

17th Century Puritanism in the Parish

Among the factors that gave the sons of the gentry and clergy an advantage over their neighbours was their more widespread attendance and placement in grammar schools which gave access to the universities and thus initiated them into the 'high culture' of their Age. Of the two, the clergy were usually more educated than their gentry colleagues. While their neighbours in Appleby took an active part in religious prophesying, maintaining links with radical puritans at Ashby and exchanging books with kinsmen and neighbours of like mind, the parsons of Austrey remained orthodox and avoided dabbling in religious controversy. Not much is known of their social origins or of their educational backgrounds, but most of them were Oxford men (unlike their Appleby counterparts who matriculated from Cambridge). The fact that the Austrey parsons owed their preferment to the crown may explain why they were drawn from more distant parts. Two critical appointments were John Prior and John Shakespeare, vicars of Austrey during the Interregnum and early Restoration periods. Prior who retained his position throughout the Civil War, Interregnum and Restoration, was a Magdalen man. John Shakespeare, his successor in 1670, was the son of a Coventry merchant and graduate of St. John's College.

The local puritan clergy were a close-knit group who relied upon each other for religious support and book lending helped to consolidate these connections. Thomas Walker, the rector of Grendon and Richard Latimer, vicar of Polesworth, were two neighbouring clerics who took part in these exchanges as shown, for example, in 1607 by Walker's bequest to Latimer of 'one booke and my part of a booke which are both in his hands'. In the post-war period the circle widened to include ejected ministers like Richard Dowley at Orton, Richard Southwell, the curate of Wilnecote and Thomas Hill of the Lea Grange, also in Orton. Hill, who drew up wills for some of the Austrey residents was also a keen scholar, 'a man of profound learning' equally proficient in Latin, Greek and Hebrew.