The Office of Reader in the Diocese of Lincoln in the Late Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries

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It is not generally realised that from the reign of Elizabeth to that of James I many of those officiating in the Church were not in holy orders, or even minor orders, but were laymen holding the office of Reader. Exactly how many of these there were in the Lincoln diocese it is difficult to say for our sources are themselves uncertain. For example, in the Second Parte of a Register, which is a Puritan examination of clerical qualifications, published circa 1593, Simon Gadon is described as a Reader but the Liber Cleri 1585 describes him as a deacon. Not all Libri Cleri make mention of a Reader but their omission does not necessarily mean that they did not exist at that date but usually that the scribe thought them too unimportant to record. The sources are so diverse that some names may yet remain to be discovered. Research so far has uncovered some 230 names from approximately 316 parishes. Some Readers served in more than one parish. But who were these Readers, how were they appointed, and what tasks did they perform?

After the death of Mary the Church of England found itself in a very difficult situation for the clergy who were in charge of benefices had sworn adherence to the Roman Catholic Church and many of these were deposed at the accession. Many were in exile, so that in many dioceses there was a grave shortage of incumbents. Between ten and fifteen per cent of the livings were vacant at Elizabeth’s accession, and certain populous areas, such as the arch-deaconry of Canterbury, had vacancies for as many as one third of the parishes. The shortage of curates was probably more acute. In addition an unduly high death rate prevailed between 1556 and 1560 which also accounted for some of the vacancies. The position in the Lincoln diocese in 1585 was that there were 1285 clergy but this figure had dropped to 1184 by 1603. This number appears adequate for approximately 1262 parishes but it must be remembered that the number of clergy included curates and those on the Cathedral staff. However, whatever the situation the Lincoln diocese was to have a number of Readers.

One remedy for the shortage was to allow those Marian clergy who wished to do so to recant, take the oath of loyalty to Elizabeth, and so retain their office. Some did so but many became unpopular with their parishioners. One opponent declared them to be ‘false perjured hypocrites bearing two faces under one hood’.

As there was still a shortage it was decided to revive the office of Reader which had been one of the minor orders abolished at the Reformation. They were to be ‘taken out of the laity, tradesmen and others; any that were of honest behaviours and that could read and write. They seemed not only to forbear their calling but were not countenanced to follow them especially if they were mechanical’. But by the early days of James I’s reign there was an increasing number of graduates. From 1600 to 1606 82 of 109 deacons in the City of London were graduates; twelve were students. By 1620 the recruitment was wholly graduate. An examination of the ordination books of Oxford and Peterborough (where many Cambridge graduates were ordained) also shows an increasing number of graduates during this period.

In the Lincoln diocese in 1585 there were 409 graduates out of a total of 1285 clergy (31.82 per cent) and in 1663 there were 646 graduates out of a total of 1184 clergy (54.56 per cent). By 1614 the number has risen to 848 graduates out of a total of 1296 clergy (65.43 per cent). Ordinands in the period 1617-19 numbered only 57, but of these no less than forty were graduates.

There were also in the first quarter of the seventeenth century a number of young men who were awaiting admission to a university and who were prepared to act as Readers until such time as a parish could be found for them. Strype refers to them as ‘those who the bishops appointed were often men of tolerable learning in Latin, bred up in their youth in schools and some of them designed for universities’.

In the Interpretation of the Bishops (1560-61) there is a set of injunctions to be subscribed and confessed by a Reader, namely:

‘I shall not preach nor interpret but only read that which is appointed by public authority.
I shall read divine service plainly, distinctly and audibly that all people may hear and understand.
I shall not minister the sacraments and other public rites, but bury the dead and purify women after childbirth.
I shall keep the register books after the injunctions.
I shall use sobriety in apparel and especially in the church in common prayer time.
I shall move man to quiet and concord and not give them cause of offence.
I shall bring to my ordinary testimony of my behaviour from the honest man of the parish where I dwell . . .
I shall give place on convenient warning so thought by the ordinary if any learned minister be placed there at suit of the patron of the parish.
I shall claim no more of the fruits sequestered of that cure when I shall serve but that it shall be thought meet to the wisdom of the ordinary.
I shall daily, at least, read one chapter of the Old Testament and one of the New . . .
I shall not appoint in my room, by reason of my absence or sickness, any other man but shall leave it to the suit of the parish to the ordinary for assigning some other able man.
I shall not read but in poorer parishes destitute of incumbents except in time of sickness or other good considerations allowed by the ordinary.
I shall not openly intermeddle with any artificer occupation as covetously to seek any gain thereby having in ecclesiastical living the sum of twenty nobles, or above by the year.’

Matthew Parker, archbishop of Canterbury, was ordaining men to serve in all parts of England. Unfortunately many of these were unsuitable people and in August 1560 he wrote to the bishops of the southern province advising them to
raise the standards of admission. As a temporary measure, until a sufficient number of educated clergy could be ordained, he suggested the appointment of Readers who would be supervised by a pluralist rector, or vicar, who would thus oversee several parishes. Between 1559 and 1562 the diocese of Canterbury was served by seventy one Readers.

Strype speaks of Readers being ‘tolerated’ which was a form of licensing. In the Lincoln diocese, as in others, the document which the Reader received was known as a ‘Toleration’. The Reader, with his surety, entered into a bond to pay twenty pounds, or some other sum, to one of the bishop’s officers, the condition of obligation being that ‘that if the above named MM be tolerated to read prayers in the church, or chapel, of MM, in the County of Lincoln, according to the Book of the Common Prayer, together with the chapters and sermons appointed by the same do not in any thing touching his said office contrary or otherwise than in the said book specified and allowed, then present obligation be void of non-effect or else to stand and remain in full force, strength, power and virtue’.

As the toleration was not an ordination it was unusual for the ceremony to be performed by a bishop. It was usually undertaken by the archdeacon, or one of his staff, at a visitation or some other suitable occasion, although at the visitation of 1585, W. Turnerbull, who was serving in the parish of Bracey was tolerated Reader by ‘Mr Belly, the vicar-general’.

Stipends, on the whole, were low: the highest which has been discovered is that of Christopher Barkwith who had a stipend of £13.6.8. at Lutton Sutton. One of the lowest is that of Joseph Rooper who, in 1614, had an annual stipend of £1.6.8.d in the parish of Bilngham. Unfortunately only forty stipends have been discovered and of these the average stipend is £5.14s.11d. But most Readers probably had other incomes for, as we shall see later, some were schoolmasters. Most clergy were farmers. Indeed, Clive Holmes (p. 56) quotes William Worship, Vicar of Holt, as saying of the Lincolnshire clergy ‘not the Smithfield butcher more skilful than some of them in handling a fat beast’.

A few were vicars choral in the Cathedral church and it was not unusual for the precentor, who had a number of livings in his gift, to award some to the vicars choral. Thus Robert Nicholson, who was a Reader at St Peter’s in Eastgate in Lincoln from 1585 to 1667 was also a ‘junior vicar choral’ of Lincoln Cathedral during at least part of that time.

Although some of the Readers may have approached the bishop himself and others may have been nominated by the patron, the rector or the vicar, some were appointed at the request of the parishioners. For example, Thomas Schoele, in 1564, was appointed Reader in the parish of Coverthorpe at the request of certain parishioners ‘who testify to his probity of life’.

It is certain that the Readers were part of the official organisation of the diocese for they were cited to appear at visitations. At his primary visitation in 1614, Richard Neile ordered the Readers to appear before him along with rectors, vicars, curates and schoolmasters. Most other bishops included Readers in their visitations, when they were often ordered ‘to read Common Prayer with a loud distinct voice’.

The Readers were not always well behaved and at the Lincoln visitation of 1585 it was complained that at Revesby, Stephen Booth, Reader, baptizes and celebrates marriage contrary to his articles of toleration. Unfortunately we do not know if any official steps were taken against him. During the archdeacon’s visitation of 1614 Roger Abbot, schoolmaster and Reader of Threecookingham was accused ‘that he did within the last twelve months commit fornication with Agnes Waller’ and that he also confessed that he had ‘solemnize matrimony between John Williamson of Threecookingham and Margaret Padley of Billingham without a certificate of banns asked in Billingham church or licence obtained.’ An example of a clandestine marriage.

The highest number of Readers is to be found in the Liber Cleri 1585 and that of 1614 and 1593 shows a high number for that was the year of the second Part of a Register, the Puritan manifesto which describes the qualifications of the Anglican clergy. But there were years when particularly careful visitations were made. From an examination of the sources one can hazard a guess that the numbers increased to about thirty or forty years from the latter years of the sixteenth century and remained at about that figure until the beginning of the Civil War. There is a gap, except for two probable names, from 1640 to 1662 when Readers began to reappear. This is partly due to lack of information but it is unlikely that the Puritans would allow Readers to return their office.

Richard Neile intended to abolish the office of Reader and at the 1614 visitation the visitors were asked to make a careful examination of the position and one replied:

I have everywhere inhabited tolerations, yet not simple. For them many churches should be totally unserved, but conditionally see if any person in orders, bringing with him his letters of orders and a testimonie of his conversation do so to the ordinary for any such place then the party tolerated and not in orders instantly give place: and soe will have removed some in the time of visitation.

It appears that some, if not all of these Readers were offered ordination to the diaconate (if not to the priesthood) and many may have accepted but there are few records of such in the ordination and visitation records which are extant for this period. However, Ralph Botham, who was curate of Aston Flantine cum Burbage and almost certainly a Reader was inhibited because ‘he did not take orders’. He had been a Reader since 1597. The only other Reader who was inhibited was Samuel Holland of Countesthorpe but the reason is not stated.

Most Readers served for only short periods but occasionally for almost twenty years. For example, John Barlow was Reader at Scotton from 1583 until at least 1614 and Robert Nicholson at St Peter’s in Eastgate, Lincoln from 1585 to 1607.

Unfortunately we have little information about the educational qualifications of these Readers although most of them may have been ‘tradesmen and others’ as described by Strype. However, twenty five had BA degrees, three were MA’s and six were described as literate. Most of these names occur after 1620 and were probably young ordinands awaiting their first living. It is interesting that Richard Neile had himself carried out the duties of a Reader before his appointment as Chaplain to William Cecil.

Some fifty eight Readers combined their office with that of schoolmaster. Richard Sampson who was admitted in 1634 in the parish of Rippingale was also licensed as a schoolmaster in that parish and elsewhere in the deaneries of Aveland and Lafford. Forty four others were licensed to teach in more than one parish and some like Frances Lawson, in 1662, to teach school in his own parish (Crowland) and within the archdeaconry of Lincoln. All these readers were licensed from 1619 onwards but William Cusin of Nelsey ‘teacheth that half a dozen pettles...
William Street of Alford was also licensed in 1662 to teach 'petty schools'.

Some Readers acted as curates in parochial chapels or chapels of ease. Robert Rollett was curate of Brothertoft chapel in the parish of Bicker from at least 1597-1607. In some cases a number of Readers served a chapel, for example, Mumby chapel was served by five different Readers in the period 1583-1615.

As we have seen from the Interpretation of the Bishops the Reader had to promise that he 'would not read in poorer parishes destitute of incumbents except in time of sickness or other good considerations allowed by the ordinary.' Edward Buche, in 1619, became Reader in the parish church of Bradley in the absence of Mr Garth, rector there. But Roger Carter, in 1617, was tolerated to read prayers in the church of Eagle during the 'imprisonment of Mr Barefoot vicar there.' At Weston, William Stanwell, the parish clerk, in 1617, was tolerated to read prayers in the absence of Mr Thimble, vicar there. But these are almost the only occasions when it is recorded that the appointment was made because of the absence of the vicar and yet there are some 62 parishes which are in charge of a Reader and this number does not include the parochial chapels. They must all have been approved by the bishop, or the archdeacon and it may be that in most cases it was the low stipend which deterred the better quality man. The evidence seems to show that most Readers only stayed a few years until a better qualified man could be secured or they themselves secured promotion. The parish of Usselby, however, was served by Readers during most of the period from 1593 to 1619.

Some readers served as curates under rectors, or vicars, and there appears to have been about twenty-five of these excluding the pluralities which will be treated separately. The case of Swinstead is interesting, because, like several others, the Reader, Owen Flood, in 1624 was to assist the vicar there and also 'exercise his office in any parish church within the deaneries of Aveland, Ness and Beltside.' The appointment of a Reader to Lincoln Cathedral is also interesting because, in that year, the Common Council of Lincoln, because few of the beneficial clergy were licensed to preach, decided to pay out of the common chamber £6.13s.4d to 'a learned man to be chosen by the Dean, to be a Reader in the Minster, and to preach on Wednesdays, in some parish church within the city'.

Another interesting group of readers were a small number who served in some of the Cathedral prebends. These included the prebend of Calstor where Richard Melton, in 1634, was Reader at Clixby (part of the prebend) and had a stipend of £4 per annum when the value of the prebend was over £2 per annum.

But many of the Readers served double benefices such as Lusby and Manby, whilst others served adjacent churches such as Bedford St Mary’s and Bedford St Peter’s. Most of the parishes were within a few miles of each other, as was required, but the two parishes of Aston Flamville and Burbage were 30 miles apart. Readers may have served these double benefices so that they could be trained in their work by the incumbent, as suggested in 1560, by Matthew Parker, archbishop of Canterbury, but it is more likely that they were used in a parish in which the incumbent was non-resident. For example, in the double benefice of Westborough and Grayingham, the Reader was resident at Westborough and the vicar in the other parish. In other cases incumbents were absent from both parishes.

There is an interesting story told about a Reader in 1662. Hugh Walter presented what purported to be a letter of recommendation from the King to the governors of Lincoln Christ’s Hospital, where he claimed that he had been formerly a Reader at the Cathedral. He was appointed a master at the school and later became a ‘senior vicar choral’. However, his incompetence and drunken habits eventually led to his dismissal.

Though the parish clerk was allowed to play some part in the service he was unable to carry out the part of a Reader without being tolerated. We find that William Stanwell, parish clerk of Weston in 1607, was tolerated to read parish prayers there in the absence of the vicar. Similarly, when William Sedgewick of Goxhill was appointed parish clerk at Barrow in 1624 he was admitted ‘to teach . . . and to assist Mr Oates there in reading divine prayers in his absence.’

It appears clear from the above, that, in many cases, the Readers were regarded as ‘cheap labour’ and, except for the few ordinands, were rather poorly educated. In some parishes it must have been difficult for people to receive the Holy Communion and for the rites of baptism and marriage to be performed. No doubt the nearest priest incumbent would help from time to time. But by the last quarter of the seventeenth century the office of Reader appeared to have died out, only to be resurrected in the eighteenth. The numbers was not far to seek. There was now an adequate supply of ordinands. In 1585 the percentage of graduate clergy in the diocese was 31.82 per cent which by 1614 had risen to 65.43 per cent. By 1710 the percentage of graduate deacons was 88.9 per cent and that of priests 93 per cent.

Notes with Abbreviations.

2. L.C. Liber Cleri 1585 No. 2.

Many of the following documents are transcribed in this volume and where this happens they are marked (F).


The following documents are all available in the Lincolnshire Archives Office:

ALL Marriage Allegation books Allel, 1-3.
B.B. The state of the churches in the archdeaconies of Lincoln and Stow, August 1602. Taken from the Brown Book and also L.C. 1570-1603 (F).
D.B. Double Benefices 24 February 1602 L.C. II (F)
L.C. Liber Cleri I-XVI.
In (F) are 1576, 1584, 1585, 1595 Buckingham, 1597-1600 Bedford and Buckingham, 1603, 1598 Stow, 1594, 1604, 1667, L.C. of the cathedral church 1585, 1588, 1591, 1599-1600.
L.S. Liber Archidiaconatus Stow, 1603 L.C. I (F).
PRO, Probate Act and Administration Book I-III (F).
PRO, Election of Proctors. I-Convocation.
R.B. Red Book, Register of Bishop Nelle, ADD. REG.III.
R.C. Register of Bishop Cooper, REG. XIX.
S.A. Subsidy of Armer 1580 P.6 C.10 (F)
S.C. Clerical Subsidy Rolls 1583 Public Record Office 1571-1603 SUB.10 (F).
S.L. Subscriptions of the Clergy in Buck’s to the Three Articles. Lambeth Palace Library. Cantuae Miscellanea tom XIII, No. 6 (F).
SUB, Subscription Books S.B. - V.B.
V.B. Violation warrants 1608-1636.

5. F. p.446.
10. F p. LVII.
17. L.A.O. L.C.I. 1585 Fo. 4v.
18. Ibid. L.C.I. 1603 Fo. 51
19. Ibid. L.C.I. 1614 Fo. 83.
22. Ibid. SUB.1, 1564 Fo. 22.
27. Venables, pp. 43.
29. Ibid. Fo. 118.
31. Ibid. L.C.I. 1598 Fo. 7v. L.C.I. 1607 Fo. 20.
32. Ibid. L.C.I. 1585 Fo. 1: L.C.I. 1607 Fo. 20.
34. L.A.O. SUB.1 Fo. 188v, 201v.
35. Ibid. SUB.1 Fo. 233.
36. Ibid. L.C.4 1614 Fo. 124v.  
NB. A full list of the Reader-Schoolmasters is to be found in L.A.O. R.L. Arundale, *Readers in the Diocese of Lincoln* (R.L.A.) MCD 1291.
37. Ibid. P.R.O. 1597, Fo. 6v: L.C.2 1604 Fo.18 L.C.2 1607 Fo. 16, Full list in R.L.A.
38. Ibid. SUB.1 Fo. 139v.
39. Ibid. SUB.1 1617 Fo.133.
40. Ibid. SUB.1 1617 Fo.133.
42. Ibid. See R.L.A.
43. Ibid. SUB 1, 1624 Fo.151.
45. L.A.O. SUB.1, 1634 Fo.201. See R.L.A.
46. Ibid. D.B. 1603 Fo.2.
47. Ibid. SUB.1 1664 Fo. 260v.
48. Ibid. L.C. 1614 Fo.118.
49. Ibid. L.C. 1585 Fo.4.
50. Ibid. R.L.A.
52. L.A.O. SUB.1 1617 Fo.133.
53. Ibid. SUB.1 1624 Fo.151v.