

THE GREAT THEFT AT HITCHAM CHURCH, 1412 AD

The following is a synopsis, with added comments, of the case of a theft of church property at Hitcham, Buckinghamshire in the year 1412. It is based upon a record of The King's Bench, under King Henry IV, as transcribed in :

"Select Cases in the Court of King's Bench under Richard II, Henry IV and Henry V", editor GO Sayles, publ : Selden Society vol88 (1971) pages 207 to 209.

William Balderby, the warden of St Michael's parish church of Hitcham, Buckinghamshire makes an accusation against one Nicholas Burne, who is being held in custody by John Preston, a marshal of the King's Bench.

[Note the dedication of Hitcham Parish Church to St Michael the Archangel, rather than the present-day dedication to St Mary. This change is by no means unusual. Dedications were proscribed at the Reformation and present dedications are often Georgian and Victorian inventions. St Mary the Virgin was probably chosen c1800 because of the association with Hitcham's founding institution, Merton Priory, very much a Marian order.]

Balderby claims that on the night of the Wednesday after the feast of St Luke the Evangelist in the fourteenth year of the reign of King Henry, the fourth after the conquest [19th October 1412] Burne stole many items, some not recovered, from Hitcham Church. namely :

one chalice of silver and gilt [a silver cup, not recovered]
one ordinal [book of liturgical procedures]
two missals [book prescribing the conducting of a mass]
one corporal cloth [a linen cloth placed under the chalice, not recovered]
one vestment of red and black silk
one chasuble [outermost vestment]
one alb [ankle-length white linen vestment]
one amice [rectangular cloth worn about the neck]
one stole [a drape about the neck]
one maniple [scarf draped over the left forearm on top of the alb]
one cape of red silk with all the parure [usually meant as jewels] thereof
one surplice [a wide tunic]
one primer [usually a theological reference book, not recovered]
one dyed cloth for the lectern with a picture of St Michael painted on it
one reredos [a screen behind the altar]

one foredos for the altar [curiously a word unknown to internet search engines, but presumably a screen in front of the altar]
two curtains

- all to the value of 20 Marks. [worth the same as ten horses then, equivalent to 160 ounces of silver, estimated to be worth about £8,000 in today's purchasing power]

Burne was apparently caught red-handed with almost all of these goods, but denies the theft.

The Sheriff of Buckingham is therefore ordered to bring twenty-four men, presumably as jurors? to come before the King at Westminster on the Monday after the Octave of Martinmas [sometime in November] for a trial.

In the meantime, Hugh Maystone of London, tailor, Hugh Martin of London, brewer, and Ellis Crowley of London undertake to indemnify the King so that the recovered goods, now valued by the valuers John Pemberton and John Nunwyk at ten marks, can be handed by the King back to William Balderby the warden of the church.

At the trial before the King it is disclosed that Burne has no land or other property. Then Burne announces that he is an ordained priest and claims immunity from prosecution by the King.

John Sandon, an official from the Abbot of Westminster, is summoned to court. Burne is given a copy of the Holy Bible and is able to read from it in the manner of an ordained priest, so on that evidence the Abbot's official pronounces Burne to be a priest and therefore subject to the Church rather than the King. As a result Burne is taken by the Abbot's men, and the recovered goods are formally restored to the Hitcham Church.

[This was by no means an unusual ploy. The sentence of the Kings Bench would be hanging. The sentence of a church court could be quite lenient. The required verse to be read from the Bible was known colloquially as 'the neck verse' as it could literally save your neck.]

The outcome of the Church's trial, if there ever was one, is not known.

Alan Woodley, 13th January 2025.