



INTRODUCTION TO THE DIAMOND JUBILEE LECTURES

In 1950 every parish in the country was invited to play a part in the Festival of Britain. This was celebrated in 1951, the centenary of the Great Exhibition held in Hyde Park which was the first of the international displays of Science, Industry and the Arts which have since been held in many places.

Battle's contribution included the foundation of the Battle and District Historical Society. We decided to celebrate the 60th anniversary of the Society with a special day of lectures which were held in the parish church on 23rd October 2010. The Dean and the Mayor of Battle spoke before the lectures and Dr Nichol, one of our Vice Presidents, gave an eloquent speech of thanks. The 200 or so people who attended seemed to have enjoyed the day and the Society gained 20 new members. I know of two people who crossed the Channel and left Portsmouth at dawn in order to be present and they did not regret it.

The country described by Dr Kynaston was remembered by some of us, but the wealth of detail he provided told us of many things we had forgotten or never known.

Professor Swanson vividly described the great loss and change inflicted by the dissolution of the monasteries of which the ruins of the Abbey are a constant reminder to everybody in Battle.

Dr Harvey Wood, whose sympathies are with the Saxons, showed how apposite is our Society's motto, *Per Bellum Patria*, which translates as "through battle the land and the nation". What happened here in 1066 formed England in a Norman mould and has influenced our history ever since and, through England, the history of the world.

Richard Moore



THE DIAMOND JUBILEE LECTURES

ENGLAND AFTER THE NORMAN CONQUEST

Dr Harriet Harvey Wood

23 October 2010

Our speaker explained that the purpose of this lecture was to explore the events following the Conquest, which caused a Treasury official, Richard FitzNigel (or FitzNeal), to write in the 1170s, little more than one hundred years after the violence and trauma of the Conquest, “It can scarcely be discerned at the present day who is English and who is Norman by race”.

As Duke William waited in his camp at Hastings for news of the reaction to the death of King Harold II, he learned that Edgar the Aetheling had been appointed King, “for the English wanted no-one to be king who was not an Englishman”. This hostility was overcome, following intimidation and destruction along the entire route of Duke William’s circuitous march, when the leaders of the English submitted “out of necessity”, at Berkhamstead.

The coronation service took place on 25th December 1066 and, in addition to the usual significance of such an event, it was regarded by some as signalling religious sanction to the change of dynasty. Whilst William I claimed the throne by hereditary right, to which William of Poitiers adds “and by right of conquest”, we are also told that he was crowned with the consent, indeed at the wish, of the English people. However, the risings which took place over the next five years do not suggest consent. Nevertheless, most of the English leaders had either experienced, or were the sons and grandsons of those who had experienced, the conquest of 1016 when Cnute commenced his reign with terror and a bloodbath. He then turned into a “very civilised, English king” who gave England an era of peace and prosperity not known for many years. The circumstances were similar and they had every reason to suppose this outcome would be too. If this was the case, they soon discovered their mistake, perhaps when William started looting churches to pay his mercenaries or, as early as 1067, to send to churches abroad; or when English leaders were sent to Normandy to grace his triumph, or when he dated his reign from the death of King Edward, thus making King Harold II an usurper and traitors of all those who supported him or fought at the Battle of Hastings.

William was in a vulnerable position and needed to secure his position by granting the estates of dispossessed English to his followers. It was not possible in the time available to identify clearly the location and value of such land-holdings and, in the resulting confusion, there were many land grabs, which are shown twenty years later in the Domesday survey; indeed sorting out the resultant mess was one of its objectives. If Englishmen regained such land it was only upon payment of extortionate sums of money, whereas Piquot, a Norman Bishop of Rochester, could use the law. Whilst Englishmen may hold land as a reward for



service after 1066, none were permitted to hold it by right of any ownership prior to that date; William did seek a degree of reconciliation by giving new grants of their pre-1066 estates to English leaders such as Edwin and Morcar who had not fought at Hastings.

To stamp their mark in the landscape, major public buildings were torn down, particularly churches and cathedrals, and rebuilt in the architectural style of the Normans. Houses were also cleared (166 in Lincoln) to make room for the castles which now covered the country. The introduction of new culture – language, law, land-holding, architecture – so swiftly and by less than 20,000 Normans, was the greatest change witnessed in the smallest time by any nation in Europe from the period of Barbarian Invasions to the twentieth-century.

Reforms and changes to the various (and increasing) forms of taxation were carried out effectively and surprisingly easily but were greatly resented. Added to which was the morale-sapping popular belief that, in an age of Holy wars, the victory of the Normans in 1066 was a punishment from God. No leader of merit sufficient to unite the English had survived the three battles of that year and the result was that risings were uncoordinated and sporadic. The Rising of the North, 1069, supported by the kings of Denmark and Scotland, was the only one which posed any real challenge to William I and was brutally crushed in what was widely regarded even at the time as a war crime. Such tolerance as William had previously shown toward the English now ceased and his followers were quick to exploit this hatred. At William's death in 1087 just 8% of land was still owned by Englishmen and only one Englishman was a bishop. By 1220 it was being written that no Englishman held civil or ecclesiastical office.

The negative effects of these changes should not be overstated however. Peasants would have noticed little difference in their daily lives and may have benefitted in the greater stability; the moneyers, merchants and townspeople seem to have suffered least – minters to Edward the Confessor continued to mint for William – and English officials were still required to continue the administration of the kingdom in English, at least until sufficient Normans could be imported to move the administration into Latin. Dispossession and impoverishment were limited to the English aristocracy, in particular those who fought at Hastings, and who emigrated in large numbers. By 1138 at the Battle of the Standard, in an army of national identity, Norman earls led an army of English levies against the invading Scots.

Returning to Richard FitzNigel's observation, our speaker pointed out that FitzNigel was explicitly referring to freemen, implying that the menial workers were still all English. The inter-marrying between English and Norman freemen probably started soon after 1066 when marrying the widow of the previous holder of one's newly acquired lands could be a useful means of promoting goodwill: the ultimate example of such inter-marriage being that of Henry, the youngest of William's sons, to Matilda, great-granddaughter of Edmund Ironside, in 1100. In addition, the household servants of the Norman lords, and the ordinal soldiers who chose to settle rather than return to the Continent, would have lived with and alongside their fellow English bondsmen.



THE DIAMOND JUBILEE LECTURES

DISSOLUTION OF THE MONASTERIES

Prof. Robert Swanson

23rd October 2010

Professor Swanson told us that, by the time of the Tudors, the monasteries seemed to be an institution that was anachronistic but which nobody, seriously, expected to disappear. Even when, in 1536, the first of the Dissolution Acts was being discussed in Parliament, opinion was that, once the smaller, less viable, establishments had been abolished, the larger would be allowed to continue. Yet, by 1540, the whole system had gone, totally and completely.

Smaller foundations had been dissolved in the past; Henry VI had used the funds of one to found Eton College and Cardinal Wolsey – ever rapacious – had similarly founded a Grammar School in Ipswich (although this, ironically, was abolished after his fall from favour). Wolsey was the more brazen because he was also the Papal Legate to England and considered that his actions were implicitly sanctioned by the Pope. Wolsey wanted to reduce the size of English Sees to provide each county with its own Diocese and Cathedral.

Where establishments were extinguished before the final dissolution, the resources were initially escheated to the Crown before being diverted for broadly religious purposes. By 1536 however, the resources remained with the Crown and were handled by a Court of Augmentation.

In 1532, a draft scheme in the form of “nationalisation” was presented to Parliament although nothing came of it. This proposed that religious life could continue but that the inmates were to be “salaried”, each monk and nun to receive £10 per annum; novices £5 and the head of the House more, but to be responsible for all repairs and hospitality.

But, generally speaking, the religious establishments considered themselves secure and permanent. After all, twenty Abbots – including the Abbot of Battle – sat in Parliament, more numerous even than the Bishops, and with a better record of attendance. What probably condemned the monasteries was their perceived wealth even though, in many cases the perception was illusory.

The wealthiest Abbey, Westminster, had an annual income of £1300 but some of the poorest could barely manage £50. Battle received £1100 but had outgoings of £1000, the bill for food alone amounting to £450, but this included the cost of entertaining visitors and charitable feeding. A surplus of £100, even allowing for indexation to twenty-first century values, was hardly venal and took no account of the employment given to the town.

However, covetous eyes had fixed themselves upon the land and property vested in the monasteries. The Black Death had decimated the population and landowners now had to pay higher wages and felt threatened by the competition from the Church. They resented that prime land was withheld from them and an increasingly spiteful whispering campaign claimed that the monks and nuns were licentious, irreligious and self-seeking. People in authority believed what they wanted to believe and there were always one or two rogue



monks to confirm their prejudices.

Whether the 1532 scheme was ever a serious proposition or just a softening up process, the first Dissolution Act of 1536 followed with indecent haste.

The monks had already accepted the Royal Supremacy in 1534 and were thus, nominally, Anglican although they clearly retained the trappings and relics of Catholicism. More particularly, they maintained the doctrine of Purgatory which was increasingly out of favour and lack of Royal support was fatal. The Court railed against the “vicious, carnal living of the monks” which was “to the displeasure of Almighty God.”

The 1536 Act did not pass easily. Houses with fewer than twelve inmates and incomes of less than £200 were to be dissolved, the property and chattels passing to the Crown. The monks were to be allowed to transfer to the larger, respectable Houses, which implied a continuity. The irony of Houses being suppressed because they were not “poor enough” was conveniently disregarded.

The Pilgrimage of Grace rebellion of 1536 administered the *coup de grâce* to the remaining monasteries. The rebellion involved a concept of returning to the old monastic way of life and naturally appealed to the incumbents. Those that specifically supported the rebellion were doomed; the rest were regarded as treacherous by default. The Abbot of Whalley was attainted and hanged and the House forfeited. The Abbot of Glastonbury and two of his monks were similarly attainted and taken to Glastonbury Tor where they were hanged, drawn and quartered, the Abbot’s head being set upon the gatehouse of his Abbey.

The second Act of 1539 rectified any doubts regarding the king’s title to surrendered Abbeys and declared that those remaining were to dissolve themselves wholly voluntarily and all did so by 1540.

Battle Abbey anticipated the second Act and dissolved itself on 27 May 1538 when the Abbot, Prior and seventeen monks retired on pension. The House was described as “sorely decayed” and “beggarly a House”, a choice of words that extended to the monks themselves. For an Abbey that was not regarded as impoverished, the chattels were sparse and it was generally believed that the monks had removed much of value before abolition. They retired on pension but the 46 lay workers were left to fend for themselves.

John Hammond, the Abbot, retired with his healthy pension of £100 a year, across the road, where he would have witnessed the beginnings of the destruction of his former domain. He died in 1546 leaving a Catholic will which made no mention of past glories.

Other monks lived on, still priests and celibate; some were appointed as beneficed clergy, whilst dispossessed nuns with nowhere to go would simply have disappeared into the wider community.

Robert Aske, one of the leaders of the Pilgrimage, summed up the contemporary feelings of loss: “The Abbeys were one of the beauties of this realm.”



The Gate House at Battle Abbey from Sussex Painted by Wilfrid Ball, 1906.



North-east corner of Robertsbridge Abbey



THE DIAMOND JUBILEE LECTURES

GREAT BRITAIN IN 1950

Dr David Kynaston

23rd October 2010

Dr Kynaston began by saying that he intended to draw examples of the condition of Britain more widely than from 1950 only. The post-war period really covered 1945-55 and in some respects longer.

He stressed that we should not sentimentalise the past and, to prove his point, quoted three headlines from the *Sussex Express* and *County Herald* of October 1950: “Shortage of Poppy Sellers at Wittersham”, “Sedlescombe cancels 1950 Bonfire Show due to lack of support” and “Wave of apathy sweeps (the British) Legion in Battle”. This was not a golden age of communal activity.

Indeed, the whole country at this time was, in many ways, a “frozen society” with very little money, a slow pace of change which only accelerated in the mid 1950s, and with the marks of war in bomb sites visible in all the big cities. Physical Britain was very different from now. There were no supermarkets and no motorways. There were pubs and cinemas in every high street. Laundry meant the mangle had to be used. Coal fires were the norm. Woodbines and Players’ cigarettes were sold in huge amounts. Chilblains were common. There was little TV before the Coronation in 1953. Suits and hats, dresses and hats, mufflers and cloth caps were usually worn. Rationing of some food was even more severe than during the war. Butter, meat, sugar, sweets, eggs, margarine were all rationed and though the rations were larger in 1950 than earlier, they shrank again in 1951 and did not end until 1954.

The mores of society were very different. There was no contraceptive pill. Homosexuality was illegal and its practice punished by imprisonment. Abortion was illegal (though widely practised). Capital punishment was carried out.

The industrial cities in which most people lived, looked very different. The lecturer quoted the weekly magazine *Picture Post*: “At Bladon the murk sets in. At Newcastle the soot falls like the opposite of snow”. He quoted an Australian actor, Michael Whatmore, describing a visit to Huddersfield from London in 1952: “Most of the journey had been grim”. It became, “spectacular when each valley became a sink of smoke. I was appalled.” Some heavy industrial areas remained like this until 25 years ago.

The assumptions of daily life were very different. Britain was a land of orderly queues, doffed hats, censored books and films. Divorce was a disgrace in the middle and working classes and even in marriages that worked well, husbands and wives lived in separate spheres. Children were told off in the streets. There were signs in windows of houses with rooms to let, “No Irish, Jews or blacks” (and, I add, in the pubs in the South East, “No gipsies”).



It was still a hierarchical society in which the middle class hoped for a job for life and the working class used the prevalence of full employment to move from job to job, as shown in the novel and film, “Saturday Night and Sunday Morning”. Authority was accepted and reinforced by national service in the armed forces for most men. But there was copious grumbling. This was, in England at least, a deeply conservative society. A foreign visitor noticed an unusually long queue going round a house. It was for bird seed.

Was England at heart a family? George Orwell’s essay, ‘The Lion and the Unicorn’ (which was expressed in different parts of the Festival of Britain in 1951 on the South Bank and Battersea Park) suggested that it was, to a large extent. It was almost mono-cultural and overwhelmingly white. People were proud of the stand against Hitler in 1940 when “we stood alone.” The royal family was a powerful unifier as reaction to King George VI’s death in February 1952 and the Queen’s Coronation in June 1953 demonstrated. A cartoon in the (then Manchester) *Guardian* showing a bloated family the day after watching the Coronation on television provoked over 500 letters of protest from *Guardian* readers, saying such things as: “I was ashamed to show it to my wife and two small daughters”.

Britain, not just England, had a settled calendar of annual events such as The Cup Final, The Derby, Guy Fawkes Day.

The English were insular (the other nations of the United Kingdom less so). The English mostly agreed with Dickens’s Mr Podsnap that, “Foreigners do as they do”. Doris Lessing recalls the settled belief that “British was best in goods, in institutions, in a way of life”.

Billy Butlin, the holiday camp entrepreneur, who knew as much as anybody about popular feeling, organised an annual cross-Channel swimming race. In 1956, after Colonel Nasser nationalised the Suez Canal, he would not allow champion Egyptian swimmers to take part, saying: “They have got the Suez Canal. I’m not going to let them get the English Channel”.

Such an attitude was common, especially in the working class. David Owen, the future Foreign Minister, doing a gap year job in Plymouth noted that his fellow workers were adamant that the “gippos” should not be allowed to get away with it.

Opinion polls showed that a majority supported Eden when he attacked Egypt, especially after the Americans forced the British government (which had never told Washington of its intention to invade Egypt) to stop their operations by refusing to support the pound sterling.

The shared characteristics which reinforced the sense of belonging to a national family can be summarised as:

- Deference, not yet punctured by satire which was to bloom in the 60s.
- Respectability, until the end of the 50s BBC broadcasts of racing never mentioned the betting odds.
- Strictly observed dress codes. For example the wearing of a coloured shirt on the floor of the Stock Exchange was unthinkable.
- Emotional restraint, or the ‘stiff upper lip’. The quietness of the streets and public places in general was something on which foreign visitors remarked. Eden, the Prime Minister, when campaigning in the general election of 1955, was deeply embarrassed



and even ashamed, that he showed emotion when speaking about the War although his son had been killed in it.

- The prevalence of trust. Crime figures had been remarkably stable since the mid-Victorian era. They only began to rise sharply at the end of the 50s. In many places doors were left unlocked.

The characteristics which support the idea of being part a national family were not always strong:

- Racial minorities were excluded. A West Indian immigrant looking for a room to rent wrote how he never met anybody who admitted to being colour prejudiced in England. Refusal was always blamed on the prejudice of the neighbours.
- Homosexuals were persecuted. For example, Alan Turing, whose code breaking exploits at Bletchley Park contributed greatly to victory in the War, was hounded to suicide. When the Samaritans were founded at the end of the post-war period, they discovered that the fear of exposure of homosexuality was a frequent cause of suicidal leanings and of actual self destruction.
- Class differences led to much feeling of exclusion. Alan Bennett wrote of how, when he went up to Oxford, he was embarrassed by his luggage of two Antler suitcases which in the porter's lodge of his college contrasted sharply with the trunks, marked with four or even five initials, and decorated with labels of sea voyages and grand foreign hotels of many of his fellow students.
- People were isolated by ignorance of intimate relations. The agony aunts in the women's magazines like *Woman* and *Woman's weekly*, then with huge circulations, endlessly repeated how to be happy and successful wives. They had to be feminine and delightful, efficient home-makers, strict but loving mothers.
- Mass Observation in 1957 discovered that only 23% of married men wanted their wives to work and among housewives 53% did not want a job. Of those who did, the great majority wanted it only for the money. But there were frequently expressed resentments: "Why should the man expect his wife to always prepare meals and provide creature comforts". "Why should men always come first if the wife felt too tired to enjoy sex"?
- Especially in the working class which, according to their own estimation, comprised 70% of the population, men controlled the budget and the means of birth control, but in spite of these inequalities and difficulties, most people managed to make a 'good fist' of married life. Marriage was taken seriously and most women wanted, above all, a 'steady earner' and a 'reliable man'. Full employment helped to make this easier. Women did not like 'chancers' and the promiscuous.

Dr Kynaston ended by considering whether life in Britain was better in 1950 than in 2010. There has been a loss of the sense of certainty which harms many people. But in 2010 society is more open, more relaxed, and more emotionally literate. So, on the whole, it is better but, like the post-war period, it is far from a golden age.

Richard Moore



THE DIAMOND JUBILEE LECTURES

THE VOTE OF THANKS ON BEHALF OF THE SOCIETY

Dr Don Nicol

23rd October 2010

The Society has, from its beginnings, owed much to the contributions of academic historians who have taken the trouble to visit Battle on a Friday evening and talk to an appreciative (though not very expert) audience. Local history, particularly that of the Battle area, is of great interest in itself, but can often be better understood and appreciated when seen in the context of British and European history in general. Many of our members are old enough to have been taught at least the outline of such history at school, but this may mean their knowledge is 40 or 50 years old. In that time there has been much further scholarship and considerable development of the subject. New discoveries have been made and existing data have been more closely examined and evaluated. Thus, while the broad outline of the story has remained the same, some of the details have been changed: problems have been shown to be rather more complicated, and matters that at one time seemed to be black and white take on various shades of grey. It is this sort of thing that keeps the subject alive: the feeling that while we may never know the whole truth about past events, and the intentions of those who took part in them, we may be able to get a little nearer to the truth than before. This is the spirit that has kept the Society alive and active over the past sixty years.

We have seen a very good example of this today. One would imagine that over the past sixty years we must have considered every possible aspect of the Norman Conquest, the events leading up to it, the battle itself and the subsequent effects on the country. However, Dr Wood has shown us that there are yet more things of which we should take account. Likewise, while the battle and the building of the Abbey is the reason for the existence of our town, the dissolution of the Abbey in 1538 must be the most significant event in the town's subsequent history. Elsewhere the Reformation marked a change in religious practice, in Battle it also brought about a complete change in local government. For almost 500 years the only local authority in Battle had been the Abbot of Battle. Thus we are grateful to Professor Swanson for setting our local affairs in the wider context of the Dissolution of the Monasteries.

Dr Kynaston's account of Great Britain in 1950 illustrated, for some members, another historical problem, namely the difference in the view of events taken by those who lived through them and the assessment of their importance by later historians. To many of us, 1950 is a matter of personal memory and we are reluctant to classify it as history, but it is already far enough away to note this effect. For example, we still had rationing, which began early in the war and did not finally end until 1954. Hence we thought a lot about food. Also, we had currency control which severely limited the amount of money that we could take on holiday abroad, and much thought was devoted to this problem. Both these matters have faded away and have no lasting significance. But, almost unnoticed, the early 1950s saw the



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introduction of gas turbines into civil aviation. This greatly increased the speed of aircraft and the load that could be carried; in due course this turned flying from something of an adventure into a routine means of global transport, with all the consequences that has for the world today. It may well be that it is still too early to make a full judgement of the events of 1950, but even if they are classified as mere nostalgia, we thoroughly enjoyed Dr Kynaston's talk.