

Monastic Life in Dover Ends

— Tim Boyton-Adams —

My final dip into G.H. Cook's wonderful collection of letters to Thomas Cromwell, entitled simply *Letters to Cromwell* (John Baker Ltd, London, 1965), includes one from a highly respected cleric and royal servant, Thomas Bedyll (d.1537). The date of his birth is not recorded, but on 5 November 1508 he took the degree Bachelor of Civil Law (or as Bedyll would have known it *Baccalaureus Civilis Legis*) at New College, Oxford. In 1518 he was a canon of Lincoln Cathedral, then rector of Bocking, Essex in 1522, Archdeacon of London in 1533-34, Archdeacon of Cornwall in 1536, as well as a canon of St. Paul's, York Minster, Wells and Chichester Cathedrals. His royal service saw him carry out the duties of chaplain to Henry VIII and clerk of the Privy Council – the latter consequently saw him working on the king's separation from the authority of Rome in 1534.

As if this were not enough, Bedyll was also secretary to William Warham, Archbishop of



Archbishop of Canterbury 1503 to 1532
William Warham, by Hans Holbein the Younger

Canterbury from 1520 until the latter's death in 1532, at which point Henry VIII commissioned him to seek the advice of learned doctors at both Oxford and Cambridge over the validity of the king's marriage to Catherine of Aragon – for which a Papal dispensation had been given by Pope Julius II in 1509. When Archbishop Thomas Cranmer pronounced the marriage null and void at Dunstable Priory in 1534, Bedyll was at his side. His final years saw him travelling in the service of Thomas Cromwell, securing oaths from the monks and nuns of religious houses over the king's Supremacy of the English Church. His legal background also saw him involved in the trials for treason of St. John Fisher and St. Thomas More in 1535, following their refusal to take the oath. Bedyll's death is noted in a letter from Richard Cromwell to his uncle Thomas on the 5 September, 1537.

Despite the high profile that Bedyll enjoyed, his approach to monastic visitations appears to have been quite sensitive and supportive when the need arose – unlike some of his fellow commissioners, such as Dr Richard Layton. Bedyll can be found praising the inmates of some of the religious houses that he visited, including the priory of the Blessed Virgin and St. Martin of the New Work, Dover, for example. Despite holding views on ecclesiastical policy and religious reform similar to Thomas Cromwell and Archbishop Thomas Cranmer, Bedyll could be quite conservative at times.

In October, 1535, Bedyll could be found in East Kent taking the surrender of monastic houses in Folkestone, Dover and Langdon. The following letter to Cromwell is of some interest in this respect, which I include here in full – though the spelling has been modernised:

'Right worshipful sir, it may [please] you to understand, that we received your letter this present Tuesday night, about 7 of the clock, by the hands of John Antony your servant, advertising you that before the receipt thereof we have been at the monasteries of Langdon, Dover, and Folkestone, and have taken a clear surrender of every of the said monasteries under their convent seals, being also recognised in their chapter houses, according to your will and commandment, whereupon divers tenants belonging to the said monasteries openly attorned unto the king's grace.

'We have received into your custody the convent seals of the said monasteries, and have in like manner received all the evidence belonging to the monasteries of Langdon and Folkestone, and have likewise received part of the evidence of Dover, such as we thought most expedient, and the residue we have put into a sure chest under a lock, whereof we have the key in our custody.'

'We have also left the canons and monks still in their houses, without any clear discharge of them, but have put them at their liberty and choice whether they will abide there until the king's grace's pleasure be further known, or else to go from thence to their friends, whereof the most part desire to have capacities, and some assigned over to other places of religion. Which monks and canons at the time of the receipt of your letter, as we trust and think, are remaining still in their houses.'

'Advertising your mastership further of the estate of the said monasteries, wherein as yet we take no inventories, because the inventories were taken already, as your mastership knows.'

'First, the house of Langdon is sore in decay, and in no manner of grain or other victuals for the relief of the house. The abbot thereof,

as he is reported, a very unthrifty evil husband and of ill rule, and his convent very ignorant and poor.'

'The house of Dover is a goodly house and well repaired in all places, as far as we could perceive; and that the prior, as it was reported unto us, found the house at his first coming thither indented in £920, and hath reduced and brought that to £100, as it is said, of whose now case divers of the honest inhabitants of Dover show themselves very sorry.'

'The house of Folkestone is a little house, well repaired, and the prior a very honest person, and a very good husband, and no less beloved amongst his neighbours.'

'We have consulted upon your letter that Henry Polsted, John Antony, and Antony Ager shall accomplish the same in all things with all convenient speed. And thus the Holy Ghost continue you in good health [and] welfare. Written at Canterbury, the 16th day of November.

Your own, Thomas Bedyll
Your servant, Henry Polsted
Your servant, John Antony.'

An interesting account, I think you'll agree. The revenue of the priory at Dover at the time of Bedyll's visit was £170 clear and that of Folkestone, where there were but two monks, was a mere £41. On the very day that Bedyll wrote his letter to Cromwell, Dover Priory was surrendered by Prior John Lambert of Folkestone, who received a pension of £20 per annum, and eight monks. The monks were dispersed after the surrender, two of them making their way to Canterbury Cathedral Priory to join the community there. In January 1536, the master of the Maison Dieu went to the dissolved priory to see what order it was in and found that it had been ransacked. Thus ended monastic life in Dover.