoming entwined with the charities' accounts. The unification of these two bodies caused issues within the town, with the feoffees of Yardley's threatened with committal to the Fleet in 1622, by the High Court of Commission, for 'misinformation' regarding the spending of charity money on the town. 10 The Corporation continued to exist until the reign of James II, where failure to raise sufficient funds to meet Quo Warranto proceedings, caused the town to lose it's Corporate status.¹¹ Thaxted therefore remained fundamentally unchanged, both architecturally and in terms of demographic expansion, until the present, with Georgian frontages disguising the late medieval buildings that constitute Thaxted's town centre. The early modern period in Thaxted was therefore a time of great political and social change that formed both a peak and decline in the history of the town.

Braintree's entry to the Doomsday book reveals much more humble origins for the town, with a value to the lord of only 1/5 of a pound. Whilst there was no cutlery trade to bolster Braintree's economy in the fourteenth century, cloth-making became an integral part of the local economy, with

⁷ These single-bay cottages are located on the eastern side of Newbiggen Street, with the earlier and much larger two-bay buildings of the burgesses standing in opposition.

⁸ E.R.O. D/DHu T29

⁹ E.R.O., D/P 16/25/24A

¹⁰ E.R.O., D/P 16/25/53

¹¹ E.R.O., D/DHu T31

¹² Rumble, Doomsday Book-Essex, 1983, Braintree

2,400 cloths exported by Braintree in 1395.13 The cloth trade for the whole of Essex in 1469, however, reveals that the markets underwent a severe slump, with only 2,637 cloths exported for the entire county. Braintree cloth was famous across the country, however the settlement's status as a village until the sixteenth century left the industry open to counterfeiting due to a lack of safeguards from town regulation.¹⁴ The end of the sixteenth century saw a rise in the town's trade as Flemish traders began to settle in the town, however, trading fluctuated greatly due to various international conflicts in European states during the period. 15 During the first half of the seventeenth century these fluctuations required the weavers repeatedly to petition the Essex Quarter Sessions over the loss of the weaving trade to the town. 16 Braintree's religious life was also in fluctuation during this period with Puritan non-conformist congregations based in the town, such as the noteworthy Reverend Thomas Hooker, who emigrated to form a colony in Massachusetts in 1632.17 First mention of the Four-and-Twenty appears in the middle of the sixteenth century and it continued to exist in some form until the eighteenth century where it was replaced by an open vestry.¹⁸

Secondary Literature and Historiography

ince the emergence of the New Histories in the 1960s and 1970s, social history has focused upon the importance of writing history from the bottom up, with a return to focus county histories.

Marxist historians such as E. P. Thompson and Robert Colls saw the political turmoil of the early seventeenth century as evidence of class conflict whilst revisionist historians, such as Conrad Russell and John Adamson, argued for short term political factors over long-term transitions. Alan Everitt's seminal work The Community of Kent and the Great Rebellion¹⁹ took social history in a new direction with an emphasis on the influences of local identities within counties over

¹³ Quin, A History of Braintree and Bocking, 1981, p.51

¹⁴ Pilgrim, Rise of the "New Draperies" in Essex, 1959, vii 15 Quin, A History of Braintree and Bocking, 1981, p.55

¹⁶ Allen, 1974, Essex Quarter Sessions Order Book 1652-1661,p.69 and p.108 17 Quin, A History of Braintree and Bocking, 1981, p.105

¹⁸ Quin, A History of Braintree and Bocking, 1981, p.121 and E.R.O., D/P 264/8/4

¹⁹ Everitt, The Community of Kent and the Great Rebellion, 1640-60, 1966

national concerns.²⁰ The focus upon 'county community' led to various important county studies including David Underdown's Somerset in the Civil War and Interregnum²¹ which was based upon the detailed perusal of county archive material. Whilst Everitt's focus on county identities was detailed, his top down approach has led to his supersession by studies of individual parishes. One such example is Terling in Essex which was the focus of Wrightson and Levine's work Poverty and Piety in an English Village: Terling, 1525-1700²². This detailed study focusses on the social structures and relationships of parishioners with the church and state, whilst positing that these aspects of the parish underwent an overall process of slow but significant change. Wrightson and Levine's approach to Terling makes use of large amounts of statistical data regarding the town's populous and therefore provides a transitional narrative of life in an Essex parish over the course of nearly 200 years. An alternative approach to the study of parish life has been attempted here, with the time period limited to 80 years in order to extract a greater level of qualitative detail than is possible in a longer study.

Underdown has proposed that the early modern period consisted of a political spectrum in which the common and elite members of society were in interaction.²³ Such relations can be examined at the parish level where politics and social lives were interlinked in similar ways to the ruling classes. The approach of this study follows the post-revisionist line of argument regarding the artificial separation of social and political history, with an examination into the impact on parish life of both national and local politics, religion and social hierarchies. A. Leftwich has argued that politics consists of all human activities surrounding power distribution, decision-making and social organisation and, therefore, is a defining characteristic of all human groups.²⁴ On this basis, the examination of the politics of the parish has incorporated, not only the structural mechanisms of governance but the relationships between religion, social status and attitudes to the poor. The interconnectedness of such factors in local and

²⁰ Eales and Hopper, The County Community in Seventeenth-Century England and Wales, 2012, Introduction

²⁰ Laiks and Topper, The Coulty Community in seventeenin-Century Engand and Wales, 2012, Int.
21 Underdown, Somerset in the Civl War and Interregnum, 1973
22 Wrightson and Levine, Poverty and Piety in an English Village: Terling, 1525-1700., 1995
23 Underdown, Revel, Riot and Rebellion: Popular Politics and Culture in England 1603-1660, 1985
24 Leftwich, Redefining Politics: People, Resources and Power, 1983, p.11

national policy are therefore combined within future references to the 'state'. The term is here used to describe bodies of national governance which include the crown, parliament and religious organisations as a reflection of their status as political superstructures with authority over the councils of Thaxted and Braintree.

Terling's study is the most renowned of the Essex town histories. However, there have been several other modern attempts to document a single parish within a county, such as Tilbury, Essex²⁵ and Retford, Nottinghamshire. 26 A comparative study of two towns within Essex is yet to be attempted and therefore the examination of Thaxted and Braintree during this period enables a detailed investigation of the variation in local politics within a single county context. By selecting only two towns within Essex, this investigation provides a detailed qualitative study similar to Wrightson and Levine's Terling investigation, whilst also introducing national political and religious concerns that were enacted within the parish. The detailed minutes for Braintree's Four-and-Twenty have been the focus of study once before by socialist historians Sidney and Beatrice Webb, whose work English Local Government: The Parish and the County, ²⁷ described the gradual decline of the Company of the Four-and-Twenty. This work consisted of a brief consideration of the Four-and-Twenty as an example of an early modern town oligarchy and, therefore, did not study in detail the mechanisms and composition of the Company during its height. W. Quinn has made a broad study of the history of Braintree and Bocking²⁸ in which there is a brief analysis of examples of particularly illuminating vestry minutes that have prompted further investigation undertaken in this study.

Thaxted has also had several histories written regarding various aspects of the town's past, the most recent of which has been an investigation into the great fight in the church of 1647 written by Richard Till and incorporating a study of Thaxted's politics in the run up to the incident.²⁹ A brief article by Robert Tittler on the incorporation of

²⁵ Sparkes, Tilbury: Town and Docks, 1964

²⁶ Marcombe, English Small Town Life: Retford, 1520-1642., 1993

²⁷ Webb and Webb, English Local Government, Vol. I: The Parish and the County, 1906

²⁸ Quínn, 1981

²⁹ Till, "A Great Fight in the Church at Thaxted": Social and religious tensions in the wake of the first Civil War, 2017

the town and sixteenth-century politics, provides context for the parish's political situation immediately prior to this period of study. K.C. Newton's work on Thaxted in the fourteenth century is an economic history of the cutlery industry and relies heavily upon the survey of three quarters of the manor of Thaxted to estimate significant demographic changes across the century. Simcoe's 'A Short History of the Parish' covers the broadest period of Thaxted's history, with great consideration given to the histories of prominent families of the town and their lineages. Histories of Thaxted have, therefore, not incorporated a comprehensive social history within their individual works and, therefore, the scope of this study will constitute an investigation into the social impact of parochial politics on the town.



³⁰ Newton, 1960

³¹ Simcoe, A Short History of the Parish and Ancient Borough of Thaxted, With a detailed description of the Church and several of the Oldest Houses in the Town, 1934

CHAPTER 1:

POWER, STATUS AND HIERARCHY

The underlying mechanism behind local governance in the early modern period was the implied power and control of public office. These institutions, though they varied nationally, were key elements in the maintenance of public order and as such can be considered as extensions of the complex national systems of hierarchical control. The extent to which these controls were structured is worthy of closer local inspection as variation in the importance of status and hierarchy to local governance provides insight into underlying political concerns. Marxist historians such as Holstun and Wood³² have emphasised the crucial role of class sub-structures in the production and maintenance of social power during the early modern period. This approach provides a causal link between localised economics and the location of power, however this also oversimplifies the processes involved in the performance of said power. At the local level, the personal interests of members of particular social strata were held in check by the responsibilities of the 'common weal', as Withington puts it. 33 The term 'class' is therefore anachronistic in the modern sense of the word. However it is possible to determine differentiated social strata within a town's population through the strict hierarchies. The emergence of Thaxted's Corporation and Braintree's Four-and-Twenty were symptomatic of wider political transition from the highly centralised manorial rule of the late medieval period to the rising importance of the burgesses and tradesmen of the early modern. This process had been underway throughout the late fifteenth and early

³² See Wood, 2001, Riot, Rebellion and Popular Politics in Early Modern England and Holstun, 2000, Ehud's Dagger: Class Struggle in the English Revolution

³³ Withington, Urban Citizens and England's Civil Wars' 2015, p.315

sixteenth centuries and the transition created rivalries between the traditionally nucleated power of the manors and the new divergent and commercial, economic interests of the wealthy inhabitants of the towns. The recognition of Corporate towns as independently functioning can be witnessed within the Poor Relief Act of 1601, when the mayors, bailiffs and head officers of such towns were given the authority of Justices of the Peace. The Legal conflicts between Thaxted's Corporation and the local elite are therefore revealing in terms of the changes in the distribution of power. Braintree's Four-and-Twenty also reflect this corporate transition without the company ever fully becoming officially 'incorporated'. Despite this, the Four-and-Twenty held both the powers of local governance and its own hierarchical system of election which is revealed through the company's minutes and constitution.

Conflict with the Gentry

egal and political tensions between Thaxted's Corporation and Yardley's charity on the one hand, and the various established local gentry on the other, reveal Thaxted to be a model example of this kind of local conflict. Lady Wiseman of Thaxted Manor is one such example. The accounts of the feoffees of Yardley's recount the difficulties faced by the Corporation when they attempted to renew their town's charter in 1616³⁵. Opposition to this came from the Wisemans who had not been consulted during the redrafting and thus took issue with the alteration that the revenue received from the confiscated goods of felons was to be redirected from the Manor to the Corporation. Lady Wiseman, 'havinge knowledge' that they were attempting to alter the charter, petitioned the Lord Chancellor on the grounds that the Company was about to 'prejudice her sonnes inheritance'. The right to a felon's confiscated property had previously belonged to the manor, which the Corporation clerk pointedly refers to as prior 'usurpation'³⁷. This indicated that there was a degree

³⁴ An Act for the Relief of the Poor, 43 Eliz. 1 C A P. II. VIII

³⁵ E.R.O., D/P 16/25/69A

³⁶ Ibid

³⁷ Ibid

of resentment between the Corporation and the local gentry over the extent to the latter's customary rights and the matter was subsequently the subject of 'much conference & many meetinges'38. The Lord Chancellor, Thomas Egerton, decreed that the goods should be divided equally between the manor and the town, which concurs with a broader period of national change that had seen the traditional rights of custom challenged by new mechanisms of litigation. The discontent exhibited by both parties indicated a battle for control over the town's finances and involved a blatant conflict of financial interests. By dividing the income equally between the Corporation and the Manor, the Lord Chancellor was equating the importance of both parties, which is surprising, considering the conservative nature of Egerton's political career, and is possibly a reflection of his declining health by this time.³⁹ This judgement came at a time of financial vulnerability for the Corporation; with the charter's renewal, an attempt to reassert their status, despite the great difficulties it faced when attempting to raise the money to do so. The manor was also in some financial difficulty as the heir, Mr John Wiseman, had not yet reached his seniority and was, consequently, not able to assume the level of financial privileges of his predecessors. Whilst the Corporation was struggling to raise money for the renewal, the Wisemans by contrast, still owned and received income from large amounts of land around in and around Thaxted, 40 meaning that the disputed income was primarily a matter of principle for the family, rather than one of financial necessity. Lady Wiseman's petition can therefore be considered in terms of the gentry attempting to reassert their influence in Thaxted whilst also limiting the powers of the Corporation.

This was not the first time Thaxted's Corporation was faced with opposition from the established landowning families. There had been issues with the Cutts family, the former lords of the borough, during the previous century. Tittler's article on these conflicts explores the role that the death of the third Lord Cutts in 1555 played in the incorporation of

³⁹ Baker, J. 'Egerton, Thomas, first Viscount Brackley (1540–1617)', 2015 40 Including their principle seat of Broadoaks, Wimbish in which the Jesuit fugitive Father Gerard had sheltered in 1585 and again 1591, McCoog, The Society of Jesus in Ireland, Scotland and England, 1589-1597: Building the Faith of Saint Peter upon the King of Spain's Monarchy, 2013, p.36

the borough to begin with, citing the fact that the fourth Lord Cutts was only ten years old at the time of its passing⁴¹. Thaxted's incorporation was granted in 1556 by Philip and Mary I, on the grounds that the town's 'greate ruine and decay by reason of greate povertie and necessyti', required such a move. 42 Tittler argues that the burgesses took advantage of the weakened manorial powers to petition for incorporation.⁴³ However the impoverished state of Thaxted during this time would suggest that, even if Lord Cutts had been in his primacy, incorporation would have been to his financial advantage. Thaxted's status of economic decay allowed the burgesses to take control of the town's interests whilst relieving the Crown of the burden of a failing parish. Whether the intention of the Burgesses was to undermine the influence of the manor is not certain. However the incorporation of the manor does highlight the presence of influential townsmen in decision-making from this point onwards, marking a distinct shift towards these new forms of governance that was seen elsewhere in the country during this time⁴⁴.

Civic Duty and Office Holding

avid Postles has argued that the self-conscious absorption of civic responsibility by the boroughs saw the creation of an 'incorporated civic culture' which emphasised the privileges of the city commonwealth over traditional forms of authority. By granting the town a charter of incorporation, the crown transferred the customary five rights of incorporation: holding a common seal, creating local by-laws, holding lands in mortmain, the ability to sue, or be sued, as a corporation and the continuance, in perpetuity, of the body corporate to the Borough. In addition to these five points however, the charter included the governing structure of the newly formed corporation which granted twenty four burgesses the power to appoint the town's constable, 'serjeants-at-mace' and bailiffs. Incorporation also gave the burgesses jurisdiction over the

⁴¹ Títtler, 1976, p.225

⁴² E.R.O., D/DHu T29

⁴³ Tittler, 1976, p.225

⁴⁴ Withington, 2015, p.315

⁴⁵ Postles, The Politics of Diffuse Authority in an Early Modern Small Town, 2010, p.1

borough court as well as empowering the mayor to hold meetings where he might imprison, fine and seize the goods of wrongdoers. These extra powers effectively replaced both the roles of the parish vestry as well as the local Justice of the Peace, who nominally oversaw the creation of parish officers⁴⁶, effectively placing Thaxted under the control of the mayor and 24 burgesses.

The 'centripetal'47 movement of power towards London precipitated a national trend, in favour of the incorporation of boroughs, during the sixteenth century 48 which, in turn, had led to a diffusion of municipal power towards the representatives of the towns themselves. Whilst the charter for Braintree was not proposed until the nineteenth century, incorporation was not the only form of local governance recognised by Parliament. Braintree during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries was effectively under the authority of the selected members of its closed vestry, known as the 'Company of the Four-and-Twenty'. The title 'Fourand Twenty' was unique to Essex although other similar organisations existed throughout the country amongst incorporated towns such as Great Dunmow. Open vestries were predominantly used throughout the rest of the nation and were commonly made up of the 'substantial' members of the parish⁴⁹ who, by custom, could advise and take part in the appointment of parish officers and deal with parish business⁵⁰. The closed nature of Braintree's Four-and-Twenty meant that the committee had complete control over its own membership and was not overtly beholden to influences from the local gentry⁵¹. Elections to the company were subject to invitation and even those from outside the company who were elected, but reluctant to join, were constitutionally subject to fines of three pounds, eight shillings and six pence for failing to appear. 52 The election of new members to the Company was taken very seriously and reveals that a strict hierarchy was maintained, especially regarding the status of its membership.

52 E.R.O., D/P 264/8/2

⁴⁶ Quinn, 1981, p.120 47 Wrightson and Levine, 1995, p.2

⁴⁸ Robert Tittler estimates 114 between 1485 and 1558 Tittler, 1976, in notes 2., p.231

⁴⁹ Usually tradesmen, freeholders, farmers of standing or 'professionals' were allowed to attend such meetings (Quinn, 1981, p.120).

⁵⁰ Hindle, Hierarchy and Community in the Elizabethan Parish: The Swallowfield Articles of 1596, 1999, p.342

⁵¹ Although the Earl of Warwick had some involvement in the affairs of the Four-and-Twenty, including commanding the Four-and-Twenty to pay the churchwardens for tasks he required them to do E.R.O., D/P 264/8/2 June 1 1629.

Much like Postle's study of the town vestry of Loughborough⁵³, Braintree had a large number of offices to fill. At the same time, the company's constitution makes it clear that the selection of members was done in order to maintain a semblance of social distinction from those it policed, which resulted in a few key members repeatedly holding the same offices, as well as there being a slow turnover in membership. Within the Minutes of the Four-and-Twenty, this was revealed, by the strict order, by which a new member's church 'stoole' was allocated to them:

'We elect & choose on to the Companye, Rice Thursby, John Battye and William Goodinge, and appoint them to be placed, in the stoole, where Robert Wortham sitt, and Mr Sparhawk & Adrian Mott into the stoole where Mr Lingwood sitt...'

-June 4 1627, Minutes of the Company of the Four-and-Twenty, Essex Record Office, D/P 264/8/2

The strict mechanisms of governance are also worthy of consideration. The constitution of Braintree's Four-and-Twenty indicates that during monthly meetings, members sat in the same order of importance that they would in church, which in turn would decide the order of their contributions towards Company matters: starting from the 'lower end'. 54 Decision-making was to be kept secret with the vestry door locked, although this was clearly not well adhered to judging by the frequency of meetings recorded as having taken place at an Inn. Voting was performed by members placing balls (and later buttons) into a box, preserving anonymity as well as the appearance of democratic process. Whilst we may suppose that the Company showed elitism in terms of the composition of its membership, it seems that attempts were made to maintain due process throughout the meetings and sanctions were implemented for transgressions.

By contrast, the lack of an obvious formalised election process for the feoffees of Yardley's caused some issue for the charity. In 1622, the accounts reveal that a new feoffment was required following disputes over

⁵³ Postles, 2010, p.5 54 E.R.O, D/P 264/8/2

Yardley's expenditure in order to 'reconvaye' the old feoffees along with the 'many new feoffees' that were needed to strengthen it. This not only suggests that there were internal divisions between the feoffees, about the running of Yardleys, but that Yardleys had failed to recruit enough new members make it an effective entity. The common 'weal' was thus hampered to a degree by the selectiveness of the older generation of feoffees and, therefore, their mandate to decide how the money should be spent was brought into question. There were ultimately limitations placed upon how the feoffees could behave regarding the town's finances. However these checks came from within. The item listed prior to the call for a new feoffment states that:

'...all old matters should be at a end and in noe wise questioned in regard of future peace and love'

-1622, Accounts of Yardley's 1598-1731, Vol. 1., Essex Records Office, D/P 16/25/69A

Whilst this item refers to the dispute involving Yardley's expenses, by preventing future feoffees from questioning previous decisions, the old membership had effectively prohibited any incoming feoffees from making drastic changes to the governing of Yardley's, thereby consolidating their influence. Yardley's was therefore much closer to an oligarchy than a democracy in the same way that some of its key members were also part of the Corporation, reflecting that the governing of Thaxted largely composed disputes between a few of the wealthiest and most influential citizens.

That being said, the influence of Thaxted's gentry was a considerable factor in the town's civic affairs. Nationally, the gentry of the 16th century had begun to recognise the need for formal education when aspiring to political office or power, both on the national stage, and in local affairs 55. This recognition coincided with the national increase in the number of endowed grammar schools, parish petty schools and expanding university places in what Laurence Stone has called 'an educational revolution'. 56 Thaxted and Braintree are both unusually early examples of educational

⁵⁵ Wrightson and Levine, 1995, p.1456 between 1560 and 1640, Stone, 1964, p.41

provisioning; with the establishment of their grammar schools having taken place in the 14th and 15th centuries respectively. Whilst a school likely existed in Braintree in the 17th century, the Four-and-Twenty make no mention of supporting it in their monthly minutes which, considering their involvement in so many aspects of daily life in Braintree, is surprising. This may indicate that for Braintree, education in the traditional sense belonged to the ministry of the church and was a separate jurisdiction from the provisioning of apprenticeships featured frequently in the minutes.⁵⁷ By contrast Yardley's was constitutionally obliged to devote some of its income towards the endowment of Thaxted Grammar School. Their accounts show that this was faithfully enacted every year, with special provisioning given to paying the schoolmaster the reasonable sum of three pounds, six shillings and eight pence per annum⁵⁸. Whilst the restriction of the school's intake exclusively to the 'freemen' of the town, limits the extent to which such support could be understood as 'charity' in the modern sense. Any such provisions for education would have provided these students a degree of potential social mobility, especially considering the schoolmasters fees were provided for. The previously mentioned Reverend Newman Leader took an active interest in the school and went to Cambridge himself to select the schoolmaster and buy his books. 59 Such dedication to the quality of education provided by the town shows the eagerness of the feoffees to fulfil their civic duties, indicating that the notion of a 'common good' was part of Yardley's ethos.

Jurisdiction and Independence

7here Thaxted and Braintree most obviously diverged was in their reactions to the interference of the state. In 1652, the Court of Sessions confirmed that because Thaxted 'hath a Charter to doe and act amonge themselves' the inhabitants of the town should no longer bring presentments or indictments to the sessions, but refer to the jurisdiction of the Corporation. 60 This affirmation of the

⁵⁷ See Chapter on Poor relief and Vagrancy

⁵⁸ E.R.O., D/P 16/25/69A, 1603-1604

⁵⁹ Simcoe, 1934, p.62 60 E.R.O., Q/SO 1/759 f. 230r. 65 E.R.O., Q/SO 1/723 f. 215r.

powers of the Corporation indicated that the membership were clearly governing in a manner that conformed to the sessions' standards of justice and they consequently wished to relieve themselves of the burden of future involvement in town affairs. A second reminder of Thaxted's jurisdiction was required however, indicating that the acceptance of the Corporation's authority was not universal within the town. The records for the courts held by the Corporation in Thaxted have been lost, but it is possible that the building, referred to today as the 'Guildhall', was the site of these sessions, due to its imposing central location and the presence of what appears to be a 'lock up'61. There was therefore a disconnect between the authority of the Corporation and the trust that some of the inhabitants had in their independent judgement, indicating that some townspeople lacked confidence in the decisions made by the town's court.

Where Thaxted's autonomy was tested most severely was an incident involving the potential imprisonment of the feoffees of Yardley's, including Lord Maynard, by the Court of Commission in 1622. The feoffees, having used the funds of Yardley's to pay partially the rates of the town⁶² were given twelve days to respond to accusations of 'misinformation' against their accounts or they would be 'comitted to the Fleet'. 63 Thaxted's record of this accusation is attached to the account book of Yardley's Charity and, below the Commission's statement, is listed the various ways in which the feoffees had complied with the established practice of utilising Yardley's funds to pay the taxes of the town, arguing that the lands of Yardley's belonged to the townsmen. The feoffees had prepared a sophisticated document of evidence relating to the original feoffment of Thomas Yardley's lands to the town and the subsequent instances of the payment of the town taxes by such revenue. 64 This seems to have been sufficient for there is no evidence that the feoffees were then imprisoned.

Following the incident, the feoffees attempted to avoid similar accusations by doctoring the 1598 settlement for the charity that was contained within the Yardley's account book, by adding explicit reference to the

⁶¹ Yardley's accounts for 1607 record the payment of one pence to Mother Wood for 'makinge cleane of the Cage' which, as Yardley's is charged with maintaining public buildings, suggests that this was the said lock-up. E.R.O., D/P 16/25/69A
62 The document is unfortunately damaged at the point where the rates were specified however it is likely that it refers to the tenth and fifteenth due to the involvement of the Court of High Commission.

⁶³ E.R.O., D/P 16/25/53

⁶⁴ E.R.O., D/P 16/25/53 and D/P 17/25/45 D/P 16/25/53 has two parts written in different hands indicating that the feoffees employed legal counsel to draft the final document.

payment of the towns taxes. 65 The chastisement of the feoffees reveals that, whilst seemingly corporately independent, Thaxted's accounts were, in some ways, as closely scrutinised as the un-incorporated.

Braintree, on the other hand, seemed to have a mixed relationship with state interests. Despite the patronage of the Earl of Warwick and the personal interest in Braintree's religious life by Archbishop Laud, in February 1628 an Order of Council was made to dispatch a company of soldiers to the town. The infraction was recorded as being a 'very obstinate' refusal to pay the 'charge for billeting' which suggests that there were political undertones to this blatant defiance. Conrad Russell has argued that, the so-called 'Forced Loan', which Charles I attempted to levy to deal with his foreign policy crises in Denmark⁶⁶, was a reflection of the crown's poor financial state rather than an attempt to undermine Parliament. 67 The widespread unpopularity of the loan was reflected by the many towns and cities, such as Braintree and Chelmsford, whose councils were unwilling or unable to pay. Local historians such as Perez Zagorin have suggested that popular opposition to taxes came not from principled defiance but from 'provincial inertia'68. This position is implausible for the case of Braintree owing to the great level of organised involvement by the Company in its economy, as well as the involvement of Archbishop Laud in Braintree's religious affairs. Threats of billeting soldiers were a real concern to those counsellors charged with raising the levy and many eventually capitulated.⁶⁹ The extent to which the Four-and-Twenty were involved in Braintree's refusal to pay is not certain.

However, not only was rate collecting part of their role within the parish, the minutes of the corresponding meeting have been removed from the record book. A meeting did occur during that month, however, as it took place at Richard Skinner's house suggesting that the minutes had originally contained the Company's response the incident.⁷⁰ No mention is made in any subsequent months to either paying the charges or the presence of soldiers in Braintree, suggesting that the minute

⁶⁵ D/P 16/25/69A This is shown through the addition of seventeenth-century superscript to the original sixteenth-century clerks hand.

⁶⁶ Cust, 1985, p.210

⁶⁷ Russell, 'Monarchies, Wars and Estates in England, France and Spain, c. 1580-1640 1982, p.205 68 Zagorin, The Court and the Country: The Beginning of the English Revolution. 1969, p.109

⁶⁹ Cust, 1985, p.234 70 E.R.O., D/P 264/8/2, March 3 1628

books were liable to crown perusal. The Company's supposed autonomy was therefore under threat as a result of their state defiance and suggests that Puritan ideas against tyrannical rule had infiltrated the members of the Four-and-Twenty.⁷¹

Conclusion

he structures of civic authority were therefore not a guarantee of localised power and influence throughout this period. The Marxist approach of stratified social powers has here been supported by the difficulties faced by Yardley's, the Four-and-Twenty and the Corporation, when enacting their assumed positions of power as the result of resistance from the gentry. The slow transition of manorial influence into corporate control was met with great resistance in the case of Thaxted, where the local gentry sought to reassert their influence over the town on multiple occasions. In Braintree, resistance to the Company's autonomous authority came in the form of military intervention, providing a glimpse at the limits of local freedoms and the possibility of crown interference as national politics meets the local stage. Incorporation was therefore both a method of maintaining civic order whilst relinquishing the burden of local government from Parliament.

Thaxted's incorporation marked the decline of manorial power, whilst at the same time it marked the rise of a new corporate elite whose attempts to consolidate power were equally exclusionary to much of the town's population. A similar situation was observable in Braintree, where the constitution of the Four-and-Twenty emphasised both the importance of maintaining the established social hierarchy within the meetings as well as in public.

CHAPTER 2:

NEPOTISM, WEALTH AND PUBLIC OFFICE

he localised power inherent to the acquisition of public office is an aspect of local governance that is crucial in determining the motivations and priorities of organisations such as the Fourand-Twenty, Yardley's and Thaxted's Corporation. The membership of the body politic can reveal the distribution, or indeed lack, of power and influence across a town's demographic. The degree to which members utilised and perpetuated their acquired powers for self-interest, reveals whether their existence was truly to the overall benefit of the town or aimed at the consolidation of existing social inequalities.

Established families are therefore useful indicators as to the presence of nepotism in the election of members, as is the impact of family members on the more challenging decisions faced by these organisations. Whilst the late sixteenth century saw what David Underdown refers to as a 'change in the balance of property' towards the emergent 'new class' of gentry, the same might be argued on a localised level, as the balance of civic and corporate power shifted towards the hands of the growing town elites. Such elites, like the gentry, often constituted the old and established families of the parishes, whose status as small landowners had seen them prosper during the economic hardships of the period. The civic governance of both Thaxted and Braintree consisted of constitutionally self-electing bodies taken from these 'men of standing', whose control over the lives of the towns' inhabitants was considerable, especially regarding members' accession to parish offices. Withington has argued that there

was a transposition of power into the hands of corporation members during this period, as the offices of the 'city commonwealth'73 and the 'corporate realm' became intermingled. This conflation of two seemingly separate spheres is not unexpected when considered alongside the selfelecting nature of the parish offices, as well as the restriction of their composition to the 'freemen' of the town. The tendency towards electing representatives from wealthier households is therefore an inevitable feature of the involvement of corporations in local government, as such members constituted tradesmen and burgesses. In towns such as Thaxted and Braintree, the surnames of the same wealthiest households appear frequently amongst the lists of public offices and corporation membership. These names are testament to the continuing influence of established families on town life and reflect Wrightson and Levine's assertion that close kinship ties within the nuclear family were a significant feature of society in Terling. The extent to which close kinship structures amongst the wealthier families contributed to civic nepotism amongst parish appointments will be examined using the evidence of Company and corporation membership; with comparison made to the list of Yardley's feoffees in the case of Thaxted. The importance such selections played in the priorities and enactment of parish offices will also be discussed in order to discover the consequences upon town affairs.

Demographic and Council Membership

arish communities like Terling have also shown that their officers were frequently drawn from the wealthier strata, with the benefits of office-holding effectively excluding the labouring poor. Since the passage of an Act of Parliament in 1554, it was the constables and churchwardens who held the right to call annual vestry meetings for the election of parish officials such as surveyors of the highways. Braintree's Four-and-Twenty maintained this practice while, at the same time,

⁷³ Withington defines 'city commonwealth' as being an artificial body made up of the citizens of an urban community subject to parliamentary representation. The commonwealth held local governmental powers as legal agency. Withington, 2015, p.315

⁷⁴ Half of Terling's churchwardens, session jurors, overseers of the poor and constables were yeoman and wealthy craftsmen (Sharpe, Early Modern England: A social history 1550-1760, 1987, p.92)

⁷⁵ Sharpe, 1987, p.92

⁷⁶ Quinn, 1981, p.121

appointing its own members to those positions and promising to 'assist the officers of the town'. In February 1623, the Four-and-Twenty elected a beadle for a full month in order to work with the overseers of the poor to 'gather up' the beggars from the town. This measure was clearly not wholly effective and on December 1st of that year, a beadle was once again appointed to 'keepe strangers out' before Christmas indicating the ruthlessness with which the vagrancy laws were being enforced by the Company. Being amongst the wealthiest citizens of Braintree, the financial burden of poor relief would have been a great concern to the Company's membership due to their personal liability for paying into the poor rates, and may be one reason why these measures were pursued so zealously.

Town Finances

Door provisioning was also an issue for the burgesses of Thaxted whose concern over expenditure was exacerbated by the difficult financial situation they faced following the failure of the town's wool trade of the sixteenth century. The poverty of Thaxted's finances, upon incorporation, was therefore a limiting factor in terms of the ambitions of the Corporation. However the 1616 settlement of the town, as recorded in the accounts of Yardley's, shows that there were, in fact, nearly 100 'freemen of the better sort, freeholders & able men'80, suggesting that the town's decline may have been overstated in order to negotiate a better deal during the renewal of the charter.

Regardless of any later exaggeration of poverty, in 1587 the town's market was deemed insufficiently profitable to raise a regular income, the trade of the town never having recovered from the decline of the cutlery industry of the preceding century. This was obvious from the charter of incorporation of 1556 which granted that the Corporation had the right to lay claim to lands of up to £40 in value if they were not being held in chief⁸¹. Yardley's also adopted a similar system of acquiring lands by

⁷⁸ E.R.O., D/P 264/8/3 February 3rd 1623

⁷⁹ E.R.O., D/P 264/8/3 December 1 1623

⁸⁰ E.R.O., D/P 16/25/69A

⁸¹ E.R.O., D/DHu T29

feoffment, which resulted in yet more consolidation of land under the control of a few landowning townsmen. The frequency with which this was enacted during the seventeenth century indicates that such seizures formed a large part of the Corporation's wealth. However it is in these acquisitions that the ambiguity between the Corporation and Yardley's Charity lies. In 1630, Yardley's Charity was warned that 'no feoffee serving as an officer of the Borough shall receive any of the charity's income', 82 indicating that parish officers had not only been feoffees in the past, but also had been receiving both sets of income.

Whilst Thaxted's Corporation and Yardley's Charity were steadily acquiring land and wealth, considerable expenditure was dedicated by Braintree's Four-and-Twenty to the acquisition of cottages specifically for use by the poor. Such provisioning was certainly for the benefit of the official inhabitants of Braintree, however the underlying concern was that such charity would be exploited by outsiders who migrated to the town. The Company's minutes between 1619 and 1636 record the repair of a cottage at the expense of the town⁸³ as well as the provisioning of a cottage for the benefit of the poor⁸⁴. Whilst such expenditures appear to be the actions of a paternal corporation giving alms to the needy, in January 1625, the Company organised the demolition of another cottage belonging to a man known as 'Danish' and the removal of his wife to the Almeshouse⁸⁵. Quite why their house was demolished was not made clear in the minutes. However frequent references to the prevention of more cottages being erected within the parish suggests that a priority of the Company was to restrict the residency of the town. The fact that the wife of Danish was sent to the Almeshouse suggests that the intention of the act was to prevent any future poor person from setting themselves up in the cottage. When considered alongside the fact that in 1626 John Bridge was paid five shillings a quarter to prevent him from erecting any more cottages on his land86, a real concern for the Fourand-Twenty was to keep the parish's population from expanding.

An example of Company members extending their influence over the

⁸² E.R.O., D/P 16/25/69A

⁸³ E.R.O., D/P 264/8/2, September 4 1620

⁸⁴ E.R.O., D/P 264/8/2, December 3 1627

⁸⁵ E.R.O., D/P 264/8/2, January 3 1625

⁸⁶ E.R.O., D/P 264/8/2, November 6 1626

town through the control of property comes in the form of a deal struck with Thomas Huntsman in 1636. Members of the Company were 'willing freely' to give their shares of a property in Coxall Lane to Huntsman, on the condition that, when he died, he 'surrender this and the rest of his houses' to be used by the town. ⁸⁷ The gift of such a property was, in itself, unusual as the Company had rented out similar properties elsewhere in the town, but it was the additional acquisition of the entire property and the 'rest of his houses' upon his death, that signified a net gain for the membership's interests. The additional clause deprived any heirs of Thomas Huntsman a potential home as well as income and therefore displayed a degree of calculated self-interest on the part of those members who owned parts of the original property.

Kinship and Nepotism

rembers of the governing bodies in both Thaxted and Braintree, therefore, had cause to maintain the presence of their Lorganisations within town life. Nevertheless the identities of the members also played a crucial role. The positions of feoffees and parish officers were clearly ubiquitous in Thaxted and therefore the influence on the enactment of parish duties must be considered to have been under the oversight of Yardley's. The names of the feoffees of Yardley's and the names of the Corporation's members often belonged to the same individuals, including the mayors John Moore and Thomas Swallow. This was further convoluted by the various marriages between Thaxted's families of significant standing, leading to various surnames being listed as aliases, such as the Moores and the Taylors. The interchangeability of the names reflects the nucleation of power among the wealthiest of the burgesses within Thaxted, even beyond the remit of trade and office appointments. This was yet further enhanced by the degree to which nepotism was a feature of both charity and Corporation membership. The minutes of Yardley's feoffees and the Corporation reveal the consistent presence of certain family names across the various memberships (See Appendix A.). 88 William Swallow is first mentioned in the 1598 list of feoffees 99 whilst his brother Thomas Swallow was mayor in 1611. 90 Samuel Fann is a consistent trustee of Yardley's from 1641 91, with his nephew Robert Fann also having joined in 1671. 92

'Purchas' is another name of repute both within Thaxted and beyond; with twelve appearances in the lists of feoffees, Corporation members and schoolmasters, as well as two mayors of the town. Samuel Purchas remains the most renowned Purchas in contemporary scholarship due to the various travel volumes he published during the first quarter of the seventeenth century.93 In the first decade of that century however, it was William Purchas whose name carried the most infamy due to a grisly murder which took place at Thaxted in April 1608. William Purchas was the son of Mary Purchas and the influential Corporation member Thomas Purchas who had also been the Mayor of Thaxted in 1606. The Essex assizes record that William, with 'malice aforethoght', stabbed his mother Mary in the left breast with a knife causing her to die instantly. 94 The legacy of the brutal murder of Mary was immortalised by the broadside ballad 'The Woeful Lamentation of William Purchas' which was first published in 1624 and ran through many editions. 95

⁸⁸ Westley, Purcas, Halles, Pigott and Turner are just a few examples of frequently appearing family names of the feoffees and Corporation members.

⁸⁹ E.R.O D/P 16/25/69A

⁹⁰ E.R.O D/P 16/25/99

⁹¹ E.R.O D/P 16/25/102

⁹² E.R.O D/P 16/25/103

⁹³ Titles include: Purchas, his Pilgrimage; or, Relations of the World and the Religiond observed in all Ages (1614) and Purchas, his Pilgrim. Microcosmus, or the historie of Man. Relating the wonders of his Generation, vanities in his Degeneration. Necessity of his Regeneration, (1619)

⁹⁴ E.R.O, T/A 418/75/9, 4 July 1608

⁹⁵ Unknown author, 'The Woeful Lamentation of William Purchas', who for murtherin his Mother at Thaxted in Essex was executed at Chelmsford. To the tune of, 'The Rich Merchant', in The English Broadside Ballad Archive, http://ebba.english.ucsb.edu/ballad/30299/xml [accessed 12 August 2017]

This ballad lamented the murder from the perspective of William and blamed it on the 'detested Vice' of drink, despite there being no mention of drunkenness in the inquisition, which had taken place the day after the murder. 96 The publication of the ballad sixteen years after the murder would suggest that the stern moralising tone used against the evils of drink was becoming part of a popular narrative against such vices rather than having been a personal attack on the family. The Woeful Lamentation was set to the tune of The Rich Merchant⁹⁷ which was another ballad involving murder and which also emphasised the repentance of the sinner, in keeping with the moralising tropes of early seventeenth-century ballads. 98 The publication of such a ballad would have been particularly humiliating to Thomas Purchas given the widespread distribution of broadsheets, with this particular tune no doubt having been sung in Thaxted's alehouses. Thomas Purchas was, by the time the song was produced, listed as 'Chief Burgess' where previously he had been referred to as yeoman, not only refuting Simcoe's claim that, though numerous, none of the Purchases were particularly 'well to do', but also indicating the incident did not diminish his social standing.

A possible source of familial tension behind the incident was that in 1599, Thomas Purchas and Thomas Purchas the younger were listed feoffees for Yardley's whilst William was not, suggesting that there was some disparity between the social standing of members of the same family.

The influence of Thomas Purchas at the time of the incident is revealed through the names of the jurors listed at William Purchas' inquisition:



⁹⁶ E.R.O., T/A 418/75/9

⁹⁷ https://ebba.english.ucsb.edu/ballad/31745/xml

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John Lord alias Francis (Corporation member and feoffee in 1599)
Nathaniel Barnard
William Carter (Corporation member)
Alexander Turner (Corporation member)
John Westley (Corportion member and feoffee in 1599)
John Bowtell senior
Simon Bowtell senior (Corporation member and feoffee in 1599)
John Browne
Thomas Collyn (feoffee in 1599) Robert Halles
John Gyver (Corporation member) Henry More
John Rolfe
Essex Records Office, T/A 418/75/9
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Six fellow Corporation members and three fellow feoffees would have meant that Thomas Purchas was well acquainted with the men who were to decide the fate of his wife's murderer and, despite the accused being his own son, the speed of the inquisition would have made it likely that tempers were high at the point of conviction. The presence of so many well-established families on the jury, the shocking nature of the crime against one of their own and Thomas Purchas' social standing in Thaxted, conspired to make the execution of William inevitable. The fact of Thomas Purchas' continued involvement in the town's affairs, in spite of such a scandalous incident, and the later public revisitation of the theme in a popular ballad, indicates the degree to which the family's influence was established within the town. In 1621 it was George Purchas who was selected, along with the mayor, Mr Taylor, to establish the new feoffment owing to his standing as 'one of the chief burgesses' indicating the continuation of the family's respectability and importance.

These well-established landowning families are representative of the decision-making structures of sixteenth and seventeenth century towns in which the consolidation of power by the burgesses was enacted

⁹⁸ Scanlon and Roscoe, The Common Touch : Popular Literature from the Elizabethans to the Restoration, 2014, p.11 99 E.R.O. D/P 16/25/69A, 1622

through legitimate municipal channels. Braintree also exhibited the self-perpetuating nature of successive family members within the Fourand-Twenty. Four generations of the Spearhawkes are found among the Company's members' signatures as well as three generations of Scotts and Hawkins and two of Skinner. 100 Like Thomas Purchas, the prominent Company member John Skinner was also faced with a familial scandal. In February 1621, Jeremy Skinner was fined first by the Company in 1621 for 'disorder' 101, then by the constables in 1627 for an unknown offence 102 and was finally, in 1628, taken before the quarter sessions for unlicensed victualing. 103 Given how involved John Skinner was in the governance of Braintree, such an errant relative would have certainly have been an embarrassment. However, like Purchas, John Skinner did not lose his social standing and continued to play a role in the Company until 1636. Like Thaxted, Braintree also saw a repetition of family surnames across the various bodies and offices of the town, with both a Martin Skinner and Richard Skinner playing significant roles within the Four-and-Twenty. Wrightson and Levine's assessment of the kinship structures of the inhabitants of Terling reveals a similar fascination with the importance of existing familial ties despite the actual nature the village's kinship networks being relatively loose. 104 This consequently implies that John, Martin and Richard Skinner's familial relationship with the roguish Jeremy was recognised by them, with a degree of flexibility, and did not imply special treatment was given to him when challenged by the Company.



¹⁰⁰ Quínn, 1981, p.127 101 E.R.O., D/P 264/8/2, February 5 1621

¹⁰² E.R.O., Q/SR 260/55

¹⁰³ E.R.O., Q/SR 263/52

¹⁰⁴ Wrightson and Levine, 1995, p.89.

Conclusion

oth Thaxted and Braintree are examples of the developing prominence of the burgesses and middling strata in town affairs. Whilst these key members of their societies were often drawn from well-established families, the acquisition of public office demonstrated an ability to capitalise upon their positions within the mechanisms of local power, to both their personal benefit and that of the towns they managed. The micro-politics of these forms of authority support Wood's claim that such exercises in local governance suppressed the potential for political change amongst the lower orders as they maintained the power hierarchies of their everyday lives. 105 This suppression was most transparent in the self-election of membership, within both Thaxted and Braintree, and is evidenced by the recurrence of the same few family surnames in positions of influence. Whilst in both cases there were instances of potential embarrassment for prominent members from familial scandal, their continued involvement in town affairs reveals both the degree of influence such individuals had as well as the fluidity with which kinship relations could be enacted. Thaxted, in particular, saw the need to expand and capitalise upon both the income and the property of Yardley's and the Corporation, with the insertion of clauses to allow for the acquisition of new lands, giving a few key individuals control over large proportions of the town. Braintree too expanded their ownership, all be it to a lesser degree, whilst at the same time enacting their interests to reduce the burden of poverty upon themselves. The members of Thaxted's Corporation, Yardley's Charity and Braintree's Four-and-Twenty were therefore deeply involved in the interests of their respective towns, from an ancestral perspective, whilst at the same time, pursuing self-interest through official municipal channels, indicating the complexity of town governance during the period.

CHAPTER 3:

Religion and the Influence of Puritanism

he importance of the role of religion in the civic governance of Thaxted and Braintree provides an interesting comparison between the political priorities of the town's ruling elites and their spiritual concerns. The extent to which their respective administrative bodies dealt with the influence of contrasting religious ideologies reveals, not only their religious preoccupations, but also the degree to which political decisions might have been affected by such issues. England in the aftermath of the Reformation experienced something of a crisis of religious identity, with emergent rival denominations attempting to assert their influence over the nation's spiritual and political life. Essex in particular was at the forefront of this battle, with Colchester's rulers attempting to create their 'godly civic commonwealth' 106 faced with the Laudian counterrevolution of the 1630s. Derogatory contemporary labels such as 'Lollard' and 'Papist' only serve to further complicate the religious landscape to the modern reader, whilst the level of assumptions about the theological understanding by the lay population are difficult to ascertain. 107 On a parish level, the vying for positions of influence from Puritans such as the Earl of Warwick and Laudians such as Lord Maynard, created real and sometimes violent conflict over the appointment of ministers. Nonetheless, incidents of ostensibly religious strife may be enmeshed with what we would today call local politics, yet, again this is a distinction which would have been alien to a contemporary audience. The minutes of Braintree's Four-and-Twenty contain a great deal of information about day-to-day decisions involving religious and political entanglement and will be examined in relation to both the Company's constitution and the

¹⁰⁶ Walter, Understanding Popular Violence in the English Revolution: The Colchester Plunderers., 1999, p.162 107 Walsham, Charitable Hatred: Tolerance and Intolerance in England, 1500-1700, 2006, p.20

context of Braintree's wider Puritanism. For Thaxted, the strains of the various religious quarrels which took place in the seventeenth century will expose more subtle power struggles between the traditional and emergent elites in the town.

The Presence of Pluralism

y electing the same core families to positions of office such as church wardens and parish constables, the Company of Braintree effectively controlled not only the distribution of poor relief but also the spiritual behaviour of the inhabitants. A certain hostility towards the 'undeserving' poor can be seen in the religious rhetoric of the minutes of the company during the 1620s and 1630s and indicates concern for the religious wellbeing of the parish. Wrightson and Levine have argued that the Reformation contributed towards a reinforcement of social stratification in Terling through the distinction between the religious beliefs of the wealthier individuals and the rest of the inhabitants. 108 Such distinctions were realised within the tendency towards Puritanism amongst the educated landowning classes of Essex, which reached peak non-conformity in the 1630s when half of all ministers had such sympathies. 109 Whilst it is tempting to view this period in terms of religious binaries, the plurality of counties such as Essex and the various upheavals faced during the period, suggest that this may not have been the case for Thaxted and Braintree. The affiliation between the town's inhabitants and the various denominations practicing on the fringes of society suggests that there was a more complex political relationship between the local governments and gentry and their religious practices. Thaxted and Braintree were subject to the influences of the local elites such as Warwick and Maynard. However to suggest that there was a coherence in local opinion would be implausible as was witnessed by the conflicts faced in both localities.

It has been suggested by Nicholas Tyacke that the impact upon urban politics of Puritan ideology was associated with opposition to tyranny from both the church and state. 110 Whilst many Puritans attempted to create 'change from within', revisionist historians such as John Morrill have suggested that the tension between Charles I's Laudian religious policy and the remnants of the Puritan movement was, in part, the cause of the English Civil War¹¹¹ Braintree was one such hotbed of religious nonconformity, with hints of localised civic rebellion revealed through the minutes of the Company of the Four-and-Twenty. A testament to both the religious plurality and intolerance of Braintree's elite was witnessed by the exodus of many of the inhabitants aboard the pilgrim ship the Lyon in 1632, to establish a Puritan colony in Braintree, Massachusetts. 112/113 A cross reference undertaken between the various names listed as being aboard the Lyon and the Archdeaconry Courts between 1617 and 1632, reveals that some of those who left for America had previously been tried for offences in Braintree. These low-level incidents included, being absent from church or prayer, and, whilst none of these offences were particularly serious, they reflect a quiet dissent amongst some inhabitants, not only against the church, but the authority of the Four-and-Twenty.

The responsibility to appoint and oversee the church wardens belonged to the Company and it is, therefore, interesting that certain members chose to defy the order of office on religious practices.

One such individual was John Talcot who was himself a member of the Four-and-Twenty and had acted as an overseer of the poor and collector for the Company. Yet in 1631 he was recorded as absent from prayer and in May 1632 it was documented that despite being elected as churchwarden at Easter that year, Talcot 'did remove owt of towne'. 114 Talcot's desertion of office in Braintree suggests that there was religious dissent amongst the elite men of the town as, even those compelled by Company membership to participate in the preservation of religious life, clearly felt unable to refuse freely. William Goodwin, who was elected to

¹¹⁰ Tyacke, The Puritan Paradigm of English Politics, 1558-1642', 2010, p.527

¹¹¹ Morrill, The Nature of the English Revolution., 1993, p.45

¹¹² See Banks, The Planters of the Commonwealth, 1930, pp.99-102 for the Lyon passenger list and Quinn,

^{113 ,} pp.101-104 for a printed version of the Archdeaconry Court records 114 E.R.O., D/P 264/8/2, May 7 1632

the Four-and-Twenty on June 4 1627, 115 was instrumental within the organising of the Lyon's voyage and emigrated himself, along with his wife Elizabeth, in 1632. 116 John Bridge, as he was known in November 1626, became 'Father Bridge' by February 1632, demonstrating the influence of Puritan ministers in this period. He was also a passenger aboard the Lyon and was a prominent member of Reverend Thomas Hooker's Puritan Company which became a leading Puritan organisation in Connecticut. Hooker's involvement in Braintree was enough to provoke the minister, Dr Samuel Collins, to write to Archbishop Laud's Chancellor in 1629 that he had 'small hope of prevailing with him', 117 suggesting that there was great religious dissidence taking place in the years prior to the Lyon's departure. John Bridge was clearly a man of both intellectual and religious weight in the New World and a nineteenth-century statue of him was erected in Cambridge, Massachusetts with the dedication:

John Bridge (1578-1665) left Braintree, Essex County, England in 1631 as a member of Reverend Mr. Hooker's Company, settling here in 1632 and staying when the company moved to Connecticut. He became the supervisor of the first public school established in Cambridge in 1635, served as deacon of the church from 1636-1658, as a representative to the Great and General Court from 1637-1641, and was appointed by that body to lay out lands in this town and beyond.

This indicates that religious intolerance from both the church and the Company itself was enough to push, even actively involved members of the establishment, to emigrate elsewhere. The fact that Bridge and Goodwin were figures involved in the Four-and-Twenty suggests that, at some point before 1632, there was a rift between the more 'godly' inhabitants and the more moderate, out of which the moderate members ultimately triumphed. A possible source of the rift was a statement made to Dr Duck in the Calendar of State Papers by the churchwardens of Braintree in January 1632 regarding their minister, Samuel Collins. The statement reported to the council that the minister had 'conformed himself to the orders of the Church of England', 118 referring to the Bishop of London's orders to

¹¹⁵ E.R.O., D/P 264/8/2, June 4 1627

¹¹⁶ Banks, 1930, pp.99-102

¹¹⁷ Davids, Annals of Evangelical Nonconformity in the County of Essex, from the Time of Wycliffe to the Restoration, with Memorials of the Essex Ministers who were Ejected or Silenced in 1660-1662, and Brief Notices of the Essex Churches which Originated with their Labours, 1863, p.150

¹¹⁸ Calendar of State Papers, Charles I, Vol. CCX., 42.MC4324202162, Jan.18 1632

discover any nonconformity in Braintree. The direct involvement of the Bishop was an indication that Braintree was the focus of religious tensions between what would now be referred to as Puritans and the Church of England. It therefore seems that the Four-and-Twenty had representatives within both camps, with the implementation of Collins' 'conformity' to the wishes of the Bishop having been supported by some members, whilst having caused several other members to leave.

Influence of Puritanism

here was, however, evidence of non-conformist associations within the Four-and-Twenty which were contained within the Company minutes and which reveal decisions made regarding the distribution of poor relief and attitudes towards poverty that could be considered 'Puritanical' in nature. The amour-propre of the Company can be examined, in this regard, as a counterpoint to Wrightson and Levine's argument that there was a commonality in the religious beliefs of the ruling strata. The third item of the Four-and-Twenty constitution states:

'3. Meeting to begin with prayers. Anyone not coming before the end of prayers, fined 6d.'

-Constitution of the Company of Four-and-Twenty, Essex Records Office, T/A 242/1 -Folio 44

Requiring prayer at the start of Four-and-Twenty Company meetings, which were allegedly for the 'maintenance of order' in the town, ¹¹⁹ indicates that a priority of the Company was to provide their actions with a religious context. The application of fines against members who missed the entirety of a meeting's prayers was reiterated throughout the minutes, usually following the absence of a particularly significant number of members. This indicates that whilst there was clearly a concern by some members to uphold the constitution, there was regular defiance of such rules by others.

Emphasis was also made in Item 14 that members 'giving scandal' would firstly lose their place in church, and secondly their membership in the Company. The preoccupation with the preservation of a 'godly' reputation and opposition to violations of the Company's moral standing are framed around the public shaming of transgressors, aimed at reducing their social standing in the first instance. This suggests that the relationship between the Company's views on morality were connected with hierarchical importance as well as their more obvious religious connotations. Members were also not to have 'more than three dishes' at meal times or be caught 'haunting taverns', 120 indicating that the Company was interested in promoting temperance. These gestures towards self-denial suggest attempts to replicate the piety of a religious organisation and are similar to the public performance of abstinence that was a feature of the godly clergy. 121 The vicar of Braintree, Samuel Collins, seems to have struggled against the nonconformity of the Four-and-Twenty, as indicated by the presence of several prominent members' names, including Martin Skinner, amongst the Archdeaconry court records. Quinn identifies the zealotry with which Collins pursued non-conformity as having originated from the fact that, the Bishop of London, William Laud, was his superior and a determined prosecutor of Puritanism. This tension between the minister and some of the Company seems to have contributed towards the exile of some Company members following 1632, as Collins continued to pursue such dissenters. Miles Claye was a churchwarden for the town in June 1629 but in 1632 was tried for failure to receive communion and refusing to kneel. 122 By 1634 he had left the parish, indicating that for some non-conformist members of the Four-and-Twenty, the situation was becoming too repressive. The minutes of 1 August 1631 reiterate that, if any of the Company were absent from prayers, they would be fined 6d, followed by the names of six offenders from that meeting. The defiance of a quarter of the Company membership during a single meeting implies that, in the year preceding

¹²⁰ E.R.O., T/A 242/1 -Folio 45

¹²¹ Webster, Godly Clergy in Early Stuart England: The Caroline Puritan Movement, c. 1620-1643, 1997, p.18

¹²² Quinn, 1981, p.103

the loss of members to the New World, standards of moral behaviour were not being upheld within the company meetings¹²³.

Prayer, Biblical study and self-restraint were fundamental to Puritan conduct and their presence in Company minutes suggests that, whilst unlikely to consider themselves 'Puritanical' in the 1620's, they were still participating in a 'godly struggle'. 124 The continued presence of Puritan members such as John Bridge until the 1630's is an indication that some members were clearly hoping to reform Braintree's religious life, from within, utilising the pre-existing mechanisms of social policing to do so. An example of this was the great deal of energy expended by the Company at meetings against the unauthorised victualing of Braintree inhabitants. Point number twelve of the Four-and-Twenty's constitution specifically prohibited any members from erecting alehouses without the consent of both the minister and the Company. 125 This suggests that, not only was temperance a priority for the Company, but moral deference was given to the church during its inception. The suppression of victualling within the minutes is sometimes justified by the 'disorder' 126 that resulted from the festivities and indicates both a moralising and public order element to their disapproval.

This is revealed by the fact that the first surviving minutes of the meetings of 1619 decree that:

'Christopher Harwood and Richard Heward shall be suppressed from victualling, although they have gotten licences, the same being obteynd contrary to the like and allowance of the chiefe of the towne in general and Mr. James Sparhawke, a churchwarden and a constable are intreated to attend at the next quarter sessions for that purpose'

- Minutes of the Company of the Four-and-Twenty, Essex Records Office, D/P 264/8/3, May 3 1619

The justification for removing the pre-existing licences of two victuallers because the 'chiefe of the town' did not 'like and allow' it, indicates that the Company wished to intervene in the moral lives of the inhabitants

¹²³ E.R.O., D/P 264/8/3, August 1st 1631.

¹²⁴ Sharpe, 1987, p.230 125 E.R.O., T/A 242/1 Folio 45

¹²⁶ E.R.O. D/P264/8/3, March 4 1622,

beyond the proposed preventative measures stated by their constitution. The pursuit of the issue, at some cost, to the level of the quarter sessions indicates that this was a matter of great concern to the Company. The use of a churchwarden and a constable to make the petition, was a recognition of the important religious jurisdiction within cases of public order, despite both offices ultimately reporting to the Company. It seems, from the constitution, that the Company was, therefore hoping for a closer working relationship between themselves and church; something which was contested under the zealous ministry of Collins.

The involvement of the highly influential Robert Rich, second Earl of Warwick in Braintree's civic affairs thus had a religious significance as well as an overtly political role. An open supporter of the Puritan cause¹²⁷, Warwick had even offered his protection to Thomas Hooker, suggesting that the Earl had found some Puritan support amongst members of the Four-and-Twenty. In 1620, the Company discussed soliciting the Earl of Warwick's help to:

"...reforme the disorders in the faire, both in keeping of the faire longer than the time allowed by the courte and in Bearebaiting, fencing with the lyke which tendeth great hinderance of the tradesmen of the town,"

- Minutes for the Company of the Four-and-Twenty, Essex Records Office, D/P 264/8/3, October 2 1620

Once again, the Company was attempting to reform elements of town life and culture, whilst soliciting the sympathetic Warwick to do so on their behalf. The Earl did, however, also represent the weavers of 'Bocking, Braintree, and other places' to the council due to an increased demand for cloth without a corresponding increase in pay. The 'masters' of the weavers were therefore likely to be members of Braintree's elite and likely to have been involved in the Company, which would certainly have inflamed any pre-existing religious tensions felt by the Earl's involvement in the town's affairs.

¹²⁷ Walter, Understanding Popular Violence in the English Revolution: The Colchester Plunderers.,1999, p.6 128 Ibid

Influence of prominent Religious Figures

haxted's Corporation had a more complex relationship with the religious life of its members than that of Braintree, owing to the longstanding political tensions between the town's burgesses and the gentry. In contrast to the minutes of the Fourand-Twenty, which are littered with intriguing details about issues of religious tension, the accounts of Yardley's charity reveal little about the religious leanings of the feoffees, being largely a record of expenditure. It is, therefore, the relationships between individual burgesses and the gentry, as well as pivotal events, which give an alternative insight into the religious pressures of Thaxted. Decisions to appoint the local vicars had traditionally resided with the Maynard family of Priors Hall 129who were local gentry and established patrons of Thaxted church¹³⁰. These tensions were manifested in various legal disputes both, during the period in question, and beforehand. The case of the Reverend Newman Leader was, however, one in which the intertwined nature of Thaxted's political and religious life became most obvious. Leader was the long-established minister of Thaxted, who was first mentioned in relation to the town's politics as a witness to the assignation, by Yardley's. of the rents from the lands towards paying the 'tenth and fifteenth taxes for all of the town'141. This early alignment with the feoffees of Yardley's later seems to have soured and led to conflict with the 'well affected' inhabitants of Thaxted, who called for Leader's removal in 1645^{131} . Leader had been in dispute with Lord Maynard over the question of tithes, and with Yardley's, regarding funds allocated for church spending¹³². Lord Maynard had in fact taken Newman Leader before the bishop of the diocese, Dr William Laud, in 1630, to establish which tithes belonged to the farmer of the rectory and which to the vicar. Bishop Laud confirmed that all tithes besides 'Tyth-Corn and a Grisp of Candles'133 belonged to the vicar, thereby denying the rectory and its de facto proprietor, Lord Maynard, extra income. 134

¹²⁹ Till, 2017, p.48

¹³⁰ See (Simcoe, 1934, p.29 and p.47) for references to the addition to the church of an altar piece and carvings from Lord Maynard. 141 E.R.O, D/P 16/25/55A

¹³¹ Till, 2017, p.48

¹³² Newcourt, 1710, p.580, 133 Newcourt, 1710, p.580

¹³⁴ Newcourt, 1710, p. 580 135 Thrush and Ferris, 2010, http://www.historyofparliamentonline.org/volume/1604-1629/member/maynardsir-william-1586-1640#footnote49 n7nagqn

This outcome would have been at odds with the close friendship between Lord Maynard and Laud which developed during the 1630s and was reinforced by Maynard's involvement in the creation of the Essex levy for the Second Bishops' War. The Maynard family saw satisfaction, however, when the Reverend was taken before the Essex Committee for Plundered Ministers, a Presbyterian organisation established to determine which ministers it deemed inadequate in terms of moral conduct and knowledge of doctrine and which later became a method of identifying Royalists.

Lord Maynard was himself a staunch Royalist and Arminian whose opposition to the Puritan movement was shown by his openly hostile rivalry with the Puritan Earl of Warwick. 135 In 1640, Lord Maynard had complained to Parliament that he had needed to 'trouble [them] so often' about the 'insolences' of the soldiers who were attempting to 'reform churches'. His petition, to have the soldiers removed, indicates the degree to which Maynard rejected encroachments upon his control in Thaxted, whilst the 'false and unjust reports' 136 which he believed referred to him, leave an intriguing question about his role in the situation.

The committee ousted Newman Leader and a battle between the Maynard family and some of the principal men of the town ensued, in order to decide his replacement. Lord Maynard's cynical use of religious mechanisms, to which he himself was not aligned, in order to quash challenges to his power in Thaxted, is indicative of the tenuous control the gentry maintained over the inhabitants of Thaxted. This also supports Walsham's argument that rigid religious categories are unhelpful to the historian during this period, as theological boundaries were more fluid, and political influences more obvious, than is sometimes suggested. 137 The dismissal of Leader provided the burgesses with an interesting dilemma in terms of the power discrepancies within Thaxted. Whilst it was a Presbyterian committee that had dismissed Leader, the advowson of the town still belonged to the reliably Royalist Maynard family, who promptly appointed the widely unpopular (and pointedly not Puritan) Edmond

¹³⁵ Thrush and Ferris, 2010, http://www.historyofparliamentonline.org/volume/1604-1629/member/maynardsir-william-1586-1640#footnote49_n7nagqn

¹³⁶ Calendar of State Papers, Charles I, MC4325301692, July 27 1640 137 Ibid 140 Walsham, 2006, pp.20-21

Croxon. The patronage of families towards ministers was a common feature of the Essex church and, as such, the loyalties of these clergy belonged to their benefactors' interests. The involvement of the Committee therefore reveals that the burgesses and Yardley's were prepared to align themselves with the prevailing wind of Essex Presbyterianism, even if the motivations were of a more political nature. This incident was arguably the catalyst for future religious troubles in Thaxted, with the allegiances of the various inhabitants not necessarily following the most obvious associations.

Piety and Violence

Tt is unclear from the feoffees and the Company's responses whether they were truly nonconformist in their religious affiliations. Nevertheless, the various office holders were involved in the 'Great fight' of the sequestrators in Thaxted church which gives some indication as to the various conflicted leanings of their members. 142 The quarrel first began with Lady Maynard's appointment of Croxon as the replacement to Newman Leader. However, this was a deeply unpopular choice, as was Samuel Hall, her next appointment, who was dismissed by the Assembly of Divines. 143 Following his appeals to the House of Lords, Hall had his appointment confirmed but due to the lack of a speaker in the Lords at that time, the proceedings were declared null and void and sequestrators were ordered to Thaxted. Richard Turner, a member of the Corporation and Andrew Halles, a feoffee of Yardley's met Hall (who had brought the mayor Michael Nightingale and clerk Henry Jebb) at the church where Hall continued with his morning sermon. The sequestrators entered the church whereupon a fight broke out in which various burgesses took part and the Mayor refused to intervene. This disconnect between the Laudian views of some of the Company and the refusal to accept Hall's ministry indicates a town divided even amongst the wealthiest members of the town's elite. The most astonishing thing about the incident was the use of violence by women, who:

¹⁴² See (Till, 2017, pp. 48-56) for a full account of the 'Great Fight' in Thaxted church and the role of the sequestrators. 143 (Till, 2017, p.51)

'fell upon them and straddling over the pews broke the iron which held the hour glass and would have struck them with it'

-Session Rolls Midsummer 1637, Essex Records Office, 2/SR 297/86,

The issue of the ministry of Thaxted church had clearly struck a nerve amongst the population and is suggestive of the divisions between dissenting members of the congregation and the older 'establishment'. The violence with which the congregation expressed their displeasure about the sequestration indicates that Thaxted was indeed largely a Laudian stronghold, as it ties to the Maynards would have suggested. Braintree had undergone its own nonconformist upheaval some ten years beforehand and Terling had become culturally 'godly' by the end of the 16th century, 144 whilst Thaxted's religious concerns were not realised until the Civil War. Considering the extent of the Puritan influence in Essex, such continued stability supports Till's suggestion that the majority of the town's 'establishment' sided with the Maynards during this incident. 145 Nonetheless, the presence of Andrew Halles and Richard Turner, two prominent and active members in Thaxted's governance, among other feoffees of Yardley's, as witnesses for the sequestrators is indicative of the degree to which nonconformist ideas had already started to appear.

Conclusion

he religious lives of Thaxted and Braintree were therefore intertwined with the governance of the town to various degrees. Essex during this period had a complex, if largely Puritan, religious landscape, which was at the forefront of dissent as well as the Laudian counter-revolution. The presence of religious plurality, as well as conflict, can be seen within both towns and reflects the fluidity of religious influences. Whilst Wrightson and Levine have argued that the seventeenth century saw an increase in social stratification as a result of the Reformation,

the cases of Thaxted and Braintree have challenged this. Whilst Braintree had the support of a Puritan patron, the antinon-conformist vicar had significant influence in the town's affairs and the Company members were divided in their loyalties. Thaxted, by contrast, had a Laudian patron whose active interference in religious affairs had eventually resulted in violence that was not especially socially stratified in nature. The day-to-day affairs featured in the minutes of the Four-and-Twenty were influenced by the Puritan values of temperance, self-denial and moral fortitude, whilst at the same time some members of the Company were also guilty of violating these values. In Thaxted, it was the political undertones of the Maynard family's religious affiliations which were a cause for contention and revealed, hitherto repressed, dissent amongst at least some of the burgesses in the town.



CHAPTER 4:

Poor Relief, Rates and Vagrancy

The 'invisible' participants in parish life were those whose lives were affected and transformed the most by parish governing: the poor. The study of parish relief and attitudes to vagrancy is therefore an opportunity to investigate the relationships between the power-wielding parishioners and their dependent townsmen. Whilst government provisioning for markets during years of dearth had begun to be implemented in the sixteenth century, 146 rural poverty had increased thereafter in the decades following 1590.147 Steve Hindle has argued in his influential book, The State and Social Change in Early Modern England, that the most significant policy of the early modern period was the introduction of the poor rate into parish politics. 148 In post-reformation England, the formalisation of poor relief only partially compensated for the shortfall in provision for the poor that had previously been provided by the monastic houses. The number of hospitals and alms houses, for example, declined by a third between 1540 and 1600. 149 Private charities, such as Yardley's, were also declining in importance as poor relief based on land tax became part of a targeted effort by the establishment to deal with the problems of parish poverty. This 'Old Poor Law' system, established in the sixteenth century, was instead focused on the collection of parish rates in order to address the 'deserving' poor and various vagrancy laws to deal with the 'undeserving'. 150 The 1598 and 1601 poor laws corrected the foundational features of the 1552 statute, reaffirming the use of the parish as the basic infrastructure for rate-collection and distribution. 151

¹⁴⁶ Slack, Crisis and Order in English Towns, 1500-1700. 1992, p.1

¹⁴⁷ Williams, 2002, p.123

¹⁴⁸ Hindle.

¹⁴⁹ Bavel, and Rijpma, 2016, p.164

¹⁵⁰ McIntosh, Poor Relief in England, 1350-1600., 2011, p.2

¹⁵¹ Ibid

Ionathon Healey has argued that these laws made major steps forward in terms of state recognition of the need to provide a minimum standard of living through the use of welfare provisioning. 152 Vagrancy laws also restricted the movement of the poor, actively encouraging them to remain in the parishes of their birth, thereby creating a very localised need for charity. 153 The enactment of poor relief required the diffusion of state powers into the hands of the populace, with the creation of parish offices forming part of the identity of a highly stratified parish elite. 154 Michael Braddick has suggested that formalised poor relief led to a 'dramatic development of state power'155 as the restrictions placed upon distribution were enforced by individuals who knew their communities well. In Thaxted and Braintree, the distribution of poor relief and enforcement of vagrancy laws were under the supervision of the Corporation and the Four-and-Twenty respectively. Their accounts reveal the rate-setting and distribution of poor relief within the town, whilst responses to their authority within Quarter Session records provides a context for the efficacy of parish level poor relief.

Rate Setting

In Braintree, poor relief, rate-setting and distribution were under the jurisdiction of the Four-and-Twenty, with the enforcement of rate-collection falling to the constables and overseers of the poor. A great proportion of the Company's minutes was, therefore, occupied with this undertaking, along with other forms of charitable provisioning, such as deciding on the residency of the local hospital. In June 1622 the Company 'examyned corrected and amended' the poor collection book submitted by the overseers¹⁵⁶ indicating that, the level of the Four-and-Twenty's involvement at that time extended to the auditing of parish accounts related to the poor. The rate-setting in Braintree caused the Four-and-Twenty a variety of issues during the period, not least of which were

¹⁵² Healey, 2010, p.552

¹⁵³ McIntosh, 2011, p.2

¹⁵⁴ Williams, 2002, p.123

¹⁵⁵ Braddick, State Formation in Early Modern England c. 1550-1700. 2000, p.118

¹⁵⁶ E.R.O., D/P 264/8/2, June 3 1622

accusations made against them for unequal rate setting and collection. A drastic change in the running of the Four-and-Twenty seems to have occurred in the decades between the 1630's and the 1650's as the structuring of the poor rates here indicates. In March 1631, the minutes recorded that all members of the Four-and-Twenty should pay thirty shillings towards the poor rates, and listed those already having done so. This reflected a commitment to the appearance of fairness with regard to the Four-and-Twenty's own poor contributions during this period and which did not seem to have continued until 1652. The Essex Quarter Sessions order book records that 'divers of the Inhabitants' of Braintree made a complaint that the poor rates were 'unequally made' with some of the principal townsmen 'not rated for their full visible ability'. 157 The court declared that the churchwardens and overseers should make their rates according to, both lands and stock, which indicates an awareness that the tradesmen of the town had greater income than land owned. These accusations were taken before the Quarter Sessions in the 1650's 158 and perhaps contributed to the later collapse of the Company by the end of the seventeenth century. The membership of the Four-and-Twenty was made up of the principal inhabitants of the town and, considering that the complaint was taken to the Quarter Sessions, this indicates that the Company was implicated amongst those not fully rated.

The fact that such inconsistencies could be raised against the wealthier members of the parish suggests that there was an awareness amongst parishioners of limits to the power that members of the Company could legally exploit, and confidence in the due process of the Quarter Sessions.

By contrast, the Corporation of Thaxted had consistently struggled to pay the full rates of the town without utilising the funds set aside in the ancient charity of Yardley's. Established in the 1440's in accordance with the will of Thomas Yardley, the manor and associated rents of his estate were to be used to pay the whole tax of tenth and fifteenth for the parish, with any remainder used to endow a Grammar School, or

put to any other use considered by the trustees to benefit the town. 159 The tenth and fifteenth was an assessed tax for entire towns, levied by parliament until 1624 when it was succeeded by the ship money tax. 160 Both taxes seem to have caused issue with the town's finances and the Corporation accounts complain of the difficulties in levving the rates faced by the overseers. The charity was utilised at various times for repairing the church, mending the highways and for the 'benefit of the poor'. However, the Corporation's attempts to pay the town's taxes from the funds caused the feoffees significant problems in the seventeenth century. The overseers' accounts for 1613 list both the mayor and members of the Corporation on the front as a clear indication of the involvement of the Corporation in overseeing the poor relief. 161 Two significant sources of funds for the town's poor relief were the town's rental income and the contributions of the Corporation members themselves 162 which reinforces the suggestion that the Corporation consisted of the wealthiest members of Thaxted society and that charitable giving was part of their identity as the parish elite. 163 The vicar, Newman Leader, petitioned the Royal Court of Audit at Chelmsford in 1617 on behalf of the Corporation, for a grant of six pounds and nine pence 'for buying clothing for the poor of Thaxted by the vicar and churchwardens'. 164 Such charity should have been covered by the collection of the poor rates which therefore indicates that, officially, the town's finances were unable to provide for the poor despite the presence of almost a hundred 'freeholders and able men' in 1616. 165 This is further evidenced by an attempt by the mayor to take the hamlet known as Yardley's from the parish of Wimbish in 1639. 166 Yardley's, as a hamlet, had regularly paid its rates including the ship money and therefore the absorption of it into Thaxted would have aided the town's finances, at considerable cost to Wimbish. Such brazen expansionism by the principal men of the town indicates that there were real difficulties in the finances of the Corporation, which they sought to rectify through the absorption

159 E.R.O., D/P 16/25/24A

¹⁶⁰ Mendle, The Ship Money Case, The Case of Shipmony, and the Development of Henry Parker's Parliamentary Absolutism'., 1989, p.513 172 E.R.O., D/P 16/25/45 173 See Chapter 1.

¹⁶¹ E.R.O., D/P 16/12/1

¹⁶² E.R.O., D/P 16/12/1

¹⁶³ Williams, 2002, p.123

¹⁶⁴ E.R.O. D/P 16/25/52

¹⁶⁵ D/P 16/25/69A

¹⁶⁶ Calendar of State Papers, May 9 1639, MC4325100411

of new financially stable parishioners. In 1652 the Corporation had grounds to remind the Sheriff of the independent jurisdiction of Thaxted regarding the levying of its rates, indicating that even at this late stage the Corporation had failed to properly enforce their collection.

Work Provision

7illiams has argued that the problems faced because of national economic fluctuations stemming from famines, population pressures and international affairs resulted in an increase in public disorder amongst the poor after 1620.167 This increase in disruption was linked to the increase in the number of those who required poor relief, and as a result became an issue for the local parishes charged with overseeing the poor rates. A concern for both the Four-and-Twenty and the Corporation, therefore, was the potential for fraudulent cases of poor relief which resulted from 'idleness'. The Poor Relief Act of 1601 demanded that the churchwardens and overseers of the poor set work for those 'having no means to maintain them'. 168 In February 1623, the Four-and-Twenty called for a man, known as Jackson, to be taken before the Justices having 'grown to great povertie through his owne idleness'. The judgement of his poverty as resulting from a lack of motivation is a reflection of the influence of the puritan values of diligent labour and restraint which preoccupied the Company at the time. 169 By referring him to the Justices, the Four-and-Twenty were limiting their responsibility to provide parish support to those it deemed deserving, which gave their judgements concerning other matters involving the poor, the additional threat of refused charity.

In Thaxted, this focus on exclusion of the idle was present within the constitution of Yardley's, which included the setting aside of funds to 'set poor people to work' as well as the placing of apprentices.¹⁷⁰

¹⁶⁷ Williams, 2002, p.123

¹⁶⁸ An Act for the Relief of the Poor, 43 Eliz.1 C A P.II

¹⁶⁹ Ward, Culture, Faith and Philanthropy: Londoners and Provincial Reform in Early Modern England, 2013, p.5

¹⁷⁰ D/P 16/25/69A

The accounts suggests that this first requirement was upheld with great rigour, as many small expenditures were recorded for works done by members of the parish. Whilst some such provisions - such as four shillings paid to Wrighte the carpenter for work on a cross¹⁷¹ - were for professional services, others - such as two pence paid for carrying wood into a cellar¹⁷² were part of Yardley's employment of the poor. These smaller tasks were carried out with some regularity by those listed as widows, reflecting a similar response to that of Braintree regarding the provisioning of aid to those considered worthy of sympathetic support. It is telling, therefore, that the reaffirmation of Yardley's income in 1622 altered the wording to the more vague 'other such uses for the good of the town'173, allowing the feoffees to redirect a greater proportion of the charity's funds towards the payment of the 'tax and the fifteenthes for the whole town' when necessary. 174 This wording was also significant when considered in relation to the 'friendly agreement' 175 between the feoffees and Newman Leader. The vicar had made a petition to the Lorde Keeper against the feoffees for their misappropriation of funds to which the feoffees, fearing the 'manifold' expense such a court battle might entail, proposed to agree on setting out the terms. 176 In the original wording, presumably agreed by Leader, the sentence regarding the provisioning of Yardley's income still included money for the 'setting of the poor'. 177 Whilst the re-emphasis away from poor provisioning would benefit those of the parish liable for taxation, such as the offices holders and feoffees of Yardley's, those dependent upon the charity's subsidies and provision of work would have been in a greater plight than beforehand.

¹⁷¹ D/P 16/25/69A, 1607

¹⁷² D/P 16/25/69A, 1607

¹⁷³ D/P 16/25/69A, 1622

¹⁷⁴ D/P 16/25/69A. 1622

¹⁷⁵ D/P 16/25/69A, 1622

¹⁷⁶ D/P 16/25/69A, 1622

¹⁷⁷ D/P 16/25/69A, 1622

Distribution

The distribution of poor relief by the Corporation and the Fourand-Twenty is significant in identifying the demographic, these wealthier members of society considered to be worthy of sponsorship. With the election of parish officers taking place at Fourand-Twenty meetings, the responsibility for the overall relief of poverty in Braintree belonged to its members who, as mentioned in chapter 3, were partially influenced by Puritan ideology. This influence can be seen in the minutes of the meetings when decisions were made regarding individuals' receipt of poor relief, such as, in the case of a man called Browne, who was described as 'very filthy and troublesome', which resulted in a denial of charity until 'he reforme himselfe'. 178 This association between philanthropy and spiritual improvement is an indication of what Ward calls 'aggressive expression of cultural power' 179 which he characterises as the method by which the godly imposed their ideas upon the provinces. The limit to such charity was revealed by a case involving the provisioning of relief for a John Layer and his two children who, unable to provide for themselves, sought parish aid. The adjacent parish of Bocking refused to provide for Layer, owing to the disputed boundary with Braintree. The case was therefore brought before the Quarter Sessions. 180 Three years later, John Layer seemed to have disappeared from the town and his two children, who were living in Braintree, were once again the subject of debate over their costs to the parish, whereupon the court decided to relocate them again to Bocking. The fact that the provisioning of one family was brought to the Quarter Sessions not once, but twice, by the parishes, indicates the limited nature of such charity and the prerogative of both councils to rid themselves of financial dependents not native to the town, regardless of whether or not they were children. Along with the official collection for the poor by the overseers, on behalf of the Company, fines for various transgressions by its members and other transgressions

were paid to the 'poore mans box'. This self-imposed charity resonates with its godly values and indicates that the Company wanted to avoid the appearance of collecting money out of self-interest. These included the aforementioned fine for missing the start of prayers, that appears to have been enforced with greater frequency in the late 1620's.

The names of those receiving parish relief held within the overseers accounts of 1613 to 1614 reappeared, on a monthly basis, throughout that year and consisted largely of elderly members of the parish, as indicated by prefixes such as 'Mother' or 'Father', and widows. ¹⁸¹ The rate of provisioning to each person seems to have varied month from month quite drastically, with a parish total of three pounds, three shillings and six pence paid out in May, and only thirty seven shillings and three pence paid in June. The accounts of Yardley's from 1598 to 1670 reveal that, whilst there were occasions on which the charity benefited the poor, the majority of its dealings involved collecting the rents from its lands, paying the schoolmaster, small-scale administrative tasks and mending the highways. 182 The Corporation was therefore the source of the majority of poor relief for Thaxted in a similar manner to the Braintree Four-and-Twenty. However the Company at Braintree was in a stronger position regarding the diversity of uses for its potential expenditure.

Vagrancy

he Vagabonds Act of 1597 made unlicensed begging by 'wandering' persons' punishable by being 'openly whipped vntill his or her bodie be bloudie'183 whereupon they were to be sent back to the parishes of their birth and each parish was to keep a register of all vagrants who were punished by them in this way. 184 Hindle suggests that in Elizabethan Essex 'local' vagrants were tolerated, whereas outsiders were removed and whipped. 185 This tolerance appears to have no longer been the case for Braintree by the end of the sixteenth century, as the pressures

¹⁸¹ D/P 16/12/1

¹⁸² E.R.O., T/P 99/2.

¹⁸³ An Act for punishment of Rogues, Vagabonds and sturdie Beggers, 39 Eliz. 1. C A P. IV. 184 Slack, Crisis and Order in English Towns, 1500-1700, 1974, p.1

¹⁸⁵ Hindle, The Experience of Authority in Early Modern England, 1996, p.141

of a declining weaving industry resulted in a scarcity of work, leading to a petition to the Court of Quarter Sessions to prevent unmarried women from practicing the weaving trade in the town.¹⁸⁶ One such incident of the removal of a woman 'supposed to have a greate belly' 187 is particularly illustrative, as this reflects the Company's desire to expel pregnant women from the parish so that their children might not claim poor relief from the town when born within its boundaries. The proximity of Braintree and Bocking's parish boundary and the continuation of streets from both towns, therefore led to an agreement to prevent the removal of the poor across their common parish boundary, in order to lessen the burden on the rate-paying inhabitants. 188 An instance, whereby the Company failed to exert their authority over the removal of vagrants, was the repeated return of a young man called Arbinger who, having previously left with his father for Stebbing, reappeared in July 1619, when the Company demanded his removal as a vagrant. 189 In October of that year, Arbinger was assigned to be apprenticed to John Roman of Bocking, with the sum of £10 being paid by the overseers for his indenture. 190 This was no small sum and, the fact that the Company paid for his apprenticeship, is surprising considering their previous declaration. However the fact that the apprenticeship was to take place in Bocking indicates that they were still keen to have him removed from their jurisdiction. For the case of Thaxted, the issue of vagrancy was under the Corporation's jurisdiction and thus the parish's court records for the town would have shown their responses to such 'wandering persons'. Although these records have not survived, and there are no references to such cases within the accounts of Yardley's, it may be assumed that the town would have been as vigilant as Braintree in their expulsions, due to the overall impoverishment of the town and its failure to levy taxes.

¹⁸⁶ Allen, 1974

¹⁸⁷ E.R.O., D/P 264/8/2, September 6 1619 188 E.R.O., D/P 264/8/2, August 2 1630

¹⁸⁹ E.R.O., D/P 264/8/2, July 12 1619

¹⁹⁰ E.R.O., D/P 264/8/2 October 4 1619

Conclusion

he 'invisible poor' therefore appear more than just in passing with regard to the concerns of the councils of Thaxted and Braintree. The relationship between the poorest of the parish and its most influential members caused many difficulties for the governing bodies, as well as revealing their attitudes towards those they deemed deserving of charity. Tensions between government regulations and the interests of the town have been revealed by the collection of both the poor rates and government taxes, as diffused state powers were utilised, on a local level, by members of the town's elite. Thaxted has been a particularly poignant example owing to the difficulty the Corporation seemed to have in the levying of government rates and the subsequent appropriation of charitable funds to make up shortfalls in their accounts. The fact that the Vicar of the town was forced to petition the Court of Audit for extra poor provision, despite the apparent wealth of some of its citizens, is an example of the disconnect between the official obligations of charity and its need during this period. The Puritan influence in the enforcement of laws surrounding the provisioning of work for the poor in Braintree, were juxtaposed with the desire to enforce the expulsion of vagrants in order to spare the rate-payers from the burden. Whilst both towns entered into the enforcement of some form of poor provisioning, the conflicting interests, of members of their respective councils, limited the extent to which such actions entered could have constituted an attempt at providing a minimum standard of living. The responsibility for overseeing poor relief was given to local councils in this period which, whilst alleviating the administrative burden from the state, presented new challenges for governing bodies who wished to work for the betterment of all the inhabitants of the town.

SUMMARY

comparative study of Thaxted and Braintree has revealed some of the underlying structures that defined parish politics between 1580 and 1660. These structures have consisted of a combination of national and local political interests which Underdown identified as belonging to a political spectrum in which the elite and the common people were both active agents. 191 By studying two parishes within the same county, common influences have been exposed with regard to the governing of Essex towns, as well as instances of political divergence. The initial chapter regarding power, hierarchy and parish politics provided evidence to support the Marxist claim that social changes were influenced by a wider socio-economic transition. This was revealed by the resistance to such changes from the local gentry who sought to maintain their influence in parish affairs, despite the newfound importance of the parish elite. The imposition, by the state of limits, on the political independence of Thaxted and Braintree's corporate councils was a notable feature of both towns during this period. Like Wrightson and Levine's study of Terling, control from parliament, the Crown and the church restricted the autonomy of local decision-making whilst, at the same time leaving day-to-day enforcement of public control to the systems of parish officers. Braintree's Four-and-Twenty was careful to reinforce social hierarchies even within its own monthly meetings and, therefore, reflected and perpetuated social stratification towards the benefit of the town's elite. Such 'men of standing' can be clearly identified within Thaxted and Braintree due to their dominance of the council memberships as well as the repetition of family names across generations of the parish

elite. Nepotism was most prevalent amongst the burgesses who made up the feoffees of Yardley's and Thaxted's Corporation and are indicative of the potential for the formation of parish oligarchies, whose self-election enabled the consolidation of power and influence. The exercise of power through the acquisition of public office was therefore linked to kinship structures within both Thaxted and Braintree and support Wood's claim that real political change was suffocated by a lack of social mobility. 192

The impact of religious nonconformity on Braintree has suggested that, separation of religion and politics during this period, is almost impossible. Whilst Thaxted dealt with Laudian influences from the local gentry, Braintree's Four-and-Twenty was infiltrated by Puritan ideology. Religious plurality was therefore a feature of local governance beyond the perceived intolerance to nonconformity that was enacted by local ministers such as Braintree's Samuel Collins. The presence of Puritans such as John Bridge amongst the membership of the Company of Braintree is similar to the Puritanical elite identified at Terling. The exodus of the godly in 1632, however, indicates that Braintree's religious relations were more complex and were influenced by wider religious concerns than the parish.

Strong, moralising values were part of the identity of the parish ruling elite and were therefore integral to the decision-making processes and structures of Thaxted's Corporation and Braintree's Company. A preoccupation with an appearance of righteousness was therefore a repeated component of Braintree's Company Minutes, despite frequent violations by some of the membership. Such divisions have also been witnessed within Thaxted's religious life, culminating in physical violence, therefore rejecting notions of a religious homogeny amongst the town's principal men.

The effect of hierarchy, nepotism and religion upon poor provisioning and charity in Thaxted and Braintree has therefore exposed limitations within such systems of corporate governance. Collective concerns about poverty, from the state, combined with the self-interest of the members

of these councils, restricted the effectiveness of social provisioning. The feoffees and Corporation of Thaxted, in particular, were guilty of redistributing public funds away from their original purposes whilst attempting to maintain Corporation status. Braintree's Four-and-Twenty, on the other hand, seemed obsessed with the expulsion of vagrants in order to avoid rate-paying responsibilities. Whilst the Four-and-Twenty were generous in their distribution of poor relief to those they deemed needy, they were also swift to refuse it to the morally deficient, reflecting again the influence of Puritan values during this period. The responsibility of overseeing the poor was thus not necessarily a political gain for the common councils, as the enforcement of rate-collection and vagrancy laws required both time and funds to pursue.

The performance and mechanisms of local government in Thaxted and Braintree were therefore not acting in rural isolation. National policy, religion and social hierarchy all influenced parish politics in numerous ways, defining the extent to which such towns could act as autonomous entities. The scope of this study has therefore been limited to the structuring and enactment of systems of power as occurred in the elite and burgesses of the towns. Further investigation into the impact of these corporate councils upon parish life might therefore focus on a feminist history of poverty in Thaxted and Braintree, due to frequency with which women are the subject of decision-making. The sources utilised within this study would also lend themselves to a full quantitative analysis of parish kinship relations in order to determine precisely when the rise of the principal families took place.

The value of using comparative case studies to investigate parish history has therefore been an effective approach towards the extraction of common power struggles faced by, seemingly, independent parishes.



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