

VCH SHROPSHIRE

Vol. VI (ii), Shrewsbury

2.5 Public Preachers

This text is made available to readers in advance of its full publication. We welcome suggestions for improvement, references and, of course, we invite readers to point out errors.

This history has been prepared for VCH Shropshire by Professor Richard Hoyle to whom we are grateful.

First public version
June 2024

© VCH Shropshire Ltd 2024. This text is supplied for research purposes only and is not to be reproduced further without permission.

2.5 Public Preachers

The office of public preacher was a civic appointment which survived for a little over 300 years.¹ That it lasted so long is largely because it had an endowment which allowed it to continue even after its original purpose had been lost.

There were essentially two reasons for creating the post of public preacher at the end of the 1570s. First, it allowed a town to bring a graduate clergyman as preacher into the town at a time when many parochial clergy were not equipped to offer sermons. Moreover, the preachers were almost certainly more advanced in their opinions than the parochial clergy and for that reason they could advance the Reformation in a town. In the case of the Shrewsbury, the public preacher also served to provide for St Mary's. Following its grant for the support of the school, the church supplied by a poorly paid curate. This was hardly becoming of a major town church (which was also a royal peculiar) and left a big gap in the provision for both the parish and the town.

Whilst there was certainly some preaching in the town in the 1570s, the public preacher can be traced to the ordinances for Shrewsbury school signed in 1578. This vested the nomination of the curate of St Mary's in the borough and the Headmaster. They were to favour a son of a burgess who had been educated at the school. If no fitting person could be found, then a man born in Chirbury was preferred. Only if no suitable person presented themselves was the field to be opened. The curate was to be paid £20 by the school: this was insufficient to attract a man of quality. It is not said, though it seems likely, that it was decided at this time that a public preachership was to be created and attached to St Mary's to supplement the stipend of the curate. From the beginning there were two conjoined posts, one appointed by the borough and headmaster on terms laid down in the ordinances, the other appointed by the bailiffs and burgesses. This caused difficulties over the years.

The bailiffs' initial choice fell on Dr Edward Bulkeley, a Shropshire man and possibly a old boy of the school, vicar of Odell in Bedfordshire and a canon of Chester. Bulkeley took up the post in 1579, probably reluctantly, and resigned in 1582 having found a successor. This was a Staffordshire man, John Tomkys, a man of Puritan views, who died prematurely in post in 1592. He seems not to have met the criteria for appointment. After his death the bailiffs

¹ For the early history of the office, see R. W. Hoyle, 'Building a "Spiritual" Temple in Shrewsbury: the public preachers, 1578-1618', *TSAHS*, 97 (2022), pp. 75-95. This account also draws on the historical collections made by Leonard Hotchkiss in the mid-1740s for the opinion of counsel, SA, P257/X/2/1 and further notes in SA 6001/9. For the individual preachers, see Hoyle above and the account of the clergy in section 4.1.7 (St Mary's).

tried to persuade Bulkeley to return, but in the event he and Richard Harris, vicar of Upton Magna, visited Cambridge to assess the available talent. Their choice landed on one Thomas Laughton. The then headmaster of the school, Thomas Meigan, objected to the appointment as Laughton – who was probably a Lincolnshire man – as he did not fulfill the criteria laid down in 1578. Meigan was overruled, but Laughton resigned the post in late 1596 or early 1597, probably because of illness. Cambridge was again trawled for a suitable person, and the choice fell on a Yorkshireman, William Bright, who died in office in 1618.

Subsequent appointments seem to have been uncontentious although not invariably conforming to the ordnances. The exception was John Lloyd, appointed curate and preacher in 1715, but who subsequently accepted a living at Berrington. This was irreconcilable with his grant from the Corporation which required him to be resident in Shrewsbury. In 1735 he was dismissed from the preachership for non-residence. Lloyd resorted to Chancery seeking to be reinstated: his case was dismissed. Benjamin Wingfield was appointed in his place in 1739 but was only able to exercise the office from Lloyd's death in 1743.²

Over time the importance of the preachership diminished. Wingfield was employed to give one Sunday afternoon sermon where his predecessors had given two, and this remained the pattern until the post disappeared in 1889.³

The emoluments of the preacher and the source of his stipend varied over time.⁴ Bulkeley appears to have received £52 (a pound a week) plus the curate's £20. Laughton, however, was appointed on a salary for the preachership of £46 3s. 4d. This seems to have remained the rate until Francis Tallents was appointed in 1652, apparently at a salary of £110 and the income from Wynne's bequest in addition. His successor, Robert Fowler appointed in 1660 had a stipend of £53 6s. 8d. and the Wynne income.⁵ This seems to have been the rate through to the appointment of John Lloyd. Bulkeley was almost certainly supported out of a collection made in the town with the Corporation making up any shortfall. On Tomkys' appointment a capital sum was raised and Tomkys paid from the interest, with the Corporation making up the shortfall, an arrangement to which Laughton objected. In 1621 the town bought an estate in Coton with the capital sum and other money for £672. At about the same time Richard Wynne bequeathed £300 to the borough for the purchase of land for the

² Blakeway and Owen, 0, pp. 413-14; SA, P257/X/2/1 fo. 5r.

³ SA, P257/X/2/1, fo. 5r; SA, 3365/2738, Rowland to Cooper, 10 Feb. 1836.

⁴ Hoyle, 'Building a "Spiritual" Temple', pp. 83-5 for the early years.

⁵ SA, P257/X/2/1, fo. 2v

maintenance of the preacher, and land at Caehowel in Edgerley was purchased in 1626. This was paid to the preacher as a supplementary income.

When Lloyd was judged to be in breach of the terms of his appointment to the public preachship, the payment of £53 6s. 8d was stopped by the Corporation. Lloyd attempted to recover this by a bill in Chancery in 1736-8 but the Corporation pointed to his failure to fulfil the terms of his appointment and his suit was dismissed. But it also maintained that their stipend was a voluntary payment and they were under no obligation to continue it.⁶

Having come to this conclusion, they chose not to reinstate the stipend when Benjamin Wingfield was appointed in 1739. It seems certain that he petitioned for it to be reinstated and probably applied to Chancery for a ruling in his favour. The school's headmaster, Leonard Hotchkis, gathered a great deal of historical material in an attempt to prove that the profits of the estate at Coton should be paid to the public preachers, perhaps because he did not wish the school's income to be charged any further with the support of the clergy at St Mary's. He secured counsel's opinion that the Corporation should pay the £40 rent of the Coton estate to the preacher but this seems not to have been acted upon. The conveyance to the Corporation did not explicitly say that the land was held for the support of the preacher. The fate of this land is not presently known. The Corporation's decision impoverished the benefice: '[t]hat the church of St Mary from formerly being the best provided for in Town is now the worst by the Corporation's detaining to its own use this £53 6s. 8d. a year, which is more than the one half of the yearly profits belonging to the church'.⁷

After Lloyd, the public preacher only received the profit of the land at Caehowell. From at least 1794 it was granted to the preacher for the duration of his appointment. In the nineteenth century it was reported that the land extended to 33 or 34 acres. In 1836 it produced a rent of £71 8s. 0d. and in 1884 £79. This was seen as a fee for a Sunday afternoon sermon at St Mary's.⁸ What happened to this land after the resignation of Archdeacon Lloyd from St Mary's in 1889 is not known.

Lloyd was the last public preacher. On his move to Edgmond there appears to have been no suggestion that a successor should be appointed and the preachship lapsed.

⁶ SA, P257/X/2/1, fo. 5r.

⁷ SA, P257/X/2/1 fo. 7r

⁸ SA, P257/X/2/1 (1794); X/2/3 (1828); 3365/2738, Rowland to Cooper, 10 Feb. 1836; Archdeacon Lloyd, *Notes on St Mary's church Shrewsbury* (1900), p. 47; P257/F/1/1 (1884).