

WILLIAM HARRISON

Hello and welcome to an Exploring Building History podcast. My name is Mary Chisholm and this podcast is a summary of the life and work of the Tudor clergyman William Harrison. He was also an historian, topographer and writer. His main work being *The Description of England*, initially published in 1577.

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William Harrison is one of a long tradition, now seemingly lost by the 21st century, of British antiquarian clergymen. He wrote his first edition of *The Description of England* in 1577, which has come to be known as *The Description of England: The Classical Contemporary Account of Tudor Social Life*. His initial work in 1577 was written as part of an introduction to *Holinshed's Chronicles* and again printed in that work in 1587. *Holinshed's Chronicles* were a history of Britain in 3 volumes – England, Ireland and Scotland. Wales, although having a defined border with England had been integrated with English Law, which is possibly why there was no volume for Wales.

In context to this 1577 publication, Elizabeth the first had been on the throne for 19 years, since 1558. Harrison was well and truly part of the Elizabethan age that produced some extraordinary individuals.

According to the Oxford Dictionary of National Biography entry for Harrison, written by Glyn Parry, he was born on the 18 April 1535 and died in 1593. That would have made his age at death around 58 years of age. He was born in London and his father was probably John Harrison, a merchant adventurer.

In the 1540s Harrison attended St. Paul's School, London, a school for boys, which had been founded in 1509 by John Colet, Dean of St. Pauls. He also attended Westminster School. The earliest records for Westminster School date back to the 1370s. However, the buildings used for the school date back to the 10th C Anglo-Saxon Abbey. Possibly the school's origins are in the 12th C but the evidence is sketchy.

The Dissolution of the Monasteries meant that in 1540 Westminster Abbey was dissolved. Although, Henry VIII personally intervened with a Royal Charter to ensure the School's survival. It was probably during Edward VI's reign (1547 to 1553) that Harrison attended Westminster School when Alexander Nowell, the protestant humanist, was master.

In 1554 Harrison entered Christ Church, Oxford University, graduating there in 1557. In April 1558 he was ordained. In 1560 he acquired his MA from Oxford. He also had associations with Cambridge University as he graduated as a Bachelor of Divinity from there in 1571.

Around 1559 he was rector of Radwinter in Essex, an appointment made by his patron Lord Cobham, for whom he was household chaplain. Cobham was a graduate of Queen's College, Cambridge, Lord Warden of the Cinque Ports and importantly a close friend of William Cecil, Elizabeth's royal minister and chief advisor.

Cobham rebuilt his medieval manor into an impressive Tudor house. I do wonder if Harrison had been present for Elizabeth I's visit in 1559 to Cobham Hall. Nowadays the hall is a school for girls.

It was here from Essex, Harrison made travels around the south of England. From January 1571 to autumn 1581 he held the rectory of Wimbish in Essex. How much time he spent in his parish is not known. Radwinter and Wimbish are near Saffron Walden and within 20 miles of Cambridge. He had adequate clerical income to support him and his family. He had married in the 1560s Marion Isebrand, a refuge from Andern in the Calais pale. They had four children together.

He had converted to Catholicism briefly during Mary I's reign. However, upon hearing the preaching of the Oxford martyrs: Nicholas Ridley, Hugh Latimer and Thomas Cramner he returned resolutely to Protestantism.

In later life he became a canon at St. George's Chapel in Windsor. On the 9 November 1593, he died, possibly of a plague, and was buried at Windsor.

Influences on Harrison's work came from the work of John Leland (who had died in 1552) and Harrison's antiquarian associates and contemporaries William Camden and John Stow. These 16th century antiquarians were beginning to build more factual observations of England and her history.

Harrison provides us with factual elements on Elizabethan England. This includes reports from others or observations. He comments on buildings that 'The greatest part of our building in the cities and good towns of England consisteth only of timber, for as yet few of the houses of the commonalty (except here and there in the West Country towns) are made of stone.'¹

He remarks that glass (as in glazing) has become plentiful in England and provides a historical context for glass. He records that it was accidentally discovered in the ancient Middle East and that it was the monk Benedict Biscop, that brought glazing to England. Bede, in the 8th century had written about how Benedict Biscop had brought glaziers to England from Gaul.²

Besides the reports of others, observation and historical context, Harrison also interviews the locals. He tells of the old men living in his local village and how they have noted 3 things that have marvellously altered in England within their memory. One is the multitude of chimneys. The second is a description of beds, having greatly improved from straw pallets and a good round log as a pillow. The third thing is how wooden platters have been replaced

¹ William Harrison, *The Description of England: The Classic Contemporary Account of Tudor Life*, ed. Georges Edelen (Washington & New York: The Folger Shakespeare Library & Dover Publications, 2015),

² Harrison, p. 197.

by pewter and how wooden spoons have been replaced by tin or silver ones. However, these luxuries are only available for those that can afford it.³

The old men are dismayed by conditions for some poorer tenants. Landlords were increasing their rents and as Harrison puts it:

the daily oppression of copyholders, whose lords see to bring their poor tenants almost into plain servitude and misery, daily devising new means and seeking up all the old how to cut them shorter and shorter, doubling, trebling, and now and then seven times increasing their fines, driving them also for every trifle to lose and forfeit their tenures...⁴

In addition, the old men also lament the practice of usury that is becoming widespread. Harrison reports it is 'now perfectly practiced almost by every Christian and so commonly that he is accounted but for a fool that doth lend his money for nothing.'⁵

Harrison also attempts to categorise the social hierarchy of the realm. The Elizabethans had a preoccupation with social order and hierarchy. A number of factors were changing social order such as a significant growth in population, initiating demographic change. There also arose opportunities from economic prosperity and a desire for status from a rising and aspirational gentry class. The Elizabethans had embraced The Great Chain of Being from classical Greek philosophy, reflecting a belief in a hierarchical order that God had intended from beings of pure spirit into earthly matter. This belief attributed the social position of a human as being pre-ordained by God and to disobey this pattern disrupted social and natural order. Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, circa 1606, reflects the consequences of such disorder from regicide when Macbeth murders Duncan, the King of Scotland. The supernatural is a significant influence on the actions of Macbeth. The source Shakespeare used for the story was Holinshed's *Chronicles of 1587*, which he took somewhat artistic licence with.

Harrison identifies four divisions of general society, which are categorised as 'gentlemen, citizens or burgesses, yeomen and artificers or laborers'.⁶ He refers to the nobility as being gentlemen of the greater sort. In terms of the other 'gentlemen' who are not nobility but above the level of citizen he provides a detailed explanation of their required qualifications to be part of this class. These include those who are knighted, bear arms and he says that 'Gentlemen be those whom their race and blood, or at the least their virtues, do make noble and known.'⁷ The ancestry that Harrison refers to is the gentry who are males and can trace their lineage back to those who came into England with William the Conqueror.⁸

³ Harrison, p. 201.

⁴ Harrison, p. 202.

⁵ Harrison, p. 202.

⁶ Harrison, P. 94

⁷ Harrison, p. 113.

⁸ Harrison, pp. 113-114.

Harrison tell us that other men are able to enter the gentry than those that have the right lineage, especially those who have studied law, have a university education, held an office or provided service to the realm. A further qualification is that gentry can be identified as those who live without manual labour as well as dress and bear themselves as a gentleman.⁹ Living as a gentleman required a man to present himself with the trappings of social positioning and wealth. This would include the buildings of the gentry. It was not just about having the position and education but translated into what architecture and ornament could be applied to present an individual's own perception of status.

Harrison's work is produced through the lens of his idealist and protestant humanist belief. At times he fears for the country and warns against evils such as enclosure, church corruption and excessive consumption.

However, his work provides an interesting and curiously informative insight into the preoccupations and interests of a man driven to produce a snapshot of history and commentary as he saw it in the Tudor Age.

I hope you have enjoyed this podcast and if you would view the transcript and please go to www.exploringbuildinghistory.co.uk and select the downloads page.

Thank you for listening.

Bibliography

Harrison, William, *The Description of England: The Classic Contemporary Account of Tudor Life*, ed. Georges Edelen (Washington & New York: The Folger Shakespeare Library & Dover Publications, 2015)

Parry, Glyn, 'Harrison, William (1535-1593)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press, 2004; online edn, Sept 2004 <<https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/12453>> [accessed 29 June 2019]

⁹ Harrison, pp. 113-114.