

ARCHBISHOP EDWIN SANDYS

By David Turner



One of the most striking artefacts in Southwell Minster is the monument erected to the memory of Archbishop Edwin Sandys. It is carved from red-veined alabaster by Nottinghamshire craftsmen and it stands today (but has not always so stood) in the North Transept, at the top of the steps leading **down to the Pilgrims' Chapel.**

He lies in repose, displaying a calm and benevolent countenance, clad in full Episcopal robes. Nine figures (his relict, together with their six sons and two daughters) are shown kneeling in prayer along the side of the monument. The widow is his second wife Cicely and the sons are Samuel, Edwin, Miles, Thomas, Henry and George. The daughters are Margaret and Ann and, since this is 1588, the girls know that their place is at the end of the line, even though two of the sons are younger than they are.

There is a lengthy epitaph inscribed on the alabaster. It begins:

The body of him who lies here was not of humble birth and lived with rank and in great state but the example he set was greater, having filled two Bishoprics he was at length promoted to be Archbishop, having attained these honours at a high price with his virtues and deserts.

Next we learn something of the qualities of the man:

He was a man above all men free from malice and vindictiveness, open and free of flattery, very liberal and compassionate, most hospitable, easy-going and proud, without it being a vice. He lived no less worthily than he taught others to do. No one could go away from listening to his sermons without being the better for them.

That is not just a full tribute, it is a fulsome one. It was, however, written after he died: what was the reality whilst he lived?

EARLY LIFE

His life spanned one of the most tumultuous periods in our political and religious history. He was born in the reign of Henry VIII and, whilst he was reading for a degree, experienced the turbulence created by that monarch and his enforcers. Edward VI, the boy King, then came along and his manipulators reshaped the church in a profound way. After six years of Edward, the country then had to face Mary for five chaotic and revengeful years. Finally, Elizabeth came to the throne and the last thirty years of **Edwin's life passed with more certainty as increasing civil, political and religious stability took hold.**

Edwin Sandys came from a well-to do family in the Furness area. Some accounts say that he was born in Hawkshead, others that he was born in St Bees. The differing reports no doubt arose from the probable fact that the family had property in both places. He was born in 1519 and his childhood friend was a boy called Edmund Grindal. These two youngsters, Grindal and Sandys, both became Bishops of London and Archbishops of York. We can imagine them playing together in that tiny, remote place, not realising that future events would carry them both to the very centre of ecclesiastical power.

EDUCATION AND FIRST BENEFICES

Edwin Sandys went to St John's College Cambridge and graduated BA in 1539 and DD in 1549 at the age of thirty. By 1553, Sandys had become Vice-Chancellor of the University of Cambridge. His ordination lacks (shall we say) total clarity, but he collected a small portfolio of benefices: Haversham in Buckinghamshire (1548), Prebends of Peterborough (1549) and Carlisle (1552).

He married Mary Sandys, a distant cousin from Woodham Ferrers in Essex. He appears to have been a vigorous protestant from the time of his earliest preaching.

THE WRONG CHOICE

Edward VI died in 1553 and Sandys was caught up in the events which followed. On 15 July 1553, the fiercely Protestant Duke of Northumberland, who had been Regent for the young King Edward VI, together with a party of fellow plotters, brought Lady Jane Grey to Cambridge and proclaimed her to be the lawful Queen of England. The Vice-Chancellor of the University – Sandys – was prevailed upon to **preach in support of this coup d'état in the Church of St Mary the Great.** The sermon was considered so remarkable that Sandys was asked to provide a written version for publication. Since he had given the sermon off the cuff, he had to labour long and hard to recreate it for the printer. It took him several days to write, cloistered in his rooms, but just as he emerged having finished it, the rebellion collapsed and the tragic Lady Jane Grey was arrested.

So Edwin Sandys had chosen the wrong side. From then on, his career seems to have lurched from one controversy to another. His immediate problem in 1553, however, was not just controversy, but personal peril. The catholic faction in the University forced him to surrender his office and he was carried to London with Northumberland and others and put in the Tower. After 29 weeks there, when Queen Mary had really got into her vindictive stride, he was moved from the Tower to make way for Cranmer and Ridley and sent to the Marshalsea. After nine weeks there, Queen Mary signed a warrant for his release, but the Bishop of Winchester insisted that he be bound over not to flee the country. Since Sandys had every intention of doing so, he refused the sureties offered on his behalf and contrived an escape from the prison.

FLIGHT

After many picaresque adventures, too numerous to relate and often of dubious authenticity, Sandys arrived in Antwerp. This, however, was not a safe haven, because the Netherlands at that time belonged to Spain and protestant refugees were being hunted down. So Sandys eventually ended up in Strasburg, where his wife Mary joined him. There she had a son, but both she and the child died. Edwin was himself gravely ill for some nine months.

Despite these shadows, his time in Strasburg was probably a high point of his life. He rejoiced in the company in which he found himself, and said in a **sermon: "We have lost the saving truth at home and found it abroad: our countrymen are become our enemies and strangers are made our friends".**

The refugee community on the continent included Edmund Grindal, Edwin's boyhood chum and when, in 1558, word reached them that Queen Mary was dead, they returned to England together, arriving in London on the day that Elizabeth was crowned.

RETURN TO ENGLAND

Sandys seems to have been warmly received by the new Queen and was soon engaged once more in church affairs. From August to November 1559 he participated in the Royal Visitation of the Northern Province, taking in Nottingham, Hull, York, Manchester, Chester, Kendal, Carlisle, Newcastle and Richmond. He was nominated to become Bishop of Carlisle, which was thought to be congenial for him with his roots in the Lake District, but he refused it. On 21 December 1559 he was offered Worcester and, after much reluctance, accepted it. He was 40 years old.

After returning to England, Sandys had married again, on 19 February 1559. His bride was Cicely Wilford, from Cranbrook in Kent and in a few short months, she found herself the wife of a Bishop. If Cicely thought that Edwin would now settle down to the sedate life, she was mistaken. Soon he was embroiled in various bitter rows. He was a man of strong opinions and **every Sunday was "Stir up Sunday" to him. He didn't like vestments and wanted them abolished.** He (and other Bishops) clashed with the Queen and the Privy Council over the use of images. He seems to have been on the brink of being deposed from his office because of his vehemence on these **matters, but some instinct told him to draw back in the face of the Queen's** wrath and he did so.

He then entered a period of relatively tranquil service to the Crown. He was well regarded by the court and both William Cecil (Lord Burghley) and Robert Dudley (Earl of Leicester) were always to hand when he faced one of his regular scrapes.

BISHOP OF WORCESTER

Whilst Bishop of Worcester, Sandys was one of the scholars assembled to revise the English Bible. He was given the Book of Kings and the Book of Chronicles to prepare and he completed them in 1565. The published edition became known as **"The Bishop's Bible"**. Within the Diocese, however, he got caught up in a most unedifying quarrel with Sir John Bourne, who had served Mary Tudor as Secretary of State. Given their religious differences, Bourne and Sandys were bound to be oil and water and his time in Worcester is peppered with numerous petty allegations and weary responses.

Sandys was also very active in parliament from his place on the Episcopal Bench. In particular, he was one of those who led the campaign to bring **Mary Queen of Scots to book. In a letter to Cecil he called her "The root of England's troubles" and he was one of the first to demand her head.**

In 1570, at the age of 51, Edwin Sandys took another step up the ecclesiastical ladder: he was translated to London when Edmund Grindal was promoted to become Archbishop of York

BISHOP OF LONDON

He spent five busy years as Bishop of London, as he made strenuous efforts to secure uniformity of worship and to ensure that the liturgy of the Church of England was adopted and became entrenched. The catholic elements were becoming bolder again and were allowed to debate issues under the tolerant Elizabeth, in sharp contrast to the way the protestant faction had been treated by Mary. The struggle for the soul of the Church in England was still ongoing. One critic said that Sandys pursued his reforming policies **with "precipitate and misguided zeal"**. One imagines that he took that as a considerable compliment.

In his five years in London, Sandys was a close ally of Matthew Parker, the Archbishop of Canterbury. Parker had been appointed by the Queen in 1558 with instructions to make the English Reformation irrevocable (Parker had

once been chaplain to the Queen's mother, Anne Boleyn). In 1575, however, after seven years in the job, Parker died and Sandys was the principal mourner at his funeral. The Queen regarded continuing reform of the church as vital and so Edmund Grindal was appointed to succeed Parker at Canterbury, leaving Edwin Sandys to be appointed, in March 1577, to succeed Grindal at York. John Aylmer succeeded Sandys as Bishop of London.

ARCHBISHOP OF YORK

Sandys was 56 years of age when he entered into his highest office. As he journeyed north to York, he may have thought to himself that he was "going home" to the North of England and to happiness. But it was not to be. His appointment to York brought him nothing but trouble for the rest of his life. He was embroiled in one row after another. Some seem to have derived from his own forthright nature, but several of them were not of his making.

The Crown, for example, wanted to appropriate Bishopthorpe Palace; then he had a sudden dispute with his predecessor Edmund Grindal, which was resolved eventually without lasting damage to their friendship and then the **lease of the Archbishop of York's house in London caused him further problems.** Grindal, as Archbishop, had attempted, in his moderate fashion, to modernise a conservative and recalcitrant region and reinstate **Protestantism. Sandys, fiercer and more abrasive, was optimistic that "We shall in short time clear all this country of perverse papists and reduce it to good conformity".** He soon learned, however, that the inhabitants of the broad acres were not easily cowed.

THE DURHAM EPISODE

A more serious and specific conflict arose in Durham. Sandys discovered that the Dean of Durham had not been properly ordained. The Dean, it appeared, had received his Orders from some obscure English Congregation in Geneva. Sandys, ignoring any possible irregularity in his own ordination, was determined to get rid of the Dean and a long controversy ensued with various commissions and hearings and enquiries. Before the matter could be settled, however, the Dean died.

Today's traveller, when leaving Yorkshire and entering County Durham, is greeted by a triumphalist notice which proclaims "You are now entering the Land of the Prince Bishops". The centuries-old ecclesiastical independence of Durham had been ended by Henry VIII only in 1536, so the bull-at-a gate Sandys soon caused great offence in the area, meeting a widespread determination that the writ of the Archbishop should not be allowed to prevail.

THE STAPLETON AFFAIR

Sandys was not a meek cleric: he was a firm and committed mainstream Protestant, who determined to root out both Papists and Puritans. So he made many enemies.

One of them was Sir Robert Stapleton, who bribed an innkeeper's wife to enter Edwin Sandys' bedchamber in Doncaster and to be discovered by her husband and then by Stapleton, who, coincidentally happened to be close by. Stapleton then tried to blackmail Sandys, but the Archbishop, in his usual forthright way, met the trouble head on and complained to the Lord Treasurer and to the Queen. Stapleton was arraigned before the Star Chamber and committed to the Tower, staying there until he showed penitence.

Although he had seen off Stapleton, the nature of the case meant that Sandys now became a figure of fun in his own diocese. Salacious stories about him multiplied. He was damaged now, and other troubles, including a long-running dispute with the Dean of York, reduced his reputation further.

SOUTHWELL

He had one last battle to fight and it concerned Southwell. Stapleton had tried to dispossess him by blackmail of the manors of Southwell and Scrooby and he had repulsed that. Now the Queen wanted Scrooby and the Earl of Leicester wanted Southwell. **He wrote that such a thing would "highly displease God, kill his conscience and spoil the Church of York"**. He threatened to resign and nothing further was heard.

So we see that Edwin Sandys took arms against a sea of troubles and by opposing, ended at least a few of them. Let us return to the words of his epitaph in the Minster:

He endured all ills great and many with imperturbable spirit - prison, exile, loss of much good fortune and above all the hardest thing for an innocent mind to bear, most malicious slanders.

Gradually, Sandys came to spend more and more time in Southwell: eventually the Palace there became his real home, rather than Cawood Castle or Bishopthorpe. Here he could be at peace, free from the infighting and the slings and arrows he had to face in York. He was also more accessible to London, where his true friends were. He was saddened, however, by the death in 1583 of his life-long friend, Edmund Grindal.

He was, however, still well regarded by his Queen, because he had worked so hard, alongside Parker and Grindall, to ensure that the Reformation took root. So in those final years, whilst living in Southwell, he found that he was able to perform one last great service for the Minster, to ensure its survival and continuity. During its long history, the Chapter of the Collegiate Church of St Mary had undergone some traumatic upheavals, suffering under Henry VIII and then being swept away entirely under Edward VI. After the Chapter had been fully restored by an Act of 1557, however, the constitution of the Collegiate Church was put on a sound footing by a set of new Statutes promulgated by Queen Elizabeth on 2 April 1585. These Statutes represented a very thorough reorganization, which reflected much credit upon those of the Queen's advisers responsible for preparing them. Chief amongst them was Edwin Sandys, the reigning Archbishop of York. That is perhaps the principal reason why he can be regarded as one of our Minster People.

HIS PASSING

He died in Southwell on 10 July 1588 at the age of 69. Whilst he had been Archbishop of York for 13 years, however, during the previous five years he had regarded Southwell, rather than York, as his home.

He was buried in its churchyard and then the fine alabaster Monument was raised to him in the Minster. It was probably designed and commissioned by his eldest son, Samuel who would be 28 years of age at the time. Edwin was 27, Miles was 25, Thomas was 20, Henry was 16 and George was 10. The two daughters, Margaret and Ann, were 22 and 18 respectively.

Shortly after he died, 122 ships of the Spanish Fleet were sighted off Land's End. Another assault threatened the still-fragile Protestant Church which

Edwin Sandys had worked so assiduously to embed in the soil of England. He would have been relieved to know that the Armada was a fiasco – and that he could rest easy in his beloved backwater, a place that he loved and where he found, in the end, some peace from the turbulence of his life.

HIS ACHIEVEMENTS

That turbulent life was a life of achievement. The small boy, playing on the beach at St Bees all those years before, had come a long way and had made a lasting contribution to his Church, the newly-fledged Protestant Church.

His epitaph says:

He wished for eloquence and it was evident in him. Conscious of his own hard labours, he despised the idlers. He encouraged learning for the benefits it brought. He upheld Church possessions as anything dedicated to God deserved to be.

I do not have the scholastic authority to attempt an objective appraisal of his life. His behaviour was full of contradictions: on the one hand, he was a progressive administrator, he worked hard to reform the church – in Worcester, in London and throughout the Northern Province. On the other hand, he made many mistakes, he made many enemies, he often lacked judgement, he was too impetuous, he did not suffer fools gladly, he had, in the modern vernacular, a very short fuse.

So I do not think we can assess his achievements in an overall sense. Let us leave that to others. Let us simply focus upon Southwell, and ask: what did he achieve for us?

The epitaph on his memorial is in no doubt:

By your favour with Elisabeth, the most illustrious of mortals, oh venerable man you were able to save this Church in which you yourself lie, from despoil.

I think his legacy for us in the Minster Community rests on two major achievements. And they stem from the two sides of his nature; the clear-thinking administrator on the one hand and the stubborn, combative, bare-knuckle fighter on the other.

As a Reforming Archbishop, he saw the need to revise the constitution of the Minster so that the Collegiate Church was in much better shape to thrive and survive, as indeed it did for another 250 years.

As a “What We Have We Hold” Archbishop, he fought and fought and fought again to ensure that all the estates and the properties attached to the Minster remained and grew – and in so doing he paved the way for the day, nearly three hundred years after he died, when there could be only one possible choice as the new Cathedral of the new Diocese.

It is too fanciful to claim that first he saved the Minster and then he made it a Cathedral. No single person could achieve that. But in honouring him and his memory, we are entitled to say that he made a major contribution to both those lasting developments.