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Research in Progress

Laudianism in the Diocese of Chester: Revisiting the Episcopate of John Bridgeman*

James Mawdesley

During the 1630s, under the archbishopate of William Laud at Canterbury (from 1633) and Richard Neile at York (from 1632), the Church of England underwent a series of dramatic changes which impacted on how parishioners interacted with worship, their church buildings, and their clergy. Archbishop Laud had a remarkable talent for seeing the Church's problems as interlinked with each other, and what he saw did not fit his ideal of a church. In Laud's view, over the past few decades the Church's land and rights had been leased out to laity by bishops who, if anything, were preachers and not land managers. Poor ecclesiastical revenues led to poor clerical wages, and a poorer quality of clergyman. Both of these trends prompted the growth of what Laud perceived to be the Church's main enemy: puritanism. Whilst some laity only acquired church lands or rights to line their pockets, others bought interests in the church so that they could appoint clergymen to particular parishes, sometimes for particular religious purposes. The puritan-inclined London Haberdashers' Company's ownership of the vicarage of Bunbury in Cheshire, and their appointment of a series of puritan preachers there, particularly incensed Laud and Neile (within Neile's province of York the diocese of Chester lay).¹ To the two archbishops,

* This notice is based upon research conducted for my forthcoming University of Sheffield PhD thesis, about clerical politics in north-western England, c. 1625–1649. I would like to thank the Arts and Humanities Research Council for funding this research, and my supervisor, Prof. Anthony Milton, for discussing with me many of the ideas contained herein.

¹ Kenneth Fincham (ed.), 'Annual accounts of the Church of England, 1632–1639', in Melanie Barber and Stephen Taylor with Gabriel Sewell (eds), *From the Reformation to the Permissive Society: A miscellany in celebration of the*



puritanism, whether provoked either by low clerical standards or through active promotion (such as at Bunbury), could lead to a more fundamental disenchantment with the Church, be that with its liturgy, the *Book of Common Prayer*, or even with episcopacy itself, with the Catholic origins of both being of concern to keener protestants. Laud's accession to the archiepiscopate in 1633, backed by a supportive king in Charles I, meant that puritanism as Laud saw it would be tackled in dramatic fashion. In Laud's view, unfettered puritanism would lead to disorder, perhaps even to the fall of the Church and the fulfilment of James I's famous dictum of 'No bishop, no king'. Puritanism was best tackled by the stamping of order and decency upon the Church of England. Rather than worship being based upon preaching, the liturgy and the sacraments were pivotal to this Laudian vision of order.²

John Bridgeman had been Bishop of Chester since 1619, and was cut from a rather different cloth to Laud or Neile. A Calvinist by inclination, he viewed puritanism with less animosity than Laud, who was distinctly uncomfortable with such puritan-Calvinist notions as salvation limited to a narrow elect. For Laud, dispensing with aspects of church regulation which were seen as popish, such as wearing the clerical surplice or kneeling to receive communion, were but the thin end of a wedge which could lead to the Church's destruction. Bridgeman was more realistic, seeing such

400th anniversary of Lambeth Palace Library, Church of England Record Society, xviii (Woodbridge, 2010), 91–2. For further information, see R. C. Richardson, *Puritanism in north-west England: A regional study of the diocese of Chester to 1642* (Manchester, 1972), 128–30.

² For an introduction to Laudian policies, see Kenneth Fincham and Peter Lake, 'The Ecclesiastical Policies of James I and Charles I', in Kenneth Fincham (ed.), *The Early Stuart Church, 1603–1642* (Basingstoke, 1993), 23–49. For a focus on the province of York, see Andrew Foster, 'Church Policies of the 1630s', in Richard Cust and Ann Hughes (eds), *Conflict in Early Stuart England: Studies in Religion and Politics 1603–1642* (Harlow, 1989), 193–223. A particularly stimulating account, which includes a justification for the use of the term 'Laudian' as deployed in this research notice, is Peter Lake, 'The Laudian Style: Order, Uniformity and the Pursuit of the 'Beauty of Holiness' in the 1630s', in Fincham *Early Stuart Church*, 161–85. For the economic aspects of Laudian policy, see Christopher Hill, *Economic Problems of the Church: From Archbishop Whitgift to the Long Parliament* (Oxford, 1956), ch. 14.

puritans as a vital proselytising tool in a diocese which included large numbers of Catholic recusants. Indeed, his opinion of puritanism was perhaps similar to that of Charles I's father James I (who had appointed Bridgeman to his see), in that if a clergyman signalled his obedience to the King, the liturgy and the Thirty-Nine Articles by subscribing to the Three Articles, small acts of nonconformity (such as not wearing the surplice) could be ignored. Accordingly, Bridgeman developed a reputation amongst puritan clerics for his tolerance.³ Whilst it would be wrong to see the Jacobean church in too rosy a light, the great success of at least some of its bishops (including Bridgeman) was to assimilate into the Church aspects of moderate puritanism, including some forms of nonconformity, which might have otherwise been forced outside of the Church and onto the slippery slope to separatism.⁴ For Laud, though, such tendencies were anathema to his vision of an ordered, decent and united Church.

In 1633, Laud and Neile struck two crippling blows to Bridgeman's style of episcopate. As Brian Quintrell has persuasively argued, an investigation backed by Laud into Bridgeman's financial affairs ultimately failed to find anything significantly amiss, but did prompt Bridgeman's future quiescence and some substantial donations from Bridgeman towards the renovation of St. Paul's Cathedral, Laud's royal-sponsored project in London.⁵ Later that year, Neile's metropolitanical visitors arrived from York. Communion tables were ordered to be railed at the east ends of churches and placed on an altarwise (north-south) axis, which was genuinely innovatory in the post-reformation Church of England, and seemed to critics to smack of Catholicism.⁶ Stockport parish in Cheshire

³ Kenneth Fincham, 'Episcopal Government, 1603–1640', in Fincham, *Early Stuart Church*, 75–7. For Bridgeman's reputation, see the account in Thomas Paget, 'An Humble Advertisement to the High Court of Parliament', in John Paget, *A Defence of Church-Government, exercised in Presbyteriall, Classical, & Synodall Assemblies* (London, 1641), unpaginated.

⁴ Patrick Collinson, *The Religion of Protestants: The Church in English Society 1559–1625* (Oxford, 1982), ch. 6.

⁵ B. W. Quintrell, 'Lancashire Ills, the King's Will and the Troubling of Bishop Bridgeman', *Tr. of the Historic Society of Lancashire and Cheshire*, cxxxii (1982), 67–102.

⁶ Kenneth Fincham, 'The Restoration of Altars in the 1630s', *Historical Journal*, xlv (2001), 919–40.

renovated their church after receiving orders at this visitation, and St. Peter's church in the centre of Chester, and Chester Cathedral, both railed their communion tables in this fashion in 1633.⁷ The visitors' emphasis on full conformity proved too much for some clergy such as Richard Mather, the curate of Toxteth Park near Liverpool, who accepted suspension and left for New England in 1635.⁸ The visitors left the diocese having suspended thirty-eight clergymen, far more than at any other visitation in memory, though most of these clerics were restored after promising to conform.⁹ Chester's star preacher, John Ley, was amongst those suspended, forcing the Corporation to scribble letters to York pleading for his reinstatement.¹⁰ Historians have differed in their interpretations of Bridgeman's involvement here. Roger Richardson and Brian Quintrell both saw him as being inherently sympathetic to puritan clerics, but forced into compliance by obedience to his episcopal superiors.¹¹ Peter Yorke, on the other hand, has seen him as being far more sympathetic towards the Laudian project, arguing that his renovation of the church at Wigan in Lancashire (where Bridgeman was rector) in the early 1620s pre-empted the Laudian style of church renovation, and that such beliefs were further evident in his renovation of Chester Cathedral in the 1630s.¹² The reality, though, is probably somewhere in the middle of these two opinions. Whilst Bridgeman spent a lot of time, money and effort on renovating Wigan church, there were plenty of church building projects taking place during the 1620s which did not prefigure Laudianism in their intent.¹³ However, after the

⁷ Cheshire Record Office, Chester, EDC 5/1635/20; P63/7/1; 'Annual accounts', ed. Fincham, 90.

⁸ Susan Hardman Moore, *Pilgrims: New World Settlers and the Call of Home* (New Haven and London, 2007), 187.

⁹ Staffordshire Record Office, Stafford, D1287/9/8 (A/92).

¹⁰ Staffordshire RO, D1287/9/8 (A/92); Cheshire RO, ML/2, Letters 273 and 274.

¹¹ R. C. Richardson, 'Puritanism and the Ecclesiastical Authorities: The Case of the Diocese of Chester', in Brian Manning, *Politics, Religion and the English Civil War* (London, 1973), 16–33; Quintrell, 'Lancashire Ills', 67–102.

¹² P. D. Yorke, 'Iconoclasm, Ecclesiology and "The Beauty of Holiness": Concepts of Sacrilege and 'the Peril of Idolatry' in Early Modern England, circa 1590–1640' (unpub. PhD thesis, University of Kent, 1997), ch. 4.

¹³ J. F. Merritt, 'Puritans, Laudians, and the phenomenon of church-building in Jacobean London', *Historical Journal*, xli (1998), 935–60.

introduction of the innovations as ecclesiastical policy, Bridgeman was certainly issuing orders at his 1634 visitation for the unifying of pews in churches, a necessary accompaniment to a newly placed communion table.¹⁴ He also admonished clergymen who refused to read the *Book of Sports* issued in 1633, which, in its allowance of sports after evening prayer on Sundays, seemed to puritans to breach the fourth commandment, but which to the Laudian hierarchy was entirely compatible with their belief that Christ had abrogated the Mosaic law, and thus Sabbath observance was for the Church to define.¹⁵

One clergyman so admonished was John Ley, the vicar of Great Budworth in Cheshire and a lecturer (a form of preacher) in Chester, who had been at the centre of a sabbatarian storm in Chester in the early 1630s into which Bridgeman had been dragged.¹⁶ When, in 1635, Bridgeman unwisely attempted to erect a stone altar in Chester Cathedral, Ley (as sub-dean of the Cathedral) wrote to Bridgeman advising him take it down again, which he did.¹⁷ Indeed, one of the most remarkable observations which one could make about the enforcement of Laudian policies in the diocese of Chester is that after the initial storm of the metropolitanical visitation, moderate puritans can be found assimilated into the diocese's administrative mechanisms. The Archdeacon of Chester, George Snell, and the Archdeacon of Richmond, Thomas Dod, were both

¹⁴ Cheshire RO, EDC 5/1636/81 (Astbury); EDC 5/1636/116 (Nantwich). Julian Davies, *The Caroline Captivity of the Church: Charles I and the Remoulding of Anglicanism 1625–1641* (Oxford, 1992), 195, has questioned whether Bridgeman enforced the placing of railing of communion tables in an altarwise position at the east ends of churches, but the 1635 orders for Aston chapel in Runcorn parish in Cheshire, preserved in the British Library, London, Additional MS, 36919, fo. 217r., and unconsulted by Davies, suggests that this was indeed the arrangement which Bridgeman pursued.

¹⁵ Cheshire RO, EDV 1/33; Kenneth L. Parker, *The English Sabbath: A study of doctrine and discipline from the Reformation to the Civil War* (Cambridge, 1988), ch. 4.

¹⁶ Staffordshire RO, D1287/18 /2 (P/399/67). See also the printed version of Ley's contentious sermons, John Ley, *Sunday a Sabbath* (London, 1641).

¹⁷ See the printed version of this letter, John Ley, *A Letter (Against the Erection of an Altar), Written June 29. 1635. to the Reverend Father John L. Bishop of Chester* (London, 1641).

presented for puritan offences at the 1633 visitation. Dod was, in fact, the nephew of England's most famous nonconformist cleric, John Dod.¹⁸ We have already seen that St. Peter's church in Chester swiftly railed its communion table in 1633. Its rector, John Glendole, and his churchwardens were reported at the 1634 visitation for not presenting parishioners who failed to bow their heads at the name of Jesus, another aspect of the Laudian drive for full conformity.¹⁹ In a parish with both puritan-inclined rector and laity, one might be surprised to find a painted board inside the church commemorating the rebuilding of the church in the late 1630s, creating more or less the church seen today. Yet, whilst this rebuilding no doubt ticked all the Laudian boxes with regards to the placing of the communion table and the uniformity of pews, St. Peter's was the home of Chester's most prominent lectureship, that occupied by John Ley.²⁰ Whilst St. Peter's was no doubt a Laudian showpiece, its rector and parishioners were perhaps more pleased that they had built an effective preaching house. Other parishes, though, were less united in their response to Laudianism. At Church Lawton in Cheshire, the parish officers had running battles with their rector, William Lawton, over his failure to conform to the new requirements.²¹

If puritans were outwardly conforming, if not necessarily in Laudian spirit, where did it all go wrong for Bishop Bridgeman, so that in the early months of 1641, he would be both attacked in Parliament and be the target of critical petitions gathered in places as diverse as Chester, Wigan, Kirkham in Lancashire and Bangor in Flintshire?²² Bridgeman, it must be said, does seem to have become more convinced by Laudianism over time, and in 1637 he pursued with vigour a further renovation of Chester Cathedral, installing a

¹⁸ Borthwick Institute of Historical Research, York, V. 1633, Court Book 2, fos. 432v, 528r. For Thomas Dod's relationship to John Dod, see Dr Beales, 'Astbury and Congleton', in William Urwick (ed.) *Historical Sketches of Nonconformity in The County Palatine of Chester* (London, 1864), 152.

¹⁹ Cheshire RO, EDV 1/32, fo. 28v.

²⁰ M. J. Crossley Evans, 'The Clergy of the City of Chester, 1630–1672', *Journal of the Chester Archaeological Society*, lxxviii (1985), 106.

²¹ Cheshire RO, EDV 1/33, fo. 4r.; EDV 5/4.

²² Wallace Notestein, *The Journal of Sir Simonds D'Ewes* (New Haven, 1923), 251–2; Staffordshire RO, D1287/18/2 (P/399/210).

stained glass east window depicting scenes from the life of Christ.²³ His timing for this renovation could not have been worse. Circulating by early 1637 was William Prynne's *Newes from Ipswich*, which told in gratuitous detail how Matthew Wren, the Bishop of Norwich, was using Laudian policy as a means to all but restore Catholicism in his diocese.²⁴ Bridgeman's underlying motive for his enthusiasm for beautifying the Cathedral was confirmed when he was drawn into the prosecution of some Chester gentlemen who had entertained Prynne when he passed through the city as a prisoner in the summer of 1637. Bridgeman was in regular contact with both Laud and Neile throughout this crisis, which culminated in the unedifying public argument between Bridgeman and some of the men concerned whilst they enacted their penances in front of a packed Cathedral congregation.²⁵ Whilst in Chester, Prynne had visited St. John's Church, the last parish in the city holding out against railing their church's communion table. That oversight was rectified at Bridgeman's primary visitation in the immediate aftermath of Prynne's visit. The churchwardens pointedly paid the ringers not to ring the bells on the Bishop's arrival, contrary to custom.²⁶

It is striking that, after 1637, opposition to Laudianism in the diocese of Chester did not come from puritans (many of whom were employed within the diocesan administration), but from clergymen who had no prior records of nonconformity. In January 1638, Thomas Holford, the perpetual curate of Plemstall in Cheshire, preached a forthright sermon in John Ley's lectureship at St. Peter's church in Chester criticising the narrow Laudian definition of conformity, and attacking the description of the 'more zealous' as 'Hereticke Schismaticke or Puritan'.²⁷ Later that year, Edward Fleetwood, the vicar of Kirkham, who had apparently received several warnings from Bridgeman for his failure to

²³ Cheshire RO, EDA 3/1, fo. 131r.

²⁴ [William Prynne], *Newes from Ipswich* (Ipswich, 1636).

²⁵ William Prynne, *A New Discovery of the Prelates Tyranny* (London: 1641), 218–26. Bridgeman's correspondence on the subject can be found in Staffordshire RO, D1287/9/8 (A/93); D1287/18/2 (P/399/5B) (P/399/6B).

²⁶ Staffordshire RO, D1287/9/8 (A/93); John Bridgeman to Richard Neile, 20 November 1637; Cheshire RO, P51/12/1

²⁷ Cheshire RO, EDC 5/1637/32.

comply with the new Laudian conformity, was finally suspended by the consistory court.²⁸

Puritanism has often been linked to parliamentary allegiance after civil war broke out in the summer of 1642.²⁹ Whilst individuals such as John Ley demonstrate the validity of this link, it is important to note that Ley only became a vocal critic of Laudianism after the convening of the Long Parliament in November 1640, when he jumped on the bandwagon of anti-Laudian sentiment which was then gaining momentum.³⁰ As we have seen, after the likes of Richard Mather had been removed, the first murmurings of anti-Laudian discontent in the diocese came not from puritan nonconformists, but rather, from clergymen who had become discontented after the imposition of Laudian policies. Interestingly, the advent of Fleetwood's nonconformity is dated to March 1636, when Bridgeman was becoming more interested in a deeper pursuit of Laudian policy than he had hitherto been.³¹ It is perhaps unsurprising that Fleetwood organised a petition against Bridgeman from Kirkham in the spring of 1641, and that, like Thomas Holford, he emerged as a parliamentarian during the first civil war.³²

James Mawdesley, University of Sheffield

²⁸ Cheshire RO, EDC 5/1638/14.

²⁹ See, for example, John Morrill, 'The Religious Context of the English Civil War', in John Morrill (ed.) *The Nature of the English Revolution* (Harlow, 1993), 45–68.

³⁰ For example, the printing in 1641 of Ley's *Letter (Against the Erection of an Altar)*. For Ley's parliamentarianism, see Richard L. Greaves, 'Ley, John (1584–1662)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press, 2004 [<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/16621>, accessed 2 August 2013].

³¹ Cheshire RO, EDC 5/1638/14.

³² Staffordshire RO, D1287/18/2 (P/399/210). For Holford's parliamentarianism, see Crossley Evans, 'Clergy', 115. Fleetwood's parliamentarianism is evident in his testimony appended to the anonymous, pro-parliamentarian pamphlet, *A Declaration of A Strange and Wonderful Monster* (London, 1646).