

# 17th Century Austrey

## Turbulent Times

The seventeenth century was a time of change and challenges to the established order, including the confrontation between King and Parliament and the growth of religious dissent after the Civil War.

Although ordinary villagers left little written evidence of their thoughts, feelings and opinions, there is plenty of evidence to suggest that rural people took an active interest in religious debate. William Weston's colourful account of the Cambridgeshire villagers who sedulously turned the pages and looked up the texts cited by the preachers at the Puritan conferences at Wisbech in the 1580s and '90s, is particularly convincing on this point. It is also significant that publication of printed commentaries, chapbooks and sermons increased dramatically in the decades leading up to the Civil War. Discussion was not limited to religious matters. Radical preachers also gave vent to controversial views on a number of matters closer to home, such as enclosure, depopulation and the treatment of the poor. Although illiterate villagers had indirect access to these ideas through the 'oral culture' of the church and the alehouse, literacy was a powerful force in the spread of radical ideas.

## Literacy and the spread of ideas

Access to ideas that challenged the prevailing religious and social establishment was an ingredient of change at parish level. In fact it could be argued that an interest in and concern about events outside the parochial world was the first step in the development of an informed 'public opinion'. Literacy and the dissemination of news or information was crucial to this process since it opened up new possibilities for the villagers.

We know that the midland gentry had an appetite for 'newes' because of the stream of written communications, printed articles and copies of parliamentary speeches bundled up in newsletters from kinsmen and associates in London. In the years leading up to the Civil War it seems that the Warwickshire gentry clubbed together to buy newsheets, reading detailed accounts of the conflict between king and parliament in printed journals such as *The Weekly Account*, *Perfect Occurrences* and *The Scottish Dove*.

To find out about the involvement of ordinary villagers in these events we have to sift through personal diaries and state papers looking for evidence of gossip, common talk and 'libels' of a political nature. The most active peddlers of information were travellers and preachers who found an eager audience for their public utterances. John Rous, the celebrated diarist, records that the scandals of the Court, disputes over church doctrines, Parliament and taxes were common talk in the provinces in the 1620s and 1630s. Rous, who was then incumbent of Santon-Downham in Norfolk, found particularly avid interest in the latest 'newes' from the Capital among his parishioners. Indeed, the popular preoccupation with current affairs was already a recognisable source of amusement. "Every man askes what newes? Every man's religion is known by his newes", declared one of Rous' fellow justices at the Mondeford sessions, in mock parody of a sermon preached before the King at Whitehall, and echoing, presumably, the fashionable greeting.

The general interest of the public in national events is forcefully shown than by the government's largely unsuccessful attempts to suppress "lavish and licentious talking in matters of state". Damaging rumours spread quickly to the great alarm of the authorities, eager to stamp out any challenge to their position, as for example in November, 1634, when the vicar of Abingdon in Berkshire was reported as "a great disturber of the peace" for publishing "strange doctrines". An informant relates that "he has lately presumed in his preaching to venture upon state business and ... has denied the king's supremacy... in a public sermon". Coachmen were particularly notorious gossipmongers who played an active part in carrying news to the provinces. That same year a coachman was accused of relaying false news, lies and tales about the Archbishop of York. A few months later a Cambridge man was reported for speaking against the bishops and the Book of Recreations after drinking sack in the Falcon Tavern!

### **Sources and Notes**

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