

The Lyke Wake Dirge & The Survival of Catholicism in Cleveland, Yorkshire

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► Key words

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▼ Abstract

The *Lyke Wake Dirge*, an overtly Catholic song, seems to have survived in the Cleveland area of Yorkshire until at least 1800. This article describes the survival of Catholicism in the area after the Reformation. It shows that continuing Catholicism created conditions that were reasonably conducive to the survival of the song. The article, acknowledges, however, that chance must have played a part.

The Lyke Wake Dirge (Roud 8194) is a song that describes the journey of the soul of a recently dead person as it attempts to make its way to heaven. The lyke is the corpse, as we still see in the lychgate outside English churches, and in German Leiche. The wake is a ceremonial watching over the dead person, long abandoned in England but more familiar in Ireland. A song for the dead is a dirge, with the word 'dirge' deriving from the Latin *dirige*, the first words of the matins ceremony for the dead, said in the presence of the corpse (Duffy 2022: 369). It was first recorded in writing by John Aubrey in around 1686 in his collection later published as *Remaines of Gentilisme and Judaisme* (1972: 176-178). Aubrey's informant said the song was sung 'about 60 yeares since at Country vulgar Funeralls' in Yorkshire (specifically near Guisborough says Sidgwick (1904: II, 89), quoting Aubrey), which gives a date of 1626 or so. (Vulgar, which Pittaway (2016) finds patronising, here means the common people.) Carol Rumens (*The Guardian*, 16th February 2009) suggests, without evidence, that the song is 14th Century. Sir Walter Scott in *Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border* (Ed. Henderson 1931: 398-401) includes a similar version, and quotes Joseph Ritson's

description of a song 'sung by the lower ranks of Roman Catholics' in Cleveland in Yorkshire, watching over a dead body during the reign of Elizabeth I (reigned 1558-1603). Ritson's description corresponds closely to the text of the song. Sidgwick (1904: II, 89) explains:

Ritson found an illustration of this dirge in a manuscript letter, written by one signing himself 'H. Tr.' to Sir Thomas Chaloner, in the Cotton MSS. (Julius, F. vi., fols. 453-462). The date approximately is the end of the sixteenth century (Sir Thomas Chaloner the elder, 1521-1565; the younger, 1561-1615). The letter is concerned with antiquities in Durham and Yorkshire, especially near Guisborough, an estate of the Chaloner family. The sentence referring to the Lyke-Wake Dirge was printed by Scott, to whom it was communicated by Ritson's executor after his death.

This is the text given by Aubrey:

This ean night, this ean night;
Every night and awle:
Fire and Fleet and candle-light
And Christ receive thy Sawle.

When thou from hence doest pass away
Every night and awle
To Whinny-moor thou comest at last
And Christ receive thy Sawle.

If ever thou gave either hosen or shun
Every night and awle
Sit thee downe and putt them on
And Christ receive thy Sawle

But if hosen nor shoon thou never gave nean
Every night, &c:
The Whinnes shall prick thee to the bare beane
And Christ receive thy Sawle.

From Whinny-moor that thou mayst pass
Every night &c:
To Brig o'Dread thou comest at last
And Christ &c:

From Brig of Dread that thou mayst pass
Every night &c:
To Purgatory fire thou com'st at last
And Christ &c:

If ever thou gave either Milke or drinke
Every night &c:
The fire shall never make thee shrink
And Christ &c:

But if milk nor drink thou never gave nean
Every night &c
The Fire shall burn thee to thy bare bane
And Christ receive thy Sawle

There is clearly a stanza or two missing after the arrival at the Brig o'Dread (as Scott points out), as there is no indication of how one may pass, or fail to pass, the bridge, in contrast to Whinny-moor and Purgatory. Atkinson (1868: 595-605) discusses the song at some length. He suggests the following for the missing stanzas (603-604):

If ever thou gave either awmous or dole,
Every night and alle;
At Brigg o' Dread nae ill thou sal thole,
And Christe receive thy saule.

But if awmous or dole thou never gave neean,
Every night and alle;
Thou s'fall an' be brusten to the bare beean,
And Christe receive thy saule.

Blakeborough (1898: 123-124), supplies the following at that point in his version:

If ivver thoo gav' o' thi siller an' gawd,
Ivvery neet an' awl,
At t' Brigg o' Dreed thoo'll find footho'd,
An' Christ tak up thi sowl.

Bud if o' siller an' gawd thoo nivver ga' neean,
Ivvery neet an' awl,

Thoo'll doon, doon tumm'l towards Hell fleeams,
An' Christ tak up thi sowl.

As we see, both suggestions involve almsgiving. Blakeborough's version does not include Purgatory, which has been replaced with Hell, so it is less Catholic. It does, however, still contain 'a strong sense of the efficacy of salvation through works', as Hutton (1995: 93) puts it. Gray (2019: 357) says:

The folk belief in 'shoes for the dead' sits easily with the medieval stress on the necessity of performing bodily works of mercy.

Blakeborough suggests (p 122) that it was sung as late as 1800 in Kildale, a village in Cleveland in the North York Moors. Moorman (1919: 101-106) includes Blakeborough's version, and then a similar song called *A Dree Neet* which mentions the 'Brig o'Deoad'. He also quotes from Aubrey's manuscript that the song was sung 'till about 1616-24'.

The Survival of the Song

The song, then, is clearly Catholic in origin, possibly dating from before the Reformation, and is strongly associated with the Cleveland area of North Yorkshire. The question this paper will explore is why such a Catholic song survived there until 1800 or so, 250 years after the Reformation, albeit in attenuated form.

Cleveland

Cleveland is an area in eastern North Yorkshire. It corresponds to the old Scandinavian administrative areas, or wapentakes, of Langbaugh, East and West, but can also include the coastal wapentake of Whitby Strand. The borders of the wapentakes have varied over the centuries. For the purposes of this paper Allertonshire, to the west, will also be included. The region is thus bounded by the river Tees in the north, the North Sea in the east, and covers most of the North York Moors, as far south as Pickering and as far west as Northallerton. It should be remembered that the modern large industrial town of Middlesbrough was a hamlet before 1800, and Guisborough was the only substantial inland town. Cleveland was long sparsely populated and remote. Even today the population living within the North York Moors National Park, an area of 1,436 square kilometres which covers much of Cleveland, numbers only 23,000 people (2021 census).

The Reformation

The English Reformation was not a single event but a process. There had been pressures for a considerable while to stop ecclesiastical corruption and to allow the Bible in English. Henry VIII, no Protestant despite the break with Rome, executed some of these reformers, for example Tyndale in 1536. In many people's minds, the event that started the Reformation was the Dissolution of the Monasteries by Henry, from 1533. The great iconoclasm, however, the stripping of the altars (Duffy 2022), occurred under his successor Edward VI, who reigned from 1547 to 1553. After Catholic Mary I, 1553 to 1558, Elizabeth I continued to make England a Protestant country, with great success. By the end of her reign Catholics were a tiny, persecuted minority (see Duffy, Thomas 1971: 58-89, Haigh 1975 and 1993, Dickens 1991).

Dickens puts forward the standard Anglican view, that the English Reformation was inevitable, almost universally welcomed, and accomplished smoothly, a view he stuck to in his second edition, despite the revisionist publications since the first edition of 1964. In this view, those who remained Catholic were disloyal, even traitors, for who can have two allegiances, to Pope and Queen?

More recent, revisionist publications have argued that the Reformation, or Reformations, plural (Haigh 1993), took a long time to fully gain the hearts and minds of the people. Bossy (1975), Duffy, Thomas and others show that old customs and practices lingered for many years (see also Haigh 1975: 218ff), though different ones survived in different places. There was not in fact a clear divide between Anglicans and Catholics. Attendance at church services was required once a month, along with taking Communion at Easter, at least. There were Puritans (Calvinists), Church anglicans (not Anglicans), who were nominal converts, and Church Papists, who conformed to the law but not in spirit. There were also recusants, who simply refused to attend Anglican church. This was illegal and laid them open to court cases and fines. (See for example Bossy 1975: 140ff; Haigh 1975: 247-294 and 1993: 251-267; Walsham 1999.)

Areas of Catholic Survival

Within quite a short time, in very few areas of England were more than 2% of the population Catholic. There were variations, however. The south and east were generally more strongly Protestant, as were more industrialized areas in the north, such as the cloth-weaving parts of Lancashire and the mining areas of Cumberland. The north more generally, particularly upland areas, had a stronger tendency to cling to the old religion. Bossy (1975: 404) shows that the three English counties with more than 2% of recusant households were County Durham, Lancashire and Monmouthshire. Yorkshire as a whole had between 1% and 2% of

recusant households, making it one of the more Catholic counties.

As said, older practices and customs associated with the Catholic Church survived for many years around England. One would expect them to survive longer in more Catholic areas. So our song, the *Lyke Wake Dirge*, might have been expected to last longer in Lancashire than in Yorkshire. Gerard (1951: 32-33), a secret Jesuit missionary in Elizabethan times, describes personally seeing congregations of 200 or more at Catholic masses in Lancashire in the 1590s. On the other hand, it would not have lasted long in Kent or East Anglia or other strongly Protestant areas. We are concerned with Cleveland, the area of North Yorkshire where the song was recorded. Let us look at Catholic remnants there.

Cleveland under Elizabeth

Under Elizabeth I (reigned 1558-1603) the Church of England was initially rather slow to proselytize in the north (Aveling 1966: 11-13; 1970: 33-34). Many gentry families remained Catholic, and they would often employ Catholic servants. Dures & Young (2022: 71-73) mention the Meynells of North Kilvington, in the west of Cleveland, and the Fairfaxes of Gilling, just to the south of Cleveland, for example. There were also the Scropes of Danby, in the centre of the moors (Aveling 1976: 147). After the abortive Rising in the North of 1569, which was in part Catholic, as well as feudal and regional, stronger efforts were made. People who did not attend church could be fined, and it was treason, and thus a capital offence, to be a Catholic priest. Priests, and sometimes lay people, were executed in considerable numbers. After 1581, the fine for recusancy was £20, forty or fifty times an artisan's monthly wage (Haigh 1993: 263-264).

In Cleveland, however, many of the parishes were large, with dispersed populations. This meant a parish would have a main church, but also a number of smaller chapels. These could often be poorly maintained. Dickens (1991: 364) points out the poverty of many Anglican livings, meaning that Anglican priests would be badly paid in areas like Cleveland, and would be unwilling to work there (Aveling 1970: 155; Watson 2007: 298). All this meant that enforcing attendance at Anglican services was difficult. Catholic priests would arrive on the north east coast and be sheltered at Grosmont Priory in the moors (Dures & Young 2022: 37), and then move around Cleveland, going from sympathetic house to sympathetic house. Aveling gives figures of 273 presentments (court cases) for recusancy and non-communicating (in an Anglican church) in the Langbaugh wapentake between 1590 and 1595, and 445 in 1603-1604. These would be people who could pay a fine, as there was little point in fining impecunious labourers and widows (Aveling 1966: 179). Dickens (1941: 182) shows that between 1575 and 1590 Cleveland, including Allertonshire, had the highest number of presentations for recusancy (180) and non-communicating (16) in all of Yorkshire.

Our song concerns death, and one occasion Catholics would not avoid Anglican churches was in death. On these occasions they would try to get into the church, or at least the

churchyard, while the clergy would often try to keep them out. Among many examples, Bossy (1975: 141) gives this one from Cleveland:

Katherine Hodgson of Egton died in childbirth in 1595, and her brother-in-law John 'together with all or most of the recusants of that chapelry did come with the corpse of the said Katherine in the dawning of the day, having gotten the church key, into the church, and buried her without any minister'.

Old Practices

Moving into the seventeenth century, we find continuations of old practices. One was pilgrimages. At Mount Grace Priory near Osmotherly, in the west of our area, there was a Lady Chapel (then a ruin but now restored). In 1614 30 people were prosecuted for praying there on the eve of the Nativity of the Virgin Mary (Dures & Young 2022: 63). Aveling (1976: 351-352) suggests that it was not only Catholics who made such pilgrimages. In 1642 the Yorkshirewoman Mary Ward, founder of the Institute of the Blessed Virgin Mary, and her companions, including a Catholic priest, made a pilgrimage there, quite openly (Littlehales 1998: 236-237; Kenworthy-Browne 2008: 66-67).

Another old practice was praying for the dead, which Protestants regarded as superstition – the dead are dead and gone, and prayer can have no effect. Women seem to have been important in this regard (Marshall 2002: 139):

Women were prominent in the clutch of offenders found burning candles and laying crosses in the vicinity of Ripon in 1615, and even more so in the group from Dishforth and Thornton-le-Beans praying for the dead at crosses in 1612. The accused comprised two men and sixteen women.

Thornton-le-Beans is within the area of our discussion.

Yet another old practice was the playing of 'interludes'. In 1609 (Aveling 1966: 289; Boddy 1976) or 1610 (Bossy 1975: 83) a group of actors from Egton, a small village in the middle of the moors, undertook a tour of north Yorkshire, performing morality plays or Shakespeare. At Gowlthwaite Hall they performed St. Christopher, a play about an irreligious man, Reprobus, who is persuaded to adopt Christianity, and is given a new name, Christopher. The players, however, inserted an interlude (Aveling 1966:289):

This was a burlesque-serious dialogue between a Catholic priest, holding a crucifix, and a Protestant minister, holding a Bible; the priest prevailed, and the interlude ended with the minister being carried off-stage by devils

Aveling says the players were not caught, though Boddy suggests otherwise. Aveling describes the continuation of the troupe until at least 1616, suggesting that as uneducated men, they must have been coached by priests from Douai (see below), who were familiar with the performance of plays (p 290). He also mentions a similar performance much later, in 1655. Another point is that the audiences on these occasions were not necessarily Catholics. In any case, it could be difficult to determine a person's sectarian allegiance. As Walsham (1999: 78 and *passim*) points out, some members of a family, usually men, would outwardly conform for economic and social reasons, while others, mostly women, would not.

The *Lyke Wake Dirge*, according to Aubrey, was still being sung in the form he gave (including Purgatory) at around this time, so we should see it as part of a pattern of behaviour, not as a unique remnant of the past.

The Seventeenth Century

Aveling (1966: 267) puts the number of Catholics in the three parts of Langbaurch at 445 in 1604, rising to 541 in 1642. For neighbouring Allertonshire the numbers are 70 and 180-190 (p 266). These are not large numbers, even in a sparsely populated area, but they do show an increase. He suggests that Catholics were tending to gather in fewer but larger communities. Dures & Young (2022: 72) estimate that Egton was one third Catholic in the early seventeenth century. In 1633 166 Catholics from Egton, a 'huge number', were presented (tried) (Sheils 1998: 120).

Aveling also (pp 295-297) points out the continuing illegal practice of sending sons to receive a Catholic education in Douai or Saint Omer, then in the Spanish Netherlands (now in France).

A key figure later in the century was Nicholas Postgate. He was born around 1598, entered the seminary at Douai in 1621, was ordained, and returned to England in 1630. He spent 30 years tending to gentry families. He moved to Cleveland around 1660 and worked as a poor priest until 1679. Apparently he was well-known to Protestants as well as Catholics. He was then captured, tried and executed in York, almost the last person to be executed just for being a Catholic priest. (See Hamilton 1980; Camm 2004: 281-303.) From his career we get an impression of a large Catholic community in Cleveland, from all levels of society. Postgate himself said his converts were 'mainly of the poorer sort' and it seems that in 1676, again, a third of the population of Egton were listed as Roman Catholic (Sheils 1998: 122).

In Osmotherly from 1665 there was a Franciscan mission, to serve the Lady Chapel (see above). There were plans for expansion in 1684-1685, but the deposition of the Catholic James II in 1688 ended them (Aveling 1966: 337-348 and photograph facing p 225).

So we see a continuing and fairly openly Catholic community, living alongside Anglican, and, increasingly, Quaker neighbours (Aveling 1966: 343-344).

The Eighteenth Century

In the eighteenth century the Catholic population of Cleveland grew slowly but steadily. For example, Aveling (1966: 394) lists the following numbers for the Egton area: 1700: 290; 1769: 320; 1780: 415. Despite the hostility to Catholics of a new landlord from 1758, Catholics and Protestants in Egton were roughly equal in numbers, with also a small group of Quakers (Rowlands 1999: 300-301).

Aveling (1966: 388) describes how Catholic chapels gradually became more visible, descending from attics to the first floor, then the ground floor and later to a separate building. Bossy (1975: 143) says that there was a Catholic area in the cemetery at Egton by 1750. Sheils (1998: 128) suggests that families in Egton could contain both Catholics and Protestants, and that relations between Catholics and Protestants were warm. Smallwood (2019: no pagination) mentions a letter from the Vicar of Whitby in 1736:

It is clear from this letter that not only were there large numbers of Catholics in the area but also that they were not being prosecuted under the recusancy laws; they were attending Mass in known houses and even the names of priests in Egton and Whitby were common knowledge.

Against this we should note the temporary upsurge in anti-Catholic feeling following the Jacobite rebellion of 1745 (Aveling 1966: 375; Smallwood 2019), with mobs attacking Catholics in Whitby and a Catholic mass-house in Stokesley (twice).

In general, though, tolerance of Dissenters, including Catholics, was increasing, leading to the Catholic Relief Acts of 1778 and 1791, which removed most of the penalties imposed on people for being Catholic. Full Catholic Emancipation came in 1829.

After the *Lyke Wake Dirge*

This brings us to 1800, after which, according to Blakeborough (1898: 122) the *Lyke Wake Dirge* was no longer sung. Today there remains a cult of Nicholas Postgate (Shell 2007: 143), one of Yorkshire's most famous Catholic martyrs, along with Margaret Clitheroe from York itself (see Rayne-Davis 2002). In Egton there is a Postgate Inn (pub), and the Victorian Catholic church of St Hedda is surprisingly large for such a small village in an Anglican country.

Conclusion

We cannot definitively answer the question of why the *Lyke Wake Dirge* survived for so long

in this area, rather than, say, the more Catholic rural Lancashire. A sparse, isolated population is one reason. The poverty of the area meant that there was little Anglican proselytizing. Old customs continued for longer in peripheral areas, not closely watched by the authorities, unlike more southern counties. Neighbourly feeling meant that Catholics were relatively unmolested. After that, we must put its survival down to chance.

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