

The Puritans' dream was to overturn the government of the bishops and rebuild the Church of England on the Presbyterian model of Calvin's Geneva or John Knox's Scotland.

The movement was strong in Northamptonshire: it has been said that "there was no county in England where Puritanism gained such a stronghold, or made such an open demonstration of its objects and methods".

In 1571, Puritan influence was strong in Northampton with regular religious exercises known as "prophesyings", and for a century the town was a Puritan hotbed. This may well have been because there was an old strain of opposition to religious orthodoxy which went back to the Lollards. It certainly had a lot to do with the connection between the spread of new religious ideas and the growth of trade; the great fairs in London and the provincial towns were ideal settings for the dissemination of ideas from the continent.

Puritanism was encouraged by Sir William Cecil, Bishop Edmund Scrambler of Peterborough, George Carleton of Overstone and Sir Richard Knightley of Fawsley.

Northampton became a nursery of 'Independency' or Congregationalism (the religion of Oliver Cromwell). Archbishop Laud remarked, "In no other county in England was there probably the same extreme defiance of rubrics, order and doctrine, as was the case of some of the parishes in Northants". Greenall comments that this was especially the case in All Saints, Northampton.

Extracts and summaries from the book "A History of Northamptonshire and the Soke of Peterborough". R.L.Greenall 1979

[1] For further details refer to a Northamptonshire Record Society Book 'Puritans In the Diocese of Peterborough' by W.J.Shiels [Northampton 1979] ISBN 0 901275 409

ROOTS AND SHOOTS!

This is the theme of this series of simple leaflets that we have prepared to further strengthen the rising tide of prayer and action in Carey's Patch.

Today, we are praying in faith for a move of God in our communities and churches tomorrow! How many of us realise or know of the ways and the people through whom God has moved in this area's yesterdays?

*"Isaac reopened the wells that had been dug in the time of his father Abraham" Gen 26v18
What God has done before, He can do again.*

We want to celebrate our heritage in Him by reflecting on the impact made on society in past generations through the translators, hymn-writers, teachers and emancipators raised up in this area.

Written by various local Christians with knowledge of their subject, these leaflets will remind us of what God has raised up in Carey's Patch through faithful servants in previous generations.

These leaflets are made freely available to the Body of Christ.

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a company limited by guarantee, registered in England & Wales No. 3505690

Registered Office: 2a Glanmor Road, Llanelli, Carmarthenshire SA15 2LU, U.K.

Registered Charity No. 1069419

ROOTS AND SHOOTS!



**No: 7 THE PURITAN INFLUENCE IN
NORTHANTS [1540-1610]**

***One of a series of leaflets
highlighting our local Christian
heritage***



Nations

WELLINGBOROUGH

A NETWORK OF INDIGENOUS MISSION MOVEMENTS

“Puritans were the hotter sort of Protestants”

Percival Wibum

This was a local vicar's comment about his friends who included wealthy farmers, schoolteachers and other churchmen. These friends were committed to applying biblical, evangelical teaching to the life of their communities, in order to establish godliness of thought and lifestyle. They wanted to root out 'Romanist superstition and heresy' for they desired a purity of faith and life, as preached by John Calvin in Geneva -to bring the Kingdom of God to their country.

Men like Dr Dod of Fawsley, who, with the strong support of wealthy neighbours, the Knightley family of Fawsley near Daventry, preached and wrote 'tracts' that had national influence, upsetting bishops and Queen Elizabeth herself.

Thomas Brown, founder of the Brownists [unfavourably commented upon by Shakespeare in "Twelfth Night"] is commemorated in St Giles' churchyard, Northampton. Brown's influence on those who emigrated to America encouraged them to keep their religious freedom; these emigrants we remember as the Pilgrim Fathers.

However, there were dozens of less well known men who preached reforming sermons, especially on market days in local market towns like Northampton, Oundle and Kettering. They spread the gospel of godliness in local communities, much to the concern of the Bishop of Peterborough and some local leaders.

Northamptonshire's closeness to the hotbeds of reforming groups - the universities of Oxford, Cambridge and the Inns of Court in London - meant local landowners could appoint likeminded men to local parish churches and as tutors and schoolteachers. These men drew together in the main towns to encourage one another, disciple each other and keep pushing forward their views at 'prophesyings'. The authorities viewed this as having a church within a church and saw these men as a threat; especially when there were proposals to have lay elders and deacons to promote godly teaching and life in some parishes. Some

Roman Catholic landowners, like the Treshams of Rothwell, reacted strongly and became involved in the Gunpowder Plot [1605]. Most of the populace though, were little influenced by these 'hotter Protestants' unless they had experienced the impact of Puritan teaching in their local parish.

Bishop Scrambler was initially sympathetic and encouraged them but later tried to curb the disturbances that the doctrinal teachings of these reformers caused. On some occasions, Puritan politicians, like the Earl of Leicester, would intervene. The Bishop's problems increased in times of crisis -bad harvests and even an earthquake prompted the Puritans to call for repentance, prayer and fasting at their market day services. When Puritan clergy were deprived of their appointments they often remained in the locality or moved to an area nearby as schoolteachers. Local Puritans used such men as teachers of their children, to bring them up in the fear and nurture of God's word. One thing the Bishop did have to acknowledge was that the Puritan parishes were outstanding for pastoral care, standards of behaviour and diligence of preaching and teaching.

Northampton was at the heart of these activities with several Puritan clergy in the town, including at All Saints and St Giles. Close at hand in Weston Favell, Hardingstone and Collingtree were more like-minded brethren who met for the 'prophesyings' at All Saints. Along the Nene valley at Earls Barton, Whiston and Doddington were more Puritan leaders and Whiston was a focus of activity [and concern for opponents] because Isabel Catesby, a local landowner, promoted meetings. Puritans who were in parishes with 'superstitious clergy' would ride over to Whiston to receive communion and teaching from Percival Wibum. Eleven out of the fifteen market towns had Puritan preachers who used their strategic position to preach biblical truth and lifestyle. There were also dozens of parishes across the county where godly clergy and landowners promoted these doctrines. Even though there were internal disagreements between different Puritans who held

varying understandings of scripture, all united to emphasise the need for real change based upon an evangelical interpretation. This love for gospel truth and godliness of life enriched the local churches and meant that families were brought up to value what the Puritans had grasped and struggled to establish. The Independents, the 'children of Puritanism', are evidence of this when at Castle Hill Chapel in Northampton, 1695, the following covenant was made -
'We, this church of Christ, whose names are underwritten, having given up ourselves to the Lord and to one another according to the will of God, do promise and covenant, in the presence of God, to walk together in all the laws and ordinances of Christ, according to the rules of his gospel".

Shiels [1] records that it was to this congregation that Philip Doddridge, who was encouraged in his youth by Hugh Clarke, a grandson of the Puritan minister of Oundle, was called in 1729. Doddridge personified the continuation and development of the evangelical! biblical tradition and life within Northamptonshire.

We owe a great debt to these men and women who, inspired by the Holy Spirit, seeking truth and applying it to lifestyle, built on the influence of Wycliffe's Lollard preachers and became increasingly influential in Northamptonshire. This influence was also felt in London and then over in America in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The Puritans left 'a good deposit in many towns and villages where people searched the scriptures, listened to biblical preaching, catechised their families and were willing to be called to account for their commitment. The influence and inheritance of these men and women was notable and prepared the way for later evangelical Anglican and Non-Conformist preachers, evangelists and missionaries.

The preaching, personal discipling and calls for repentance with prayer and fasting of the Puritans are of timeless significance and remain a challenge in the 21st century.