

Dom Sigebert Buckley and the Meon connection

Foreword

In the Church Hall of the RC parish of Petersfield there is a plaque which bears tribute to “The Hampshire Catholics of this Neighbourhood who bore every hardship rather than betray their faith.” In other words, these were Catholics persecuted and jailed under the English Reformation. A number of villages and towns are listed; under East Meon, the first two names are “Anthony Norton of Punsholt esquire” and “Dom Sigebert Buckley, the last monk of Westminster”. This was the starting point of this investigation.

Background

Dom Sigebert (pronounced Sijbert) Buckley represents the slender but vital link between the Benedictine Abbey of Westminster, dissolved during the Reformation, and today’s thriving community at Ampleforth Abbey in Yorkshire, via two hundred years of exile at Dieulouard, in north east France. Buckley died in 1610 at the age of 82 and is believed to be buried at Punsholt, two miles to the north of the villages of West and East Meon.

The Benedictine Abbey at Westminster was founded (or re-founded) by Edward the Confessor in 1065, just before his death and before his successor Harold was overthrown by William the Conqueror. The Abbey prospered under Norman rule, coming under the governance of Cluny and Citeaux, and was a moving force in the formation of the English Benedictine Congregation in 1218. It ran a school, which survives today as Westminster College. However, under Henry VIII the abbey was dissolved and although it was reinstated briefly in the reign of Queen Mary it was finally closed under Queen Elizabeth. The building was saved because the monarch designated it a place of coronation but the community was disbanded and the monks imprisoned, freed under Mary and then imprisoned again under Elizabeth. One of these monks was Dom Sigebert Buckley who outlived all his peers.

Three years before his death in 1610, Dom Sigebert was able to pass on the baton of the Westminster Abbey by ‘aggregating’ two monks who had joined Benedictine monasteries in Italy. These two then escaped to Dieulouard in France and founded a monastic community which represented the Westminster community in exile, receiving English Catholics into the Benedictine Congregation and educating English boys who could not be brought up in the faith in England. In 1792 the French Revolution hounded the Dieulouard Benedictines out of France and they returned to England; in 1803 the Dieulouard community took over a house in North Yorkshire and Ampleforth Abbey was founded. Thus, direct descendancy had been maintained from the foundation of Westminster in 1065 to the present day at Ampleforth, but would not have survived the Reformation had it not been for one man, Sigebert Buckley.

The Meon connection

Dom Sigebert ‘aggregated’ Robert Saddler and Edward Mayhew, the two English monks, in 1607. His statement, signed and witnessed,ⁱ is the official record of the event and states that it took place ‘At London’; two theories have emerged; one says the ceremony took place in the Gatehouse Prison in Westminster, another that it took place in Clerkenwell.

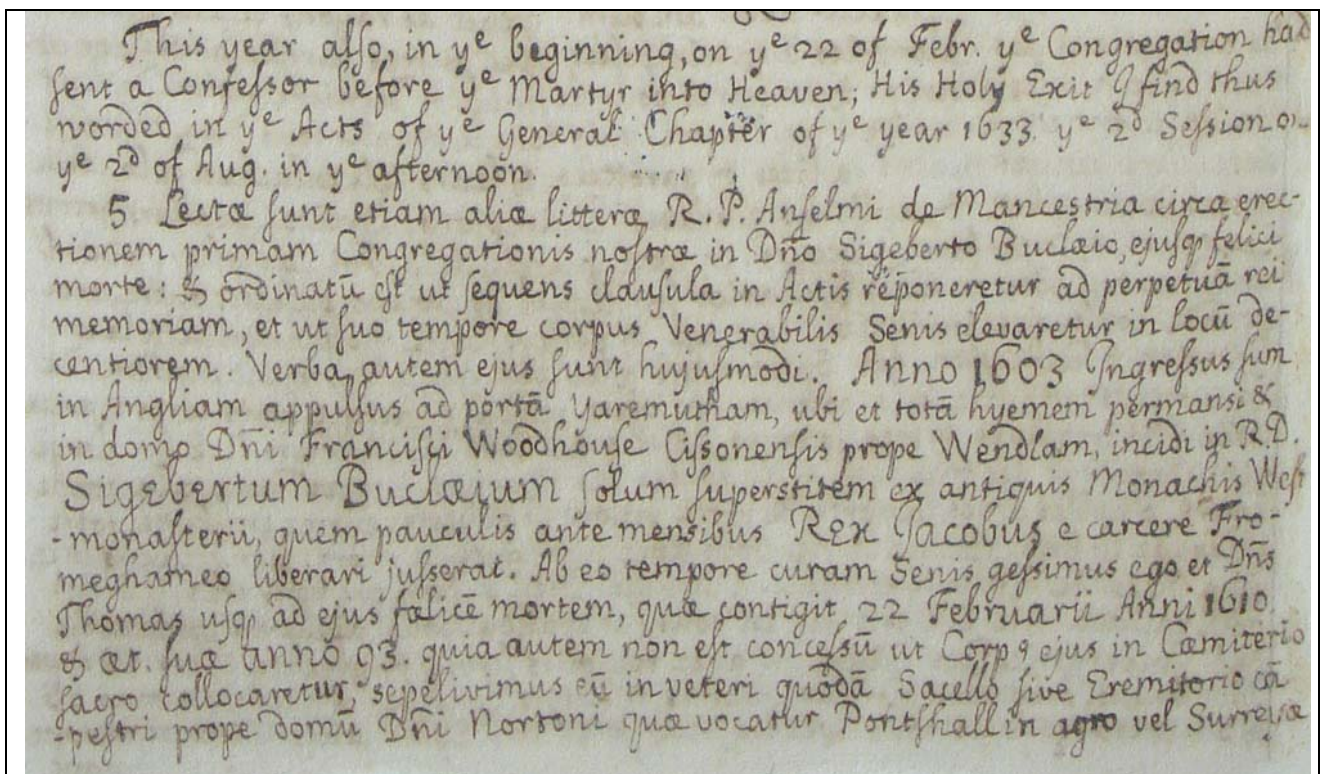
The document was written the year before his death ‘at the house of Thomas Loveden of Punsholt’. Buckley had evidently been released from prison, possibly because his old age It

was witnessed by another priest and also by Anthony and Henry Norton, brothers-in-law of Thomas Loveden. It appears that this Catholic family was active in support of their faith, to the extent of sheltering recusant priests.

It is also uncertain where Buckley was buried. The monk who had come from Italy to seek out Dom Sigebert and arrange the aggregation was Dom Anselm Beech and his record states:

“As his body was not allowed to be laid in consecrated ground we buried him in a certain old chapel or country hermitage near the house of Mr Norton called Ponthall in the county of either Surrey or Sussex. I could wish his body might be transferred to some more honourable place since without doubt the good old man was highly deserving, having endured forty years of perpetual persecution for the Catholic faith, ever confined in some prison of other...”

Given the carefully drafted (and witnessed) description of the aggregation, it is certain that the place of Dom Sigebert's death and burial was Punsholt, close to the Sussex border and not far from the Surrey one but in fact in east Hampshire, in the parish of West Meon.



This year also, in ye beginning, on ye 22 of Febr. ye Congregation had sent a Confessor before ye Martyr into Heaven; His Holy Exit I find thus worded in ye Acts of ye General Chapter of ye year 1633. ye 2^d Session on ye 2^d of Aug. in ye afternoon.

5. Lecta sunt etiam alia littera R. P. Anselmi de Mancestria circa erectionem primam Congregationis nostrae in Dño Sigeberto Buckleio, ejusq; felici morte: & ordinatū est ut sequens clausula in Actis reponeretur ad perpetuā rei memoriam, et ut suo tempore corpus Venerabilis Senis elevaretur in locū decentiorem. Verba, autem ejus sunt hujusmodi. Anno 1603 Ingressus sum in Angliam appulsi ad portā Yaremutham, ubi et totā huiemem permansi & in domo Dñi Francisji Woodhouse Xissonensis prope Wendlam, inveni in R. D. Sigebertum Buckleium solum superstitem ex antiquis Monachis Westmonasterii, quem pauculis ante mensibus Rex Jacobus e carcere Fro-meghameo liberari jusserat. Ab eo tempore curam Senis gessimus ego et Dñs Thomas usq; ad ejus felicē mortem, quā contigit 22 Februarii Anni 1610. & et. huius anno 93. quia autem non est concessū ut Corp⁹ ejus in Camiterio sacro collocaretur, sepelivimus eū in veteri quodā Saello five Eremitorio cō-pestri prope domū Dñi Nortoni quae vocatur Ponthall in agro vel Surrey.

Translation from the French of the Acts of General Chapter in 1633 which relates how Anselm Beech came to England in 1603 at Yarmouth and, in the house of Francis Woodhouse of Xisson, near Wendlam, met Buckley who was by then the sole survivor of the Westminster Benedictine community. Buckley had been released from gaol that year by the newly crowned King James I. Beech and Dom Thomas Preston took care of Buckley until his 'happy' death. As his body was not allowed to be laid in consecrated ground, we buried him in a certain old chapel or country hermitage, near the house of Mr Norton called Ponthall in the county either of Surrey or Sussex.

There is no official record of his burial, which is not surprising given the dangers which would have accompanied the disposal of the body of a Catholic priest in the official parish cemetery. However, as Beech reports, efforts were made to bury him in consecrated ground this may have been the chapel at Punsholt, a remote house in what is to this day called 'Woodlands' – not in Surrey or Sussex but East Hampshire. But it is not clear where the chapel was.

There is a tradition that the remains lie beneath two slate slabs which sit prominently among the stone flagstones in what is now the dining room of today's Punsholt Farm (until recently a thriving training stables for race horses). If so, this *may* have been the site of the previous chapel – today's house shows no trace of its previous architecture, though the sketch below shows what is believed to have been the previous Tudor construction.



Numerous questions remain to be researched

1. What is known about Thomas Lovedean, Anthony Norton and Henry Norton? Only Anthony is listed on the Petersfield laque as being persecuted.
2. Was there an active community of Catholics in the Meon Valley at that time? Of the other names in the list, Robert (probably Richard) Joy is believed to have been a recusant priest and George Bartlett, the current owner of The Court House in East Meon, believes there were priest holes in The Court House and that priests were smuggled into All Saints Church through a tunnel under the road (which is believed to have survived until the early 20th century)
3. George Bartlett also reports that Richard Joy had been imprisoned, and released, from Winchester Gaol. He notes that the next name down on the list, under Hambleton, is 'Anthony Udevale' who may well have been the brother of the Head Gaoler at Winchester, suggesting there may have been Catholic sympathies.
4. Why are Norton and Buckley listed under East Meon when Punsholt is in the parish of West Meon? East Meon had been by far the most important Catholic community in that part of Hampshire and Punsholt does appear as part of the Hundred of East

Meon in the earliest maps; research is needed into the actual parish boundaries at that time.

5. Another on the list is William Fawkenor of Westbury, gent. Westbury House is still an anomaly since it sits on the outskirts of West Meon but is included in the lay parish of East Meon.

Ampleforth returns to Hampshire

The Benedictines often provide priests to look after parishes both in their own vicinity and in more remote locations – Ampleforth today services what it calls ‘missions’ in four dioceses.

The Church of St Laurence in Petersfield was built at the start of the 1890s by a convert to Catholicism, Laurence Trent Cave. His wife was a devout Catholic and even before Laurence converted to the religion, following their son’s recovery from dangerous illness, he had bought land in Petersfield and built the church of St Laurence. It was blessed by the first Bishop of Portsmouth in March 1891. The first parish priest died two years later and St Laurence became one of Ampleforth’s missions, the first monk being Dom Ildefonsus Cummins. It continued as an Ampleforth mission for over 50 years.

One of Laurence Trent Cave’s sons went to Ampleforth which may account for this connection. LTC’s great grandson Adrian has given me a contact in the family who has done research into the Caves’ involvement in Petersfield Parish.

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Excerpts from Dom Sigebert’s testimony

At the house of Thomas Loveden at Punsholt and before me, Dom Maurus signed by me and the witnesses below, Dom Sebert or Sigebert made, signed and sealed this statement on 8 November 1609.

I, D. Sebert, otherwise Sigebert, priest and monk of the monastery of St. Peter, Westminster, of the Congregation of England of the Order of St. Benedict: lest the rights, privileges, insignia, should perish which were formerly granted by Princes and Pontiffs and which for some years, God so permitting, have been preserved in me the sole survivor of all the English monks: did at London in the year 1607, the 21st day of November, with the consent of their superiors receive and admit as brethren and monks of the said monastery D. Robert Sadler of Peterborough and D. Edward Maihew of Salisbury, English priests and monks professed of the Cassinese Congregation of St. Justina of Padua