

# Egton Catholics 1600-1900

By David Smallwood

The twin villages of Egton & Egton Bridge are situated in North Yorkshire, seven miles south west of Whitby and half a mile south of the main Guisborough to Whitby road. During penal times and later, there was a large Catholic population in and around these villages. This article is an attempt to describe some of the history of that faith community over this three-hundred-year period.

By 1600 the Protestant Reformation was pretty much complete in this country. Elizabeth I had been on the throne for over forty years and had not only made herself head of the established Church in England but also required all her subjects, including Catholics, to attend that Church and receive communion there at least once a year. Those who refused, so called "recusants", were penalised in various ways. The punishments included fines, confiscation of property and even imprisonment. The most severe penalty was imposed on Catholic priests who, because they had trained abroad before returning secretly to England, were regarded as traitors – the penalty for this was death by being hanged, drawn and quartered. Despite the severity of the penalty, many brave priests continued to operate in this area receiving refuge and support from local Catholics.

Blessed Nicholas Postgate is probably the most famous of the priest martyrs who worked around Egton. He had himself been born in the area in 1598 and returned to work there for the last sixteen years of his life. We know from the Third Douai Diary that he entered the English College in 1621, was ordained priest on 18<sup>th</sup> March 1628 and left to return to England on 29<sup>th</sup> June 1630. The first thirty years of his ministry were spent based with gentry families; firstly with Lord and Lady Hungate at Saxton Hall near Tadcaster, later with Viscount Dunbar at Burton Constable. Around 1662 he returned to his home area and was based in a humble cottage called "the Hermitage" on the high moor just two miles from Egton. From here it is likely that he ministered not just in Egton but also over a much wider range including Guisborough, Skelton and Loftus, fifteen miles further north. In 1664 Fr Postgate wrote a letter back to Douai giving an account of his thirty-two years' ministry in Yorkshire. He said that he had performed: *226 Marriages, 593 Infant Baptisms, 719 Burials and 2,400 Conversions.*

It is generally agreed that the last figure refers mainly to reconciliations of lapsed Catholics rather than to conversions from Protestantism. Bearing in mind that he had only been back in the Egton area for two years when he sent this letter, these figures relate mainly to his work around Tadcaster and in the East Riding. He went on to say that his congregation in 1664 was 600. Again, this figure relates not solely to Egton Catholics, but also includes those he would have ministered to in the areas mentioned above.

In 1674, over 200 persons from Egton were arraigned at Thirsk quarter sessions for recusancy. Apart from the sheer size of the list of those who appeared, two other features of it are worthy of notice. Firstly, many of the surnames are the same as those of Catholics living in the Egton area even today, indicating the stability of this community. Secondly, these people would all have known Fr Postgate personally – this is a list of his congregation in 1674.

In 1678 the so-called Titus Oates plot, wrongly alleging that there was a Catholic plot to assassinate King Charles II, stirred up much anti-Catholic feeling. One person taken in by this was a man called John Reeves who shortly afterwards came to Whitby to work for the customs service. Hearing that Fr Postgate was to carry out a baptism in Littlebeck, a small village just outside Whitby, Reeves went there and had him apprehended. Fr Postgate was taken first to a magistrate in Brompton by Sawdon, near Scarborough, who questioned him about his activities. The next day he was taken to York and then tried some days later in the Guildhall as a Catholic priest and found guilty of treason. He spent the next several months in prison and finally on 7<sup>th</sup> August 1679 he was hanged, drawn and quartered at the Knavesmire in York.

Nicholas Postgate was almost, but not quite, the last Catholic priest to be martyred for the Faith in this country – Fr Thomas Thwing was executed at York the following year and then Bishop Oliver Plunkett at Tyburn in 1681. Even though the penal laws were not to be repealed for a further hundred years the application of those laws became increasingly less severe. As early as 1688 a structure was set up in England and Wales to govern the church here which consisted of four ecclesiastical Districts, each headed by a Vicar Apostolic. Egton was at that time in the Northern District and would remain so until 1844 when the original four districts were subdivided into eight when they became part of the Yorkshire District. The Vicars Apostolic had the rank of bishop, but not the title.

There is a long letter in Whitby Library dated January 25<sup>th</sup> 1736 from Rev. James Borwick, the Vicar of Whitby, to the Precentor of the Church of England in York complaining bitterly of the significant numbers of “popish recusants” in Whitby and the surrounding area. 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 Whitby and Egton were common knowledge. The house in Egton Bridge of Mr John Smith is mentioned as one of the houses where Mass was being said regularly.

In contrast to this general relaxation of persecution, there was an upsurge in anti-Catholic feeling in 1745 following the Jacobite uprising. Two priests in the Egton Area, Luke Potts and Thomas Lidell, were arrested and taken to York; but this was because they were suspected of Jacobite sympathies and not because they were Catholic priests. Although they were detained for several months, neither was

charged with any offence and both were eventually released on condition they did not return to the Egton district.

The Relief Acts of 1778 and 1791 finally, formally repealed the recusancy laws. Catholics were no longer required to attend Anglican services; Catholic priests were freely allowed to celebrate Mass, and the building of Catholic chapels was now permissible. There were still a few minor restrictions. Catholics could only take up public office after swearing an oath of loyalty to the crown. Priests were not allowed to perform services nor to wear vestments outdoors. Chapels had to be plain simple buildings with neither steeple nor bell tower.

Ironically these years that form a positive watershed for the fortunes of Catholics in England & Wales also formed a watershed, but a negative one, for the fortunes of Catholics in France. The French revolution, beginning in 1789, had profound effects there with the revolutionaries persecuting the Catholic Church because they saw it as supporting the very aristocracy and monarchy that they were struggling to overcome. Because of this persecution, the English College at Douai was forced to close down in 1793 – the professors and the remaining students fled to England and set up at Crook Hall in County Durham; this was close to the site that was later to become Ushaw College. One of these students was a John Woodcock who completed his studies at Crook Hall, was ordained there in 1795 and shortly afterwards took over the Egton Bridge Mission.

There is an entry in the Land Registry records, held in in North Yorkshire County Record Office, for the year 1797, recording the transfer from the landowner Thomas Smith, of a piece of land in Egton Bridge on which was a partially constructed chapel, to a group of trustees consisting of Matthew Gibson, Vicar Apostolic of the North, and Fr John Woodcock together with three local Catholic laymen. The chapel was completed the following year and a splendid watercolour painting, dating from shortly afterwards, has survived and is now in Middlesbrough Diocesan Archives. As well as the new chapel, the painting includes the house of Thomas Smith, where we know Mass was said from at least the early eighteenth century. The western third of the chapel can be seen to have two storeys, forming a house for the priest, whilst the remaining two-thirds of the building, at the eastern end, forms the chapel itself. Fr Woodcock remained in charge at Egton Bridge until 1827 and then the Mission was run jointly with the adjoining Mission of Ugthorpe by Fr Nicholas Rigby until 1835.

A national religious survey of “dissenters” (i.e. of all religions except Anglicans) was carried out in 1829. This was never published because most of the returns were lost in a fire. However, some districts, including the North Riding, had kept copies. The survey reveals that in 1829, Egton parish included 397 Catholics showing that numbers had almost doubled since the 1674 presentation of Egton recusants at Thirsk Quarter Sessions.

Between 1835 and 1841 a Lancashire priest, Henry Greenhalgh oversaw Egton Bridge. A notebook has survived from this period which, whilst mainly filled with the names of Easter Communicants for these and later years, also, at the back of the book, contains some dated notes about the affairs of the mission. These notes were begun by Henry Greenhalgh but then continued by some of his successors. The first entry is a long inventory of the contents of the house and chapel, but then we read: *1835, October, set up a belfry and cross on the Chapel end.*

The total cost of the project was £9-13s-11d, half of which he paid himself and half of which was subscribed by the congregation. The mason Isaac Lawson, one of the trustees of the chapel, did not charge for his labour and several other members of the congregation gave a day's work on the project. In microcosm, this is typical of the behaviour of both priests and congregations here over the centuries. The entry ends: *"N.B. The parson christened it the Pope's head"*.

In 1843 a Lancashire priest, Fr Peter Kaye, who had previously spent most of his ministry in urban settings, came to Egton Bridge. He had already created plans for pious self-help groups which he sent round all the missions in the Northern Districts. He named these groups "Guilds" by comparison with medieval craft guilds – they were a happy combination of corporal and spiritual works of mercy. News of the movement had reached Egton Bridge by 1840 when Fr Greenhalgh was despatched to Bradford to get details of the Guild.

On his return members of the Egton Bridge congregation enthusiastically set up a Guild under the title "The Holy Guild of St Joseph and St Hedda" – St Joseph because he was the patron saint of workers and St Hedda because he was a local saint having been a monk at Whitby Abbey before being appointed Bishop of the West Saxons at Winchester. The main activities of the Guild were the provision of funerals for deceased members and sick pay for male members temporarily out of work because of illness. On the spiritual side, the Guild arranged for Masses to be said for members at the time of their death together with monthly Masses offered for all deceased members; there was also a set of "Guild Prayers" which members said daily.

A large proportion of the congregation joined the Guild, paying regular subscriptions, and its activities continued to be a major feature of parish life right up to the end of the twentieth century. Several such Guilds were set up elsewhere, including Sheffield, Huddersfield and Bradford, but these seem to have disbanded after only a short time, so the Egton Bridge Guild is unique in its longevity. Incidentally, it had not generally been the practice before the restoration of the hierarchy in 1850 to give Catholic chapels patronal names – they were simply named after the place where they were situated e.g. "the Catholic Chapel, Egton Bridge". In the baptismal register which begins in 1841, this has been amended to "St Hedda's

Chapel, Egton Bridge” – the main patron of the Guild had become the patron of the parish.

Peter Kaye was evidently a man of very enlightened ideas, much ahead of his times. Although he was only in Egton bridge for ten months he encouraged his congregation to set up a parish committee. Interestingly, the minute book of the committee starts by defining its aims to be “looking after all the affairs of the congregation” but then the word “congregation” has been crossed out and replaced with the word “chapel”. Most of their activities were to do with supervising collections and using this money to provide furnishings and linen for the chapel and house. They also recruited and paid a schoolmaster and arranged for a room in the priest’s house to be used to teach children on Sunday afternoons.

Fr Andrew Macartney, who succeeded Fr Peter Kaye, was altogether of a different character. Unusually for the time, although of course very common later in the century, he was of Irish origin. Before studying for the priesthood, he had been a soldier fighting in the Peninsular War against Napoleon. Almost his first act in the mission was to dismiss the schoolmaster – he later explained this was because the man was not practising his religion. Although he did not communicate this to the Committee, he evidently disapproved of their activities as he refused to loan the key to the chapel, so they were forced to hold their next meeting outdoors and subsequent ones in Mr Smith’s house. Some members of the congregation wrote a letter of complaint to Bishop Briggs about Fr Macartney’s behaviour. There is extensive material in Leeds Diocesan Archives (catalogued as “Briggs Correspondence”) concerning this dispute including Fr Macartney’s response to the complaint and the report of a committee of enquiry set up to investigate the affair. When this investigation was over, we hear no more about the Parish Committee.

In 1851 the government carried out a census of religious places of worship. In his return for St Hedda’s, Fr Macartney gave the size of the congregation at Mass on the morning of 30<sup>th</sup> March as 450 (including 100 children). It is remarkable that so many persons could be fitted into such a small building, although we do know that there was a gallery above the ground level. He went on to say:

*We have upwards of 600 souls; but this congregation lies very wide some having to come 13 miles. I have endeavoured to give the usual average attendance in winter when not wet but in summer there are at least 50 more.*

In 1859 a Belgian priest, Fr Francis Joseph Callebert, took over as Parish Priest of St Hedda’s. He quickly recognised the inadequacies of the existing chapel and immediately started to contemplate a new, much larger church. It took several attempts to persuade the Bishop to give his permission for this to be built, and then in 1865 the architects M. E. Hadfield and Sons of Sheffield were commissioned to draw up plans. By June 1866 the foundation stone had been laid and on August 21<sup>st</sup> 1867 the new church was opened. Fr Callebert had project-managed both the

professional craftsmen engaged in the building and also large numbers of volunteers from his congregation who laboured in the quarry or used their wagons to carry stone down to the site. In recognition of his work in building a new church Francis Joseph Callebert was made an honorary Canon in 1881.

Most Catholic churches are built on borrowed money. Often the income of the parish is only enough to barely cover the interest, so it usually takes many decades for the whole of a loan to be paid off. Not so St Hedda's: the loan was paid off less than eighteen years after it was opened, allowing the church to be consecrated on July 4<sup>th</sup>, 1885. This was all due to Canon Callebert's hard work: there had been some large donations but most of the monies raised came in the form of many small donations. At the official opening, he related that the first money he had got for the new church was "a sum of eighteen pence given to me by an Irishman coming out of Malton Fair". Regular appeals for money are recorded in the church notice books, typically accompanied by the phrase "gold or silver is expected". Canon Callebert finally retired in 1907, having served the parish for 48 years.

In conclusion, I hope that I have managed to convey some of the resilience, warmth and faithfulness of Egton Catholics over this period. In the diocesan archives of both Middlesbrough and Leeds as well as in several public depositories, there is a wealth of material on this community still to be fully assessed. This essay is merely an outline sketch and not a finished painting.

*This talk on Egton Catholics was given to the Cleveland Circle by David Smallwood in February 2019. David Smallwood is the Archivist of the Middlesbrough Diocese.*