The churchwarden accounts of Great Marlow, Buckinghamshire

In the spring of 1979, having spent much of that winter working in Berkshire, I began to investigate the surviving evidence from the county across the Thames, Buckinghamshire. One of the most remarkable things about records research is the unevenness of the survival of the evidence. The Berkshire collection, now complete and awaiting companions to share the covers of a REED volume, is quite rich and diverse with evidence from four towns, many parishes and the estate of the Hobys of Bisham. It is also possible to pursue the details of the lives of the people who are mentioned in the records because many wills survive for the county. Yet I soon found that the situation is totally different in Buckinghamshire. No town records of any consequence survive, and there are very few parishes with lengthy runs of accounts. The single major set of records from this county are the records of Eton College. The archivists in the Buckinghamshire Record Office in Aylesbury were as frustrated as I was. One explanation that was offered for the dearth of early material was the heavy involvement of the people of Buckinghamshire in the Parliamentary cause. Be that as it may, it is remarkable how little survives in this county from before the Restoration. It is also worth noting that one set of documents that does survive is legal documents of a Baptist congregation dating from the 1630s. Non-conformity was very strong very early in Buckinghamshire particularly in the Chilterns.

In an attempt to flesh out the tiny collection of material available to me at that time, I set out to locate undeposited records. I had had some luck that year writing to the incumbents of ancient parishes in Berkshire in an attempt to find churchwardens’ accounts. I therefore set out to do the same in Buckinghamshire. The accounts of Great Marlow, though not deposited in the record office in Aylesbury, seemed to me to be
an easy set to locate. Lawrence Blair in *A List of Churchwardens' Accounts* lists the Marlow accounts as surviving from 1593. In his *English Church Ales* he lists the receipts for the church ales in 1595 and 1609. I was also aware of a reference in *Notes and Queries* for 1876 of an inventory listing morris bells, coats and feathers, accompanied by a note citing an antiquarian source, 'These morris coats were lent out to the neighbouring parishes. They are accounted for till 1629'. It was with considerable confidence, then, that I wrote to the incumbent and asked to be allowed to consult the accounts. Much to my dismay he replied that the ancient accounts had been put in store during World War II in the cellars of a gentleman's house. The gentleman in question was, in 1979, 79 years old and in the opinion of my correspondent not 'sufficiently sprightly to delve into the church chests and boxes for these records'. He added that it would be inconvenient for him to receive me for the next five weeks, the period corresponding to my time in England. And so I reluctantly gave up my pursuit of these accounts at that time. However, this last winter, I was briefly in the Aylesbury record office and was delighted to discover that the accounts have now been deposited. The earliest book contains accounts from 1593–1674. Among its first entries are 2s 8d for 'A Register booke', possibly the book itself, along with 5d for paper (ff 2–2v). It is a medium-sized book still in its original binding of soft calf and now quite fragile.

The Great Marlow book is a valuable link for the cultural life of the Thames valley. For those living on the banks of the river in the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the fact that Marlow was in Buckinghamshire and the parishes across the river in Berkshire was immaterial. The life of the river valley flowed together. The morris gear that belonged to Marlow, most fully described in 1615 as 'fower paire of garters of morris bells/flower morris Coates and a fooles Coate/flower ffeathers' (f 32), is very similar to the equipment of the tiny neighbouring parish of Bray in Berkshire, 'fower coates for morrice daunisers and for mayd maryan & a payre of breeches & dooblet for the foole & a cup'. The renting out of Marlow's morris gear appears four times in the accounts: in 1594 to the parish of Maidenhead (f 5v), in 1612 to the parish of Bisham (f 25) and twice to unspecified neighbouring parishes in 1606-07 (f 16) and in 1608 (f 18). Both Maidenhead and Bisham are in Berkshire, but no evidence survives from either parish. These Marlow references are the only evidence that the two parishes, like so many others in the Thames valley, were involved in morris activity.

The first appearance of the morris gear in an inventory is the year 1606–07 (f 17v). The next inventory was the one made in 1615. It is repeated in 1616 (f 34) and again in 1617 (f 36v). From 1620 until 1629 the parish inventory includes the morris gear less the fool's coat but with a marginal notation each time similar to this one for 1620, 'in the handes of Edward wooden' (f 43v). Wooden first appears in the accounts in 1617 when he signs a memo as one of the churchwardens (f 37). In a note about church ale receipts in 1620, Edward Wooden is described as a 'late Churchwarden' (f 40v). By 1623 it is clear that Wooden is renting property from the parish 'in the Church close' (f 46). His rental payment ceases in 1630 when the property is paid for by a man called Neville. All mention of the morris gear disappears at this time. It seems clear that Wooden took the gear home with him after his term as warden and, since he was living very near the church, he was allowed to keep it until his death. No will survives for him that might explain the disappearance of the gear with his death.

Great Marlow and tiny Bisham across the river shared other things besides morris gear. Bisham was the site of the home of the Hoby family. In 1592 Queen Elizabeth came to visit her old friend Lady Russell, the mother of Sir Edward Hoby. The entertainment provided by Lady Russell for the queen is recorded by Nichols and has been re-edited for the REED Berkshire collection. In 1593, in the accounts for the previous year, the Marlow churchwardens record 13d paid to one John Black 'for mendying the belles when the Queene came to Bisham' (f 1). Bisham, and so presumably the Hoby household whose members continued their association with the court, was frequently visited by the Stuart
kings in the first quarter of the seventeenth century. Ringers were paid by the Marlow parish in 1605 (f 15), 1607 (f 16v), 1611 (f 23v), 1617 (f 35), 1618 (f 38) and 1625 (f 50v). Royal passages through Marlow itself are marked by bell ringing in 1612 (f 27v), 1614 (f 31v), 1620 (f 41), 1622 (f 45), 1626 (f 52) and 1628 (f 56). A careful matching of known itineraries with these entries will add to our understanding of royal travels. However, the actual date of Elizabeth's visit to Lady Russell, 1592, and the date of the accounts that record the same event, 1593, should serve as a warning. The events accounted for in dated financial records are frequently events that took place the preceding calendar year.

Blair was most interested in the Marlow accounts for the evidence they contain of church ales. The receipts for the ales are certainly an interesting aspect of these accounts. In the ten years between the beginning of the accounts and the promulgating of the so-called Canon 88 in 16037 that was intended to put an end to all church ales on church premises, there were only three ales: in 1593 (f 1), 1594 (f 4), and 1603 (f 12). In that year, 1603, the receipts from the ale were over one third of the total income of the parish (£11 7s of £30 15s 4d). Six more ales were held before 1642. The next one in 1625 (f 16) earned over seven pounds while the total receipts were just eighteen. In 1609 the ale earned an astounding £16 out of a total income of £39 10s 4d. A major repair of the fabric of the church was undertaken that year. The repair expenses totalled £36 2s 4d (f 19). There was no ale in 1610, but in 1611 £16 16s 6d was raised from a total income of only £23 8s 10d. Of this £7 3s was delivered to the bridgewardens (ff 23—4). Why the churchwardens of Great Marlow should have felt it incumbent upon them to turn part of their profits over to the bridgewardens must remain a mystery. The church at Marlow, of course, is on the river, and the modern bridge begins its span over the churchyard. Perhaps the ancient bridge was also contiguous to the churchyard, and it was felt that it should share the profit of an event held in the yard. After this year there were only three more ales: in 1620 (f 40v), 1634 (f 70) and 1639 (f 88). Only £7 3s 4d was cleared at the last event. It did little to bring the parish out of its growing debt. At the end of 1640, the churchwardens recorded an accumulated deficit of £25 11s (f 91).

There seems to be no pattern to the occurrence of ales. The annual income was clearly higher in the years when they were held until 1630 when the more direct approach to fund raising — a levy of the members of the parish for the repair of the roof — brought the annual receipts up to £67 (f 60). A special levy was again made in 1635 when £74 0s 16d was raised (f 72v). A major repair was undertaken in 1638 with neither an ale nor a special levy, and it is in this year that the debt begins to build up (f 84). The nine ales held in the half-century recorded in the surviving records tell us little about the practice in the parish before 1593. What is clear from the evidence is that the ales were considered a money-making event for the parish.

The contributors to Notes and Queries were interested in morris customs; Lawrence Blair was interested in church ales. If the Great Marlow book had not reappeared, we would have known the essential facts that the parish had morris gear that it rented out and held church ales. Neither antiquarian, however, was interested in plays, and without the book we would have no knowledge of the following entry for 1594: 'Receivers of players for playinge in the Church Lofte ijs'. This is the only reference to players in the records. We will never know whether this is an isolated incident or the last occurrence of a long-standing custom. We will also never know whether these are actors or musicians. Nor do we know what is meant by the church loft, and the ancient church which might have provided physical evidence was pulled down in the nineteenth century. Nevertheless, it adds another reference to what is a growing pattern of players renting performance space from parishes at the end of the sixteenth century.

The appearance of the Great Marlow churchwardens' accounts adds one more source of evidence for the parish activities of a church undergoing a period of severe strain. As in so many similar records we can sense a community adjusting to the external pressures
of theological and institutional disputes and the internal pressures of economic difficulties and a decaying property. Again, as elsewhere, we see the community events — the ales and the morris events — giving way to individual financial levies. The Great Marlow accounts confirm the slow drift away from the communal life of truths commonly held to the individual life of a justified soul standing alone before his God.

NOTES

1 Lawrence Blair, A List of Churchwardens' Accounts (Ann Arbor, 1939), 13.
2 Lawrence Blair, English Church Ales (Ann Arbor, 1940), 31.
3 Notes and Queries, 5th series, 5 (1876), 228.
4 Aylesbury; Buckinghamshire Record Office m/140/5/1. I want to thank, particularly, Sarah Charlton of the Bucks.
5 Reading; Berkshire Record Office b/23/5/1, f 17. This inventory is for 1623 but it repeats, with slightly more detail, an earlier entry for 1602.
6 See John Nichols, The Progresses and Public Processions of Queen Elizabeth (London, 1823), iii, 130ff. Lady Russell had been one of the circle of Protestant gentlewomen educated with the young Elizabeth.
7 For a discussion of the actions leading up to this apparently final legislation see W. E. Tate, The Parish Chest (Cambridge, 1969).

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The King and Queenes Entertainement at Richmond

On their return from a visit to Oxford in September 1636, King Charles and Queen Henrietta Maria were entertained at Richmond Palace by a masque in which their six-year-old son, the future Charles II, was the chief masquer: he took the role of Britomart and performed in two dances. The occasion evidently arose from the Queen’s ‘signifying her pleasure that she would see her Sonne the most illustrious Prince in a dance’, but such a casual origin must have lain some months prior, since the preparations for the show were evidently elaborate, for all the apology of the anonymous author of the published text that ‘it came to be what it is, without any designe, but rather out of a kind of necessity urging it.’

From a critical point of view the Entertainement certainly is a rough-and-ready assemblage of motifs. It begins with an antimasque of four countrymen, who, in time-honoured theatrical fashion, have wandered into court and are bemusedly searching for the Queen. They serve to introduce a pastoral dance and shepherd’s song, and the scene then changes to a military camp. A Romano-British captain and a 'Druid' debate the relative virtues of Mars and Apollo; they are followed by a song of priests, and a wild dance of soldiers. The arrival of Britomart and his knights adventurers, 'The springing hopes of Armes and Arts,' is announced by a messenger, but their appearance is preceded by an entirely gratuitous comic Spaniard, who dances, and by a further chorus from the priests. The scene opens to reveal Britomart and his knights, dressed 'in a Warlike habit, after the Roman fashion', seated on a triumphal arch: they descend and dance. Six dwarf squires present impresa shields painted with the devices of their knights to the Queen, after which the masquers dance for a second time and then return to their seats, the scene closing on them. The masque ends with a valedictory song from the priestly chorus.