

THE PROPHESYING MOVEMENT IN KENTISH TOWNS DURING THE 1570s

PETER CLARK

Provincial towns played an important sometimes leading rôle in the propagation of radical Protestant truths in sixteenth-century England, through the example of their godly citizens, the teaching of their schoolmasters, and the sermons of civic preachers and lecturers (the latter often preaching on market days to townspeople and villagers from the adjoining countryside).¹ In the 1560s and 1570s towns were also the venue for those conferences of clergy frequently with lay audiences, which were known as prophesyings. Prophesying meetings were held in many county and market towns in southern England and were, potentially at least, a powerful vehicle for Church reform.² Unfortunately, they have 'left few traces in the formal ecclesiastical records'. Our most detailed information is derived from the articles which were drawn up to regulate conference proceedings. So far only two or three sets of articles have been published (for Norwich, Northamptonshire and Hertfordshire).³ The articles printed below, which were found in an Elizabethan register of the Canterbury church courts, relate to three separate conferences held in east Kent.⁴ The first conference was held at Sandwich for Sandwich and Dover deaneries; the second met at Ashford for Lympne and Charing deaneries; and the third alternated between Faversham and Sittingbourne and served Ospringe and Sittingbourne deaneries. The articles are particularly

¹ P. Clark and P. Slack, *English Towns in Transition*, 1976, 150-1; W. J. Sheils, 'Religion in Provincial Towns', in F. Heal and R. O'Day, (Eds.), *Church and Society in England Henry VIII to James I*, 1977, 156-176.

² P. Collinson, *The Elizabethan Puritan Movement*, 1967, esp. 168 *et seq.*; see also L. J. Trinterud, (Ed.), *Elizabethan Puritanism*, 1971, 191 *et seq.*; P. McGrath, *Papists and Puritans under Elizabeth I*, 1967, 146 *et seq.*; S. E. Lehmborg, 'Archbishop Grindal and the Prophesyings', *Historical Magazine of the Protestant Episcopal Church*, xxxiv (1965), 87-145.

³ Collinson, *op. cit.*, 168; Trinterud, *op. cit.*, 199-201; R. M. Serjeantson, *A History of the Church of All Saints, Northampton*, 1901, 106-08; J. Strype, *Annals of the Reformation*, 1824, II(i), 472 *et seq.*

⁴ Canterbury Cathedral Library (CCL), Z.5.1, fol. 166v-167r, 169r-171r. On fol. 164v-166r are copies of the prophesying articles for Buckinghamshire and Eye (in Suffolk).

interesting since they show that prophesyings were functioning in several Kent towns during Matthew Parker's archiepiscopate (unlike his successor Edmund Grindal, Parker is usually regarded as an opponent of the movement). The east Kent articles also offer data, including the names of participants, which is absent from other articles.⁵

The east Kent conferences were apparently inaugurated in May 1572 and their organization was broadly similar to that which we find elsewhere.⁶ Proceedings were supervised by godly moderators who chose the speakers and a scriptural text for each meeting. At the conference, held in the church of the host town, the speakers expounded on the set text before a gathering of neighbouring clergy, probably watched by local laity. This was followed by a private session for clergy alone, at which the text was further discussed, while the moderators corrected and reprimanded the ideas and behaviour of wayward or ignorant clergy. The articles indicate however procedural differences between conferences. The Ashford meeting, for instance, seems to have dispensed with the regulation found at other prophesyings (in and outside Kent), that participants should formally submit and subscribe to the conference articles.⁷ Even more interesting, the Ashford articles omit the provision agreed at the other east Kent meetings which allowed recalcitrant clergy to be referred to the diocesan.

Who attended the east Kent conferences? We can identify three main groups of clergy from the conference lists. Firstly, there were those whom the Sandwich articles called 'the inferior sort' – clergy who were not learned enough to speak at meetings, but who were required to write out their views on the set text for examination and correction by the moderators. Among them were several members of the Ashford meeting, such as George Baker, the non-graduate curate of Ruckinge in traditionalist Romney Marsh.⁸ The second group of clergy appearing at the east Kent conferences were moderate, 'official' Protestants, in some cases men associated with the diocesan administration. One example was Simon Clerke, the vicar of Milton-next-Sittingbourne and a moderator at the Faversham/Sittingbourne

⁵ For a survey of the east Kent deaneries and their parishes in 1563, see British Library (BL), Harleian MS.594, fol. 63–84; according to this the deaneries covered by prophesyings were the most populous in the diocese. The only striking omission from the list of prophesying centres was Canterbury: but in 1572 the city was badly riven by religious factionalism among the magistrates (e.g., CCL: JQ 1572, 1573; AC 2, fol. 296 *et seq.*).

⁶ Collinson, *op. cit.*, 174–75.

⁷ Serjeantson, *op. cit.*, 106; Strype, *op. cit.*, 476; CCL, Z.5.1., fol. 164v.

⁸ For religious conservatism at Ruckinge: A. Hussey, 'Archbishop Parker's Visitation, 1569', *Home Counties Magazine*, v (1903), 115.

exercise. A native of Rutland, Clerke had become vicar of Milton about 1560 and subsequently acquired the extra living of Murston and the privileged office of a Six Preacher at Canterbury cathedral. Thomas Taylor, the vicar of Faversham and another of the moderators at this conference, was also a conformist.⁹ The third group of clergy attending the meetings was more radical. Thomas Turpin, the rector of Crundale and a member of the Sandwich prophesying, had been a Marian exile, and was now an active nonconformist in the Dover area.¹⁰ Roger Newman from Westwell, who attended the Ashford exercise, was another former exile whose brother had died as a martyr under Mary.¹¹ William Calthorpe, the vicar of Sittingbourne, had taken his B.A. in 1567–68 and M.A. in 1571 from St. John's College, Cambridge, then caught up in a wave of Presbyterian enthusiasm under the leadership of Thomas Cartwright; Calthorpe's own ministry at Sittingbourne was notorious for his blatant nonconformity.¹² Other radicals participating in the east Kent prophesyings included John Ingram, Thomas Pausson, William Watts and John Pickard (who had recently succeeded the quasi-Presbyterian Edward Dering at Pluckley).¹³

Both the membership and organization of these conferences suggest that they were the product, at least in part, of active lobbying by radical Protestant ministers in Canterbury diocese. There may also have been an urban initiative. All the conference towns were leading centres of Puritanism in Elizabethan Kent. By the early 1570s their magistrates were actively enforcing a Puritan ethic, the suppression of dancing, vice and drunkenness, and the preservation of the sanctity of the English Sunday. They were also increasingly concerned with propagating the Word in the more conservative villages of their market region, with which they had expanding contact through the medium of internal trade.¹⁴ Urban support for prophesyings was buttressed by the sympathetic attitude of local Protestant gentry, some of whom had close ties with the conference towns.¹⁵ By the early 1570s many

⁹ J. Venn and J. A. Venn, *Alumni Cantabrigienses: 10 1751, 1922–27*, I, 346; W. H. Frere (Ed.), *Registrum Matthaei Parker*, Canterbury and York Soc., 1928–33, 388, 594; J. I. Daeley, 'The Episcopal Administration of Mathew Parker, Archbishop of Canterbury', unpublished Ph.D. thesis, University of London, 1967, 401.

¹⁰ C. H. Garrett, *The Marian Exiles*, 1938, 316; Daeley *op. cit.*, 279 *et seq.*

¹¹ Frere, *op. cit.*, 832; BL, Harleian MS, 416, fol. 123–24.

¹² Venn and Venn, *op. cit.*, I, 284; CCL: Z.3.11, fol. 36v; Y.4.3, fol. 91.

¹³ Venn and Venn, *op. cit.*, III, 358; Daeley, *op. cit.*, 279 *et seq.*, 302 *et seq.*

¹⁴ For a general account of Kentish Puritanism at this time see P. Clark, *English Provincial Society: Religion, Politics and Society in Kent 1500–1640*, 1977, ch.v. Sandwich had a radical Protestant tradition going back to the 1530s. The wider evangelical function of the host town was particularly evident at Northampton (Serjeantson, *op. cit.*, 105–6).

¹⁵ Sittingbourne, for instance, was dominated by the Puritan William Cromer, of Tunstall.

Kentish gentry – and other laity – were becoming anxious at the limited progress of the Protestant recovery in the county. While the previous decade had witnessed a general advance against Catholic positions in some areas, too many Catholic gentry, too many strongholds of ignorance (both lay and clerical), remained unconverted. Such anxiety was compounded by the Papal excommunication of the Queen in 1570, and the growing threat of foreign invasion (with east Kent particularly vulnerable). The rôle of the prophesying meeting as a vehicle for godly discussion, for the propagation of the Word among local clergy and laity, and for the correction of ‘blind’ priests was clearly invaluable in the struggle against Romanism and ignorance.

As elsewhere, it seems likely that there was some degree of official diocesan sanction for the east Kent conferences. In Rochester diocese we know that Bishop Edmund Freke backed similar meetings about this time.¹⁶ For Canterbury diocese there is no direct evidence of episcopal approval but the attendance of orthodox ministers, the arrangement (in two cases) for handing recalcitrant clergy over to the diocesan, and the entry of the articles in a diocesan register (along with copies of articles for Buckinghamshire and Eye), all imply official recognition.¹⁷ From 1569 the leading local churchman, the Suffragan Bishop of Dover, was Richard Rogers, a Marian exile and a leading patron of Kentish Puritans into the 1580s.¹⁸ No less important, the prophesyings may also have gained the sympathy of Archbishop Parker. By 1572 Parker was seeking to join forces with radical Protestants in Kent to combat monstrous, malignant Romanism. Tacit support for the east Kent prophesyings may have been one element in this campaign.¹⁹

The East Kent prophesying articles indicate both the importance of towns as centres for radical religious activity in the Elizabethan period, and the continuing co-operation between radical Protestants, moderate clergy and even fairly conservative members of the church hierarchy into the 1570s. The wider Protestant front only really fell to pieces under Archbishop Whitgift’s conservative onslaught after 1583. Yet, there can be little question that by the 1570s détente was increasingly fragile. Faced with vigorous demands from Elizabeth in 1574 for the suppression of the prophesying movement throughout the country,

¹⁶ Presumably the Eye and Buckinghamshire articles were recorded to provide an extra check on the procedure of the Kent meetings.

¹⁷ *VCH, Kent*, II, 85 and n.; see also BL, Addit. MS. 21 545, fol. 26 (I owe this reference to Professor P. Collinson).

¹⁸ *D.N.B.*, Rogers, Richard.

¹⁹ Another aspect of Parker’s policy was the appointment of a number of radical Protestant gentry to the new diocesan High Commission established at Canterbury in 1572; for a discussion of this see, P. Clark, ‘The Ecclesiastical Commission at Canterbury’, *Arch. Cant.*, lxxix (1974), 185.

Parker appears to have closed down the east Kent meetings. Their suppression foreshadowed the general ban on prophesyings in the Southern Province in 1576–77.²⁰

*Canterbury Cathedral Library, Z.5.1, fol. 166v–167r, 169r–171r*²¹

[fo. 166v]

Artycles agreed uppon by the mynysters of the Deanryes of Sandwich and others for due or orderly exersye or conference to be had amongest them.²²

1. In primis first that there be appoynted iii moderators of the gravest, best learned and discrettest of the mynysters there, who shall by their offyce not onlye appoynt the place of scriptures whereuppon the ministers shall intreate, but also appoynt the speakers. And if any shall seme to longe whereby others appoynted to speake shall have no tyme, or to speak impertynently besydes the texte, that then they at their discretyons shall putt them to sylence. And also it shall be Lawfull for the sayd moderators to call before them any such of the ministers as they shall thinke mete, and them to reprehende yf they see cause or otherwise to enforme them yf any mysdemeanor ether in lyef or negligence in Studye.
2. Item that in speakinge to avoyde contentyon the speakers do but open the lyterall sense and meaning of ye holy ghost and digresse not into exhortatyon, and especyally into invectyves; but opening one place of scripture by the other, and shewing how dyverslye one worde or Phrase of scripture is taken and used in the scriptures, and so by conference of places to open the texte and the cause of the wryttinge of the apostle or evangelist and such other circumstances as may open the lettre.
3. Item because it is supposed that all the ministers are not mete to speake openly especyallye of the inferior sorte, therefore such shall wrytt their myndes uppon the texte and delyver the same to the

²⁰ Collinson, *op. cit.*, 193 *et seq.* In one or two centres such as Ashford (A. J. Pearman, *History of Ashford*, 1868, 80–1) the exercise probably re-surfaced in the more orthodox form of a combination lectureship; for a general discussion of these lectureships, see P. Collinson, 'Lectures by Combination: Structures and Characteristics of Church Life in Seventeenth Century England', *Bulletin Institute of Historical Research*, xlii (1975), 189 *et seq.*

²¹ The original spelling of the document has been retained, except that all abbreviations have been extended. Punctuation and capitalisation have been modernised where necessary to make the sense clear.

²² The biographical data in the following footnotes has been derived without further citation from: Daeley, *op. cit.*; Frere, *op. cit.*; Venn and Venn, *op. cit.*; J. Foster, *Alumni Oxonienses 1500–1714*, 1888; CCL, miscellaneous visitation returns.

moderators or eyther of them in wrytting, and they to be appoynted by the moderators

[fo. 167]

4. Item that there be appoynted three speakers who shall first speake and the others to be called out by the moderators at their discretyon, so that none but the first three speakers shall know before whoe shall speake, and so thereby every one may be provyded to speake.
5. Item that one of the moderators do shortly conclude the sayenges of such as have spoken, or other wyse to saye his mynde touching the texte.
6. Item that such as shall come to this exercise or conference shall subscribe their names to these artycles, and also and also [sic] performe them and any refuse to subscribe then they to be refered to the ordynarye.
7. Item yf any subscribinge to this order and so consentinge hereunto be absente without lawfull cause or excuse, that then he shall paye to the moderators to be bestowed at their discretyon of the ministry the some of iii^s iiiii^d; and that everye absente shall at his next cominge shewe to the moderators and the rest of the ministers the cause of his absence, who shall have the allowance of the same at their discretyon.

[fo. 170r]

Decanat[us] Sandwich²³

1. Inprimis the place of scripture is the xviiith verse of the first Chapter of St Paull to the Romanes beginning thus, palam enim est ira dei de celo, and in Englishe, for thus the wrath of god is reveled.
2. Item there is appointed for the first speakers these Mr Fountayne,²⁴ Mr Ingrame,²⁵ and Mr Elgar.²⁶
3. Item the xviiith, xixth and xxth verse of the same firste chapter of St Paull to the Romaynes.
4. Item the tyme appointed to this exercise is the first tuesdaye in June viz^t the third daye of June next, in St Maryes churche in Sandwiche and so monethlye, except other causes fall out not knowen of.
5. Item if enye be absent uppon no sufficient cause to be allowed by the residue of the ministers, that then he shall paye in name of a fyne xii^d.

²³ The remainder of the document is in a different hand from the above.

²⁴ Vicar of Lydden, River and Ewell (1568); charged with lax ministry (1573).

²⁵ ?Fellow, New College, Oxford c. 1564; rector of St. James, Dover and Charlton (1574); preaches; uses common bread in sacrament (1573).

²⁶ Rector of Deal 1562 – c. 1587; also parson of Walmer; uses common bread in sacrament (1573); omits surplice (1584).

6. Item because all cannott speake openlye, it is agreed that the inferior sorte of the ministerye shall write their mindes uppon the sayd thre verses.
7. Item Mr Spicer is appointed to be moderator.

Subscribed the xixth of maye 1572 by theise whose names here followe.

Richard Spicer	Thomas Turpin ³²
Thomas Pausson ²⁸	Thomas Lylford ³³
Thomas Elgar	John Seintpeir ³⁴
John Ingrave	Chrofer Burton ³⁵
Richard Stint ²⁹	George Eltonhed ³⁶
Richard Phounlain [sic]	William Wattes ³⁷
Robert Banister ³⁰	Robert Pybourne
William Somersall ³¹	

[fo. 169v]

Certen articles agreed uppon by the Ministers of the deaneryes of Ospringe and Sittingborne the xxiith of may 1572 for an orderlye exercise to be had emongeste them.

1. First it is agreed that there first metinge shalbe at Sittingborne the thirsdaye after Trynitye sondaye nexte viz' the fifthe of June.
2. Item it is agreed that there shalbe a speaker to be appointed principallye and he to speake uppon the texte without digression.
3. Item it is agreed that they shall first beginne with the Epistle of St Paule to the Galathians.
4. Item when the first speaker hath done it shalbe lawfull to the moderators to appoint one or twoe others to speake uppon the same texte, if none willinglye offer to doe the same.

²⁷ Fellow, Exeter College, Oxford 1556–57, 1562–67; minister of St. Clement's, Sandwich, 1569–75; master of Sandwich school (1570).

²⁸ Vicar of St. Mary, Sandwich, 1565–97; rector of Ham; uses common bread, omits surplice (1573, 1579).

²⁹ Rector of Waldershare and Eythorne (1569–91); uses common bread (1573).

³⁰ Vicar of Sibertswold, 1564–82; also Coldred, 1569; non-resident; no preacher; non-graduate.

³¹ Curate, Sutton and West Langdon, 1561.

³² Rector of Crundale, 1564; Marian exile at Wessell; later minister of St. Mary, Dover; uses common bread (1573).

³³ Vicar of Tilmanstone, 1553–86; also of Betteshanger (1569).

³⁴ Rector of Wootton, 1560, also curate of Denton, 1569; no preacher or graduate.

³⁵ Matriculated St. John's College, Cambridge, 1558; Rector of Ripple, 1568–99.

³⁶ Ordained 1562; Vicar of Preston-next-Wingham; lax preacher (1578).

³⁷ Vicar of St. Margaret-at-Cliffe, 1570 – c. 80; also of Bewsfield; uses common bread (1573); omits surplice; non graduate (1569).

5. Item the moderators be appointed to be Mr Clerke,³⁸ Mr Caltroppe,³⁹ Mr Taylor⁴⁰ and Mr Playce.⁴¹
6. Item it is agreed that every minister both subscribe and also performe these agrementes and if they shall refuse to do the same then they to be referred to the Ordinarye.
7. Item it is agreed that as manye as subscribe and so consent hereunto if they be absent from this exercise they shall paye in name of a fine xii^d to be bestowed at the discretion of the moderators, except he be absent uppon some lawfull excuse to be allowed by the moderators.
8. It is agreed that this exercise shalbe and continewe every thre weekes; and one day to be kept at Sittingborne and the other at Feversham in the churche.
9. It is agreed that it may be lawfull to the moderators to call before them eny suche of the ministers as they shall thincke mete, and to reprehend if they see cause, or otherwise to enforme them of eny misdemeaner eyther in life or negligence in studie.

[fo. 170v]

Certen Agrementes agreed uppon by all the Ministers within the deaneryes of Lympne and Charinge the viith daye of Maye Anno 1572 for an orderlye exercise to be had amongst them, beginninge the first Tuesdaye in June next and so to continewe monethlye uppon the same day, except the same day be holye daye, then uppon the Tuesdaye next folowinge; the first exercise to be holden at Asheforde and afterwardes as it shalbe apoynted at their assemblyes and thoughte convenient.

Item the place of Scripture wherof they shall entreate is the firste Chapter of the firste Epistle of St Paull to Tymothye.

Item ther is apoynted for the first speakers these three persons folowinge, to witt, Mr John Levett,⁴² Mr Thomas Pett⁴³ and Mr John Picarde.⁴⁴

The firste, the second and the third verse of the same epistle and Chapter successivelye by them to be entreated uppon.

Item the tyme apoynted for them all three to occupye is one howre and

³⁸ Vicar of Milton-next-Sittingbourne, 1560 – c. 72; *supra*, n. 00.

³⁹ Vicar of Sittingbourne, 1569–87; M.A., St. John's College, Cambridge, 1571.

⁴⁰ Vicar of Faversham, 1570–74; matriculated Corpus Christi College, Cambridge, 1551; ?vicar of Northlie, Oxon.

⁴¹ Rector of Badlesmere and Throwley; *d.* 1573; no preacher or graduate.

⁴² Rector of Kenardington (1561); also Snargate (1568).

⁴³ Former vicar of St. Peter, Sandwich; vicar of Ashford, 1571; uses common bread; preacher.

⁴⁴ Fellow of Christ's College, Cambridge, 1563–68; curate of Pluckley (1569); incumbent 1570; uses common bread.

a halfe, that is, everye of them halfe an houre or two howres at the most amongst them.

Item if enye private conference is to be had amongst them it shalbe done in the Chauncell after that the congregation is departed.

Item the sayd three speakers shall sitt together in some convenient place and speake orderlye as they sitt and as their turne serveth accordinge to their appoyntment; agreed uppon by them whose names here ensue in the behalfe of all their bretherne in bothe these above named deaneries.

[fo. 171r]

Thomas Pett vicar of Assheforthe
 John Levett parson of Kenarton
 John Mantell minister of Hawekerst⁴⁵
 Thomas Horsemunde parson of Hothefeild⁴⁶
 Paule Colman vicar of Sellinge⁴⁷
 George Elye vicar of Tenterden⁴⁸
 Kenelme Dygbye parson of Old Romney⁴⁹
 Richard Dunslake vicar of Rolvinden⁵⁰
 George Gryme curat of Benenden⁵¹
 Robert Martyn parson of Dymchurche⁵²
 Andrewe Dowle vicar of Beatrisden⁵³
 Thomas Grave parson of Halden⁵⁴
 John Braynforth vicar of Kenington⁵⁵
 George Bond curat of Apledore⁵⁶
 Thomas Oliver parson of Kingesnothe
 Roger Newman vicar of Westwell⁵⁷
 Thomas Baret curat of Warhorne⁵⁸

⁴⁵ ?Curate of Hawkhurst; ?matriculated St. John's College, Cambridge.

⁴⁶ Rector of Hothfield 1560; preacher; omits surplice (1573).

⁴⁷ Vicar of Sellindge, 1569; uses common bread (1569).

⁴⁸ Vicar of Tenterden, 1571; B.A., Oxon., 1566; uses common bread, 1573; suspended by Whitgift (1584).

⁴⁹ Rector of Old Romney, 1568–1603; matriculated Trinity College, Cambridge 1552; omits surplice (1573).

⁵⁰ Vicar of Rolvenden, 1555 – c. 88.

⁵¹ Curate of Benenden, 1569; no preacher or graduate.

⁵² Rector of Dymchurch c. 1566; feeds cattle in churchyard; dresses 'not comely'; a 'peace-breaker' (1573).

⁵³ Vicar of Bethersden, 1568–75; minor canon of Canterbury cathedral, 1570; clash with Bishop Rogers, 1569; non graduate.

⁵⁴ Incumbent of Halden; uses common bread (1573).

⁵⁵ Ordination 1560; vicar of Kennington, 1564–1605.

⁵⁶ ?Admitted Corpus Christi College, Cambridge, 1565; nonconformist (no cap or tippet) 1569; pluralist vicar of Ebony and Apledore (1569).

⁵⁷ Vicar of Westwell, 1567–80.

⁵⁸ Curate for Thomas Knell, rector, 1560.

PETER CLARK

Henry Charlton curat of Snorgate
Henry Stafford of Smalled in Tenterden⁵⁹
John Ireland vicar of Willesborowe⁶⁰
Thomas Brymstone vicar of Stone⁶¹
George Baker curat of Ruckinge⁶²
Anthony Brymstone curat of Aldington⁶³
William Selherst curat of Brensett⁶⁴

Kent Archaeological Society is a registered charity number 223382

© Kent Archaeological Society 11th August 2014

⁵⁹ Reader at Smallhythe, 1573; later vicar of New Romney.

⁶⁰ Vicar of Willesborough, 1562; uses common bread (1573).

⁶¹ Vicar of Stone 1569; neglects preaching (1573).

⁶² No sermons (1573).

⁶³ Later nonconformist parson of Horton (1585).

⁶⁴ Reads service in body of church (1569).