



Saint Bede's Catholic High School A Business & Enterprise College



The Martyrs of Lancaster

MARTYR Literally, a “witness.”
One who is put to death because of his or her faith in Jesus Christ.

CANONISATION the act of admitting a deceased person into the canon (list) of saints

BEATIFICATION an act of the Pope who declares that a deceased person lived a holy life and is worthy of public veneration; a first step toward canonization

Excommunication the act of banishing a member of the Church from the communion of believers and the privileges of the Church; cutting a person off from a religious society

Lay person a person who is not a member of the clergy

Protestantism the name given to any of the churches of western Christendom that separated from the Roman Catholic Church during the Reformation

catholic a person who follow the Catholic religion. The origin of the name is Greek *katholikos* meaning, ‘universal’

treason the crime of betraying one’s country

Priest an ordained minister of the Catholic, Orthodox, or Anglican Church, authorized to perform certain ceremonies

sacrifice an act of giving up something one values for the sake of something that is of greater importance

The Lancaster Martyrs



During the period 1584-1646 fifteen Catholics were executed in Lancaster for their faith. The law at this time made it illegal to convert or be converted to Catholicism, to say or hear Mass or to help or conceal the presence of a priest. To be a priest ordained abroad was classed as treason.

In 1534 King Henry VIII declared himself 'Supreme Head of the Church in England' after being excommunicated for divorcing his first wife, Catherine of Aragon. This break was to be the start of several hundred years of conflict in the life of the Church in this country, during which time many people were to die for their religious beliefs.

Many people were outraged at Parliament's decision to strip the monastic houses of their land, buildings and other property between 1536-1539. These assets which rightfully belong to the Church were appropriated by the Crown to help finance Henry's military exploits abroad. This led to an uprising known as 'The Pilgrimage of Grace'. The protest was an attempt by northern laymen and priests to halt the process of religious change and reverse the Dissolution of the Monasteries.

Sadly it failed and many of the ringleaders were put to death, included the Abbot of Whalley.

Henry VIII was succeeded by his young son, Edward VI. His uncle was named Protector and administered matters of State for the young king. During this time the religious revolution was pushed still further, with new prayer books and services being devised which ultimately led to England becoming a Protestant state.

In 1553, Queen Mary, a staunch Catholic, came to the throne. She reversed many of the religious changes that had occurred over the past two decades. However she died in 1559 and was succeeded by her sister Elizabeth who once again set England on the road to Protestantism.

During Elizabeth's reign legislation was introduced, such as the Treason Act of 1571, which was aimed at dealing with priests trained abroad. In effect practising Catholicism became a treasonable offence punishable by death.

Of the approximately 650 priests working in England during Elizabeth's reign, 133 were executed as 'traitors' for refusing to conform. At least 377 spent time in prison. Many lay people suffered a similar fate, especially those who harboured priests.

Many priests who came from the seminaries abroad headed for Lancashire which, despite political pressure, had remained a bastion of Catholicism. Local gentry would often shelter priests in their homes where the Mass would also be said by the priest. In many of these homes special secret rooms or passages were built so that priests could hide themselves in times of trouble.

Many of those who were captured were imprisoned at Lancaster Castle which is still used a prison today. Between 1584-1646 many Catholics were executed in the city of Lancaster, which was the main town of the county. Given the large number of those killed, Lancaster is undoubtedly the second most important execution site in the country after Tyburn in London. Fifteen of those executed have been officially named as martyrs who died for their faith.

On their journey to execution just outside the city boundaries, the martyrs were cruelly treated. Some were tied to hurdles and others dragged upside down along the road. Once at their site of execution their torment was not over. They were usually hung until they were not quite dead, stretched and then disembowelled whilst still conscious. When they did eventually die they were beheaded and the remainder of their bodies were hacked into quarters and displayed in prominent places as a warning to other Catholics. The site of the executions has been recently marked by a memorial plaque.

Although executions for being a Catholic stopped in the latter half of the seventeenth century, it was to be a long while before Catholics were freely allowed to practice their faith in public once again. Our diocese is rightly proud of its rich Catholic heritage!

The Lancaster Martyrs



Throughout the religious upheavals following the English Reformation the vast majority of English Catholics, many of whom lived in Lancashire, remained staunchly loyal to the throne. The Old Faith remained strong, however, and despite the danger, many young men went to Europe to train for 'The English Mission' as it became known. Returning to England these priests would have spent their time, for the most part, moving clandestinely from house to house, often forced to hide for days in tiny spaces built for the purpose and known as Priest Holes while government agents searched for them. These men, and the lay-people who helped them, fully understood that they could expect little clemency from the courts if they were captured. The law reserved its harshest penalties for those convicted of treason. In this case, priests were hanged, drawn and quartered, while laymen were executed by hanging. 1

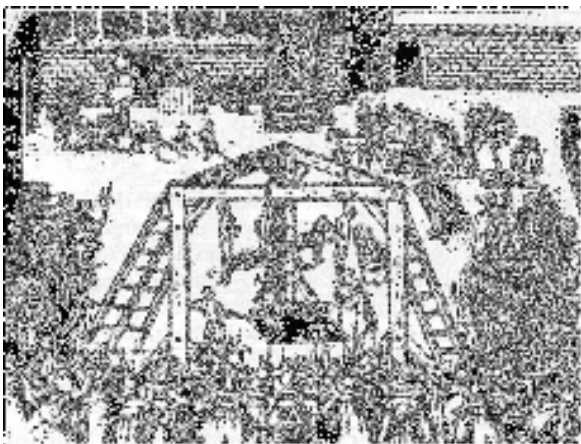
The sacrifice of the fifteen men was finally recognised by Rome:

Bell, Finch and Hurst were beatified by Pope Pius XI in 1929.

Arrowsmith and Barlow were canonised by Pope Paul VI in 1970.

Nutter, Thwing, Hunt, Middleton, Thules, Wrenno, Bamber, Woodcock and Whittaker were all beatified by Pope John Paul II in 1987

Lawrence Bailey's case is still unproven and he remains 'The Venerable'.



THE LANCASHIRE MARTYRS AND DATES OF EXECUTION

Blessed James Bell – 1584
Blessed John Finch – 1584
Blessed Robert Nutter – 1600
Blessed Edward Thwing – 1600
Blessed Thurstan Hunt – 1601
Blessed Robert Middleton – 1601
Venerable Lawrence Bailey – 1604
Blessed John Thules – 1616
Blessed Roger Wrenno – 1616
Saint Edmund Arrowsmith – 1628
Blessed Richard, Hurst – 1628
Saint Ambrose Barlow – 1641
Blessed John Woodcock – 1646
Blessed Thomas Whittaker – 1646
Blessed Edward Bamber – 1646

The source of this material is quite dated. It does not mention the many men of Lancashire who died outside the county or reflect more recent beatifications. These men of Lancashire, Westmorland and Cumberland were executed outside the county and beatified in 1929 or 1987 and some canonised in 1970.

Blessed Thomas Cottam - 1582
Blessed John Nutter – 1584
Blessed George Haydock – 1584
Blessed William Marsden – 1586
Blessed John Sandys – 1586
Blessed George Beesley – 1591
Blessed John Mason – 1591
Saint John Boste – 1594
Blessed Christopher Robinson – 1597
Blessed Thomas Sprott – 1600
Blessed James Duckett – 1602
Blessed Thomas Somers – 1610
Blessed Thomas Tunstall – 1616
Blessed William Ward – 1641
Blessed John Duckett – 1644
Blessed John Pickering – 1679
Saint John Wall – 1679
Saint John Plessington – 1679

The Lancaster Martyrs



Blessed James Bell (d 1584)

Bell was born in Warrington and became a priest during the reign of Queen Mary but conformed under Elizabeth and served as an Anglican minister for 20 years. He returned to Lancashire in 1579 and was reconciled to the Faith in 1581. In January 1584, he was arrested and taken to Manchester, then brought to Lancaster for trial. He was executed on 10th April 1584.

Blessed John Finch (d 1584)

John Finch was a yeoman farmer from Ecclestone, near Chorley. He was raised a Protestant but after his conversion he helped to conceal priests in his home and to act as their guide about the county. He was betrayed while on such a mission and was arrested by the Earl of Derby. He was tortured and then spent three years in prison before coming to trial at Lancaster. He was executed on the same day as Bell.

Blessed Robert Nutter (1557-1600)

Fr Robert Nutter, who came from Burnley, was sent to the Tower of London after his arrest in 1584 along with his brother, who was also a priest. Both were savagely tortured, and Robert had to witness his brother's execution before he was himself allowed to leave the country. Despite this he returned at the end of 1585 and, after being captured once more, spent the next twelve years in prison at Wisbech. He managed to escape in 1600 but was re-arrested. He was executed in Lancaster on 26th July 1600.

Blessed Edward Thwing (1565-1600)

Thwing came from Heworth, near York and studied at Rheims, being ordained in 1590. Although in poor health he came to England and worked in Lancashire for three years before his arrest. He was executed alongside Robert Nutter - 'this little severity' as one Justice of the Peace described it.

Blessed Thurstan Hunt (1555-1601)

Fr Hunt worked in the North undetected for 15 years, using the name Robert Greenlowe. In September 1600 he was captured after a failed attempt to free his co-priest Robert Middleton who was being taken to Lancaster for trial. Both men were sent to London as it seems that Hunt had somehow got wind of the forthcoming Essex Rebellion. An open letter was found on his person warning the Queen of the plot. Despite (or perhaps because of) this he and Middleton were sent back to Lancaster in some haste - 'their legs tied under the belly of their horse and their hands behind them'. They were executed on 3rd April 1601.

Blessed Robert Middleton (1571-1601)

Middleton came from York and was raised a Protestant. He converted in his teens and went abroad to study for the priesthood. His sister was present at his execution and offered £100 for his life and for him to talk to a minister in the hope of re-converting him. He reproached her and refused all attempts to sway him from his faith.

Venerable Lawrence Bailey (d.1604)

Bailey was one of the lay-people who assisted the priests in their mission. He was captured in September 1604 after helping a priest to escape arrest. He was hanged on 16th September 1604.

The Lancaster Martyrs



Blessed John Thules (1568-1616) **Blessed Roger Wrenno** (1578-1616)

Fr John Thules was arrested at the house of Roger Wrenno, a 'poor weaver' from Chorley. They managed to escape from Lancaster Castle, but after walking all night they found that they had been going in circles and were still within sight of their prison. Recaptured and condemned, they were offered their lives if they would recant their faith. Both refused. The first attempt to hang Wrenno failed when the rope broke. Seeing this as divine intervention, the Sheriff said to him 'It is God's will thou shouldst not die; take the oath therefore and be a good subject and the King will show mercy'. Wrenno replied, 'If you had seen that which I have just now seen, you would be as much in haste to die as I now am'. He quickly mounted the scaffold again and was hanged.

St Edmund Arrowsmith (d 1628)

A native of Haydock, Edmund Arrowsmith entered the seminary at Douai when he was 20 and was ordained in 1611. In the summer of 1628, he was betrayed by a Catholic man named Holden who was the son of the landlord of the Blue Anchor Inn at Brindle. At his trial he had the misfortune to come before the Puritan judge, Sir Henry Yelverton, who accused him outright of being a priest and tried to trap him into admitting it. This was important as there was very little other evidence against him. Eventually Edmund was found guilty and the judge ordered him held in irons in the worst cell in the castle until his execution. This was a tiny cell known as The Smoothing Iron, which may well be what we can see today in Hadrian's Tower.

No-one could be found to carry out the execution until, finally, a deserter, himself under sentence of death, volunteered in return for his liberty and 40/-. Edmund suffered the full rigour of the law but one of his hands was rescued from the executioner's flames. It can be seen at the church of St Oswald at Ashton-in-Makerfield, where miracles of healing are said to occur at its touch.

Blessed Richard Hurst (d 1628)

Hurst, a farmer long suspected of having Catholic sympathies, was arrested while out ploughing his fields. In the struggle, one of his attackers broke his leg and subsequently died. Hurst was charged with the man's murder as well as for his Catholic activities and was hanged on 29th August 1628, the day after Arrowsmith.

St Ambrose Barlow (1585-1641)

Fr Barlow worked in Lancashire from 1617 until 1641 and was noted for his piety. He was arrested while saying mass in Leigh on Easter Day 1641. Tried at the Lancaster Autumn Assize, he was executed on 10th September 1641.

Blessed Edward Bamber (1600-1646)

Born at Carleton in the parish of Poulton-le-Fylde, Bamber was ordained in Spain in 1626. At his execution he threw a handful of money into the crowd and reconciled a man condemned for the murder of his brother, giving him absolution on the gallows.

Blessed John Woodcock (1603-1646)

Born in Leyland John was brought up a Protestant but later became a Franciscan. He was arrested after saying mass at Bamber Bridge. Eventually brought to court in August 1646, he admitted to being a priest. Nothing further was needed to condemn him and he received the inevitable death sentence. The rope broke at the first attempt, but he was hanged again and then butchered alive.

Blessed Thomas Whittaker (1611-1646)

Fr Whittaker ministered in the area of St Michaels-on-Wyre, Goosnargh and Kirkham. He was arrested once but escaped before his ultimate capture in 1643. Thomas was clearly in mortal terror of what awaited him and, having watched the executions of Bamber and Woodcock, he was offered the chance to save himself by denying his faith. It must have taken enormous courage to say what he did: 'Use your pleasure with me. A reprieve of even a pardon upon your condition I utterly refuse'. He was the last priest to be executed in Lancaster.

THE Martyrs' Walk and recommended detours



1. Lancaster Castle
2. Priory and Parish Church of St Mary
3. The Judges Lodgings
4. St Leonardgate Catholic Chapel
5. The Golden Lion Public House
6. The Memorial site
7. St Peters Cathedral and Library
8. The Palatine Hall in Dalton Square
9. The City Museum, Market Square
10. The Friends Meeting House

Christ be near at either hand,
 Christ behind, before me stand.
 Christ be with me where e're I go,
 Christ around, above below.

Christ be in my heart and mind,
 Christ within my soul enshrined,
 Christ control my wayward heart,
 Christ abode and ne'er depart.

Christ my life and only way,
 Christ my lantern night and day.
 Christ my unchanging friend,
 Guide and Shepherd to the end.