Communal Piety in Sixteenth Century Boston

Claire Cross

In the last few decades the long held assumption that the corruption of the late medieval church caused the Protestant Reformation has increasingly come under fire. Indeed more and more historians have questioned whether there was any widespread popular disillusion with the Catholic church in the early decades of the sixteenth century. Several detailed studies of religion in late medieval English towns have recently appeared in print. Dr. Tanner has taken his examination of the church in Norwich to 1532. In a series of articles Dr. C. Burgess and Mr. P. Heath have assessed late medieval piety in Bristol and Hull while the city of Exeter features prominently in Dr. Whiting’s consideration of the West Country and the capital has received its due in Dr. Brigden’s work on London and the Reformation. All these scholars have stressed the spontaneous attachment of townspeople to their parish churches and emphasised the vitality of the late medieval religious guilds. Dr. Burgess has gone further and set out the positive attractions of the doctrine of purgatory which enabled the living to offer intercessions for the dead. If the case for the popularity of the old religion is accepted, it raises the question as to why the abrupt transition from Catholicism to Protestantism over the course of the sixteenth century apparently aroused such little opposition. Some historians like Professor Scarisbrick and Dr. Haigh have suggested that the majority of the people submitted unwillingly to the might of the Tudor state. Others have postulated widespread indifference: the people at the time did not much care what form of religion was being enforced. Dr. Tanner has interestingly argued that the very strength of religious practice in late medieval Norwich led some citizens to respond spontaneously to new forms of piety introduced by Protestant Reformers. Adopting the opposite view Dr. Whiting believes that with the obliteration of popular religious observances the masses were lost to the national church in the West country in the sixteenth century and never afterwards regained. The purpose of this essay is to try to see where Boston stands in relation to these much bigger cities, and to attempt to explain how an orthodox Catholic town in 1520, could emerge in 1600, if not a generation earlier, as an emphatically Protestant corporation.

The fact that Boston, like the rival port of Hull, was a medieval ‘new town’ very greatly influenced its religious evolution. Ancient cities such as London, Norwich or York had a great multiplicity of parishes: until the Reformation, for example, York had around fifty parishes, admittedly reduced to twenty-five in the second half of the sixteenth century, but still far too many for the needs of the population of about ten thousand. Since the ecclesiastical parish coincided with the township the people of Boston could concentrate their energies upon their single great church of St Botolph as the inhabitants of Hull lavished their attention on their equally vast church of Holy Trinity. Both Boston and Hull had expanded after the spread of monasticism during the high middle ages, so neither town ever possessed a Benedictine foundation, though, through the agency of the de la Pole family, Hull did receive a priory of Cistercian monks, the one order still attracting lay patronage on a substantial scale in the later fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries. Furthermore, not being the seat of a bishop, Boston had never to contend with a dominant secular religious corporation, as was at least partly the case with the cathedral cities of Lincoln and York.

Throughout the middle ages the rectory of Boston belonged to an absentee religious institution, first St Mary’s Abbey, York, and then from 1485 the Priory of St John of Jerusalem, and this enhanced even more the religious independence of the town, with the result that the inhabitants could exercise a remarkable degree of urban enterprise. A Subsidy Certificate of 1526 reveals that in addition to the vicar and his three curates there were in Boston no less than eighteen chantry priests and eleven stipendiaries, all save one ministering in St Botolph’s and virtually all established and financed by earlier lay initiatives. In this respect the situation in Boston very closely paralleled that in Hull where Holy Trinity besides the vicar and his assistants had a team of at least twelve chantry priests, called the Priests of the ‘Half’. Where, however, Boston differed considerably from Hull was in the strength, size and sheer economic power of its religious guilds, again it seems largely lay inspired and lay dominated.

In its endowment comparable to a medium sized monastery or major collegiate foundation the Guild of the Blessed Virgin Mary was by a very long way the greatest of Boston’s five major religious guilds in the early sixteenth century. The welfare of the guild provided by its early patrons was the business of the guild when it visited the town in the late 1530s. The guild had its altar in St Mary’s choir in St Botolph’s, once only a chapel ‘but now’, he went on to explain, ‘it is so risen and adornned, that it is the chiestt of the toune, and for a parroche chirc the beste and fayrest of al Lincolnshire, and servid so with singings, and that of cunning men, as no parroche in al England. The society and brethren which longe being in the churc hath causid this, and now much lande longith to this society’. In their return to the crown in 1548 the chantry commissioners reported that the income of St Mary’s Guild amounted to just over £323 a year. Out of this the warden dispensed the large sum of almost £130 on obits and other anniversaries masses endowed by past members of the guild and hired nine chaplains on salaries ranging from £10 earned by William Harrison, who also acted as schoolmaster, to 23s. 4d. assigned to a certain priest called Christopher officiating part-time at the Hospital of St John of Jerusalem. The seven other chaplains drew a minimum of £5 6s. 8d, a reasonable annual stipend for a priest at the time. In addition to all its chaplains the guild maintained a prestigious choir which sang daily in the parish church to the accompaniment of the organist, William Ward. The commons alone of the choristers totalled £16 a year. The management of such a munificent establishment built up by the gifts of the faithful since the guild’s incorporation in 1392 must have required very considerable financial expertise. In addition to choirs and altars for corporate feasts, the guild owned some books, the first part of the Bible and the Legenda Sanctorum, certain relics appropriately including some of the reputed milk of the Virgin, an array of rich vestments, and gold and silver crosses, chalices, masers and candlesticks exceeding a thousand ounces in weight.

Second only to St Mary’s Guild was the Corpus Christi Guild, with an annual income of over £100, four times the sum some Yorkshire manors enjoyed in the early sixteenth century. It retained seven chaplains, one at a wage of £6, the remainder at £5 13s. 4d., spent about £15 annually on obits and anniversaries, and 77s. 4d. on celebrating the feast of Corpus Christi every June. In 1548 its funds were in surplus on the year, but only by £7. Boston’s other three guilds had nothing like the influence of these two great guilds. The Holy Trinity Guild, nevertheless, had an annual income of £20, which enabled it to keep one full-time chaplain, John Gilmel, on a salary of £6, in addition to observing obits and anniversaries at a total cost of 39s. 3d. It, too, had harboured its resources well and was in profit on the year to the extent of 74s. The Guild of St Peter and St. Paul derived a little over £37 from its property and so could employ two chaplains, Thomas Augustin and George Hawke, who in 1548 drew £11 6s. 8d. between them. It, also, had managed its income efficiently, and ended the year with a surplus of
79s. 9d. The Guild of St. George, the poorest of the five with funds of a little more than £11 a year, only just sufficient to provide services at the altar of St. George, had a mere 2s 7d in hand at the end of 1548.5

The five guilds existed for both religious and charitable purposes, a modern distinction which would not have been clearly comprehensible in the early sixteenth century. As a report of 1545 set out, the township had endowed the guilds with the intent that as well divers chaplains should celebrate in the church for the souls of the founders and others for ever, who from time to time should show their best diligence in the ministration of this teaching in the church aforesaid . . . And that twelve poor persons of the said borough or town, called 'Our Ladies beadmen', should be maintained out of the issues and profits of the lands and possessions of the said guilds for ever. At the height of their influence the guilds must have been very splendid indeed. Even when the chantries were to be dissolved in the reign of Edward VI and they had already alienated many of their goods, the five guilds between them still owned six chantries, one pax, one gilt cover of a gospel weighing 123 ounces, two great chalices and three paxes, each gilt weighing over 45 ounces, the whole appraised at £81.6

Although no benefactors had ever founded a monastery in Boston, during the course of the middle ages the four orders of friars, the Dominicans, Franciscans, Auins and Carmelites, all settled in the town, again largely on lay initiative. German merchant living in Boston seem to have been responsible for establishing the Franciscan house; by the late fifteenth century the Corpus Christi plays were usually performed in the friary church. The Dominican church, also, must have been of considerable size since it could accommodate large congregations at the time of the Lenten sermons. The friaries constituted the most important centres of learning in Boston. Because the plague was raging in that part for the town, Leland did not inspect the library of the Austin Friars but he discovered many books of interest in the Carmelite convent, and commented in particular on the Dominicans' library, which included Tursip's History of Charles the Great, a volume containing Chronica Summarum Pontificum et Imperatorum, De Gesibus Trojanorum, Hsora of Chronicon, Historia Britonum, Albertus De Mirabilibus—which he reserved for the king and which is now in the British Library—Peter of Tarantia's De Virtues et Vices, on the Epistles of St. Paul and on the Fourth Book of The Sentences [of Peter Lombard] and Gorham on St. Luke. The warden of the Franciscans, John Perrot, or Porrett, had incepted as a Doctor of Divinity at Oxford in 1526. Both ecclesiastically and educationally the friars seem to have been serving the town well until their dissolution.7

Through the wills registered at Lincoln some impression can be gained of what the friaries meant to the inhabitants of Boston in the early part of the sixteenth century. When he made his will on 11 January 1529/30 Robert Rydder of Boston chose to be interred in the Black Friars church, at the same time providing for the two daily masses (the five daily masses has become an individual task, but every successive daily masses) to be offered for his soul at the Scala Celi altar in St. Botolph's. After requiring that his body should be buried in the parish church Simon Gooday in March 1530 gave 20d. to the White Friars and a further 4d. to the rood within the church of the Austin Friars. In the same year John Hone of Boston, a skinner, envisions the only a very grand funerary ceremony but also a permanent memorial in which the friars would play a prominent part:

I will that the iii orders of freyes in Boston, as well preses, falls and one of the convent, bring me further to the parvyse churche of St. Botulphie in Boston, ij and ij together to say placebo and dirige with commendacion over the nyght, yff it so fortune; and in the mornyng every preste of them, as can or may, say messe of Scala Celi, yff it be Wednesday, Fryday or Satterday; and then every preste of them to have for hyes payn and labor ilijj, and every nysys and yong freere jnd. Also I will that theber be spent at my buyrrall day, vijth day and xxxthy day, at day of theym onely by hit selff, in almys xxs. in breyd or money. Also my buyrrall day, vijth day and xxxth day be generall to all preste and clerkes that shall bee ther present to say placebo and dirige with commendacion, ij and ij together, over the nyght; and in the mornyng the sayd prestes to say messe at Scala Celi, yff it so fortune it be Wednesdy, Fryday or Satterday; and every one of them to have for hyys labor and payn ilijj. I will that one hable prest syng for me, Margaret and Agnes, Enote, Margery and Jenet, my wyffes, and William and Alice, my fader and mother, and all my benefactors, and all crystyn soules, for the space of iiij yeres in our Ladi's quere at Boston; and he to have for his stipenda and wages at vys. vjs. vijyd. be to payd yerele. I will that Jenet, my wyffye and executrix, cause ij trentals of xxy messys at Scala Celi to be syngd immediately after my decease in our Ladi's quere Wednesdy, Fryday and Satterday, and the prestes that syng the messys to have in remembrance the souale of me Huighe Schawe and my wyffye and my fader and mother and all other my benefactors, and to have for the labor xxs.8

In Boston, as elsewhere, the friars clearly earned a considerable income through assisting at the funerals of leading inhabitants. In 1530 Robert Ryder was bequeathed upon 'the iii j closors in the town of Boston for goyng before me to the high churche and for synyng of dirige, every on of them lijs. ilijs', and then singled out the Carmelites to receive a garnish of vessels made of lay metal and his best spod in addition to half the value of his houses standing in the Back Lane next to the Friars to be spent upon repairs at the convent 'on the next nede of'. Also in 1530 William Pakker of Boston charged his wife to pay 2s. 6d. yearly to the prior and convent of the White Friars 'for one obyte which I will be kepte there for ever for the soulys of John Thoms, Agnes and Jenet yys wytyes'. In 1531 Agnes Houson wished to be buried in the White Friars, and left the convent 10s., 'and the to syng a trental of massys for hyt. I bequeythe more to the sayd freres and there to remayn whyls it will indure a mazer of sylver and a brasse pot. To the yong freres of the sayd house a cowe'. Again in 1531 Richard Jefferyard ordained 'that Agnes my wyff do cause to be song for me and my father and mother and all my good frendes with all the soulys that I am bounde to praye for every Fryday duryng the space of a vere after foloyng by a frere a messe of Scala Celi. I will the day of my buyrrall that my wyff do cause to be sung for me xij messys of Scala Celi by xij freres'. Yet once more in 1531 Stephen Woodhouse required 'two trentals of St. Gregory to be sayd at the iii orders off freres for my souyle, my parents, consanguinity and affinitie, and all crystyn soules, by equalle deision, and they have every on of them vs'. Almost as a matter of course in 1532 Edward Bawtre, merchant of the Staple, set aside 20d. for 'every order of freys in Boston accompanyng my body to the church'. In 1532 also Edmund Burke was instructed 'at the Whyte Freys in Boston within the chappell of tow Ladye' and bequeathed to the convent after the deaths of his wife and son his house in Glassing Lane, 'yff the law will suffer it, and the shall kepe yerly on obbyt by note for my soule, my wyffye soule and all crieten soulys', adding for good measure 6s. 8d. for the repairation of their church. As late as 1534 Nicholas Crawthorne was expressing his wish to be buried in the church of the Boston Franciscan Friary.9

Yet even though a significant number of Boston testators looked to the friars, the majority still turned to prayers for the repose of their souls. In this decade, for example, Sir John Grant, who died without direct heirs in 1531, laid down in precise detail in his will very elaborate ceremonies to be performed for the health of his soul. He asked first for 'my body to be buryed in Boston churche of St. Botulphie, beside the grave of my father, and I bequeath to my mortuary that
that the lawe admittys'. Then after some rather perfurious legacies to cousins, he passed on to what clearly concerned him most.

I will be brought furthe the day of buryall in our Lady gyde with all the prestes belonging to the same gyde, and the ij parish prestes, and the chaunter, with all the quyndernems, the ij^, also all the prestes belonging to all the gyldes that I am brother in, with all the iij orders of freys. And on my vij day, and xxy day then I will have all our Lady prestes, the ij parish prestes, the chaunter and the quyndernems, St. Catharyne prest in Trinete prestes. The residue of my goods not gyffyn nor bestowed upon my buyrall day, vij day and xxy day, I gyff to Frethsyde Huynes, my cosyn, onely excepte iis iijid. that I bequest to Sr Robert Wyter, and one sherte clothe, he to pray for my soules and all cristen souls.10

These early sixteenth century wills demonstrate exactly how the guilds had come to amass such extensive property. In February 1523 George Howson provided that if his son died without heirs, he could spare it unsold, the house in which he then lived should 'remayn to the gyld of Sanct Peter with in the paryshe church of Sanct Botulph of Boston, yff they may lawfully take it, or ells it to be solde, and the mony thersoff to be disposed by his executors for our soulys, fathers, mothers, and other our benefactors and for ever more gift to the benefit of a priest to singe a mass for his soul, his wife's souls and all Christian souls in St. Mary's choir for a year or longer, if it could be afforded, and giving 1d. a week for a year to the anchorees, 4d. to every preacher who preached in the parish church for a year, praying for his soul and all Christian souls, 2d. to the parish priest every Sunday for a year similarly praying for his soul, and all Christian souls, and 26s. 8d. for the painting and gilding of St. Anthony's choir, the very wealthy mercer, John Leek, bestowed his vestments and other ornements upon the parish church 'to remayn ther as long as the wills may endure under the custody off the aldermen off the gyld off Saynt Peter or his deputys'. He had continued 'that all of Corpus Christi gyld have my landes in Leke and Leuerton, an ij garthyns lyeng in Boston upon the west syde off the water or havyn, and xvij. in mony, for the term of iij xx and xij yeres and, yff it may be soffyrd by the law, for ever, or ells att the ende off the sayd term yt to be solde be my executors or the executors off them, with thy condycion that the sayd gyld shall kepe an obbyt of my iij gildes, iijd. yerly for my soule, my wyffes soules, for the souls off my father and mother and all cristen soules'. Revealing even more about contemporary religious practices he willed 'that Saynt Peter gyld have my standing cuppe off siluer and gytte with the covering, and with this condycion, that the porperty off Mary Magdalene have the use of the Pencost and all leafer gyldes in the day of Corpus Cristi, so that sufficient secury be sett for it, that it shall be brought alway again at the same day or at night'. He finally ordained 'that a caddyll off xij pounds weight be kepte before the sepulcre at Ester yerly the space off x yeres'.

Another substantial Boston burgess, Thomas Murre in 1530 made bequests to Boston guilds on a similarly lavish scale. Besides conferring upon 'the bedmen of our Lady gyde in Boston xijd. in the weke a yere lasyng after my decease, wekyly to be payd', and 7d. upon the Guild for the Seven Martyrs in Boston, he went on to ask to 'be mayd a brother in Corpus Cristi gyde after my beryall, in payyng my dewetys as the custome of the gyld is. I gyff my iij housys and my lyttyn gyde, calld my layng place, to the alderman, chamberlains and cobrether of Corpus Cristi gyde for the term of xij years and xij, and for ever, iff it may be sufferyd by the lawe, beryng much hoolde for all cristen soules as the sayd alderman and cobrether and my executors may a gre uppyn'. If his children should die without direct descendents, Edward Bawtre instructed a distant relative, who would then become his chief beneficiary, to 'kepe an obbyt for me in Boston churche in St. Peter gyde to the value of iijd. yere'. This sort of attachment to the

guilds was certainly not confined to the wealthy; in 1529 Richard Quykerell contributed his mite, a mere 8d. to the Appostyll gyde in the churche of Boston for amendyng of ayrumentes', while in 1530 William Malteby left just 6d. to the Seven Martyrs' Guild.12

Some of these religious bequests may have owed a great deal to convention, others, like those of Leek and Gann, undoubtedly smacked of ostentatious display, but the wills nevertheless bear witness to the vitality of late mediaeval religious observance in the town. Only a year before the Reformation Parliament began passing the legislation which led inexorably to the break with Rome Eleanor Robynson of Boston, gentlewoman, arranged to have 'a prest to synge for me in Boston churche the space of six yeres, yff it may be borne'. Another Boston woman, Agnes Howson, equally oblivious of what the future held, two years later left an altar clothe 'to our Lady of Pletie of the Whyte Freys'. These sorts of bequests attest to a continuing belief in the efficacy of prayers for the dead and in the mediation of the Virgin Mary. The inhabitants of Boston would therefore seem to have been totally unprepared for the revolutionary religious changes of the latter part of the reign of Henry VIII. Their commitment to the old religious practices raises the question why they offered so little open resistance to the destruction of their customary services and acquiesced so apparently readily in the new religious ways. Perhaps in Boston, as Dr. Tanner has suggested may have been the case in Nore, the late mediaeval piety next to the impeding 'new religion' acted rather as its harbinger. Perhaps the contemporaries of George Howson, who had valued the Catholic Lenten preaching in the parish church, progressed spontaneously to an appreciation of the sermons of Protestant ministers. This is no more than conjecture. What cannot be denied is that Boston gained a real material advantage at the Reformation, full urban privileges for the very first time.13

The Reformation changes initiated by Parliament from 1529 appear to have had little immediate impact upon Boston. Henry VIII, increasingly dependent on Thomas Cromwell, at first directed his attack upon the papacy with the express purpose of procuring the annulment of his marriage to Katherine of Aragon. To judge from the surviving wills, the lay people of the town as elsewhere in England seem to have felt little devotion to a far distant pope. The second prong of the King's assault upon the church, the campaign against the papacy's most likely defenders in England, the religious orders, also had no local repercussions since Boston did not possess any of the friaries for which they were dissolved. Rumours that the king might turn his attention next to the goods of the parish churches, on the other hand, may well have alarmed the inhabitants. After the disturbances in Louth which precipitated the Pilgrimage of Grace, on 6 October 1536 some two thousand rebels came up to the walls of Boston. A party of townspeople made common cause with the Pilgrims, but the majority refused to rise and sought the aid of the loyal earl of Shrewsbury. Although the burgesses did not admit the Pilgrims into the town, they remained on the defensive for years afterwards. When Henry VIII visited the county in 1541 they considered it politic to present him with the substantial sum of £50, partly as a peace offering, but perhaps partly as an inducement for the priviliges they were hoping to secure.14

While the townspeople must have been conscious of the threat to their chantries and guilds, the dissolution of the four friaries constituted the only major change in Boston's religious institutions in the 1530s. Having witnessed the loss of the monasteries in the surrounding countryside, the inhabitants seem to have anticipated their confiscation and were witheld gifts to the friaries which they had still been making on a generous scale in the early 1530s. In January 1539 John Taverne, the musician, informed Cromwell that the priors and brethren of the Boston Dominicans, White Friars and Austrines had come to him and "piteously lamented ... their poverty, knowing not how to live till their houses be surrendered". "The devotion of the people is clean gone,"
he continued, ‘their [that is the convents'] plate and implements sold; so they have nothing left but the lead which (if I had not forbid it) they would have plucked down and sold, too’. The next month the blow fell. On 23 February Richard, Bishop of Dover, told Cromwell that he had taken to the king’s use the four convents of friars in Boston, ‘very profitable and of large personal service’. Thus the friars passed into the hands of Mr. Taverner and Mr. Johnys, the king’s servants, ‘with all the poor implements for his money’. He begged Cromwell to obtain for the friars ‘capacities’, that is licenses, to enable them to hold posts in the secular church.15

Unlike the monks and nuns granted pensions when their houses were closed, as mendicants the friars received no recompense at all on the dissolution of their convents. Consequently the commissioners did not need to list the members of the four friaries. In the city of York with its myriad small parish churches several friars secured employment as vicars or curates but Boston offered no such opportunities so the local friars had no alternative but to move elsewhere. Something in the region of forty friars, probably a conservative estimate, would have left Boston in 1539. The loss of the friaries also dramatically altered the ecclesiastical provision in the town: at a stroke the state had reduced the number of churches from five to, at all intents and purposes, for St. John’s was derelict for much of the century, one.

To the town as a whole, however, the impending destruction of the guilds must have seemed of far greater consequence than the loss of some of the friaries.16 It is clear from the registers of the fives great Boston guilds had in a symbolic, but none the less very real sense, represented the community in both the religious and the secular spheres. It is remarkable that Boston never gained formal borough status in the medieval period: a comparable new town, Hull, became an independent urban community in 1293 soon after its acquisition by the crown from the abbey of Mearux. Although Boston seems to have enjoyed a degree of burghal freedom from at least the thirteenth century, it never obtained a charter of incorporation and remained a scigniorial borough until the sixteenth century. In the high middle ages the crown had made grants either to the bailiffs of the manors into which the town was divided, the Richmond Fee to the east of the Witham, the Tattershall Fee and the de Crew, later the Roos Fee, to the west, together with the burgesses of Boston, or directly to the lords of the three manors. When, therefore, in the 1530s and early 1540s Protestants began attacking the idea of purgatory and the utility of prayers for the dead, and the crown proceeded to contemplate the nationalisation of all church lands and religious guilds, some forward looking Boston burgesses recognised the threat such a step would pose to their very existence as an urban entity. Exactly one year before the first commissioners began their valuation of all chantries throughout England Boston in 1545 secured its incorporation. The charter of Henry VIII vested the government of the town in a mayor and twelve aldermen together with a common council of eighteen chosen by the mayor and aldermen from the body of freemen. Immediately after the incorporation the borough purchased for £1,646 a substantial amount of guild property, including that of St. Mary’s Guild, of the Corpus Christi Guild, and the guilds of Holy Trinity, Saints Peter and Paul and St. George, as well as the manor of Boston, and the rectory and vicarage of the town. So when Edward VI in 1548 proceeded to dissolve the chantries the inhabitants of Boston had already procured to the town’s use much of the income which had previously gone to the guilds.

Not all of the property of the chantries and guilds came to the town, however. William Parker, Lord of Northorpe, Boston, acquired some of the land, intending to endow a hospital or almshouse in Boston. The scheme failed on his attainder whereupon his property reverted to the crown. In 1554 Mary I permitted the corporation to purchase these additional guild or ‘erection’ lands which enabled the corporation to re-establish the grammar school formerly maintained by St. Mary’s Guild. The hall of St. Mary’s Guild now became the town hall of the new corporation, an indication of the part the guild had played in the community life of Boston in the later middle ages. These developments marked a significant change in the balance of authority in the town. Whereas previously merchants may have used the guilds, especially St. Mary’s Guild, to achieve an influence in burgal matters, after 1545 the membership of the corporation began to govern the borough direct. The religious and secular symbiosis, so pronounced in the middle ages, however, survived the changes, though in a subtly different form. When in 1545 the corporation obtained the rectory of Boston from the king, the fabric of St. Botolph’s church together with the right of appointing the vicar passed to the town. Boston now had the potentiality of functioning as a miniature Zurich or Geneva and within a surprisingly short period of time some townspeople seem to have grasped the opportunity to promote the new religion. After Parliament had approved the introduction of an English liturgy in 1549 and the government of Protector Somerset had begun a national campaign to extirpate all remaining traces of Catholicism on 5 June 1550 Mr. Mayor, Mr. Felde, Mr. Wendon, Mr. Kyd and other aldermen resolved ‘to consider what should be done about the whitening of the church, the high choir and St. Peter’s’.17

The whitewashing of the churches might well indicate little more than outward compliance with the directives of the central government, and churchwardens’ accounts reveal that all over England communities were obeying the laws passed by Parliament, but in Boston by the 1530s there are signs that some of the inhabitants were beginning to make a considered commitment to Protestantism. In his recent account of the Reformation in the county Dr. Hodgett believed that Lincolnshire towns did no more than follow the requirements of the central government, enforcing Protestantism under Edward VI, reverting to Catholicism under Mary, and then under Elizabeth resuming the previous course; that at least a minority of Boston burgesses had adopted the new religious ways by the accession of Mary. Perhaps the sermons that they had been accustomed to hearing both in St. Botolph’s and in the friaries had prepared them for Protestant preaching in the reigns of Henry VIII and Edward VI. Before the dissolution of the Dominical chancery in 1536 one Boston friar demonstrated his reforming sympathies by denouncing idolatry as the great rood from St. Botolph’s was being burnt in the Market Place on Cromwell’s orders on 7 September 1538, ‘which [sermon]’, the vicarage was informed, ‘hath done much good and hath turned many men’s hearts....’ Even more significantly, three university Protestantants had come to Boston with William Tyndale and complained that Thomas Garret, a Lincolnshire man and a graduate, who had helped create a Protestant cell at Wolsey’s new college at Oxford by bringing down from London Tyndale’s translation of the New Testament and numerous Lutheran books, was preaching in the county in 1536. A member of St. Mary’s Guild, Garret seems then to have served briefly as master of the guild’s school before returning to London where he died for his faith in 1540. John Taverner’s connection with Boston lasted much longer. He had been a musician at Tattershall College before Wolsey in 1526 recruited him as choirmaster of his new foundation at Oxford. Taverner met Garret at Cardinal’s College, and hid some of his heretical books in his room. In 1530 he withdrew from the university, and by 1537 had settled permanently in Boston where he married a local widow, and joined the Corpus Christi Guild, acting as its treasurer from 1541 until its dissolution. On the town’s incorporation in February 1545 he was elected one of its town aldermen, though he lived only a few months longer to exercise his newly acquired authority. John Foxe, the martyrologist, also converted to Protestantism at Oxford, may have been another of the agents for change in his birthplace. Many years after he had left Boston he dedicated in 1550 one of his books, An Instruction of Christian Faith, to his stepfather, Richard Melton. In addition it is possible that the influence of the emphatically Protestant Katherine,
Duchess of Suffolk extended from Spilsby as far south as Boston. By the mid century this evangelism had resulted in the establishment of a Protestant group in the town.18

In November 1561 Melchior Smith took up his appointment as vicar of Holy Trinity in Hull, invited there by 'the earliest and importunate suitor of theme of Hull who sent for him once, twice or thrice by one Mr. Parker, then chamberlaine of Hull'. A section of the town relished the constant preaching of their new, very Protestant, incumbent, but a conservative faction, disliking his religion, brought a case against him in the northern High Commission court; they alleged that he confined his ministry largely to the delivery of sermons, that he failed to observe some of the rubrics of the Book of Common Prayer, and refused to wear the surplice. In the course of their examination it was asked whether he had lived for three years in Boston and for four years in Burton on Trent, near where he had been born. The chronology is unclear, but the interrogatories imply that Smith had been ministering in Boston at least since Elizabeth's accession. His opponents then went on to insinuate that he had sown discord by his preaching in Boston as he was now doing in Hull. At this juncture Smith angrily retorted that if he had been hated in Boston he wold wish suche hatred to follow him in evere place, for some of themme offered unto this respondent to be taken of these landes during the lif natural of this respondent vii, viii, viiij., some iij., some xviij., some xvs. And somme more and somme lesse according to that abilities. Yea, they did offer him at Burton besides the premises a paten [perhaps he meant a contract] of there scale, there love was suche towards him that willingely they wold here none preach but this respondent.

Smith did not reveal precisely what doctrines he had been spreading in Boston that so attracted his congregation but subsequently admitted that when he had been briefly in Burton on Trent he 'taught the children of his freindes Calvyns Cathachism and David Psalms in verses [most probably the new Protestant metrical version of Sternhold and Hopkins'] in the common scoles, whereat he beleived certayne Papistes were offended, but contention was there none'.19

Obscure though this incident is, it proves that some Boston inhabitants by the beginning of Elizabeth's reign and perhaps earlier had opted so decisively for Protestantism that they were ready to maintain a Protestant preacher by voluntary contributions, as had also happened in Coventry where Protestanism had definitely continued in secret in the Marian period. In the second half of the sixteenth century in Boston as in the first the mayor and aldermen looked to the outward performance of religion as an expression of corporate unity. While Mary still remained queen they had resolved in 1558 that all the aldermen of this borrowe shall at all tymes in the churche sit in Our Lady's quere with the maior, or in the high quere on principall feastes when the maior shall set ther, upon such paynes as in the howe shall be set and taxed. And all the comen councell of this towne to sit in the churche in St. Peter's quere, on the north side thereof every holyday from tym to tyme on paynes as is set downe, and sometime on paynes as may arise to walke in the churche to the ill example of others. The alteration in religion on Elizabeth's accession merely reinforced the corporation's general attitude. In November 1561 the mayor and burgesses ruled that every holy day the aldermen should attend church, sitting in Our Lady's choir, with the Common Councill in St. Peter's choir; and imposed a fine for non-attendance of 12d. for the aldermen and of 8d. for members of the Common Council.20

The transfer of the rectory of St. Botolph's to the corporation in 1545 yet further strengthened the control of the urban elite over the town's religion, so evident in the management of the five great religious guilds in the medieval period. Boston as before continued under the jurisdiction of the bishop of Lincoln, but with a sympathetic bishop, such as the former Marian exile, Nicholas Bullingham, administering the diocese Protestantism seems to have developed without hindrance upon the foundations laid by Melchior Smith and his lay supporters. As early as December 1560 William Moore, butcher of Boston, in his will witnessed, and perhaps written by the vicar, William Fyske, left his soul to Almighty God, his Father, hoping by the blood of the Saviour, Jesus Christ, to be of the number of those elected to perpetual salvation. Thereafter about half of the town's testators adopted a similarly explicitly Protestant preamble. In 1567 William Sherman and in 1571 Thomas Bowte commissioned funeral sermons at a cost of 3s. 4d., while in 1570 Richard Robinson, the last of his fathers, bequeathed to pay 3s. 4d. yearly to the Boston poor for ever around the anniversary of his death. From time to time the Assembly raised subscriptions for additional preaching and erected special pewing for the magistrates in front of the pulpit in St. Botolph's. In addition it exerted its energies in the enforcement of godliness. Every year during 1557 the inhabitants had set up permanent or temporary chantry chaplains Alderman Henry Foxe, perhaps a kinsman of the martyrlogist, in his will made in the first decade of Elizabeth's reign established the post of borough or mayor's chaplain. In 1568 the Assembly selected James Kay as the first lecturer 'to serve the mayor and aldermen and other persons in the city, in addition to his meat and drink, which he had at the mayor's table, a stipend of £10 annually. Twelve years later in 1580 the corporation decided that the borough preacher besides delivering a funeral sermon at the burial of all aldermen, common councillors and their wives should preach one Friday in each month throughout the year and every Friday in Lent.21

Possession of the town living, which at the turn of the century the corporation augmented with £20 a year from the newly purchased appropriation of the parishion of Skirbeck, enabled the borough to act as a buffer between its vicars and subsequent bishops of Lincoln less sympathetic to Protestant deviations than Nicholas Bullingham. James Worship, M.A. Holland's successor and in 1583 refused to concede that the Book of Common Prayer contained nothing contrary to the word of God and was suspended from his living for a time. He incurred the censure of the High Commission again in 1590 for having with some of the townspeople taken down the loot in the parish church where the great organ had formerly stood, but he died, in 1592, still vicar of Boston. Of like mind with Worship, Thomas Wool, the incumbent at the accession of James I, appeared before diocesan officials 'for not wearing the surplice nor signinge with the signe of the crosse in baptisme'. 'Sithence the visitation', they complained to the bishop, 'notice hath been given to the courte that the surplas hath bene tennned, and he in soluto, and of his seatt, maketh it. 1593 refused to set it on'. Wool later formally declared his conformity, but the bishop did not
require him to subscribe. When the corporation in 1612 presented John Cotton to St. Botolph's Bishop Barlow contemplated presenting his institution on the grounds that Cotton was too young to have responsibility over such a large and fractious congregation, though in the end he gave way and confirmed his appointment. A mere four years later episcopal officers charged Cotton with nonconformity, but he escaped punishment through the efforts of one of his parishioners, Thomas Leverett. Thereafter Cotton ‘enjoyed rest’ in Boston until 1621 when the bishop enjoined him to kneel during the communion service. Yet again he evaded complying. During this time of relative tranquility Cotton and the godly members of his congregation ‘entered into a covenant with the Lord, that each should not separate from the other, to find in the Lord in the purity of his worship’. To preserve this purity from corruption by Armenian innovations in 1632 Cotton with a group of his parishioners sailed to America to found a second Boston in New England.23

The century between the calling of the Reformation Parliament and the emigration of Cotton and his lay supporters to the New World would have first sights seem to have been a period of great disjunction in Boston’s religious history. Yet the changes caused by the transition from a religion of sacraments to a religion of the word masked some very real continuities. During the whole course of the sixteenth century the town’s religion embodied the corporate values of the community. There is no sign that any of the inhabitants of Boston had felt imperative to change religious allegiance. Changes initiated by the central government in the 1530s, but that they accepted the changes so relatively quickly seems to have been brought about by two quite different factors, a pecuniary stake in the new regime and the absence of substantial conservative opposition. The incorporation of Boston in 1545 meant that from henceforth the leading men of the town had an entrenched interest in the status quo. The dissolution of the friaries, the chantries and religious guilds brought about an exodus of around sixty priests. Since Boston, like Hull, had no livings to offer its dispensessed religious it thereafter encountered little clerical resistance to Protestant reform. From 1568 the town had its vicar and mayor’s chaplain, together with the grammar school master and usher, both of whom might also be in orders; a spectacular decline from the ecclesiastical establishment of 1530. This reduction, however, meant that the much more academic clergy could speak with a new authority and a single voice. The town fathers may have decided for ‘godly religion’ as early as the latter years of the reign of Henry VIII and, at least to the outward eye, working in harmony with their ministers, they had created their Christian commonwealth by the accession of Charles I. However great the theological revolution, religion in Boston over the course of the century remained the chief vehicle for the public expression of corporate values, the community at prayer.

NOTES
1. I should like to thank Dr. Jeremy Goldberg, Dr. Sarah Rees-Jones and Mr. Derek Lynam for very helpful discussions on late medieval and early modern English towns.
8. Lincoln Wills 1505-1530, Lincoln Record Society, 10 (1818), pp.105-6, 170, 189-91.
13. Lincoln Wills 1530-1532, pp.100-01; Lincoln Wills 1530-1532, p.150.
17. V.C.H. Lincoln, II, p.451; Thompson, Boston, p.66; Assembly Minutes, p.5.
21. Lincolnshire Archives Office L.C.C. Wills 1565 f. 198 (1960); 1567 f. 490 (Sherman); 1570 f. 1528 (Robinson); 1571 f. 112 (Bowdler); Assembly Minutes, p.35; Rev. J. R. H. Johnson, ed., Corporation Minutes, p.75.
22. Assembly Minutes, pp.50, 77; Bailey, ed., Corporation Minutes, pp.75, 131, 137, 177.