
History Society: Dr David Starkey on ‘Edmund Dudley’

Anxious no doubt to steer his audience’s attention away from recent recognition of Hilary Mantel and her hero Thomas Cromwell – he later pointedly commented that while Mantel was a novelist he was an historian – Dr David Starkey CBE was in characteristically witty and entertaining form when he gave a lecture to the Gray’s Inn Historical Society to a packed Bingham Room on 31st January.

An invitation to address the Inn chimed neatly with his current research and writing which, he said, are focusing on the last years of Henry VII’s reign, when his son Prince Henry lived at his court and received his political education. This period involved a struggle between churchmen and lawyers that was moreover fought over the very death bed of the king, and one of the principal actors in this extraordinary tale, and its most distinguished victim, was a member of the Inn, Edmund Dudley Esq, President of the Council and the old king’s most hated financial agent.

Starkey explained that, though Henry VII had by the end of his reign laid the foundations to the dynasty that bore his name, his claim to the throne had always been a highly dubious one. Several contenders had much sounder ones, none more so in the closing years of the reign than that of Edmund de la Pole, Earl of Suffolk, who was living in exile at the court of the Holy Roman Emperor, Maximilian, in Austria. Revenue to augment the royal coffers in the Tower of London was needed, apart from paying the extravagances of the court, to pay the Hapsburgs a regular series of bribes to keep Suffolk from returning to England.

Even though at the opening of Parliament in January 1504 the new Archbishop of Canterbury and Chancellor, William Warham, citing St Augustine, had said that without justice ‘what are kingdoms for but great bands of robbers’, it soon became apparent that Henry was intent on fundraising with a vengeance with scant regard to justice. In September Edmund Dudley entered royal service and, together with Richard Empson, a Middle Temple lawyer, became the king’s financial agent. The confrontation between the common lawyers and the Church had been joined.

Dudley with his encyclopaedic knowledge of the royal prerogative became from 1504 until 1509 Henry's 'extortioner in chief' enforcing what Starkey described as 'unrestrained savage depredations in a reign of fiscal terror', with a brief to seek out all potential revenue due under the royal prerogative and to take every opportunity to apply the law to the king's advantage by rooting out each and every legal infraction. Dudley, said Starkey, was Thomas Cromwell's role model and direct predecessor.

Dudley set to work with a will enforcing bonds and fines often long forgotten and described by Starkey as 'pure money grabbing'. Inevitably much of the burden of payment fell on the Church and the monasteries. While in the early years of the reign the Exchequer was 'staggeringly incompetent', Dudley managed to turn round the king's financial fortunes by switching to a system of cash based finance. To show how successful he was ordinary revenue at the time was £100,000 per annum but Dudley increased it by a yearly £50,000 each year between 1504 and 1507, mainly in silver coinage in the Tower. 'There was a great deal of money to be got and the king got a great deal of money.'

So why and how did Dudley fall? Although he and Empson had made themselves hugely unpopular by their zeal on the king's behalf, Starkey suggested that to understand Henry VII one needed to understand that, while he was deeply avaricious, he also believed in Hell, that bad deeds had consequences. He was in many ways the personification of Jekyll and Hyde. Within a short space of time both his elder son, Arthur, and his wife, Elizabeth, had died, and in these later years of his reign important influences in his life were his 'father confessors', one of whom was John Burnell, a Franciscan friar. Franciscans believed financial wealth was a sin and Henry was persuaded his family misfortunes were a visitation from God and he sent to Rome for papal dispensation for his reprehensible financial gains, at the same time asking for dispensation for Prince Henry to marry Arthur's widow, Catherine of Aragon.

Another powerful influence was his own mother, Lady Margaret of Beaufort, whose own confessor was Bishop John Fisher who together with the clergy detested the king's common lawyers' aggression against the privileges and liberties of the Church. By early 1509 Henry was dying, probably of throat cancer, and his ecclesiastical circle closed in on him and was determined on an 'ecclesiastical coup' against the lawyers. Dudley and Fisher personified the conflict between the legal establishment and the Church that was, of course, to develop further in

the reign of Henry VIII.

The king died on 21st April 1509 at Richmond and his death was kept secret for three days, at least until Dudley and Empson in London could be arrested and taken to the Tower. The following year Henry VII's son issued warrants for their execution, a massively popular event. A small Reformation had taken place, said Starkey, and the clergy had reasserted themselves against the lawyers, at least for the time being.

Master Robert Hardy

A new picture of Gray's Inn Square

To help mark seven centuries of Christian worship at the site of the Inn's Chapel, the Society has recently purchased a graphite drawing of Gray's Inn Square by Christopher Knox with the Chapel shown prominently. The picture now hangs outside the entrance to the Bingham Room and is entitled 'Passing Thunder Storm over Gray's Inn Chapel'.

Christopher Knox was born in Northumberland and spent his childhood absorbing impressions of the wild Northumberland coastline that greatly influence his work as a professional artist today. He will often go out from dawn to dusk recording what he sees in his sketchbooks and in the photographs he takes, not to mention storing what is engraved on his memory. This is readily illustrated by his drawing of the Chapel which is 'moody', almost Northumbrian in its evocation which drives the observer to anticipate that at any moment DCI Vera Stanhope, in the form of Brenda Blethyn in the stories by Ann Cleeves, will soon impose herself on the view, wet and windswept.

Mr Knox has exhibited regularly at the Mall Galleries since 2012 and lives in Lewes, Sussex, where he has held a successful one-man show. Apart from the Northumberland landscape, he drew early inspiration from the works of J.M.W. Turner and John Constable.

Timothy Shuttleworth, Master of Pictures