

The Origins of the Ancient Library

The ancient library of the cathedral was founded by Dr Miles Mosse, the preacher at St James Church, in 1595, and it is the oldest parochial library in the country. Its very existence shows that some stability had been established in Bury St Edmunds after more than 60 turbulent years.

On 4th November 1539 the old order had collapsed. Abbot John Reeve was expelled and the abbey, which for centuries had ruled the town through its sacrist and cellararer, was no more. During the following years Bury saw the abolition of its medieval guilds in the reign of Edward VI and the burning of 22 protestants in the reign of Mary. There were also economic and social changes. Bury had been the twelfth most wealthy town in England. It was in the centre of a rich agricultural area, had a flourishing cloth trade and, with the shrine of St Edmund, attracted profitable pilgrims from far and wide. The loss of the abbey changed much of this; there was unemployment and a real power vacuum.

Bury had no corporation so there was no group to take the lead. Many tried – the JPs, the local gentry, the Bishop of Norwich, and prominent townspeople. The well-endowed feoffees of the town lands sometimes looked beyond their charity work, and the common conference, established by the 1570s, haphazardly regulated for licencing, vagabonds and church attendance. In 1550 a grammar school had been founded, and the governors, often also feoffees and members of the common conference, tried to exert their influence.

Unsurprisingly, at this time, religion was a major issue and a focus of conflict between the conservative conformists and the Calvinistic protestants was the appointment of preachers to the two churches of St Mary's and St James. At this time each had a minister (curate) who was paid and a preacher (doctor) who relied on donations. Edmund Freake, Bishop of Norwich (1576-83), and some local landowners were determined to promote conservative conformists, the ‘godly gentry’ like Sir Robert Jermyn of Rushbrooke and Sir John Higham of Barrow wanted protestants. The governors and the feoffees tended to be conservative but the townsfolk, although divided, wanted protestants. Feelings ran so high that during the ‘Bury Stirs’ of the late 1570s and 1580s three petitions were sent to the Privy Council in protest at the dismissal of protestant preachers from the churches by the bishop. These were dangerous times – John Copping and Elias Thacker were hanged in July 1583 for their extreme protestant views.

Although Bury wasn’t to get its charter and corporation until 1606, the appointment of Miles Mosse as preacher at St James in 1586 with a regular salary of £48 a year paid by the feoffees showed that there was some stability by that time. Bury was a protestant, even puritan, town and Dr Mosse was determined that the local clergy, most of whom were Cambridge graduates, should be well trained. There were regular sessions on Mondays and also lectures on Wednesdays and Fridays which laymen could attend. A library was an essential resource and in 1595 Dr Mosse obtained sponsorship to buy books. Existing book plates show that at least 41 local clergy, gentlemen and townspeople contributed and 138 titles appear on the inventory provided to wardens John Man and William Briggs on 13th October 1599.

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