

The Evidence for Boy Bishops at St James's Church, Louth

'The custom of electing a boy-bishop on the feast of St. Nicholas dates from very early times, and was in vogue in most Catholic countries, but chiefly in England, where it prevailed certainly in all the larger monastic and scholastic establishments, and also in many country parishes besides, with the full approbation of authority, ecclesiastical and civil. The boy-bishop was chosen from among the children of the monastery school, the cathedral choir, or pupils of the grammar school. Elected on St. Nicholas's Day (6 December), he was dressed in pontifical vestments and, followed by his companions in priest's robes, went in procession round the parish, blessing the people. He then took possession of the church, where he presided at all the ceremonies and offices until Holy Innocents Day on 28 December. The custom was abolished by Henry VIII, restored by Queen Mary and again abolished by Elizabeth I, though here and there it lingered on for some time longer'. (Catholic Encyclopedia 1913)

High on the tower vice of St James's Church in Louth, Lincolnshire is a narrow passage that leads to a small locked cell. This still contains the medieval tread-wheel that had been employed



to haul up the stone used in the building of the spire from 1501-1515. On the wall and marked on a piece of white chalk stone just inside the passage entrance is this enigmatic little graffito illustrated here of a clerical figure dressed in chasuble and alb and wearing a mitre upon his head.

The graffito cannot date any earlier than the late-15th century when the tower was being completed in readiness for the building of the spire and if it does represent a boy bishop it is likely to have been marked there before the abolition of boy bishop ceremonies in the 1540s by Henry VIII who had denounced them as *'chyllysh observaunces'*.

After the suppression of the Lincolnshire Rising by Henry, which had started at Louth in this very church just a few years earlier in 1536, it is likely that the church would have been very compliant to new legislation and act swiftly to suppress these ceremonies. The custom did however enjoy a brief resurgence in some places during the Catholic revival of Mary's reign in the 1550s and we know from the churchwardens' accounts that *'items pertaining to the old ritual'* were purchased at Louth in 1553-4 only to be sold again in 1566-7.

Written records of payments for a boy bishop in Louth are very good as 'The First Churchwardens' Accounts Book' (Dudding, published in 1941) shows regular payments to the chosen or elected boy during each year of the account book's remit from 1500-1524. Although the spelling varies somewhat he is always referred to as a *'chylld byschop'* rather than a *'boy'*.

Although we have few records at Louth prior to 1500 it seems that the ceremony was already well established by then and therefore may have been an ancient one. The payment to the boy bishop throughout the period of the churchwardens' accounts is *6d* but in some years in addition to this simple accounting there are a few clues to flesh out a little more detail of the ceremony.

In 1500 and again in 1501 there are entries for payments -

'to the chylld byschop at cristynmes for j paire cloffs'

These record the purchase of a pair of gloves for the boy bishop to wear during his tenure. Other than the graffito this is the only clue to any additional items of dress that may have been worn although in an inventory of the goods of St James's Church dated to 1486 there appears amongst other apparel the following entry - *'also ij copis of childer of silke'* - that is for two copes of silk for children. At Magdalen College, Oxford on the eve of St Nicholas when their boy bishop was elected one of the items he was presented with was a pair of gloves as a mark of dignity.

In 1500 we see payments to Thomas Couper and Joh. Bradpull for *nayls* (nails) and in 1501 and again in 1505 –

'for one child bischop – nayles, makyng his see'.

'Item paid for making the childe bishop see'.

These payments suggest a prop or staging was used in the ceremony. Perhaps a seat or throne had been made or, given the small sums involved, a previously made item had been repaired.

In many places the boy bishop was chosen on 6th December at The Feast of St Nicholas and held office until Holy Innocents Day on December 28th. We do not know if this was the case at Louth, for we have no evidence for the election itself, but the boy bishop certainly presided on Holy Innocents Day as in 1513-14 a payment of 6d is made –

'for the childe bischop at cristynmes of childermes day'.

'Childermes' or *'Childermass'* is an ancient name for The Feast of the Holy Innocents when it had also become customary for boy bishops to deliver a sermon. At Louth it seems likely that the title when bestowed was held until the next boy was appointed for in the year 1502 we see an entry -

'Item paid to the child byschope at Cristynmes for a yer in part of his expenses'.....6d.

Although the written records for Boy Bishop ceremonies is widespread, tangible evidence of their existence is very much rarer. There is a small episcopal tomb effigy in Salisbury Cathedral (where boy bishop ceremonies are well documented) which was long believed to be that of a boy bishop but this is now more generally believed to be that of a secondary heart or viscera burial of a real bishop.

In 1842-3 on the removal of some priest's stalls in St Mary's Church, Bury St Edmunds a number of coin-like lead tokens were discovered. Since that time many more of these tokens have been found usually bearing a bishop's mitre or the head of a bishop on one side and with a legend that often includes the inscription SANCTE NICOLAE (St Nicholas) or similar. These are mainly seen in the Bury St Edmunds and Suffolk area and are believed to be connected to the boy bishop ceremonies held there. They may have been distributed by the boy bishop as part of the ceremony which did in many places include feasting and perambulations around *'his'* parish. Other examples of similar tokens exist in Continental countries too.

In addition to these few examples there is now the possibility of a graffito representation of a boy bishop at St James's Church in Louth. It is hoped that as the recording of graffiti from buildings becomes more widespread as a means of acquiring historical evidence then more evidence may come to light of this once common but now largely forgotten medieval ceremony.

In recent years in some places the boy bishop ceremony has been reintroduced with Hereford and Salisbury Cathedral amongst others resurrecting it. There are many references to Boy Bishops online and the links below are just a useful sample of the information that can be found.

Curious Church Gleanings – Boy Bishops

<https://archive.org/stream/curiouschurchgl00unkngoog#page/n255/mode/2up>

Camden Miscellany – Two Sermons preached by the Boy Bishop.....

<https://archive.org/stream/camdenmiscellany07camduoft#page/n7/mode/2up>

St Nicholas Center – Boy Bishops or Nicholas Youth Bishops

<http://www.stnicholascenter.org/pages/boy-youth-bishops/>

St Nicholas Center – Boy Bishops - general links

<http://www.stnicholascenter.org/pages/search/?query=boy+bishop>

St Nicholas or 'Boy Bishop' tokens in fifteenth and sixteenth century East Anglia

<http://www.caitlingreen.org/2015/01/st-nicholas-or-boy-bishop-tokens-in.html>