

## CHAPTER 4 [Pages 19 - 26]

### BOURTON-ON-DUNSMORE

When Gregory Soden was living here in the last quarter of the fifteenth century, the population of England was no more than four millions, four-fifths of them living in rural villages each of which was self-supporting for most of its necessities. The great city of Coventry, eight miles to the north-west across the heath and one of the largest and most important towns in England, had some five thousand inhabitants.

Although Gregory would have known of the stirring events of the reigns of Edward VI, Jane 'Bloody' Mary and Elizabeth I, with one exception they would have little or no effect on his family's daily life. That exception was Henry VIII's break with the Pope. They had now to accustom themselves, to hearing the church services being conducted in their native English according to the new Book of Common Prayer and listen to the scriptures read from the English Bible which had been placed in every church. Depending on who sat on the throne at any one time men hardly knew whether they should call themselves catholic or protestant, it was not until Elizabeth's reign, beginning in 1558, that the villagers' religious observance became of a more settled nature.

But if religious controversy passed Bourton-on-Dunsmore by, the country-folk living around Coventry could not ignore what

19

was happening in the city, which became notorious for religious persecution. In the early part of the century seven citizens were condemned to be burned at the stake for heresy; in 1554 the city sheriff was imprisoned on the same charge, but escaped and fled abroad. Five years later Mary Queen of Scots was imprisoned at the Bull Inn after her removal from Tutbury Castle.

Apart from the bare facts about Gregory's children, grandchildren and great grandchildren gleaned from the Bourton-on-Dunsmore parish registers, little more is known about him. He features as plaintiff in a dispute about money matters with John Wright of Long Itchington in the Court of Chancery sometime between 1579 and 1587, where mention is made of a decision at the Coventry assizes when damages were awarded against Gregory. In another legal case hearing sometime between 1558 and 1602 before the Court of Requests, George sued John Hancoxe for payment of eight or nine years' arrears of 'whole tythes' amounting to £40.

The records of both court cases refer to Gregory as 'Clerk, of

Long Ichynton, Co Warwick', so it might be assumed that he was vicar of the parish. Such an assumption, however, seems to conflict with a reference in the Patent Roll of 26 March 1569 which records the appointment by Queen Elizabeth of George Soden to the vicarage of Long Itchington, at that time void by the death of the previous incumbent, Thomas de Odingsels, who

20

himself had only been appointed by the Duchess of Suffolk in the same year. We know from other sources that George remained as vicar until 1606.

So what can be the explanation for these apparently conflicting records? It has already been mentioned that in his will of 1557 Gregory's father, Thomas, referred to his three sons, without mentioning their names. Gregory was certainly one of them, and George may well have been another. Regarding the problem of both George and Gregory apparently being incumbents of Long Itchington at the same time, the explanation would seem to be that George was the lay rector and owner of the benefice, and accordingly the recipient of the Great (or 'whole') tithes, and Georger as vicar, would receive the Small Tithes. For this to have been the case Gregory would not need to have been ordained, or even to have lived at Long Itchington. On the other hand, if the assumption is made that Gregory was himself a priest (though

this is difficult to check because the extant Lichfield diocesan ordination records cease at 1531) it is possible that he was his brother George's assistant curate. Since this would be a purely personal appointment by the vicar, there were few if any-records relating to the second priest, and it was quite common at the time for the incumbent to live elsewhere and for such appointees to be members of the same family.

21

The birth of Gregory's eldest son, Robert took place at Swalcliffe. He was married at Bishop's Itchington, twelve miles south of Bourton, to Mary Bradwell in 1587. They had a large family of four girls and seven boys, all born at Bourton between 1588 and 1607. Robert himself died in 1629 and was buried at the village church. of their children, Thomas, the second son, married Ann Pretty at Honington in 1622, and they moved to Pailton (Monks Kirby), a village adjoining Combefields (of which much will be written in the next chapter) where he established himself as a husbandman and victualler, founding a family line there which was to last until the nineteenth century.

The Monks Kirby Sodens turned out to be a rascally lot, as shown by the following extracts from the minutes of Quarter Sessions:

1638 Trinity

Thomas Soden, late of Pailton, victualler, indicted for

continuing a cottage at Pailton.

1639 Michaelmas

Thomas Soden of Paylton, victualler, for selling less than a quart

1640 Epiphany

Thomas Soden of Paylton, husbandman, for keeping an alehouse without a licence.

1652

Jeremy Soden of Pailton, to be restrained from ale selling for keeping lewd and drunken company and not keeping the assize of beer and ale. Also fine 20s. to be given to the poor and bound over.

1657

Jeremiah Soudan of Pelton for selling ale without a license.

1657 Trinity

Jeremy Soden of Pailton, victualler, indicted for selling ale without a license.

1680 Easter

information of inhabitants of Pailton that John Soden, a poor man, with his wife tried to gain settlement there.

Last settlement in Fenny Drayton, Leics. Ordered to be sent back there.

Richard, Robert's third son, stayed on at Bourton, where three children were born to him and his wife, Jillian, between 1634

and 1640. Their fourth son, John, who was baptised at Bourton on 27 November 1599, became a husbandman at Napton-on-the-Hill where he was buried on either 12 September 1635 or 7 September 1648.

John was not the first of a line of Sodens at Napton which was to remain there, generally as farmers, until the beginning of the nineteenth century. Although these Sodens did not defy the law as frequently as their relations at Monks Kirby they did not escape it entirely, for the Quarter Sessions minutes for Michaelmas 1686 record that

William Soden and 15 others of Napton indicted for riot and assault on Elizabeth, wife of William Sheppard, at Napton.

Fined 2s. each

Edward, baptised in 1603, married Jane Hands at Solihull in 1638, and at some time moved to Claverdon. There the family evidently prospered for in 1574 he or his son of the same name paid Hearth Tax on no less than five hearths, indicating that he inhabited a house much larger than the average, even for a yeoman of the period. His prosperity was at times gained at the expense of the community as he was indicted at the Epiphany Quarter sessions in 1671/2 for ploughing common land in Claverdon. William, the fifth son, who was born in 1605, moved to Kineton, where the parish registers record that two sons/ John and William, were born to him and his wife Beatta in 1628

\* A benefaction board by the north door of the church records the gift in 1805 of £5 to the poor of the parish by Elizabeth Soden.

23

and 1629 respectively. Lastly, there was Henry, who died at Bourton in 1630 aged only 23.

Robert's eldest son, also named Robert (II), was born in 1591 and, like his father, spent all his life in the village, being

buried there on 6 April 1643, aged 52. We know from the record of his children's baptisms that his wife was named Alice, but as their marriage is not recorded at Bourton (or as far as is known, anywhere else in Warwickshire) we do not know whether she was a Bourton girl or, perhaps, from some other parish. The likelihood is that the marriage took place in about 1624.

Robert II and Alice had a much smaller family than his father, two boys and two girls. All were born in Bourton, and it is at this stage that some dispersal of the family took place. The younger son, also named Robert (III), who was born in 1632 married Frances Jones in 1662 at Wolston and settled there as a farmer, founding another branch of the family.

Robert III's elder brother William's baptism took place in November 1529, and from then on there is no further trace of him at Bourton until his name appears in the Hearth Tax returns for Brinklow in 1672 and for Combe(fields) in 1661, 1670 and 1672 on each occasion for two hearths. Furthermore, the Sodens completely disappeared from Bourton by 1643, so what can have happened to them? One possible cause was the enclosure of the common fields at Bourton. Under the Tudors the price of wool

landowners to throw together the common field arable strips into larger fields, enclosed and laid down to pasture for sheep, and, at the same time, to enclose the wasteland of the manor. This process was unevenly spread over the county as a whole, but Bourton-on-Dunsmore is one of the places mentioned by Stowe in 1607 as having been largely converted to pasture resulting in the decay of farms. Another possibility is the effect the Commonwealth (1649-1660) and the Civil War, beginning in 1642 had on the life of the village. Warwickshire was the scene of the battle of Edgehill, about midway between Kineton and Radway, in October 1642, and Coventry itself was held against the King by Parliamentary forces and the citizenry. But in many places a local civil war dragged on spasmodically for several years together, distinct from the main armies, though they too sometimes became involved in one of these.

A further possibility is that William found himself a wife at Combe-fields with a bit of money or even a farm of her own, though their marriage does not seem to have been recorded.

What is so disappointing is that so little flesh can be put on the bones of dates and places, births, marriages and burials, recorded here.

Nothing at all is known of the houses in which they lived, their style of life or how they fitted into the social pattern of the village. Much might have been learned

from the records of the manor (there were two in the parish, viz. Draycote and Bourton) but, despite an exhaustive search, no

25

trace of their whereabouts, if they still exist, can be found.

Other records, such as the Protestation Oath Returns of 1641-2, the list of those subscribing to a collection for Distressed Protestants in Ireland of the same year, and the Muster certificates listing men between 16 and 60 in each parish available for military service, provide no information.

26