

The Puritan Tradition in Southwold, Suffolk in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries.

Peter Razzell

On a Sunday in 1722, Daniel Defoe visited the small coastal town of Southwold in Suffolk, and wrote the following:

I was surprised to see an extraordinary large church, capable of receiving five or six thousand people, and but twenty-seven in it besides the parson and the clerk, but at the same time the meeting house of the Dissenters was full to the very doors, having, as I guessed from six to eight hundred people in it.¹

How this situation came about is revealed by the number of Anglican baptisms in the period between 1620 and 1729.²

Table 1: Number of Baptisms in Southwold, 1620-1739.

Anglican Baptisms	
1620-29	654
1630-39	736
1640-49	442
1650-59	16
1660-69	28
1670-79	34
1680-89	210
1690-99	181
1700-09	180
1710-19	40
1720-29	64
Non-Conformist Baptisms	
1730-39	147

The reduction in the number of Anglican baptisms occurred from 1640 onwards, at the beginning of the English civil war. There was a slight increase in the period 1680-1709, before a further reduction from 1710 onwards. The overwhelming number of religious independents in 1722 was the result of a long puritan tradition in the town and county, including during the civil war period.³ The town's religious history has been summarized by the Southwold Museum website as follows:

Suffolk had for long been known as Puritan country. Chief Justice Wray, in 1556 wrote that 'there were no counties in England so far out of order as Norfolk and Suffolk, the most of them wilful Puritans ... varying in all points from the Book of Common Prayer.' Southwold had a succession of Puritan vicars and Robert Selby had been reported to his Bishop for failing to wear a surplice, anathema to Puritans. The next incumbent was Christopher Youngs, 1611-1626, 'a preacher of God's word', whose children left for New England as a result of religious

¹ Daniel Defoe, *Tour Through England*, Online, Letter 1, Part2: Harwich and Suffolk.

² This data was kindly provided by Andrew Wallington-Smith of the Southwold Museum.

³ For an account of the puritan influence in the town from the early seventeenth century see John Browne, *History of Congregationalism and Memorials of the Churches in Norfolk and Suffolk* (1877), pp. 433-437.

persecution ... The Town Council paid for the employment of Puritan lecturers, one of whom, Mr Woodward, was ‘... silenced at the Restoration.’ And yet, the congregation at Southwold, ‘obdurately inclined to dissent’, persisted in their preference for freer forms of worship and an emphasis on preaching.⁴

Southwold was the home of a number of puritan emigrants to the Massachusetts Bay Colony in the 1630s, notably a party of eighteen assembled under Reverend Young, which travelled in the *Mary Ann* in 1637. Richard Ibrook, born in Southwold and a former bailiff of the town, emigrated to Hingham, Massachusetts.⁵

In 1645 the High Steward of the town was Miles Corbet, an active participant in the parliamentary cause. He was ‘sent to Ireland by Cromwell in the 1650s, to “settle” affairs there ... and his was the final signature on the death warrant of King Charles I ... On 19 April 1662, with others, he was taken to Tyburn, where he was hung, drawn and quartered.’⁶

One of the leading townsmen, Thomas Postle, who was a merchant, grocer and draper, refused the Oath of Supremacy when elected Bailiff [Mayor] in 1662, and ‘was promptly removed from office. But he served as Bailiff twice more in 1671 and 1690, and most of his fellow councillors shared his religious sympathies.’⁷ In addition fourteen other townsmen also refused the oath and were expelled from the council.⁸

The town shared the radical history of East Anglia, particularly in coastal and urban areas. This was a part of the North Sea trading community, trading with Holland, Belgium, Iceland and other protestant communities on the continent. Southwold’s economy during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries was largely based on the fishing industry, which involved exports to the continent, as well as Iceland and London. It had acquired a charter in the fifteenth century which established a corporation, in spite of a relatively small population which fluctuated between 1,000 and 2,000 people. Its prosperity had been enhanced by the failure of Dunwich had been a trading port second the only London during the medieval period. This had resulted from the silting up of its harbour, which eventually also affected Southwold.

The town had a population of about 2,000 people in 1654.⁹ The economy of the town was revealed by an account of businesses affected by the great fire which occurred in 1659. According to Thomas Gardner these included ‘Fish-Houses, Malt Houses, Tuckle Houses, Brew-Houses, and other Out-Houses. Also the greatest Part of the moveable Goods, Nets, and Tackling, of the Inhabitants, for their fishing Trade at Sea, and all their Corn, Malt, Barley, Fish, Coals, and other Merchandizes, Goods, and Commodities.’¹⁰ A description of the economy in the late 1660s concluded that ‘the chief business of the Town is for Sea affairs ... The chief trade is to Iceland and the North-sea for Codd; they also have a Coal-trade, and a great passage trade to London with cheeses and butter; they have also something to do in Ship-building, and refining of salt.’¹¹

Why did Southwold become a centre of intense puritanism? The answer can only be found in the context of general developments during the civil war in England. Clarendon concluded that the chief opposition to the king lay in ‘great towns and corporations ... not only the citizens of London ... but also the greatest part of all cities

⁴ The heading of Christianity in the Southwold Museum Website.

⁵ *Wikipedia Southwold*.

⁶ L,M, West, *This Fearful Thing*, 2021, pp. 246, 247.

⁷ Simon Loftus, *An Illustrated History of Southwold*, 2018, p. 15.

⁸ Thomas Gardner, *Historical Account of Dunwich, Blythburgh and Soutwold*, 1754, pp. 194, 195.

⁹ Gardner, *Historical*, p.212.

¹⁰ *Ibid*, p. 194.

¹¹ Loftus, *An Illustrated*, p. 14.

and market towns of England.’¹² The role of tradesmen in the civil war was confirmed by Parker, in his *Discourse of Ecclesiastical Polotie* published in 1671: ‘For ‘tis notorious that there is not any sort of people so inclinable to seditious practices as the trading part of a nation.’¹³

Part of the reason for the puritanism of the trading classes was their independence from manorial control. In nucleated villages in fielden areas ‘manorial customs [were] fairly rigid ... the labourers outlook deeply imbued with the prevalent preconceptions of church and manor house ... In isolated hamlets ... the customs of the manor were sometime vague or difficult to enforce ... In these areas [the population was] more prone to pick up new ways and ideas.’¹⁴ Geographical isolation was an important factor in generating an independent culture. According to Southwold Museum website, ‘Southwold has long tradition of independence which has inspired fierce loyalty, independence even from the crown ... the town’s location is characterised ... by the waterways that surround it on every side. Almost an island ...’¹⁵

According to the Compton Census of 1676 dissenters were ‘mostly found in towns with a strong puritan tradition, in centres of the cloth industry, and in places where the social and residential structures created conditions favourable to religious individualism.’¹⁶ The Evans list of English dissenters made in about 1718, indicated that 63 per cent of Presbyterians, 69 per cent of Independents, 58 of Particular Baptists and 61 per cent of General Baptists worshipped in cities, boroughs or market towns.’¹⁷ One contemporary account claimed that ‘the growth of Puritanism ... was by means if the City of London ... by reason of its universall trade throughout the kingdome, with its commodities conveying and deriving this civil contagion to all our cities and corporations.’¹⁸

The puritan divine Richard Baxter explained why tradesmen were attracted to puritanism: ‘among merchants, mercers, drapers and other corporation tradesmen ... there is usually more knowledge and religion than among the poor enslaved husbandman. I may well say *enslaved*: for more are so servilely dependent ... as they are on their landlords. They dare not displease them lest they turn them out of their houses, or increase their rents.’¹⁹ Baxter claimed that the reason that tradesmen and artisans were such strong supporters of Parliament was as follows: ‘The Reasons which the Party themselves gave was Because (they say) the Tradesmen have a Correspondency with London, and so are grown to be far more Intelligent sort of Men.’²⁰

Southwold was part of East Anglia, which historically was noted for its independence and puritanism. As a fishing and trading town, it was isolated from any manorial control, and traded with the Continent of Europe and London, It was a strong supporter of the puritan movement from the civil war period onwards, both supporting Parliament, and establishing a long history of religious dissent.

¹² Peter Razzell, *Essays in Historical Sociology*, 2021, p. 102.

¹³ Razzell, *Essays*, p. 103.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, p. 67.

¹⁵ Southwold Museum Website

¹⁶ Razzell, *Essays*, p. 111.

¹⁷ Michael Watts, *The Dissenters*, p. 285.

¹⁸ Razzell, *Essays*, p. 105.

¹⁹ *Ibid*, p. 113.

²⁰ *Ibid*, p. 103.