Saint John Roberts

Monk and Martyr

David W. Atherton
and
Michael P. Peyton
On 10th December 1610 John Roberts, aged thirty three, a Catholic priest, was hanged, drawn and quartered at Tyburn having been found guilty of high treason. Born in 1577 in Trawsfynydd, Merionethshire, North Wales, he was the first son of John and Anna Roberts. He may have been born at one of three houses, Gelli Goch, Tyddan Gwladys or Rhiw Goch. For priests in England execution was by no means uncommon and he had flirted with danger for several years. What is particularly significant is that he was a monk of the Order of St. Benedict and he had been the first member of this Order to venture to England since the dissolution of the monasteries.

It is difficult for us living in a secular age to appreciate the importance of religious belief and practice to our ancestors in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Only by considering these matters can we understand the story of John Roberts. Inability to practise one’s religion in a manner pleasing to God could lead to the abandonment of hope of heaven and doom a person to an eternity of damnation. Henry VIII’s dispute and final break with Rome after 1533 left the nation as undeniably Christian but with great variations in opinion as to how to live a Christian life. The separation, brought about in order to secure the Tudor dynasty, left large sections of the population with spiritual loyalty to the Pope. Others, also troublesome to those in authority, spurred on by the Reformation in Europe and ideas spread by the printing press, saw little need for bishops and the formal ecclesiastical structure so important to the monarch in maintaining political control. Rather than the various groups displaying Christian piety and benevolence, the spirit of the age was one of persecution and animosity.

Henry VIII’s dispute and final break with Rome after 1533 had arisen because of his attempts to safeguard the Tudor dynasty by producing a male heir. Although religious practice changed comparatively little during his reign, the King replaced the Pope as Supreme Head of the English Church. During the reigns of three of his children the nature of religious observance swung widely; severe measures were taken against those who did not follow the current official line. The reign of Edward VI (1547-53) saw the introduction of increasingly Protestant practices under the guidance of Archbishop Cranmer. The seizure of Church property, begun under Henry VIII, continued. The real presence of Jesus Christ in the sacrament of the bread and the wine was denied and communion in both forms could be taken by the laity rather than just by the priests. After much discussion the Book of Common Prayer was produced in 1552, specifying the liturgy to be used in parish churches. The Act of Uniformity 1551 stated that “...all and every Person and Persons inhabiting within this Realm, or any other of the King's Majesty's Dominions, shall diligently and faithfully, having no lawful or reasonable Excuse to be absent, endeavour themselves to resort to their Parish Church or Chapel accustomed, or, upon reasonable Let thereof, to some usual Place where Common Prayer and such Service of God shall be used”. Attendance or conducting a service at a place where the liturgy was not followed would lead to imprisonment.

Despite attempts to exclude her from the throne, Edward’s Catholic half-sister, Mary, daughter of Catherine of Aragon, became Queen and, with determination, set about undoing the work of Edward and Cranmer. On her accession in 1553 Mary issued a proclamation stating that she would not compel her subjects to follow her religion but all the religious legislation of Edward was repealed. Clerical celibacy was restored. Leading reformers such as Hugh Latimer and Thomas Cranmer were imprisoned. In an attempt to ensure the continuation of the Catholic line, Mary married Philip of Spain in 1554. In that year the English church was returned to Roman jurisdiction and the Heresy Acts of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries were revived.
Fearing the penalties specified by these Acts, many rich Protestants sought exile but those that remained fell victim to the so-called Marian Persecution, giving the Queen the nickname “Bloody Mary”. Bishops Latimer and Ridley were burned at the stake as heretics. Cranmer’s renunciation of Protestantism was not enough to save him and he too was burned. In all, about two hundred and eighty religious dissenters met the same fate. Mary’s failure to produce an heir led to the accession of her Protestant half-sister, Elizabeth, in 1558 and then the oppressors became the oppressed.

A crucial issue was the inter-relationship between religious loyalty and political allegiance. Any monarch could not be sure of the support of a subject who did not conform to his or her version of Christianity. Religious freedom could lead to the emergence of powerful groups intent on overthrowing the established order. The interplay of religion and politics may be seen throughout the reign of Elizabeth at both a domestic and international level.

Despite the urging of France to the contrary, the Pope, Paul IV (1555-59), did not protest against Elizabeth’s claim to the throne. She lost little time in removing the country from papal control and ending Catholic religious practices. Through the Act of Supremacy in 1558, and her adoption of the title “Supreme Governor of this realm” Elizabeth substituted royal for papal authority in spiritual matters. The Act of Uniformity of the same year replaced the mass and other Roman exercises with a modified version of the Book of Common Prayer dating from the reign of Edward VI. The prayer-book introduced into the English language memorable phrases such as “from ashes to ashes, dust to dust” and “speak now or for ever hold thy peace”. The effect of the Act of Supremacy was that anyone who maintained papal authority would forfeit all goods and chattels in the case of the first offence. Reoffending would lead a person to face the law of Praemunire. This prohibited the assertion of any papal or foreign authority over that of the monarch, which could, after further offences, lead to charges of high treason and the banning of heirs from inheriting honours and offices. The Act of Uniformity was intended to force on the nation the adoption of the Book of Common Prayer. Any cleric who used any other form of service would lose property and be imprisoned. Those who refused to attend an Anglican service faced a fine of twelve pence on each occasion.
Throughout Elizabeth’s reign the intensity of measures taken against priests and the Catholic Faithful varied according to the degree of threat which they were deemed to pose. Tightening of the screw sometimes followed external challenges, usually from the Pope. It must not be assumed, however, that leading non-Catholics were of one mind as to how to deal with the Catholic population. Within Parliament the Commons sometimes expressed opinions considered too extreme by both the Lords and the monarch. Many compromises had to be made.

Initial relationships with the Papacy had been relatively friendly. Shortly after his consecration Pius IV (1559-65) had written to Elizabeth encouraging her to return the nation to the Catholic fold. His envoy was not allowed to enter the country and his invitation to English bishops to take part in the Council of Trent (1545-63) was rejected. Rumours circulated that the Pope was not entirely opposed to the Book of Common Prayer. Encouraged by this, to avoid fines, many Catholics reluctantly attended Anglican services, though often hearing mass in secret. Papal opposition to Anglican forms of worship became plain in 1562.

Elizabeth’s second parliament met in 1563 after the failure of a plot organised by the nephews of Cardinal Pole to overthrow the government. Ecclesiastical commissioners also reported that the Acts of Supremacy and Uniformity were being flouted and the result was the passing of “an Act for the assurance of the queen’s royal power.” This specified that an oath affirming the supremacy of the Queen had to be taken by all holders of significant positions and by all those who attended mass or who assisted in its celebration. Refusal to take the oath would lead to forfeiture of property and imprisonment. A repeat offence would lead to the offender being hanged, drawn and quartered as a traitor. In practice the Act was not implemented fully but it posed a powerful threat.

At a Convocation of the English Church in 1563, under the leadership of Matthew Parker, Archbishop of Canterbury, The Thirty-Nine Articles of Religion were accepted which set out the key features of the doctrine of the Church of England. They reflected some traditional Roman practices and avoided some of the more extreme Protestant ideas followed on the Continent. The breach with Rome was made abundantly clear, the Pope was declared to have no power in England, the “Sacrifices of the Mass” were said to be fables; transubstantiation had no scriptural foundation; the Roman doctrines of purgatory, indulgences, the invocation of saints and the veneration of images and saints were described as foolish and vain inventions and “contrary to the Word of God.”

On the accession of Pope Pius V (1566–72) the papal attitude towards the Queen changed as it became obvious that there would be no voluntary return of England to Catholicism. The Pope made a strong condemnation of the Book of Common Prayer and two English priests, Sanders and Harding, were empowered to give absolution to all those guilty of schism, that is promoting division within the Church. This was followed up by a papal bull authorising the absolution of those who had been guilty of heresy by conforming to the Acts of Supremacy and Uniformity. Those following the old religion were encouraged by William Allen (1532-1594). He was born in the Fylde area of Lancashire and later became a cardinal. In 1568, aided by Dr. Owen Lewis and Morgan Phillips, he founded the English College at Douai. Its function was to train young English men for the priesthood with the intention that these “seminary priests” should return to England to promote the Faith. The last prelate of the old Catholic hierarchy, Bishop Watson of Lincoln, died a prisoner in Wisbech Castle in 1584.

The Queen’s position was far from secure. There was a rival claimant to the throne, the Catholic Mary Queen of Scots, and in 1569, in her support, the Northern Rising occurred under the leadership of the Earls of Westmorland and Northumberland. This was put down with difficulty by Elizabeth’s forces. The papal response in 1570 was to issue a bull, “Regnans in Excelsis”, excommunicating Elizabeth. The Pope’s displeasure and his reaction to events in England may be seen in the following extracts from the Bull:-

“Elizabeth, the pretended queen of England...having usurped the place of supreme head of the Church of England......has reduced this same kingdom to a miserable ruin. She has......oppressed the followers of the
Catholic faith, instituted false preachers and ministers of impiety, abolished the sacrifice of the mass, prayers, fasts, celibacy and Catholic ceremonies. She has dared to eject bishops, rectors of churches and other Catholic priests from their churches and benefices. She has forced the people to come to terms with her wicked laws, to abjure the authority and obedience of the pope of Rome. She has thrown Catholic prelates and parsons into prison where many have miserably ended their lives. Therefore we declare the aforesaid Elizabeth to be a heretic and her to have incurred the sentence of excommunication and to be cut off from the unity of the body of Christ.”

The Bull goes on to deny “the pretended queen” the right to her crown and to absolve all her peoples from any sworn oaths of fealty and obedience. Those that persisted in following her commands should also consider themselves excommunicated. To people who accepted the reality of eternal damnation this was a dreadful penalty. Politically it was practically an instruction to rebel.

Royal reaction was both predictable and necessary. Statutes were quickly passed making it high treason to affirm that the queen had no right to the crown or to declare her a heretic. Similarly it was high treason to seek to put into effect or publish any papal bull. To counter the efforts of the seminary priests in trying to win back those who had agreed to attend the Anglican services, there was passed the Statute of Persuasion, making it high treason for a priest to reconcile, and for a layman to be reconciled “from the religion now by the Queen’s authority established within her highness’s dominions to the Romish Religion.”

Penalties were imposed on those who brought into the country articles blessed by the Pope and on people leaving the country for lengthy periods without royal approval. Fines and imprisonment for non-attendance at Anglican services or hearing the mass were increased. 1585 saw the passing of the “Act against Jesuits, Seminary priests and other such like disobedient persons”. This made it high treason for any Jesuit or seminary priest to be in England and a felony for anyone to harbour or relieve them. It was under the terms of this act that most of the Catholic martyrs were executed during and after Elizabeth’s reign.

Meanwhile the attitude of the English population towards Catholics and Catholicism was being greatly influenced by a highly significant book, “Actes and Monuments”, generally known as “Foxe’s Book of Martyrs”. The first English edition appeared in 1563, published by John Day, which ran to almost 1,800 pages. John Foxe covered the history of those who had died for their faith from the early Christian martyrs, through the medieval period, ending with graphic illustrated accounts of those who had fallen victim to Marian persecution. By 1596 it had grown in size and it had reached its fifth edition. Far from being an unbiased text, it was a work of anti-Catholic propaganda. Following a Convocation Order in 1571, this tome
was chained beside the Great Bible, authorised by Henry VIII, in cathedrals and many churches. Selected readings were made from the pulpit and treated almost as Scripture. Some historians argue that it developed the concept of an English nation threatened by foreign enemies.

Protestant England faced its greatest challenge in the form of the Spanish Armada in 1588. Relations between Catholic Spain and Protestant England were always going to be difficult but problems were exacerbated by the piratical activities of English seamen and English support for Protestant rebels in the Low Countries. Elizabeth’s order to execute her Catholic rival, Mary Queen of Scots, outraged Catholic Europe. The executed queen had left her claim to the English throne to Phillip II of Spain. Papal authority had been given to his plans to invade England and oust the Queen. In the event, the destruction of the invasion fleet boosted English national pride, strengthened Elizabeth’s support and led to Catholicism being associated with a lack of patriotism.
The above comments clearly are applicable to the nation as a whole but there were marked regional variations. London may have been largely Protestant but, for the Crown, problems were especially acute in Lancashire which was the strongest Catholic county in England. Most of the landed gentry refused to attend the parish church and encouraged their tenants to do likewise, even if that meant paying recusancy fines of £20 a month, a crippling burden. Some Catholic landowning families sent their sons to Douai to be trained as priests and from about 1575 they began to trickle back into the county. Even the magistrates and the law officers of the county could not be relied on to conform to the new laws; some were reported to the Privy Council as being recusants. Attempts to serve writs sometimes failed, one royal official being forced to eat an indictment he was seeking to serve on a Catholic.

The person on whom principally devolved the duty of enforcing the new Acts of Supremacy and Uniformity in Lancashire at the beginning of Elizabeth’s reign was the Bishop of Chester. On February 21st 1567/8 the Queen wrote to remind the Bishop that "such disorders are found within your diocese as we hear not of the like in any other parts of our realm," and charges him to make a personal visitation "unto the remote parts and specially unto Lancashire" to remedy them. In 1574 the Lords of the Council wrote to stir up the Earl of Derby, who, as Lord-Lieutenant of Lancashire, was the principal lay Commissioner: "Lancashire is the very sink of popery, where more unlawful acts have been committed and more unlawful persons holden secret masses than in any other part of the realm."

The truth is that the greater part of Lancashire, and the Lancashire gentry in particular, were still thoroughly Catholic at heart all through the Elizabethan persecution. They resented the imposition by force of a State religion. There were also a vast number of strong men who clung fast to the Faith and their principles and did not grudge the cost of doing so.

The challenge to royal power and the established religious order did not just come from the Lancashire Catholics. Manchester and Bolton were hotbeds of Puritanism linked by commerce to London. During Elizabeth’s reign they formed a radical group within the Anglican Church, producing religious pamphlets to spread their views. After the accession of James I (1603-1625), they tended to break away into non-
conformist groups of the Presbyterian persuasion. “The Book of Sports”, formally called “The Declaration of Sports”, was an order issued by King James I for use in Lancashire to resolve a conflict on the subject of what could or could not be engaged in as Sunday recreations. This was later extended to the entire country, producing outrage amongst the Puritans.

In North Wales, Catholicism had been removed and very little had replaced it to meet the religious needs of the population. In “The Catholic Martyrs of Wales, 1535-1680” by T.P. Ellis, the then Bishop of Menevia wrote in a Foreword: “The Reformation was not at all welcomed by the people of Wales – it was forced upon an utterly unwilling people...the change was effected by the policy of the prison and the gibbet.” At the time of the birth of John Roberts, the chief religious house of the area, the Cistercian abbey of Cymer, had been in ruins for forty years. Of fourteen parishes in Merioneth in the diocese of Bangor, five had no minister of any sort, two were in the hands of laymen and, of the remaining seven with ministers, five lived away from their parishes. Often services were taken by curates who were semi-literate. In 1580 the Bishop of Bangor wrote “If you look thoroughly to the whole number of gentlemen and others of all sorts in North Wales, ye shall scarcely find any ... in any sort well-instructed in the faith of Christ.... for of the whole multitude, such which be under thirty years of age seem to have no show of any religion, the others will nearly all dare to profess and maintain the absurdist points of Popish heresy.”

During the reign of James I religious divisions became even more pronounced, oddly perhaps since his mother had been Mary, Queen of Scots and he had secured the support of English Catholics by a promise of toleration. Within nine months of the death of Elizabeth some hundred and forty priests came to the country and within a year they had made about ten thousand converts. On the advice of Robert Cecil, a Royal Proclamation was made on 22nd February 1604 banishing all priests from the land within a year. In July there was a revival of Elizabethan statues and additions were made. James I brought in his wake a band of “hungry Scots”, leading the King to sequestrate the estates of Catholics and give them to his compatriots. Two thirds of all property belonging to Catholics could be confiscated by the Crown. The education of Catholic youths abroad was prohibited under penalty of being totally disinherited and severe penalties were imposed on those who aided them to travel. Catholic children were to remain at home and to be handed
over to tutors appointed by the bishop of the diocese. If their parents objected they could be fined £2 a day. Executions were resumed, mainly of laymen who had sheltered a priest or been involved in conversion of a Protestant to the Catholic faith. In February 1605, a campaign was launched against recusants, six thousand of whom were arrested, prosecuted and fined. The Gunpowder Plot increased the fears of officialdom and gave a further impetus to ant-Catholic measures. All the Catholics in London were rounded up. Under the Popish Recusants Act of 1605 Roman Catholics were banned from practising law or medicine, acting as a guardian or a trustee and it allowed searching and seizures of arms in Catholic homes. By 1610 no recusant could initiate or defend an action in court and Catholics were banned from moving more than ten miles from their homes. A new Oath of Allegiance was given to all persons over the age of eighteen. This was to cause particular problems to John Roberts during his trial.

Living as a Catholic in England or Wales during the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries was a struggle, so much so that T.P. Ellis, in his writings, refers to this period as “The Terror”.

John Roberts grew up, laboured and died during these years but he was not born a Catholic. John was baptised into the Protestant faith at the local church of St. Madryn, Trawsfynydd.

His family had a distinguished ancestry and must have been relatively wealthy. It is speculated that he received his education from a former monk of Cymer Abbey. What is known is that he was admitted to St. John’s College, Oxford. Contact with the Bodleian Library, Oxford has enabled us to gain a copy of his signature in the matriculation Register when he was aged nineteen.
His name also appears, with those of other students in the original matriculation register for 1564-1615.

Foster’s *Alumni Oxonienses*, a printed register of those matriculating between 1500 and 1714, says of John Roberts:

Roberts, John of co. Merioneth, gent, St. John’s Coll matric 26 Feb., 1595-6, aged 19.

One of his contemporaries was William Laud, later the ill-fated Archbishop of Canterbury of Charles I.

John Roberts left Oxford after two years without taking a degree and went for legal training to Furnival’s Inn, Holborn, London. The Inns of Court attracted many Welsh students and were seen as “hotbeds of Popery”. The present authors contacted Lincoln’s Inn London to see if any light could be thrown on John Roberts’ life at Furnival’s Inn. Frances Bellis, the Assistant Librarian of Lincoln’s Inn, replied stating: “I am afraid that very few records for Furnival’s Inn survive and we have none at all. Indeed, according to Hegarty’s Biographical Register of St. John’s College Oxford 1555-1660, he only spent a few months studying at this Inn of Chancery before he went to France where he decided on a completely different course for his life. At that time one of the functions of the Inn of Chancery was to prepare law students for the Inns of Court. A student would
spend one or two years at one before joining an Inn of Court to finish his legal education and become a barrister.”

The story of John Roberts features in the writing of major historians such Bishop Challoner, “Memoirs of Missionary Priests…”, (1741); John Hungerford Pollen, “Acts of English Martyrs Hitherto Unpublished.” (1891) and Dom Bede Camm who produced major works at the end of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. These tend to concentrate on the events connected with his trial and execution. Two books of T. P. Ellis, “The Catholic Martyrs of Wales”, (1933) and “The Welsh Benedictines of the Terror”, (1936) are unusual in that they furnish a degree of detail not found elsewhere. The background of Thomas Peter Ellis is interesting. Born in Wales he went on to become an eminent judge in the Indian Civil Service. On retirement he returned to Wales, became a Roman Catholic, and wrote extensively on the history of Catholicism in Wales. He gained some material on John Roberts from the Public Records Office and the Douay Diaries. Furthermore he explained that “At the time, one of the very able of the government spies abroad was Lewis Owen. To Lewis Owen and his record, ‘The Running Register’, we owe a good deal of our information about Blessed John Roberts for the next few years.”

In his “Epistle to the Reader” Owen wrote:- “O ye foolish English Papists, who hath bewitched you, that you cannot perceive how you are gull’d, and carried away (like so many sheepe led to the slaughter house) by these enchanting Syrens.” and in the “Introduction” he explains why he decided to publish this work in 1626. “Having in my many yeares travell in forraine Countries Jeene with mine eyes, and by Conference with others, learned the state of the Colledges, Seminaries and Cloisters, which our English Fugitives have in all
the forraine parts, together with some part of their practices, imposture, cozenage & deceits, their whole drifts being to alienate the hearts of his Maiefties Subiects from their Allegiance, and to posseff them with the filthy dregs of Spanijh infection and PopiJh Superijtition: and withal to impoverijh this Kingdome, by transjporting over into those parts, of infinit jummes of money, and divers other heinous capitall crimes, and intolerable offences and abuJes, too long here to bee recited, I thought it my bounden dutie both to my King, Church, and Country, to publijh the same to the view of the world, being not altogether ignorant that it is a subiect not well pleasijng the humours of the Englijh Romane-Catholikes, eJpecially their Clergie-men....”

The detail he provided on events within the colleges and seminaries of Europe gives a clear indication of the extent and effectiveness of the government’s espionage system.

In 1598, John Roberts, then still a Protestant, crossed to the Continent, to seek excitement and adventure. He went to Paris where he met with a Catholic “English knight”, probably Mr. More, part of the household of the Archbishop of Bordeaux. After discussion with him he decided to become a Roman Catholic. Final instruction in the Faith was given to him by Canon Louis Godebert, the penitentiary of Notre Dame, and in June 1598 he was received into the Church. It is unlikely that he ever saw Wales again. He received letters of introduction from Cardinal Francois d’Escobeau de Sourdis, the Archbishop-elect of Bordeaux, to the Jesuit fathers of Bordeaux and also to the College of St. Alban, Valladolid. St. Alban’s had been founded in 1589 by the efforts of the Jesuit, Father Robert Persons. Roberts decided to go to Valladolid, travelling via Madrid where it is likely that he first met Donna Luisa de Carvajal. He reached Valladolid on 15th September 1598 and he was admitted into College on 18th October 1598.

Travelling to Spain was difficult since more than one student going to Valladolid had been arrested as an English spy. At that time in the College there were fifty three students, guided by ten Jesuit tutors. His admission record, liber primi examinis, kindly provided for us by the Archivist of the College, refers to his noble parents who were in heart Catholic; his time in Oxford and London; the fact that he had always venerated the Catholic religion and “his burning desire to become a labourer in our Lord’s vineyard”. He was
given the number “139” and would have been referred to by this number for administrative and domestic purposes.

During the summer months students rose at half past four, in winter at half-past five. The day was spent in meditation, prayer and study and it included a singing lesson. Thursday was a day of recreation. Bedtime was nine o’clock in summer, and ten in winter. Lewis Owen reported that: “Many fall sick and dye, by reason of the unwholesomeness of the air and want of exercise, for they have no liberty or recreation.”

Within the College, headed by Father Persons, he found many of his countrymen. Some were Benedictines, some Jesuits, some secular priests. Normally, six months after entering the College a student would take the Missionary Oath which included the words: “I promise and swear to Almighty God that, with His Divine grace and favour, I will receive in due time holy orders, and return to England to procure the conversion of the souls of my countrymen…” This was never administered to John Roberts.

In early 1599 he decided to seek entry into the Order of Saint Benedict. He was admitted as a postulate into the monastery of San Benito, Valladolid in May 1599, with three others from St. Alban’s. His decision to leave produced a furious reaction from his superiors in the College, reported by Lewis Owen. They “repaired with all speed to the Lord Abbot of that Abbey, & with open mouths exclaimed against Roberts, saying that he was a very deboysh’d fellow, a common mover, a breeder of debate in their Colledge, a notorious drunkard, a prophane blasphemer, and swearer; and withal, one whom they suspected to be no good Catholike; but rather a Spy, or an Intelligencer, sent thither out of England…”

Owen continues his account: “The Abbot having heard all that they could say against Roberts, & believing all to be true that they reported. As soone as they were departed, he sent for Roberts and privately related unto him all the whole discourse, and told him plainly, that hee could not entertain him any longer in the Abbey. Whereupon Roberts, being driven to such a non-plus, knew not what to say…”
The Jesuits of St. Alban’s College agreed to take him back. This convinced the Abbot that their allegations were false. “The Abbot replied that he would never believe that Father Persons would admit him again into the College ‘for’, said he, ‘it stands not with his reputation to entertain such a lewd fellow as hee reports you to be’…”

The Abbot agreed to admit him and as many English students as would care to join him. The loss of students from the seminaries to the Benedictines was such as to threaten their existence.

From the early 1580s there had been divisions between the Jesuits, who had borne the brunt of the persecution, and the secular priests as to the best method of restoring the Faith in England and Wales. A further cause of dispute concerned how the former monastic lands should be reallocated following a restoration of Catholicism. Students in the seminaries, like Roberts, were turning to the Order of Saint Benedict. They believed that because of its thousand year history in the country it would be more effective and arouse less suspicion than the more aggressive “foreign” body, the Society of Jesus, which dated only from 1540. The Rule of St. Benedict precluded members from engaging in political action. In their spiritual work, monks could receive support and help from a network of continental houses. Not all monks had an ambition to go on the Mission to England; many still sought to serve God through contemplation and prayer.

On April 23rd 1609, a papal decree laid down that, as the Jesuits were forbidden under pain of excommunication to dissuade seminarians from entering the Benedictine Order, so the monks were forbidden under the same penalty to dissuade the same seminarians from becoming Jesuits.

A further item from the College archives provides a brief summary of Robert’s life, referring to his admission and his departure to join the Benedictines. A later hand records his martyrdom on 10th December 1610. To the left of the writing is a crude drawing of a rose. This flower, which should have been drawn in red, has five petals to represent the five wounds of Christ, is the symbol of a martyr.

He and some companions left Valladolid between May and October 1599. They were sent to the Abbey of San Martin Pinario (of the Pinewood), Santiago de Compostela to make their novitiate. This involved a journey of over two hundred miles. Bede Camm writes: “Doubtless they went thither in true pilgrim fashion, on foot, with staff and wallet, the broad-brimmed hat, adorned with St. James’ cockle-shell, and the water-gourd slung on the staff”. The novitiate lasted about a year. The novices lived in a separate part of the monastery, cut off from the rest by a locked door of which the Novice Master kept the key. They had their own chapel and refectory. The day was divided between manual work, prayer and study. Dinner was at eleven, at which meat was allowed on Sunday, Monday, Tuesday and Thursday. Each Monday and Friday they met in the Chapterhouse for the “Chapter of Faults” in which the brethren would accuse themselves of breaches of the Rule. Novices may not receive visits except under strict regulations. A woman was not allowed to visit, unless she was the mother or the sister of the novice. At the end of his novitiate, John Roberts humbly begged the favour of the monastic habit. This was granted. John took the name Fra Juan de Mervinia (Brother John of Merioneth). Probably, he was ordained priest in 1602.
St. John Robert’s Formula of Monastic Profession, from the archives of the Diocese of Compostela is written on paper and measures 30cm by 42cm. The handwriting of five people can be identified who contributed to the document at different times. It may be translated as:-

I, Brother John of Merioneth an Englishman promise my stability of perpetual enclosure, and the conversion of my customs, and obedience before God and His Saints according to the Rule of St. Benedict in this Monastery of San Martin Pinario, of the Order of the same Saint, in the presence of Reverend Father Brother Diego Ramos, Abbot.

Brother John of Merioneth  
6th August 1600

_He died a martyr in England at the hands of his own father._

_He died a martyr in England and this house has an arm of his._

The source of the bizarre idea that he died at the hand of his father is unknown. The Vow of Enclosure placed strict limits on the ability of all monks to leave the Abbey and on the duration of this absence which caused difficulty in allowing the use of monks on Mission work. The Pope gave special permission for this by decree on March 20th 1602. John Roberts set out for England on the 26th December 1602, in the company of Dom Augustine Bradshaw and probably Dom Joseph Prater. They went to Bordeaux where the group was spotted by an English spy, then to Paris and St. Omer where they seem to have been delayed. In early April 1603 they caught a ship from a French port which had a spy on board. John Roberts reported later that he had paid £3 for his passage to England, and in the night was set on shore when the rest of the passengers were asleep. They had arrived in the country shortly after the death of Queen Elizabeth on March 24th. They were the first monks to come back to England after the suppression of the monasteries.
Merely entering the country as a Catholic priest was treasonable and hazardous. Ports were dangerous and officials had descriptions from spies of those attempting to return to these shores. In Elizabeth’s “Proclamation against Jesuits”, 1591 it was said:

“And furthermore, because it is known and proved by common experience...that they do come into the same (realm) by secret creeks and landing places, disguised both in names and persons, some in apparel as soldiers, mariners or merchants, pretending that they have heretofore been taken prisoners and put into galleys and delivered. Some come as gentlemen with contrary names in comely apparel as though they had travelled to foreign countries for knowledge: and generally all, for the most part, are clothed like gentlemen in apparel, and many as gallants; yea in all colours, and with feathers and such like, disguising themselves; and many of them in their behaviour as ruffians, far off to be thought or suspected to be friars, priests, Jesuits or popish scholars.”

In early April 1603, Brothers Bradshaw and Roberts reached London where, in disguise, they went to the Clink prison to see two secular priests who were being held. John Roberts remained in London and was arrested. James I had arrived in London, an occasion marked by a “general goal delivery”, that is a release of prisoners. The Catholic priests in custody were banished. On 13th May 1603 John and others were put into a boat, rowed to Gravesend, escorted to the south coast and then to Calais where their guards released them. He went to Douai where he arrived on 24th May 1603. Perhaps from there he continued to Antwerp, Brussels and Spain.

In 1603 there was a severe outbreak of plague in London estimated to have killed about thirty thousand of its citizens and which led to paralysis of government and delayed the coronation of James I. These circumstances gave John Roberts his chance to return. He helped those affected and ministered to the spiritual and bodily wants of the people, establishing a strong reputation amongst the Catholic community. Lewis Owen, the spy, reported “He became very famous amongst the English Papists, and many resorted to him, some of them out of curiosity to see a Benedictine monk once again in England; and others came out of a blind zeal of his fatherhood; but, howsoever, they did all minister and contribute very largely towards his relief and the rest of the English monklings...... Within a short time... he begot here many Proselytes or Popelinngs, and having so done, transporte them into Spaine to be trayened up in the Monasticall discipline.”

His work at this time is also recorded in the Annales Collegii Anglorum Vallesoletani (Annals of the English College, Valladolid), 1610/11:-

“He made his way to desolate houses and ministered to the sick he found there and employed the remedies by which many were brought back from death by the plague and recovered their health. These people......suspected that he had fallen from heaven. Accordingly they listened to him and he framed words concerning religion and the paths of life......many whom death did not carry off remained faithful Catholics and most affectionately disposed towards this father.”

We now draw heavily on the works of Ellis in dealing with the period until his final arrest and trial. In Spring 1604, Roberts set out from London with four young men to the south coast en route for Spain. He intended to accompany them and attend a General Chapter of the Congregation held to discuss the affairs of the English Mission. They were arrested as they were about to take ship. His identity was not discovered. He looked young and was thought to be a postulant and so was released. He went to Spain and then back to England to work in London, based at the house of Mr. Knight, a scrivener, on the corner of Holborn and Chancery Lane. He was arrested shortly afterwards by warrant of the Archbishop of Canterbury. His release was secured by the intervention of the French Ambassador, de la Boderie. He then went to the Continent and stayed there till early autumn 1605.
The Gunpowder Plot was exploited to stem the rising tide of Catholicism in England. All the known Catholics in London were rounded up. On November 5th Roberts was arrested by Justice Grange in the house of Mrs Percy, “first wife” of Thomas Percy, one of the “plotters”, who appears to have been a bigamist. This seems to have been the priest’s normal lodging. Roberts was described as “newly entered, booted as having ridden.” He was taken to the Gatehouse Prison which had been part of the old Benedictine Abbey of Westminster. He was kept there for a period of seven months, enduring harsh conditions. Attempts were made to link him with the Plot but no such connection could be made.

The document above is an extract from a letter submitted by Thomas Harlow which seeks payment for expenses incurred in keeping prisoners at the Gatehouse. It is signed by Lord Cecil, Earl of Shrewsbury, who authorised payment of the account. The section indicated refers to John Roberts and it reads: “John Robertes a preist comitted by the Lords grace of Canterbury as a Commissioner putt on the Kings charge by Captain Meysey [Walter Meysey, Keeper] Close prisoner and yet not close comitted nor so kept, on Christmas quarter tenn weekes 3 dayes who had no diet of him halfe the tyme wherin the Kinge is deceived of.” The bill totals £9 6s. The letter was given to the monastic community of Downside by Ian Norrington, an old boy, who purchased it at Bonhams in 2006.

On 10th July 1606 a fresh proclamation was made banning all priests from the realm. John and other priests already in captivity were to be imprisoned till death, however the French Ambassador intervened and Roberts was banished again. He was away from England for over a year during which time he was very active in Douai, being involved in the foundation of what was to become the Abbey of St. Gregory. The Benedictines felt that they needed such a base for training postulants nearer England than Spain or Italy. Douai was attractive, being the seat of a fine university and a secular seminary.
Probably in 1606, a room was taken in the Anchin College at Douai as a dormitory for the Benedictines. Roberts was involved in discussions which, by the end of 1606, led to a house being hired as a temporary monastery. The lower room was formed into a chapel and a community was created of about a dozen monks. Support was provided from the other Benedictine houses in Flanders. In 1608 the Vatican confirmed the establishment of a house at Douai. Roberts was active in securing financial support from Spain and he became its first Prior. It was to be an important Benedictine centre until 1795 when it fell victim to the French Revolution.

He returned to England in October 1607 and on 27th December 1607 he was arrested by Humphrey Crosse and committed again to the Gatehouse. A new Oath of Allegiance to the King had been drafted. Parts of it were unobjectionable to Catholics but aspects were, and in September 1606 Pope Paul V banned all Catholics from taking it. Roberts remained imprisoned. With the aid of a fellow prisoner, Francis Miles, and external help, he succeeded in filing through the bars of the cell and he and three other prisoners escaped. It is uncertain whether he then went abroad.

In May 1609 he was back in the Gatehouse being arrested under a warrant of Archbishop Bancroft. On 15th May 1609 he was transferred to Newgate. Father Birkhead, writing to Dr. Smith, the agent in Rome, said “It is thought that Mr. Roberts, the Benedictine, shall go to the pot, being removed from the Gatehouse to Newgate.” “The pot” was the cauldron in which dismembered limbs of victims were boiled before being exhibited. Ambassador de la Broderie intervened and had him banished, accompanied by Mark Crowther
and Francis Miles. He made his way to Spain then back in Douai in 1610. Another outbreak of plague in London gave Roberts the incentive to return.

In the year 1609 there had been no executions at all of Catholic priests or laymen which aroused the fury of Parliament. On June 2nd 1610 a “united prayer” of both Houses led to a proclamation against priests, Jesuits and recusants. All Catholics had to quit London within a month; Catholics would face confiscation of arms and ammunition and all priests were to leave the realm within a month. All persons over eighteen were to take the Oath of Allegiance within six months. Refusal would involve the penalties of Praemunire, which included death. Women recusants were to be imprisoned until they conformed to the Established Religion unless their husbands could purchase their liberty at the rate of £10 a month.

On 2nd December 1610, Advent Sunday, at a house at the corner of Chancery Lane, Roberts and five other priests were arrested while he was conducting mass. He was taken through the streets to Newgate while still wearing his vestments, something likely to provoke a riot.

Summarising the trial and execution of John Roberts presents a considerable challenge to the modern writer. One can imagine that the event would have led to a flurry of correspondence between those who knew him and the various monastic houses and seminaries in Europe with which he was connected.

That great student of Catholic history, Dom Bede Camm, writing in “A Benedictine Martyr in England”, 1897, identifies no less than nine documentary sources. Additional problems arise because they have been translated and retranslated into various languages. In general, they agree, at least about the main events.

Challoner, in 1741, draws on a manuscript sent to him from St. Omer. Pollen identifies his source as Stoneyhurst MSS Anglia, iii n. 102, written in Italian on May 16th 1611 by someone who was present in court. Two accounts are to found in the Westminster archives and letters were sent by two Jesuits. There is also a Spanish account written by Don Antonio Yepes which is based on what Bede Camm calls “the French life”. This, he says, was an account written initially by John Roberts while in prison after his conviction, and is a French version of a Latin translation of a document originally in English. Where though is this “French life” to be found?
We modern writers have an enormously powerful research tool at our disposal, namely the internet. The Newberry Library of Chicago has undertaken a project to record French pamphlets from the sixteenth to the nineteenth centuries. In the collection of Saint-Sulpice, Paris, Case folio BX4060.A1 S25 ser.1 v. 56 no. 3 carries the title which, when translated, shows that it covers the speeches and events associated with the martyrdom of John Roberts. This is “the French life”.

Within the folio is the following comment:-

« Nous, Fr. Augustin de Saint-Jean, prieur et vicaire général des moines Anglais de decà les monts, de la Congrégation de St Benoist en Espaigne, tesmoignons que la sus-dite manière tenue et passée en l'examen et jugement du R. P. Jean de Mervinia est translatée fidèlement de l'Anglois en Latin, jouxte l'exemplaire qu'iceluy mesure B. Martir a escrit de sa propre main dedans la prison, après sa condamnation : mais, ce qui s'est ensuivy depuis cela jusques à la fin et exécution de la sentence de mort, jouxte l'exemplaire à nous donné par le R. P. Robert de St Benoit moyne du mesme ordre qui a esté present à l'execution d'icelle sentence et estoit chef de ceux qui tirèrent les corps des martyrs hors la fosse comme dessus. Ainsi je l'atteste frère Augustin de St Jean que dessus.

Ce discours est digne d'être mis en lumière. — Faict à Douay, le quatriesme de May 1611, George Colveneere, Docteur et Professeur en la S. Theologie, visitateur et censeur des livres en l’Université de Douay. »

Translation of seventeenth century French is a challenge but the essential points are that Father Augustin de Saint-Jean, who is the Prior and Vicar General of the English monks of the Order of St. Benedict in Spain “this side of the mountains” (the Pyrenees), witnesses that the testimony of John of Mervinia, written with his own hand while in prison awaiting execution, was translated faithfully from English into Latin. (At some stage it must have been translated into French.) Further information has been given by Robert of St. Benedict, a monk of the same Order, who was present at the execution and was the leader of those who dragged the bodies of the martyrs from the ditch. Permission was given for this to be published at Douai on the 4th May 1611 since “This story deserves to see the light”. It is reported that King James read this book and was unsettled by it.

For convenience we will use chiefly the account of the trial used by Pollen. This deals with the Arraignment and Condemnation of Father John Roberts O.S.B. and Thomas Somers, Secular Priest. Thomas Somers, alias Wilson, was at one time a schoolmaster in Westmoreland. After his ordination in 1606 he had laboured
chiefly in London. Their trial was held on the 5th December 1610 in the Justice Hall of Newgate before George Abbot, Bishop of London; Lord Chief Justice Coke; The Recorder of London and royal officials.

The Bishop of London and the Lord Chief Justice

The fact that the Bench consisted of such illustrious personages indicates the degree of importance attached to the cases. The report places much emphasis on the interaction between the Bishop (sometimes referred to as “the pseudo-bishop”) and Roberts. The obligation of all adults to take the new oath of allegiance was of critical importance in the trial, as well as Robert’s status as a priest.

The trial opened with Mr. Somers being asked to take the Oath of Allegiance. He replied briefly that he would not take it in the form printed in the statute book.

The Bishop said, turning to Roberts:-

“Mr. Roberts, you know how often you have been brought before me, what trouble I have taken for you and with what kindness I have treated you, and all in order to persuade you to become a good subject to the King’s Majesty, who has shown you so much mercy. Hitherto you have only been punished with exile on several occasions, though you have been captured and recaptured time after time. And even still, in spite of your contempt for his laws and ordinances, notwithstanding your return contrary to his express command and will, still I say, he desired to make one more trial of your loyalty and good disposition in his regard and to grant you favour. It is therefore my duty to offer you the oath of allegiance made and ordained expressly by both Houses of Parliament to discover the loyalty and obedience of the recusant Papists and priests who are subjects of his Majesty. Now what say you, Mr. Roberts? Will you take this oath or not?”

Roberts replied that he had not refused or would ever refuse to take any oath of allegiance but the oath contained other matter besides allegiance. If these were removed, he would swear to the rest which concerns only allegiance to the sovereign. The Bishop said that he could not alter the oath as determined by Parliament. The Recorder tried to persuade him to take it as it stood but he refused. A jury of twelve men was selected. The indictment against Somers was read, based on the statute prohibiting the presence of priests in England. Somers agreed that he was a priest “but no traitor for all that”. “That will do,” said the Recorder, and turning to the jury: “you have heard that he confesses he is a priest, and this is enough for you to find him guilty.”
The indictment against Roberts was read and he was asked whether he were guilty or not. He answered that this was for them to prove. “Ah,” said the Lord Chief Justice, “I can see that this is a cunning fellow. But speak plainly, do you deny that you are a priest?”

Father Roberts answered, “Sir, are you my judge or my accuser? Both offices cannot be united in the same person.”

The Bishop said “Surely my lords, we shall find this man is of a different temper from his fellow.” And getting up he spoke as follows:-

“Mr Roberts, I am astonished that you want to raise such difficulties for yourself and this Bench. You cannot now be ignorant that I know you to be a monk of the Order of St. Benedict and, in fact, the Provincial of the monks of that Order in England.”

Roberts asked him to prove this in court. The Bishop addressed the court and said that Roberts was a person of high standing and very dangerous to the state. He had been found on the very day of the Powder Treason in the house of the wife of its author and contriver. “You can infer how dangerous he is to the King and country.”

Roberts pointed out that he had been cleared of all charges relating to the Plot before the Privy Council. “So clearly was I justified that they declared me to be a man of good repute, and in liberating me testified that no imputation whatever rested on me.”

The Bishop outlined his time in Europe, his studies, the time spent in Compostela “and the mischief he had worked among the subjects of his Majesty”. Nothing was presented to prove that he was a priest. Eventually Roberts said “My lord I will spare you this trouble; I can see very well what you want; and I too wish you to have your desire. I say it not to you only, but to all the Court, and I acknowledge that I am a priest and a monk of the Order of St. Benedict…… If my one life were ten thousand lives, and every life ten thousand times more dear to me than mine is, I would give them all in this cause.”

“And yet”, said the Recorder,” you will not die for your faith, but for treason; as it is not for being ordained priest but for returning to this country to exercise your office of priest against the order of the law that you have been declared guilty.”

Roberts said he was bound to do so as a priest. “No”, said the Bishop, “you disturb the people, you have come to deceive the subjects of his Majesty, and seduce them from their loyalty and obedience, and this is the reason of your coming back.” Roberts said that he was merely trying to lead back to the right path “poor wandering souls whom you and your foolish and ignorant ministers have led astray”. He was merely teaching the same faith as that brought by St. Augustine who converted the country to Christianity. This argument caused some disorder in court. He said that unlike the false doctrine of Luther he himself taught obedience to princes. The Bishop refused to dispute religious matters with him. Roberts denied that he was Superior of the Benedictines in England and had himself ordained priests.

Roberts asked the bishop “Have you the boldness to offer a single instance before these our miserable times….where a Catholic Bishop has seated himself among secular judges in a capital case? You would have done much better, my lord, to remain in your palace and in your church and chapter, reforming the dissolute conduct of your clergy, than to come and sit on this Bench, while matters of life and death are being decided.”

Roberts asked the members of the Bench to decide the case rather than the “simple and ignorant men” who formed the jury so that these poor men may not be responsible for our blood. To this the Recorder answered:- “We cannot do this. You must be content to let the law take its course, and you should be satisfied that your case is decided by twelve of your own countrymen.”

The jury retired and found the two accused to be guilty of high treason. The Roberts and Somers prayed God to pardon those poor men of the jury who knew not what they did. The two priests were then taken back to Newgate.
On Saturday 8th December, Father Roberts and Mr. Somers were taken back to Court to hear their sentence. The Recorder asked whether they had anything to say to show reason why he should not pronounce sentence. Roberts acknowledged that he was a priest and monk, as were Saints Augustine and Paulinus who had converted the country from unbelief. He had done what little he could do to liberate the country from heresy and he left it to the Recorder to judge whether this was high treason.

The Recorder said “God have mercy on you.” Then he made a violent attack on them, especially Roberts, pointing him out as the most turbulent and dangerous priest in England. Sentence was pronounced by the Recorder on each in turn. Roberts said to the Recorder “I pray God to pardon you and all who have plotted to shed my blood. May God protect the King, the Queen, the Prince and all the family of his Majesty and give them grace to serve Him faithfully.” The Recorder took off his hat and said “I congratulate you on making such a good end.” and ordered the condemned men to be taken back to prison. There is some suggestion in correspondence dating from 1611, referred to by Bede Camm, that the two may have been reprieved were it not for the insistence of the Bishop of London who urged the Recorder to “proceed in justice against them”.

On the night before their execution, a Spanish lady, Donna Luisa de Carvajal, provided a fine feast at Newgate for twenty Catholic prisoners at which she presided and John Roberts was guest of honour. Born in 1566 and dying in 1614, Luisa was a member of the Spanish nobility. She had decided not to marry, living a holy life in Madrid with a few servants. She desired to seek converts for Catholicism. She took a vow of martyrdom and travelled to England, arriving in London in early 1606. Living at or near the Spanish embassy she worked as a teacher, a missionary and in providing charitable service to the poor. As the condemned men awaited execution, Luisa bribed the guards to move them to a section of the prison where other Catholics were kept. Apparently at some stage a chance of escape was offered to Roberts which he refused. Increasing the level of bribe, she arranged a feast which included a Spanish pear tart.
On December 10th, the two condemned priests were led from the prison door and delivered into the charge of the Sheriff of Middlesex who was to preside at their execution. They were tied to hurdles to be dragged to Tyburn, a distance of about two miles. Tyburn was the site of “The King’s Gallows” or “The Tyburn Tree”. The design of the gallows was such that several people could be hanged at once. From the first recorded execution there in 1196, probably over fifty thousand persons were executed there before its use ceased in 1783. Our account is based chiefly on Challoner, writing in 1741, who gained his information from the St. Omer manuscript.

“The multitude of the gentry and of the common people was such and so great that they could not draw them to their intended place but were forced to take them from the hurdle and send them to the carts in which stood sixteen condemned men with their ropes about their necks, and tied to the gallows. Father Roberts was taken first from the hurdle, who, with a cheerful and smiling countenance, walked in his gown to the cart.... He took notice, upon this occasion, that he was to be hanged amongst thieves, upon which, one of the officers put him in mind that his master was so served.... He turned towards the poor condemned prisoners who were singing Genevan hymns and begged them to stop. He blessed them and said 'We are all come hither to die, from which there is no hope of escape, and if you die in the religion now professsed in England, you shall undoubtedly perish everlastingly; let me therefore, for the love of our blessed Saviour, entreat you that we may all die in one faith..... let me beseech you to pronounce with me these words – I believe in the holy Catholic church. I am condemned to die, for that being a priest I came into England, contrary to statute made in the 27th year of the late queen’s reign’. To the objection that he came into England without due authority he replied that he was sent into England by the same authority by which St. Augustine the Apostle of England was sent and that, for the profession and teaching of that religion, which St. Augustine planted in England, he was now condemned to die.”

Periodically he was interrupted by one of the officers supervising the execution saying:– “He must not be suffered to allure the king’s people in this sort.” Roberts answered “I say nothing against the king: he is a good king; I beseech God to bless him, his grave senate, the council, the honourable bench by whom I was condemned together will all those that have been instruments of my death. Neither is it the king that causes us to die; he is a clement king: it is heresy, it is heresy that does this.” Being advised to put on his nightcap he answered “Do you think I fear the headache?” And seeing the fire prepared to burn his bowels, he said “I perceive you prepare a hot breakfast for us.” His last words were “All ye men and women saints intercede for us.”

John Roberts and his friend Thomas Somers embraced each other. At the insistence of the crowd they were allowed to hang until thoroughly dead whereas those suffering this form of execution would normally be cut-down when semi-conscious. They were disembowelled, beheaded and quartered and their entrails burned. Robert’s heart was held aloft by the executioner who made the normal proclamation “Behold the heart of a traitor.” The crowd remained silent instead of giving the usual response of “Long live the King!” Their quarters were buried in a ditch and the bodies of the sixteen hanged criminals thrown on top of them. Their severed heads were carried off and placed on spikes on London Bridge.

The 1611 pamphlet from Douai transcribed by the Newberry Library contains an illustration of the martyrdom. The image refers to John Roberts of Mervinia and other English monks of the Congregation of St. Benedict in Spain, put to death by heretics in London on 20th December 1610. (Effigies R.P. Joannis de Mervinia alias Roberts monachi Angli congrega. Sti. Bti. in Hispania, ab hereticis interfeci Londini die 20 Decemb. ao. 1610, quod sacerdos et monichis sedis apostolicae authoritate in Anglia sit missus). In the image we see Roberts about to be hung with the words “Extra ecclesiam nulla salus” (“Outside the church there is no salvation.”) issuing from his mouth. Near the bottom-centre of the image the bones of another martyr are visible, while an execution (dismemberment) is taking place in the upper right-hand side of the image. Similarly, the castle in the distance is depicted with a head on a pike protruding from the tower and
below that another monk is bound on a sled behind a horse, presumably being brought to the gallows for execution.

The two martyrs did not remain buried for long. There is little dispute about what happened but some disagreement about who was responsible. Donna Luisa certainly was a key figure. Apparently a group of Catholics decided that they would attempt to recover the bodies of the martyrs from the ditch in which they had been buried. Dom Marius Scott approached her for help. Challoner writes that two nights after the execution, one of Mr. Robert’s brethren (identified elsewhere as Dom Robert Haddock) with some other Catholics dug out the quarters of Mr. Roberts and Mr. Wilson from the pit. As they were coming into the town at the break of day, they encountered the Watch and one of the party, to aid his escape, let drop a leg and thigh of John Roberts. This was taken to the Bishop of London who ordered it to be buried within the church of St. Saviour, Southwark to prevent any further attempt at removal. The remaining body parts were taken to the abode of Donna Luisa, who, with her ladies, greeted them with great solemnity and later embalmed them. The “Annales Collegii Anglorum Vallesolentani” state, of the body of John Roberts, that Donna Luisa “kept it safe, pickled with aromatics, and caused it to be preserved for the devotion of those who would come after.” In a letter to the Marquesa de Caracena, she wrote: “The owners of the sacred deposit have carried it away, leaving me portions of the relics, in acknowledgement of the hospitality afforded them.” The recovered parts of the body were sent to Douai. It was decided that a portion of these
relics should be sent to the Abbey of San Martin, Compostela, to which Dom William Johnson transported an arm. En route a large piece was left at the Abbey of San Benito, Valladolid.

The account provided by Lady Georgina Fuller in her “Life of Luisa de Carvajal.” 1881, is significantly different. Page 267 states that:-

“At that time Don Alonzo de Velasco of the Order of Santiago and captain of a regiment of horse in Flanders was staying with his father in London who was the Spanish Ambassador. Three days after they had been buried, Luisa proposed to him and to the gentlemen of his household to recover the bodies of the two martyrs which had been thrown into the bottom of a deep pit under those of the malefactors who had been executed at the same time, and for the express purpose, the executioner declared, of preventing the Papists from getting hold of them. It was a nauseous, horrible and repulsive labour, but these brave men underwent it without shrinking, and after lifting up the decaying corpses of the sixteen malefactors they found the mangled remains of the two saints and bore them away..... in sheets sent for that purpose...they succeeded at last in bringing the sacred burden to her house.....She went in devout procession with her companions to meet them. Twelve of them wearing white veils, and carrying lighted tapers in their hands, stood at the entrance of the house to greet the holy relics and the brave men who had recovered them...... Tenderly and with a mingled feeling of joy and sorrow, they deposited them on a couch before the altar of the little oratory, covered them over with a piece of new red silk, scattered flowers upon it and then knelt around for a time in silent prayer.”

Some doubt must be cast on this account since she writes “At that season of the year it does not get dark till near ten and the light begins to dawn by two o’clock in the morning.” The recovery of the remains took place in mid December.

Part of the story of Robert’s last few days is corroborated by State Papers. T.P. Ellis found that on February 8th 1611, Secretary Lake wrote to Lord Salisbury:- “I was commanded by his Majesty to write somewhat earnestly to your lordship in a matter whereof he sayeth he hath been informed since his coming hither by a servant of his now, who assureth him to know the matter to be true. That at the late execution of the two priests, the old lady who is in the Spanish ambassador’s house went the night before publicly to the prison, and there supped with the priests; which his Majesty taketh to be fowle disorder, and not to be suffered...”

There then followed investigation by the Bishop of London into the events prior to the death of the priests which is recorded in “the French life” from Douai. When the Bishop of London interrogated Simon Houghton, keeper of Newgate:-

“Il dit qu’une semaine environ avant que fut executé Roberts, le moine bénédictin, l’ambassadeur d’Espagne ou quelqu’un de sa maison a envoyé à Roberts à Newgate un festin de diverses tartes et d’un grand nombre d’autres douceurs.”

“He said that about a week before Roberts, the Benedictine monk, was executed, the Spanish Ambassador or someone from his household, sent to Roberts at Newgate a feast of different pies and a large number of other sweetmeats.”

Questioning then turned to Abraham Reynolds, the valet of Simon Houghton, who said:-

“Et la nuit avant l’exécution dudit Roberts.... il vint à Newgate une grande dame, déguisée comme si elle avait été une femme de moindre condition. »

“And the night before the execution of the said Roberts, there came to Newgate a great lady, disguised as if she was a woman of lower status.”

It is not known how, if at all, these two were punished for neglect of duty and corruption.

As early as 1642, the first steps were taken towards canonisation of the English and Welsh martyrs but the process was suspended, partly because of the opposition likely to be faced in the wider community and partly because of the difficulties in obtaining the necessary evidence. The “Unam Sanctam Catholicam”
website sets out the initial problems faced. To be accepted as a “martyr” it has to be established beyond any doubt that a person was directly put to death, and that this death was suffered on account of some point of the Faith. Meeting the criteria can be surprisingly demanding in situations where no documentary evidence was kept of the martyrdom, or when much time has elapsed. Both problems existed in the cases of many of those who died during the English Reformation. There is, however, the possibility of “equipollent evidence”, that is evidence which is equally strong. This could be proof of a cult going back at least one hundred years prior to the opening of the martyr’s Cause. This proof is usually made up of local feasts, records of homilies in praise of martyrs, hymns and sometimes architectural, in the form of shrines and art. Such was the persecution faced by Catholics in England and Wales that even such alternative evidence was hard to find.

Various attempts were made in 1866, 1871, 1874, and 1880 to get around this problem but, by 1881, almost a quarter of the English and Welsh martyrs were still classed as “dilati”, or unrecognised, and even those cases which were not seemed stalled. Then, in 1880, the Promotor Fidei (Devil’s Advocate) in the causes of these martyrs was made aware of some extraordinary evidence of cult (equipollent evidence) by the Rector of the English College, Rome. Mgr. Henry O’Callaghan called attention to the existence in the College of a series of frescoes depicting the sufferings of the English and Welsh martyrs painted between 1580 and 1582 by the Italian artist Nicholas Ciciniani.

The frescoes depict early martyrs such as St. Dunstan and St. Thomas Becket, but they also include depictions of the Reformation-era martyrs such as More, Fisher and many others. There was an inscription on the frescoes which read, “Martyr saints, who in ancient or more recent times of persecution have suffered in England for Christ and for the defence of the Catholic faith.” The titles "Saint" and "Blessed" appear on many of the depictions. Furthermore, contemporary letters were discovered describing the frescoes as being made at the request of Pope Gregory XIII (1572-1585). This was extremely strong evidence of proof of cult, going back almost to the times of the martyrdoms, and showed papal approval. The Promotor Fidei recommended proceeding with the causes and the Sacred Congregation agreed.

On December 9th 1886, Leo XIII signed the commission for the introduction of the cause of two hundred and sixty one martyrs, officially establishing them as venerabiles. Sixty three of the martyrs were beatified in 1886, the best known being Thomas More and John Fisher.

Only towards the end of the eighteenth century had the position of Catholics in England and Wales improved. The Papists Act of 1778 removed many restrictions from Catholics who were prepared to swear an oath of loyalty to the monarch and who were prepared to deny the concept that excommunicated
princes could be murdered. This, however, triggered the Gordon Riots in 1780 during which a mob of 50,000 caused tumult in London until put down by the military.

The French Revolution brought some sympathy to its Catholic victims. In Britain Catholic places of worship were tolerated and Catholics were no longer required to swear the Oath of Loyalty. It was only in 1829, however, that most of the remaining penalties on Catholics were removed in the Roman Catholic Relief Act. Anti-Catholic sentiment did increase with the influx of Irish migrants after the Potato Famine of the 1840s. In 1850, Catholic dioceses were re-established in Britain. The 1871 Universities Tests Act opened up the Universities to students of all religions. In 1880, St Joseph’s College, Upholland was built to provide priests for the half million Catholics living in the dioceses of Liverpool and Salford. It would seem, therefore that all that John Roberts and his fellow martyrs had desired had eventually been achieved. The struggle had, however, taken almost three centuries.

Indicative of the restored position of Catholicism in Britain was the start of work on Westminster Cathedral in 1895. The Cardinal Archbishop of Westminster, Herbert Vaughan, sought to emphasise the importance of this new edifice by arranging for the relics of St. Edmund, one-time patron saint of England, to be returned from St. Sermin, Toulouse. The elaborate ceremonial produced an outcry in a hostile press with much criticism of the veneration of relics which scholars argued, in any case, could not be those of the saint. In the event, matters descended into farce when the Cardinal accepted the argument that they were not genuine.

By 1910 Dom Bede Camm in “Forgotten Shrines” felt able to write:-
“Englishmen of all creeds have grown more sympathetic of late, as they have come to know something of the true story of that long persecution which made their Catholic fellow countrymen outlaws in their own land, and turned their most treasured religious convictions into crime against the State. We are beginning to understand the extraordinary loyalty of these Recusants, so faithful to the sovereign who persecuted them just because they were so true to the religion of their fathers.”

Further investigations Into the Cause were begun in 1923 leading to one hundred and thirty six beatifications of victims of religious persecution. John Roberts, having been venerated by a decree of martyrdom on 8th December 1929, was actually beatified, together with other martyrs, by Pope Pius XI on December 15th 1929. John Fisher and Thomas More were canonised in 1935. The Hierarchy of England and Wales then promoted the canonisation of a limited group of the martyrs. After patient work, the list of forty martyrs was presented to the Holy See on December 1st 1960. The selection was based on achieving a spread of social status, religious rank, geographical location and the extent of popular devotion. The list included the Blessed John Roberts. Sufficient data were collected about them to induce the Archbishop of Westminster, Cardinal William Godfrey, to send a description of twenty four seemingly miraculous cases to the Sacred Congregation. Two special cases were selected with one in particular standing out. This was the cure of a young mother affected with a malignant tumour in the left scapula; a cure which the Medical Council had judged gradual, perfect, constant and unaccountable on the natural plane. Pope Paul VI confirmed that this cure had been brought about by God at the intercession of the Forty Blessed Martyrs of England and Wales and on the strength of this one miracle he gave permission for the whole group to be recognised as saints.

“L’Osservatore Romano”, 29th October 1970, contained an article written by Paolo Molinari S.J.. As Jesuit Postulator General he researched the lives of candidates for beatification and canonisation. He explained that on May 18th 1970, the Holy Father in the Consistory asked the opinion of Cardinals, Patriarchs, Archbishops, Bishops, and Abbots about the canonisation of the Forty Martyrs of England and Wales. There was a unanimous answer in favour of canonisation.
Pope Paul VI said:
“We greatly rejoice that unanimously you have asked that these blessed Martyrs of England and Wales be canonised; this is also our desire. It is our intention to enrol them among the saints and to declare them worthy of the honours that the Church attributes to those holy persons who have obtained their heavenly reward. With God’s help, we will do this on the twenty-fifth day of October this year in the Vatican Basilica.”

Cardinal Heenan, the senior member of the English Hierarchy, wrote in a pastoral letter on Trinity Sunday 1970:
“People may ask you:— What is the point of canonising the Blessed English Martyrs?...The object of canonisation is to help not the martyrs but ourselves. Their example is just what we need at the present time. These men and women gave their lives to defend the truths of the Catholic faith and the authority of the Vicar of Christ.”

Thus, on 25th October 1970 Blessed John Roberts came to be canonised. Paolo Molinari, S.J., wrote:—
“And this is just what the Church intends to stress with their Canonisation. It was and is her intention to hold up to the admiration not only of Catholics, but of all men, the example of persons unconditionally loyal to Christ and to their conscience to the extent of being ready to shed their blood for that reason. Owing to their living faith in Christ, their personal attachment to Him, their deep sharing of His life and principles, these persons gave a clear demonstration of their authentically Christian charity for men, also when—on the scaffold—they prayed not only for those who shared their religious convictions, but also for all their fellow-countrymen, and in particular for the Head of the State and even for their executioners.”

In November 1969 the Archbishop of Canterbury, Dr. Michael Ramsey, had expressed his apprehension that this canonisation might rekindle animosity harmful to the ecumenical movement which had become of major concern to the Christian churches, especially after the visit of Archbishop of Canterbury, Geoffrey Fisher, to Pope John XXIII in 1960, the first such meeting for almost five hundred years. In a Memorandum published in “The Tablet” of 29th November 1969 Archbishop Ramsey explained:—
“I have been asked a number of times what I think would be the consequences for ecumenical work of the proposed canonisation. I am increasingly convinced that canonisation would be harmful to the ecumenical cause in England.....In England our past history creates inevitable difficulties for the ecumenical progress......There is not only the prejudice of ultra-Protestant people but there is also the “siege mentality” which is still apt to possess Roman Catholics in England....The “siege mentality” is, I believe, bound up psychologically with a kind of martyrdom complex deeply, and of course intelligibly, rooted in history. My fear is that devotion to the English Martyrs on either side has been and still is a focus for this kind of mentality in its polemical form. ....I have read the “Manifesto for Martyrs’ Sunday 1965” and also the “Biblical Service for the Feast of the Martyrs of England and Wales”.....While some ecumenical language is used, the final outcome is that the Martyrs are to be invoked so that, with the aid of their prayers for non-Roman Catholic Christians, England may be brought within the Roman obedience. I cannot therefore help thinking that the proposed canonisation will in the historical circumstances of England encourage on both sides the kind of emotions of which we are anxious to be rid.”

This anxiety, although shared by some Anglicans and Catholics, was not widespread. Right from the first announcement of the Re-opening of the Cause of the 40 Martyrs, decreed by Pope John XXIII in 1961, the Hierarchy of England and Wales let it be clearly understood that nothing was further from the intentions of the Bishops than to stir up bad feelings and quarrels of the past. The “Catholic Herald” of 23rd October 1970 reported that Archbishop Beck of Liverpool, in a Pastoral Letter, said the Catholics’ pride in the canonisation of the Forty Martyrs did not mean any blame was placed on other Christians and it was not a threat or hindrance to the growth of genuine ecumenism.

Oddly, once the forty martyrs of England and Wales were canonised, some of them tended to disappear from public consciousness. This was certainly true of Saint John Roberts who became referred to as “the
forgotten martyr of Wales”. In 2009 the Right Rev. Edwin Regan, Bishop of Wrexham, said:- “Although the name St. John Roberts isn’t as well known today, he is a major figure in our religious history.” A “Saint John Roberts 400 Working Group” was formed, chaired by Keith O’Brien, to arrange a series of events to mark the four hundredth anniversary of his martyrdom. Much of the programme and its detailed organisation was due to the efforts of Sue Roberts, Vice Chairman of Cylch Catholig (Catholic Circle) which, with the Catholic Church in Wales, financed virtually all of the activities. We draw considerably on information provided by her in the following account of the celebrations.

The 400th anniversary was seen as an opportunity to raise the profile of a saint who, unusually, had his roots in rural, Welsh-speaking Wales. Since Welsh was the saint’s mother tongue that fact was to be celebrated. It provided an excellent opportunity to remind the nation that the roots of the Welsh Christian tradition are Catholic. However, a conscious decision was made that Saint John Roberts could be presented as a “Saint for the whole of Wales” hence the celebrations were open to everyone.

The first event in the celebrations was a pilgrimage in 2008 to Valladolid, where he attended the seminary, and to Santiago de Compostela, where he was ordained. This was an ecumenical, Welsh language seven day pilgrimage for forty two people, arranged over a period two years and was led by Bishop Regan from the Catholic Church and Canon Andrew Jones (now Archdeacon of Meirionnydd) from the Church in Wales. This proved to be highly successful. There was also a second pilgrimage to the Continent, to Brussels and Douai, between the 8th and 10th of May 2010 to make the point that St John Roberts belonged to the European tradition. This pilgrimage was joined this time by Rev Pryderi Llwyd Jones, a nonconformist minister, and Rev Aled Edwards, the Chief Executive of Churches Together in Wales, the ‘official’ ecumenical body.

On Thursday 10th December 2009, a unique bilingual mass was held in a small church in Dolgellau, called “Our Lady of the Seven Sorrows”, which marked the official start of the anniversary year. Present were Bishop Edwin Regan; the Dolgellau nuns of the Carmelite Order and Father Joshy, the Parish Priest who had been born in India. The clergy wore red vestments, the sign of martyrdom. By summer 2010 celebrations were well underway and increasing in scale. A major mass was held at Cymer Abbey on 6th June 2010, the Feast of Corpus Christi. The event was given a papal blessing by Pope Benedict XVI.
Between 16th and 18th July 2010 the Welsh Pilgrimage took place. Leaving North Wales the pilgrims visited Downside Abbey on Friday 16th. After lunch they continued to Tyburn Abbey where Mother Mathias welcomed them. She gave a short account of the Tyburn martyrs and of the life and death of St. John Roberts. An ecumenical service was conducted by Bishop Edwin Regan, in remembrance of John Roberts and the English and Welsh martyrs. Members of the group went to the crypt to see the relics of the martyrs.

On 17th July 2010, an Ecumenical Service was held at Westminster Cathedral in celebration of the 400th Anniversary of the Martyrdom of St. John Roberts.

Leading this celebration of reconciliation were, from left to right, the Anglican Archbishop of Wales (Most Rev’d Barry Morgan) and the Catholic Archbishop of Westminster (Mgr. Vincent Nichols), the Archbishop of Canterbury (Dr. Rowan Williams), the Catholic Bishop of Wrexham (Edwin Regan) plus other Anglican and Catholic bishops and various representatives from Orthodox Churches. These included His Grace Bishop Athanasios of Tropaeou (Oecumenical Patriarchate), Archbishop Elisey of Sourozh (Moscow Patriarchate), the Very Rev’d Archimandrite of the Oecumenical Throne Ephrem (Lash) and Archimandrite Deiniol, Administrator of the Wales Orthodox Mission (Ukrainian Orthodox Church within the Oecumenical Patriarchate). Metropolitan Seraphim of Glastonbury, of the British Orthodox Church, noted that, as a Londoner, he wanted to honour the humanitarian and pastoral ministry of the saint to Londoners.

Large contingents from Wales were in attendance and the service was bi-lingual. The Archdruid of Wales represented the nation’s literary life. The choral piece, "Beatus Juan de Mervinia", in both Latin and Welsh, was specially commissioned for the service from the Welsh composer Brian Hughes. The London Welsh Chorale and Westminster Cathedral Choir performed. Twelve year old Mali Fflur, National Eisteddfod winner, sang a poem in praise of St John Roberts composed by the crowned bard Dafydd Pritchard. During the service the legendary Welsh folk singer and activist Dafydd Iwan performed his famous song ‘Oscar Romera.’ This recounts the life and achievements of the Archbishop from El Salvador assassinated during the celebration of mass in 1980.
It had been difficult to persuade the authorities at Westminster that the service would be viable, that it should be ecumenical and be led by the Archbishops of Westminster and Canterbury. Securing the agreement of the Archbishop of Canterbury to preach in Welsh at Westminster Cathedral was remarkable. The event was highly successful with over a thousand in the congregation.

On the final day of the Pilgrimage, the group went to St. John’s Oxford, to celebrate sung Mass in English, Welsh and Latin. This was open to all denominations.
On Sunday, 24th October 2010 Father Joshy blessed a bust of the Saint erected in Rhiw Goch. This had been commissioned by Mr Archie Riley. It and a smaller bust in the Llys Ednowain Heritage Centre had been sculpted in bronze resin by Mike Murphy.

Afterwards, at the medieval church of St.Madryn's, the cover from the font in which John Roberts had been baptised, was blessed by the Right Reverend Andrew John, Anglican Bishop of Bangor.
Keith O’Brien wrote “The final occasion was a special mass on the day of his martyrdom, 10th December, at the Cardiff Metropolitan Cathedral of St David. This was in the care of Bishop Edwin Regan, with Dafydd Elis-Thomas reading and a sermon by Bishop Tom Burns. It was a fitting and dignified end to an unforgettable year of celebrations in honour of one of Trawsfynydd’s most famous sons.”

The organisers believed that the success of the year’s events showed how the Catholic tradition could be brought alive even to an audience which had little knowledge of its relevance.

There are permanent reminders of Saint John Roberts remaining in the area of his birth. “The Tablet” of 2nd September 1933 refers to the blessing of a portrait of the Blessed John Roberts by his lordship the Bishop of Menevia. It was to form a perpetual memorial in the church of Our Lady of Sorrows at Dolgellau, the martyr’s native town. In the background of the portrait is shown the quadrangle of the now demolished college of St. Gregory at Douai where Father Roberts was the first Prior. This is now to be found in the vestry of the Sacred Cross Church, Gellilydan. There is also the St. John Roberts Trail which begins at St. Madryn’s Church, Trawsfynydd and continues towards Cymer Abbey. His life is commemorated by an exhibition in the Llys Ednowain Heritage Centre. At Stanbrook Abbey, Wass, North Yorkshire, the Benedictine nuns have pear tart, part of the Saint’s final meal, on his feast day, October 25th.

The most lasting and poignant reminders of the life and work of St. John Roberts are his relics. According to Dom Bede Camm, writing about a century ago, there are four things we ourselves can do to venerate the martyrs of this country: “firstly, acquaint ourselves with the stories of their lives; secondly, visit shrines and relics; thirdly follow their example, sacrificing ourselves for the holy sacrifice of the Mass; and fourthly, help to promote knowledge and veneration of the martyrs in the wider world.”

Since the beginning of Christianity, believers have seen relics as a way of coming closer to the saints and therefore to God. Saint Jerome wrote in “Ad Riparium”, I, P.L.,XXII, 907:-
“Do not worship, we do not adore but we do venerate the relics of the martyrs in order the better to adore Him whose martyrs they are”.

The Council of Trent (1563) defended invoking the prayers of the saints, and venerating their relics and burial places:-
“The sacred bodies of the holy martyrs and of the other saints living with Christ, which have been living members of Christ and the temple of the Holy Spirit, and which are destined to be raised and glorified by Him unto life eternal, should also be venerated by the faithful. Through them, many benefits are granted to men by God.”

In 1896, a Decree issued by the Congregation of Indulgences and Sacred Relics stated:-
“Ancient relics are to retain the veneration they have always enjoyed except when in individual instances there are clear arguments that they are false and superstitious”.

A recent statement of the Church’s attitude to relics may be seen in an article in the “Catholic Herald” of June 23rd 2011, in connection with an exhibition of relics and reliquaries at the British Museum. The Archbishop of Westminster, Vincent Nichols, now Cardinal, a contemporary at the Venerable English College in Rome of one of the present authors, was reported as saying:-
“It’s perfectly clear that relics are a very important part of the expression of religious faith as well as of cultural importance in the way that people cling to a souvenir from a person they’ve loved or a place that they have been to. And what that conveys is the connecting of this moment with the treasured moment of the past. And if that connection is made through an object which, maybe, forensically won’t stand up to the test, that is of secondary importance to the spiritual and emotive power that the object can contain, and does contain.

I think that’s where the setting of the relic is as eloquent as the relic itself. If you look at a lot of these reliquaries you do not actually see the relic. The relic is, as it were, the end of an inner journey. So what they’re looking for is the viewer to really enter their own soul to understand how they enter into the value of the treasure of the relic that is before them.”
So it’s a spiritual dialogue that takes place between this object and the person themself. That is why they’re called “Treasures of Heaven”, because it is through the spiritual that our hearts are raised to heaven.”

What is known of the past and current location of the relics of St. John Roberts? One of his “quarters” was buried at the church of St. Saviour, Southwark (Southwark Cathedral) after being dropped in panic by one of those seeking to recover it from the ditch. Presumably there it still remains.

The bulk of the recovered relics were taken to Douai but not all of them remained there. Bede Camm writing in “A Benedictine Martyr in England” in 1897 explained:-

“At Douay it may easily be conceived with what joy and exaltation these glorious trophies were received. It was, however, only just that at least a portion of Dom John Roberts’ relics should be given to his monastery at Compostella. An arm was therefore entrusted to the care of Dom William Johnson, our martyr’s old companion at Valladolid and San Martino, who was to take it as a most precious treasure to present to the Abbot and community of the famous Abbey. Yepes recounts with much emotion how he saw with his own eyes and held in his hands this sacred relic, as Dom William passed by Valladolid on his way to Santiago. He begged a portion for the Abbey of San Benito, and succeeded in obtaining a large piece; for it was surely fitting that some memorial of the martyr should be left at Valladolid, in the house in which he first took refuge at the feet of Saint Benedict. (‘Yepes’ was Dom Antonio Yepes, chronicler of the Benedictine Order) Thus London, Douay, Valladolid, Santiago shared between them the earthly remains of him who now prays for them in Heaven.”

The relics kept at St. Gregory’s, Douai were lost in 1795 in the upheavals of Revolutionary France. Bede Camm wrote of his great disappointment that they are “apparently lost without hope of recovery”. In September 1835, the monks were expelled from San Martin, Compostela and for while it was occupied by the army and used as government offices. Bede Camm explained:- “One of John Roberts’ arms was preserved as a sacred relic by the Community, but it has unhappily been lost since the expulsion, and all researches have as yet proved fruitless”. He says of the arm “a relic which the late lamented prelate, Abbot nullius of New Nursia, himself the last survivor of that ancient house, told me that he distinctly remembered.” In 1928, Bede Camm made a pilgrimage to Compostela in the hope of finding the arm but, despite every help being given to him by the Cardinal Archbishop of Santiago and the Canons of the Basilica, he failed to do so. In June 2001, Keith O’Brien, was in correspondence with the Vice-director of the Diocesan Archives of Santiago de Compostela, Rev. Joseph Fleming, who supplied a certified copy of the “profession” of John Roberts. His reply refers to the dissolution of the abbey of San Martin in 1835 when most of the monastic archive was sent to Madrid. The Rev. Fleming wrote “However the reference to his arm being kept as a relic is true. It was lost at the dissolution of 1835, but some relics were deposited in the cathedral and it is possible that the arm is among them…”

Inquiries made for this work in June 2014 confirm that the Cédula of profession is still within the Diocesan Archives. The Archivist stated that:- “This document contains a further annotation which says that the holy relic of the arm is kept in the monastery. About this we do not know where you can currently find the relic.”

As regards any relics of Saint John Roberts in Great Britain, in 1897, Bede Camm wrote “As far as we know, only one finger now remains, which is still preserved with reverent love by the Franciscan nuns of Taunton. A small particle of it lies before us as we write.” This finger had been described by Pollen in 1891 as being in the Convent of Our Lady of Dolours of the Third Order of St. Francis at Taunton, He describes it as marked “Joannis Mervin. digitus, Ordinis Sti Benedicti Sacerdotis et Martyris in Anglia”.

The document below, now to be found in the archives of Downside Abbey, casts light on the history of the Taunton relic.
By the time “Forgotten Shrines” was published in 1910, more relics of Saint John had appeared. “At Clare Abbey Darlington were two fingers of V. John Roberts. The skin is the colour of parchment and it is in almost perfect preservation. On one finger is a label with the inscription in a 17th century hand ‘Beati Joannis Mervenia digitus sacerdotis et martyris Ordinis Sti Benedicti in Anglia’.” Bede Camm wrote “One of the fingers was given by the nuns to the writer and the other was subsequently given to the Benedictines of Downside.” He was at Erdington Abbey when the gift was made to him in 1898.

The manner in which Bede Camm increased his knowledge of the location of these relics and, indeed gained possession of one, is fascinating. “The Tablet” of December 8th 1900 contains an interesting letter headed
RELICS OF THE ENGLISH MARTYRS.

SIR,—I am engaged in compiling a catalogue of the relics of the English Martyrs which are still preserved among us, and should be very grateful if those of your readers who possess such relics, or know where some may be found, would kindly communicate with me. I should be grateful for a minute description of the relic, its size, appearance, &c., and, if possible, for a full size sketch or drawing. A rough tracing would be sufficient in most cases....

Under the term “English Martyrs” I include, of course, the Venerable as well as the Blessed.

I am, your, &c.,
D. BEDE CAMM, O.S.B.

Erdington Abbey, Birmingham
December 1, 1900, Feast of the English Martyrs

In 1901 he summarised the information gained in a manuscript entitled “Descriptive Catalogue of the Relics of the English Martyrs”. This is now at Downside Abbey to where Camm transferred his stability in 1913. The Catalogue includes illustrations of the relics of John Roberts in two locations.
It would appear that in 1910, the relics of Saint John Roberts in this country amounted to three fingers. One was in Taunton, one at Downside, and a third with Bede Camm at Erdington. The inevitable question concerns the origins of these fingers; how and when did they get into the possession of their custodians? The reader may recall that mentioned on Page 24 is a letter from Donna Luisa to the Marquesa de Caracena, in which she wrote: “The owners of the sacred deposit have carried it away, leaving me portions of the relics, in acknowledgement of the hospitality afforded them.” It is not unreasonable to assume that relics listed above come from those left with Donna Luisa. The means by which they may have gone from her to the various abbeys remains hidden, at least to the current authors.

In 1931, Bede Camm wrote a chapter on the Blessed John Roberts in his work “Nine Martyr Monks”. The Appendix provides more information about these relics. The Poor Clares in Darlington had been unaware of the identity of “John of Mervinia” until the appearance of his 1897 book on John Roberts. Correspondence with the nuns led to Bede Camm being given the little finger in 1898. The Poor Clares made a gift of the other finger which bore the inscription to Downside Abbey in 1908. According to the Catalogue, when at Clare Abbey this had been accompanied by a small piece of bone. The finger and bone had been “sealed up together in a reliquary”. Dr Hopkinson-Ball of Downside Abbey, the Archivist working for the current “Beacon of Learning Project”, informed us:- “When the finger arrived at Downside it does not seem to have been removed from its former reliquary. This small, cylindrical, glass-fronted theca (in which I am, admittedly, assuming that it arrived) was simply inserted into a larger brass standing reliquary. This reliquary was then sealed with a metal clasp at the back. Despite gentle persuasion, I was unable to open the clasp and so I could not examine the interior (for seal or possible documentation). The brass reliquary has clearly been reused, as the foot is inscribed indicating that
it originally held a relic of St Ethelbert. This in itself is quite interesting, suggesting St John’s enhanced status and the demotion of St Ethelbert upon the finger’s arrival at Downside; the brass reliquary of St Ethelbert is seemingly a Downside piece as there is another, near identical reliquary, in the collection.” (It is uncertain from which of two St Ethelberts this relic originated.)

A sentence in T.P. Ellis’ “Welsh Benedictines of the Terror” (1936), refers to St. John’s relics and it reads “one small fragment rests to-day in the little Catholic Church of the town of Dolgelley, the parish church of the martyr’s home.” A report in “The Tablet” of 7th July 1934 states:- “BLESSED JOHN ROBERTS, O.S.B. – Through the generosity of the Poor Clares at Darlington, Dolgelley now possesses a relic of its local martyr enclosed in a reliquary given by the Bishop of Hexham and Newcastle. On August 12 the Bishop of Menevia will assist in a solemn High Mass, and the Translation of the relic will take place in the afternoon.”

Bede Camm was not merely a scholar and historian; he was actively involved in the maintenance and support of religious houses. Reginald Camm was ordained a minister in the Church of England in 1888 and became a curate for a short time. He converted to Catholicism in 1890 and was accepted into the novitiate of Maredsous Abbey, France in that year, He was sent to Rome where he was solemnly professed on Christmas Day 1894 and ordained as a priest on March 9th 1895 at the Basilica of St. John Lateran. He was sent to Erdington Abbey which was then founded as a community of refugee monks from Germany. In 1904, he published “Lives of the English Martyrs”. Whilst working on this book he came to know Mother Mary of St. Peter who had led her monastic community from Paris because of anti-clerical legislation being enacted in France. The nuns built a new monastery at Tyburn, where many Catholic martyrs had been executed in sixteenth and seventeenth century England. They opened a small shrine in the crypt. In 1909, financial problems had led the nuns to decide to sell the property. Bede Camm approached Mother St. Peter and offered financial support, using a legacy received from his father. He went on to help develop the site, erecting stained glass windows and constructing a larger shrine. In “Nine Martyr Monks” he explained that in 1912 he donated the little finger of John Roberts which they then preserved in a reliquary. This donation is also referred to by Bede Camm on Page 212 of the “Descriptive Catalogue” and shown above.

In 1931 Bede Camm commented on the third finger preserved at the Franciscan Convent, Taunton and wrote “A small portion of this was given to Downside Abbey in 1886.”, a donation recorded in his MS “Descriptive Catalogue”.

In answer to our queries Dr Hopkinson-Ball stated:-
“The smaller relic of St John Roberts given to Downside in 1886 remains elusive; Dom Boniface (The Custos Reliquarium) has no recollection of it being in the Collection. It does not appear in the modern list of the relic assemblage and I have been unable to find any evidence of its being gifted to another house or individual.”

We will now identify the current location of the relics of Saint John. The relics of the English and Welsh Martyrs, previously housed at Taunton, went with the Community in 1954, when the sisters moved to Goodings, Berkshire. Early in 1972 the relics moved again when the Sisters of the Third Order of St. Francis
amalgamated with the Community of Poor Clares, Arundel, West Sussex. There the relic of John Roberts may be found, described as:

\[
\text{dig:prim Johannes Roberts OSB} \\
\text{Dec 10\textsuperscript{th} 1610}
\]

At Downside the relic of the finger given in 1908 is venerated and is able to be viewed clearly during special masses. The theca appears to be of a different shape than that shown in Bede Camm’s sketch. The label is still in place but the finger is no longer sealed together with a piece of bone.
The relic at the Tyburn Convent is shown below.

Photographs © Keith O'Brien

At the Convent, the finger of the Saint is in a reliquary beneath a depiction of the scene of his execution, the same engraving as that shown in the “French life.”

Several modern sources refer to a finger of Saint John Roberts being kept at the Sacred Cross Church, Gellilydan. This church, in Welsh, Eglwys y Groes Sanctaidd, located near the birthplace of John Roberts, was only opened in 1952 and was converted from a building dating from the late seventeenth century when it served as a tannery.

The earliest mention of a relic in this area is by Father Sean Hynes in 1955, who, in a short history of the parish, wrote that the relic was venerated in Blaenau Ffestiniog on the occasion of a mass in honour of the Blessed John Roberts. A publication of the Wales and the Marches Catholic History Society of 14th September 2012 marks the Diamond Jubilee of the Sacred Cross Church. It recalls an event on 14th November 1955 when a hundred parishioners gathered to say the Rosary in Welsh and to have Benediction in honour of the then Blessed John Roberts.

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In 2014, the relic is to be found in Blaenau Ffestiniog in the private chapel of the Right Reverend Edwin Regan, Bishop Emeritus of Wrexham, since the Sacred Cross Church is not in daily use. The photograph of the Gellilydan relic on the right, provided by Bishop Emeritus Regan, shows text on a label within the reliquary which says “EX OSSIBUS B. JOANNIS ROBERTS O.S.B.”. The description is interesting since it refers to the relic as being “from the bones of” rather than from a finger, and it uses the letter B. to refer to John Roberts. This implies that the label must have been written since his Beatification in 1929. The relic is attached by two pieces of cotton and a wax seal.

Examination of the handwriting on the document inside the Gellilydan reliquary and comparison with that of Bede Camm in the “Descriptive Catalogue” allows us to state with reasonable confidence that they are the same. The relic appears to match the description of the “small particle of bone, about three quarters of an inch in length” given by the Franciscan Sisters of Taunton to Downside in 1886 and which is not in the modern list of relics kept at Downside. It seems likely that it left Downside for North Wales before 1955. At one stage in our research we assumed that Gellilydan relic had been “the small fragment” reported in 1936 by T.P. Ellis’ as being in Dolgelley. This is now very unlikely since “The Tablet” article of 1934 reveals its origin as being the Poor Clares of Darlington, the source of the fingers which eventually went to Downside and Tyburn. Page 63 of Bede Camm’s “Descriptive Catalogue” includes an illustration of a piece of bone held at Clare Abbey which presumably is the one which went to Dolgelley/Dollgellau in 1934. It is quite different in shape from the Gellilydan relic. Where now is this piece of bone and its reliquary?

Sister Scholastica, the Archivist of Stanbrook Abbey, Wass, North Yorkshire, kindly informed us that her Community possesses a very small relic, a sliver of bone from the finger of Saint John Roberts. The entry for the relic reads:-

Bl. John Roberts ex digito
Description Oval silver (reliquary)
Seal Brownlow. Episc Clifton
Authentication Clifton Feb 1st, 1896
Donor Dom Bede Camm
Unfortunately it is impossible to determine when this relic came into the possession of the Community. The fact that Taunton is within the Diocese of Clifton leads one to suspect that this relic may be part of the Taunton finger. At the time of writing this relic is inaccessible. Given the date of its authentication, this cannot be the small piece of bone which accompanied one of the fingers from Clare Abbey.

The only contemporary portrait of John Roberts known to Bede Camm was the one in “the French life” reproduced on Page 24. He found this print in a book at the Benedictine Priory of Atherstone in 1901 which he then passed on to the Tyburn Convent with the finger in an oak triptych. He found in the Record Office three autographed letters by John Roberts, one in English and two in Spanish.

John Roberts was put to death as a traitor. His priestly status, his popularity amongst the London poor and his unwillingness to swear an Oath of Allegiance in the form prescribed by Parliament were seen as a threat to the state. To the Catholic Church, he was a martyr; dying for the faith of ages and obedience to the Pope rather than accept the “heresy” of the Protestant/Catholic fusion which is Anglicanism. With the movement towards ecumenism since the mid twentieth century it is interesting to see how the Church now views the actions of such a man who chose death rather than compromise his religious principles.

In his homily on 25th October 1970 Pope Paul VI greeted all those assembled for the canonisation of the Forty Martyrs, including the representative of the Archbishop of Canterbury, Rev. Dr. Harry Smythe. He then said:–

“May the blood of these Martyrs be able to heal the great wound inflicted upon God’s Church by reason of the separation of the Anglican Church from the Catholic Church. Is it not one – these Martyrs say to us – the Church founded by Christ? Is not this their witness? Their devotion to their nation gives us the assurance that on the day when – God willing – the unity of the faith and of Christian life is restored, no offence will be inflicted on the honour and sovereignty of a great country such as England. There will be no seeking to lessen the legitimate prestige and worthy patrimony of piety and usage proper to the Anglican Church when the Roman Church – this humble “Servant of the Servants of God” is able to embrace her ever beloved Sister in the one authentic communion of the family of Christ: a communion of origin and of faith, a communion of priesthood and of rule, a communion of the Saints in the freedom and love of the Spirit of Jesus. Perhaps We shall have to go on, waiting and watching in prayer, in order to deserve that blessed day. But already We are strengthened in this hope by the heavenly friendship of the Forty Martyrs of England and Wales who are canonised today. Amen.”

The Welsh Pilgrimage of 2010, to mark the four hundredth anniversary of the death of Saint John Roberts, had, as its highlight, the major ecumenical service at Westminster Cathedral. Given the theme of reconciliation, the sermon given in Welsh by the Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams, was particularly significant. His participation owed much to the persuasive powers of Sue Roberts. It is interesting to set his views alongside those of the Pope Paul VI, speaking forty years earlier. The Archbishop said that it was too easy to see the Welsh and English martyrs as champions of a Catholic past. Many were unsophisticated people but many were at the forefront of the new movements of the age. “They were citizens of Europe, familiar with the developments in scholarship that were going forward, with movements in philosophy and culture….They were children of the Renaissance, children of the rebirth of imagination and creativity in that extraordinary period…..The martyr isn’t a person who says ‘no’ to the world in any simple sense. The martyr sees the richness of the world, the wealth of mind and imagination, the wealth of culture and beauty of the human spirit….. It’s no surprise that the records of the martyrs of the early Church are so often couched in terms of Eucharistic theology – the martyr as an image of the sacramental Body of Christ….Which is also why we are able to celebrate the martyrs of churches other than our own – with penitence and with gratitude, Roman Catholics celebrating the Reformed martyrs, the Anglican Church celebrating, as we do today, those who were victims of its own violence and prejudice. I’m very conscious of course of the picture of the Anglican bishop of London – George Abbot, later Archbishop of Canterbury – presiding at the trial of John Roberts. But today it is possible at last to celebrate together – to celebrate John Roberts as a sign of the
splendour of God and so of that divine power and liberty that is revealed in universal reconciliation. ... What is the martyr’s message? ... The martyr’s witness tells us the fact that men and women are created for the sake of joy...in the gift of God. John Roberts...found the wellsprings of renewal that water the Church. Like every martyr – indeed every Christian – John Roberts proclaims, with his contemporary John Donne, ‘Death, thou shalt die.’

The Pope said “Is it not one – these Martyrs say to us – the Church founded by Christ?” Had this question been posed to John Roberts, how would he have responded? How would the seventeenth century predecessor of Rowan Williams, Archbishop George Abbot, have reacted to this modern interpretation of a Catholic martyr as “an image of the sacramental Body of Christ” rather than as a traitor?

The execution of John Roberts can only be understood in the context of the history, politics and culture of the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries which made Catholics different and dangerous. The reduced emphasis on religious divisions today can only be explained within a similar broad context. Some would see the martyrs and their relics as a hindrance to this process of reconciliation, others as a reminder that religious principles are not to be discarded easily. According to Bede Camm “If it wasn’t for the sacrifice and witness of these men and women the Catholic faith in this country would have been extinguished.”

Vincent Nichols, Cardinal Archbishop of Westminster, preaching at a mass to celebrate the two hundredth anniversary of Downside Abbey in March 2014 said: “How did these martyrs do it? Where did they find that courage and joyful determination to be faithful unto death?... Death was just a final step. And they also knew that through that death they could bear an enduring witness to the truth of their faith. And how right they were.”

Writing the Foreword to “The Catholic Martyrs of Wales”, by T.P. Ellis, in 1933 the then Bishop of Menevia, Francis Vaughan, stated: “We are so far removed from the troublous times of the sixteenth and seventeenth Centuries as to be able to look back, calmly and dispassionately, upon the events which filled them, and survey movement and countermovement with a complete absence of prejudice.” The present authors hope that we have managed to look back and write dispassionately about a complex and fascinating story. It would be interesting to see how subsequent generations view the willingness of such a brave man as John Roberts to face death for his faith. Will his few, scattered relics merely be considered to be a reminder of historical religious disputes ultimately settled?
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