

Research Interests

The Dissolution of the Monasteries and the Lives of the ex-Religious.

Between 1536 and 1540 every monastery in England was dissolved (for a mixture of religious, political and economic motives which are still disputed and too complicated to go into here). The occupants of the monasteries were thus forced to leave the institutions in which they had expected to spend the rest of their lives, and construct new futures for themselves. Many (though not all) had pensions from the Crown, which were a form of compensation for their stake in the dissolved house. The pensions varied according to the wealth of the house and the status of the individual within the house. Some pensions were quite generous, while others were meagre.

The process of building a new life was complicated by a number of factors. There was probably some emotional and psychological turmoil from the dissolution itself - monasticism had been part of the English landscape for a millenium, and the process was fairly quick and seems to have been quite unexpected – though this leaves little trace in the records. The legal status of the ex-religious was ambiguous; many of the monks did not go through the formal procedure of getting capacities which would allow them to function as secular priests. This, of course, was not an option for the nuns, or for those monks who had not been ordained. Their rights to hold property were unclear, and their rights to marry changed over the period. Furthermore, it is not at all clear how the secular world received them, from parents or siblings who had thought that they were well-provided for, to neighbours who might see them as the vestiges of an abhorrent system, the victims of a political scheme or simply men and women of religion who were awkwardly ambiguous in the secular world.

My study begins with the financial records of the ex-religious of Bedfordshire, Berkshire, Buckinghamshire and Oxfordshire. I chose these counties mainly because of their Augmentations receiver, George Wright (the image to the right comes from one of his account books). In the 1540s he was responsible for the payment of the ex-religious pensions and he kept unusually detailed notes which allow us to begin the process of following the ex-religious into their new lives. I am also, however, looking at a variety of other sources, including, but not limited to, bishops' registers, wills, visitation records, surrenders and augmentations records.

