


RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Enclosures and de-sacralization in Tudor Coventry, and the foundations of modern urban space

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## Abstract

The Reformation exacted considerable changes on towns across Britain, occurring at the same time as the shift away from broadcloths to other economies. Part of the process of change was the de-sacralization of former monastic spaces. The parallel process of increased commons enclosures alongside acquisitions of church lands produced a secularized and privatized landscape which transitioned the medieval city to the modern. The active enclosures by Coventry corporation in the 1530s and 1540s, and local documents rationalizing such actions under the concept of benefiting the common weal, provide a clear example of the process.

The sixteenth and seventeenth centuries were a period of significant realignment in the British urban hierarchy.<sup>1</sup> At the beginning of the period, the provincial urban hierarchy was dominated by textile producing regional centres which, socially and politically, consisted of complex layers of corporate, church, and guild institutions.<sup>2</sup> After various economic slumps during the sixteenth century, most textile towns evolved into regional shopping and distribution centres. Meanwhile, after the crisis of the Reformation, religious and political institutions became centralized under city governments. Essentially, 1540 to 1660 was a long period of significant social, cultural, and economic adjustment.<sup>3</sup> Changes in property relations as part of the realignment process, especially the secularization of sacred places after the Reformation, have been well documented by historians.<sup>4</sup> However, the significance of an outbreak of commons enclosures happening at the same time as the transfer of former church properties to private ownership has been understated. Consideration of the appropriation by corporations and individuals of common

<sup>1</sup>P. Clark and P. Slack, *English Towns in Transition, 1500–1700* (Oxford, 1976); A. Dyer, *Decline and Growth in English Towns, 1400–1640* (Cambridge, 1991); P. Clark (ed.), *Cambridge Urban History of Britain*, vol. II (Cambridge, 2000).

<sup>2</sup>P. Slack, 'Great and good towns 1540–1700', in Clark (ed.), *Cambridge Urban History of Britain*, vol. II, 372.

<sup>3</sup>*Ibid.*, 373.

<sup>4</sup>M. Reed, 'The urban landscape', in Clark (ed.), *Cambridge Urban History of Britain*, vol. II, 308.

lands along with that of church properties is important in understanding the realignment process towards the paradigm of the modern city dominated by private property. The city of Coventry was to the forefront in acquiring former church properties since it was already incorporated. It was therefore able to enclose commons precociously while other towns were still dealing with the process of incorporation in order to acquire church properties. The large-scale corporate enclosures of commons which accompanied the large-scale purchase of church properties in the city of Coventry in the mid-sixteenth century exemplify a major shift in using and conceptualizing urban spaces.

The seventeenth-century antiquarian William Dugdale attributed the Reformation, especially the consequences of the dissolution, with the primary cause of problems for Coventry in the sixteenth century.<sup>5</sup> Later, twentieth-century historians claimed economic crisis as the reason for Coventry's decline. However, the economic decline narrative for Coventry, or even for the country as a whole, no longer holds sway.<sup>6</sup> Although towns and regions clearly underwent economic cycles and changes, a mostly economic explanation for sixteenth-century developments appears to be too materialistic and limiting. A switch of emphasis from a social and economic to a religious and political account of change better fits with the findings of the more recent historiography of the period. Ronald Hutton leads the way when he establishes clear religious and political causes, rather than economic, for the huge changes in communal rituals and festivals during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.<sup>7</sup> Phil Withington especially argues against a narrative of stagnation, but instead finds clear growth of markets, infrastructure, and, more importantly, evolving civic institutions. Essentially, Withington argues urbanization should be assessed through culture and institutions as well as through demography and economics.<sup>8</sup> Historical archaeologists also emphasize social and cultural causes for changes in material culture. Both Chris King and Stefania Merlo Perring find changes in structures and phases of urban building or rebuilding in sixteenth-century towns were due more to shifts in social relations and culture than from economic cycles.<sup>9</sup> Finally, Robert Tittler reveals the revolutionary impact of the Reformation and the dissolution of church lands on urban institu-

<sup>5</sup>W. Dugdale, *The Antiquities of Warwickshire* (London, 1656).

<sup>6</sup>A good concise summary of the essentially stalemated urban decline debate can be found in Dyer, *Decline and Growth in English Towns*. The original argument for serious decline in Coventry is found in C. Phythian-Adams, *Desolation of a City: Coventry and the Urban Crisis of the Late Middle Ages* (Cambridge, 1979). Mary Hulton later compiled and published the various tax and census documents pertaining to Coventry during the early sixteenth century. Her analysis shows that previous literal readings of the numbers were misleading, and lead to excessively pessimistic viewpoints. M. Hulton, *Coventry and Its People in the 1520s* (Stratford-upon-Avon, 1999), especially 19–24. The two most recent reviews of the economic state of Coventry generally agree on a long mid-fifteenth-century slump, followed by recovery in the 1480s: R. Goddard, *Commercial Contraction and Urban Decline in Fifteenth-Century Coventry* (Stratford-upon-Avon, 2006); D. Leech, 'Stability and change at the end of the Middle Ages: Coventry 1450–1525', *Midland History*, 34 (2009), 1–21.

<sup>7</sup>R. Hutton, *The Rise and Fall of Merry England* (Oxford, 1994), summarized in 260–2.

<sup>8</sup>P. Withington, *The Politics of Commonwealth* (Cambridge, 2009), 3–7.

<sup>9</sup>C. King, 'The interpretation of urban buildings: power, memory and appropriation in Norwich merchant's houses, c. 1400–1660', *World Archaeology*, 41 (2009), 472; S.M. Perring, 'Reformation of the English cathedral landscape: negotiating change in York Minster Close', *World Archaeology*, 45 (2013), 188.

tions and society.<sup>10</sup> Coventry's evolution in the sixteenth century can also be traced to the impact of the Reformation more than any other factor. Therefore, it seems increasingly worthwhile to follow Dugdale's lead and revisit the Reformation, or more specifically the dissolution and the resulting process of land and property acquisitions, including of commons, to discern the most significant changes to the city.

In Coventry, it was through the civic and private appropriation of previously common and sacred places that some of the deepest changes would occur, changes which would significantly redefine the city. The post-dissolution appropriation of both church property and of common lands fundamentally changed the spaces in which culture and economy were enacted. Sacred monastic sites were important to the community as the location of preaching and almsgiving, as well as serving as hosts for major guild functions. These places with their community functions were suppressed, and then turned into private property. At the same time, in an integrated process scarcely recognized by historians writing about this period, the commons – the lands accessible by the commoners for necessary resources and for grazing – were enclosed to a significant extent.<sup>11</sup> The transfer of these important community and common spaces to private property, along with the changes in core institutions, meant that during the middle decades of the sixteenth century the organization of space – as well as the political, religious, and social fabric of life – that had been inherited from the medieval period underwent a fundamental transformation.

Certainly, economic changes became increasingly noticeable during the sixteenth century. Coventry was evolving from a cloth town to a regional distribution centre with a niche textile industry. The broadcloth industry had been the staple of the city since the fourteenth century. During the sixteenth century, broadcloths went into decline, though cloth merchants still found markets into the 1580s.<sup>12</sup> The reduced capacity was to some extent replaced by the specialized products of cap and thread making. In addition, the city's role as a regional centre for consumer consumption increased as measured by a greater diversity of trades.<sup>13</sup> During the second half of the sixteenth century, Coventry's economic renewal as a major regional centre faltered. The city suffered from increasing competition by multiple other market centres in the Midlands. Meanwhile, the capping trade fell off, and along with it the thread trade, due to competition from felt caps.<sup>14</sup> The mercers and drapers attempted to hold on to their dominance, but were increasingly undermined by the unregulated shops which were replacing the old markets and fairs. During the second half of the century, the formerly great cloth merchants simply became shopkeepers themselves, and their monopoly as the city's merchant elites all but disappeared.<sup>15</sup> However, the shops themselves were a successful adaptation

<sup>10</sup>R. Tittler, *The Reformation and the Towns in England* (Oxford, 1998).

<sup>11</sup>For example, Clark (ed.), *Cambridge Urban History of Britain*, vol. II, has only three brief references to commons enclosures for the sixteenth century.

<sup>12</sup>A. Dyer, 'Midlands', in Clark (ed.), *Cambridge Urban History of Britain*, vol. II, 107.

<sup>13</sup>Hulton, *Coventry and Its People*, 29.

<sup>14</sup>P. Berger, *The Most Necessary Luxuries: The Mercers Company of Coventry, 1550–1680* (University Park, 1993), 2–7 and 72.

<sup>15</sup>Berger, *Most Necessary Luxuries*, 8 and 93–9.

to the city's new role as a regional centre. In fact, contemporary visitors described Coventry's shops as large and plentiful during the seventeenth century.<sup>16</sup>

The city's population – in parallel with all the other large towns in England – had dropped during the fifteenth century. In Coventry's case, population fell from about 9,000 to about 7,000.<sup>17</sup> Since the other larger towns had also proportionally lost population, Coventry still remained one of the five largest provincial towns in the country, and would continue as such for much of the sixteenth century. Later in the century, its population remained in its new equilibrium while other expanding towns outgrew the city. So Coventry eventually dropped in relative ranking.<sup>18</sup> Thus, Coventry shifted from a major textile town to an important provincial market and distribution centre.

The Reformation's impact on towns did not receive sufficient study until Robert Tittler's seminal *The Reformation and the Towns in England*, published in 1998. Tittler found two fundamental developments in towns due to the Reformation. First, the suppression of church institutions meant civic authorities took over enforcement of moral discipline and religious doctrine. Second, the dissolution had a major impact on urban land ownership through civic appropriation of former church properties.<sup>19</sup> The radical losses of traditional institutions and drastic changes in property ownership caused political and financial crises in many cities as they attempted to adjust.<sup>20</sup> However, the degree of change, and extent of any, if any, crisis varied considerably by city and town.<sup>21</sup> Coventry certainly was one of the towns which did change considerably according to Tittler's criteria. In fact, it changed even more than has been perceived by historians following Tittler, as enclosures of commons alongside the acquisition of suppressed church properties reveal a much greater shift in control and ownership of land and property than previously understood. Therefore, commons enclosures must be addressed as one of the radical changes of the Reformation period.

### Enclosure of the commons before the dissolution

Commons enclosures and resistance against them had a long history in Coventry. Throughout the fifteenth century, Coventry's city leaders had frequently sided with the protesters against various local landowners' encroachments on the commons, at least when the protesters kept the peace. In fact, in 1525 the Coventry city council

<sup>16</sup>Dyer, 'Midlands', 107.

<sup>17</sup>The 1377 Poll Tax numbers, using a commonly accepted multiplier, give us the 9,000 estimate. The 1520 census merely gives ward totals and a sum of 6,601. The 1523 census counts 5,670 people, and a remarkable number of 'vacant' houses. However, it was evidently a quick preliminary survey taken in one day, and was not followed up. It simply became buried among miscellaneous records (see Hulton, *Coventry and Its People*, 17–18, and Phythian-Adams, *Desolation of a City*, 291–3). Finally, it is almost impossible to gauge with any precision what percentage of the population the 1522 Muster and the 1525 Subsidy covered. Given that even the 1520 census is likely not a full count, I would suggest a reasonable population estimate would be around 7,000 people.

<sup>18</sup>Slack, 'Great and good towns 1540–1700', 352.

<sup>19</sup>Tittler, *The Reformation and the Towns*, 7–8.

<sup>20</sup>*Ibid.*, 47–50.

<sup>21</sup>For wide variations among towns, see P. Collinson and J. Craig (eds.), *The Reformation in English Towns, 1500–1640* (New York, 1998).

enacted 'that all such common grounds as have been lately enclosed about this city shall from hence be common as they have been used in ancient times and no more to be enclosed'.<sup>22</sup> This apparent victory occurred after the long and contentious series of lawsuits, protests and even riots between 1460 and 1525 over the right of access to the commons.<sup>23</sup> The price had been high: gaol for many, and even death for the ringleaders. Laurence Saunders, who had actively led the citizens in protests against commons encroachments, disappeared into royal prison in 1496,<sup>24</sup> while several leaders of the big Lammas day riots of 1525 were executed and their heads and body parts placed at the city gates.<sup>25</sup> Despite the harsh reaction against the rioters, it appears after 1525 that the common lands continued to be protected, and traditional liberties preserved.<sup>26</sup>

The significant change occurred at the same time as the dissolution of the monasteries. In a sudden change of direction at the end of the 1530s, the city council began to support enclosures consistently, and in fact used corporation powers to enclose and lease out commons. This complete change of heart developed simultaneously with, and was linked to, the city's assertive strategy of accessing and leasing large amounts of former church properties after the dissolution. The reversal of direction developed in Westminster when the suppression and then sale of monastic properties to private parties encouraged the enclosers in parliament to act more openly. Before the Reformation, the crown and parliament had actively opposed enclosure. In fact, parliament had enacted a sequence of commissions and acts against enclosure between 1489 and 1548.<sup>27</sup> Yet by the 1540s, the growing proportion of enclosers serving in parliament became strong enough to derail the process by creating loopholes and exemptions. After the reign of Edward VI, Westminster rarely acted against enclosures.<sup>28</sup> Though, since it was the Midlands which suffered the most from enclosures, strong resistance against them did persist locally well into the seventeenth century.<sup>29</sup> Coventry corporation's move to enclose developed in the early stages of the tilt in favour of enclosing. Division in Westminster allowed enclosures to occur locally with less chance of opposition or reversal from the

<sup>22</sup>M. Dormer-Harris (ed.), *The Coventry Leet Book* (London, 1913) (henceforth *Leet Book*), 692.

<sup>23</sup>D. Leech, 'By the evidence of the city: enclosing land and memory in fifteenth-century Coventry', *Medieval History Journal*, 15 (2012), 171–96.

<sup>24</sup>M. Dormer-Harris, 'Laurence Saunders, citizen of Coventry', *English Historical Review*, 9 (1894), 633–51.

<sup>25</sup>*Letters and Papers of Henry VIII*, vol. IV, 1568 and 1743. Coventry Archives (henceforth CA), *Chamberlains' Accounts* (BA/A/1/1/26/1), 79–85. This section of accounts covered 1525–26 where the chamberlains not only found themselves making the usual repairs to the city wall and streets, but also paying for posting bills about the commons, and making many repairs of existing stocks and pillories as well as setting up some new ones. At one point, they performed the grisly task of 'taking down the heeds and the partes from the gates'. Also see royal demands for punishing the rioters in CA BA/H/17/A79/28 and 59c.

<sup>26</sup>The commons around Coventry were very extensive (still over 3,000 acres in 1860, *Award under Coventry Inclosure, 1860* (Coventry: Inclosure Commission for England and Wales, 1860)), and provided essential resources and supplemental income for the citizens. Access was also a bellwether of the liberties for citizens.

<sup>27</sup>J.S. Leadam, *The Domesday of Inclosures, 1517–1518* (London, 1897), tracks the multiple attempts by the crown to control enclosures since 1488. Also see M. Beresford, *The Lost Villages of England* (London, 1954), 102–33.

<sup>28</sup>Beresford, *Lost Villages*, 112 and 118.

<sup>29</sup>J. Thirsk, 'Tudor enclosures', in J. Hurstfield (ed.), *The Tudors* (New York, 1973), 123–4.

government as anti-enclosure measures increasingly stalled in the later sixteenth century. By mid-century, with the acquisition of former church properties and the enclosures of commons, the corporation became the largest controller of land and property in and around the city. In addition, the exercise of charity, education and religious practice which had previously been the preserve of the church now fell under the control of the corporation.

The process of Coventry's transition matches the career of Thomas Gregory, lawyer, and town clerk from 1528 to 1574. Fortunately, the Shakespeare Birthplace Trust archive in Stratford holds a collection of his and his descendants' papers relating to Coventry in this period.<sup>30</sup> Surviving documents include lists of common lands, draft subsidy rolls, and several corporation accounts and rentals. Of associated documents in the Coventry City Archive, it seems that the chamberlains' accounts and council book of the time were also written in his hand.<sup>31</sup> In addition to Gregory's documents, other Coventry Archive records such the mayor's register of 1420–1555 (published as the *Leet Book* by the invaluable Mary Dormer-Harris) as well as the bailiffs' accounts, property deeds, official letters and a few surviving guild records provide us with a vivid picture of late medieval Coventry and the period of transition.<sup>32</sup>

In c. 1530, Thomas Gregory created a draft of a list of the commons around the city.<sup>33</sup> His list corresponds to the 1423 survey of common lands which opens the *Leet Book*.<sup>34</sup> The 1423 listing was made in response to disputes over commons access, and listed which lands were or should be open to common access. The fields listed were Lammas lands which were made commons from Lammas day to Candlemas day, and then returned to private use for the rest of the year. Lammas lands formed the majority of the commons of the city, and they were also the ones most often in dispute. The landowners were often the ones at odds with the citizens when some attempted to enclose the fields all the year round and not allow commoning.

The 1423 and 1530 lists are almost an exact match: both leave off the various woods and wastes which formed the permanent commons and just list the oft disputed Lammas lands. Gregory might have been using the 1423 original as a master, but he used shorter descriptions, a couple of names were changed and he transposed a few of the fields. To the east of the city, where most of the commons were the aforementioned woods and wastes accessible year round, both lists just have the same three fields. To the south, much of the land was taken up by the royal manor and park at Cheylesmore, but multiple fields were still available for commons. In six out of seven cases the lists match. One Lammas field is found on the 1423 list but not in 1530. Most of the common fields lay to the west and

<sup>30</sup>The Gregory–Hood collection is catalogued as DR10. Much of Thomas Gregory's Coventry material is found in the range DR10/1843–1870. Shakespeare Birthplace Trust is hereafter SBT.

<sup>31</sup>*Chamberlains' Accounts* (CA BA/A/1/1/26/1), which actually begin in 1499, and *Council Book* (CA BA/H/3/17/1) from the council book's inception in 1555 to 1572.

<sup>32</sup>*Leet Book*, *Bailiffs' Accounts* (CA BA/G/1/25/1) which begin in 1542, *Letter Book* (CA BA/H/17/79). The Coventry Archive has an extensive collection of property deeds dating from the thirteenth century onwards. The most significant record missing from this period is the Apprentices' Register.

<sup>33</sup>SBT DR10/1849.

<sup>34</sup>*Leet Book*, 45–53.

north of the city. On the north side, 13 of 16 entries on the two lists match. The 1423 list mentions three clusters of unnamed fields, but none of these appear in 1530. The west side had similar disparities. Eight entries do match, but two crofts listed in 1423 do not appear in 1530. More significantly, two large groups of fields, all named, which were under dispute in 1423 due to wrongful enclosure by the landholder do not appear at all in 1530. There is no record of the outcome of the 1423 dispute, so those fields may have remained enclosed.

It is clear from Gregory's notes on each field's status that at this point he was ensuring and protecting commons access, just as was attempted in 1423. The common at Whitley, the subject of so much of the contentions and riots in the recent past, was especially carefully described and clearly identified as available as common land after Lammas day. Gregory also pointed out several places which should be commons but were not. He described them as 'wrongsuche stopped', and 'ought to be common'. Interestingly, most of the wrongfully enclosed lands were to the west of the city where many of the disputed lands had been in 1423. Five years after the 1525 decree in which ploughed land was returned to common land, and 100 years after the initial commons list entered in the *Leet Book*, the corporation seemed to have been continuing to ensure traditional access to the commons.

One might argue for the same point in 1534, when the city council complained that too much common land was still under plough.<sup>35</sup> The council admitted the land had been placed under plough when there had been a dearth of corn (likely in the early 1520s), and had continued to allow people to plough it (despite the prohibition of 1525 apparently).<sup>36</sup> Conjecture could lead to the conclusion that the ploughed commons were those fields, especially to the north and west of the city, which Thomas Gregory had omitted from his 1530 listing. Those persons continuing to plough the commons were now accused of 'regarding their own private profits more than the ancient customs and the common wealth and profit of the city'. The loss of commons hurt their fellow citizens who were unable to partake in 'their recreations and walks, in shooting, and other honourable and honest pastimes', but also they could no longer pasture 'milk cows, cattle, and hackney horses', all of which were necessary to maintain their livings. Therefore, the corporation was returning the lands to Lammas fields. However, a special licence from the mayor and council could be granted as an exception to allow ploughing on the common. Later, it would be this idea of corporation permission to plough which would open the door for renewed corporation-sponsored enclosures. In 1534, the corporation, while still acting to protect the commons, was also carefully reserving the right to do as it would with them regardless of the previously hard-fought defences of traditional liberties.<sup>37</sup>

<sup>35</sup>*Ibid.*, 719–20.

<sup>36</sup>For the dearth, see *Leet Book*, 679–80.

<sup>37</sup>See Leech, 'By the evidence of the city', for the process of the city council's involvement in enclosures disputes to obtain greater authority and control over the commons at the cost of freemen's traditional participation. The freemen had fought hard to retain their rights, and indeed certainly still maintained an important role in civic governance after 1525. See C. Liddy, 'Urban enclosure riots: risings of the commons in English towns, 1480–1525', *Past & Present*, 226 (2015), 41–76.

## Dissolution and the privatization of space

Changes developed quickly. In 1538, both dissolution of monasteries and large-scale leasing of the commons began. Greyfriars and Whitefriars were both dissolved in October 1538, and in the following year, St Mary's priory and the Charterhouse followed suit.<sup>38</sup> Whitefriars and Greyfriars had been deeply embedded in the community: serving as hosts for guild functions, providing services to the poor and sick, sending out popular preachers and setting an example at least approximate to clerical poverty.<sup>39</sup> Whitefriars also hosted a well-used site of pilgrimage in the 'Lady in the Tower' shrine. City records show that the corporation had occasion to clean up the considerable detritus left behind by the regular flow of pilgrims to the shrine.<sup>40</sup> Charterhouse also hosted guild functions as well as serving as an artistic centre.<sup>41</sup> The centrality of Coventry's friaries to the community was not unusual. The London friaries performed similar roles, for example. They supplied spiritual services such as prayers for the dead, confessions, charity to the poor and excellent preaching. Local guilds frequently used their facilities for services and celebrations. Instead of holding large amounts of property, the London friaries also depended mostly on donations and bequests which for the most part were quite plentiful.<sup>42</sup> On the other hand, relations with St Mary's priory often were tense. Although, as the seat of the cathedral, it was a major centre for ritual, the priory was also the largest landlord within the city, and as such had been regularly involved in city politics as well as enclosures.<sup>43</sup> The city leaders initially pleaded for the preservation of the friaries. Then they argued to at least keep the churches in order to increase the number of parish churches available.<sup>44</sup> Their pleas were ignored. When the dissolutions proceeded apace leading members of the corporation adapted to the situation, and co-operated actively with the process. During 1538 and 1539, Henry Over, sheriff and future mayor (1544), received particular approbation in helping with the surrenders, and in keeping the 'unruly poor' from 'despoiling' the buildings.<sup>45</sup> Upon dissolution, all monastic institutions and their properties within the town fell into the possession of the crown. Their sacred and community functions ceased and the properties were to be sold into private hands.

The amount of land within the city which the monastic closes took up was fairly significant. The city walls enclosed about 170 acres.<sup>46</sup> St Mary's, Greyfriars, and Whitefriars, all within the walls, held over 20 percent of the total acreage, while the Charterhouse held another 14 acres right outside the wall. Thus, a considerable

<sup>38</sup> *Letters and Papers of Henry VIII*, vol. XIII:2, 503, 539, vol. XIV, 69, 73.

<sup>39</sup> *Carpenters' Guild Accounts* (CA PA3/1); CA PA54/285/7; I. Soden, *Coventry: The Hidden History* (Stroud, 2005), 65–73, 82–3. Father Bredon, one of the Franciscans, had been a popular and controversial preacher in Coventry in the fifteenth century, *Leet Book*, 35–6.

<sup>40</sup> For example, *Chamberlains' Accounts* (CA BA/A/1/1/26/1), 86.

<sup>41</sup> J. Luxford, 'The Charterhouse of St. Anne, Coventry', in L. Monckton and R. Morris (eds.), *Coventry: Medieval Art, Architecture and Archeology in the City and its Vicinity* (Leeds, 2011), 240–66.

<sup>42</sup> N. Holder, *The Friaries of Medieval London* (Woodbridge, 2017), 254–5 and 268–9.

<sup>43</sup> J.J. Scarisbrick, 'The dissolution of St. Mary's priory Coventry', in G. Demidowicz (ed.), *Coventry's First Cathedral* (Stamford, 1994), 158–68. See The National Archives (TNA) C1/60/154 and TNA C1/434/8 for examples of enclosures issues involving the priory.

<sup>44</sup> *Letters and Papers of Henry VIII*, vol. XIII:2, 394, 650, vol. XIV:1, 34.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, vol. XIV:1, 150.

<sup>46</sup> *Archeological Survey Map M4919* (Coventry City Library).



portion of the space within the city had completely changed in function and ownership from ecclesiastical, with community functions, to secular and private. In exactly the same two years, 1538 and 1539, the city council took aggressive action to enclose and lease out large sections of the common lands to private individuals. This was a dramatic turnaround from decades of previous policy. With the corporation also hoping to obtain the former church properties from the king, clearly they were moving to dominate control of land and property in and around the city in order to extend civic authority.<sup>47</sup> The governing elites could not resist the lure of extending control, increasing revenue, nor even the temptation of gaining more land in their own hands.

In a complete reversal from the stance made in 1534, the council announced in May 1538 (repeated in 1539) the enclosing and leasing of a considerable proportion of the commons. Although this occurred months ahead of the physical suppressions of monasteries in Coventry, dissolutions were already occurring all over the country, and the city's monasteries had been earmarked in February for suppression.<sup>48</sup> The corporation leadership were reshuffling the pieces as opportunity arose. The successful enclosures of 1538 compared to the intense conflict of previous decades was due to the initiative for acquisition coming from the corporation rather than individuals. In their announcement, the council claimed that most citizens did not use or profit from the commons, despite 'perfectly knowing' both their liberties and which fields and closes were commons.<sup>49</sup> On the other hand, the council claimed that those who did use the commons misused and surcharged (overused) the pasture. Therefore, 50 men (five from each ward) were summoned to assent to a long list of common fields to be enclosed and leased by the city. The enclosures would provide 'good governance, rule, and conservation' of the commons and would also provide 'universal profit and benefit' to the commonality. Notably, the summoning of men representing the wards does reveal that consent of the freemen was still necessary for the corporation to enact measures. The language used concerning the common good turned its usual meaning on its head. Typically during the sixteenth century, it was the enclosers and engrossers who were accused of harming the common weal by putting private profit above the public good.<sup>50</sup> However, the corporation was acting under the new civic ideology that corporation control of property (both former church and other), and common lands, as well as the civic functions of market regulation, charity, education and infrastructure, provided the best means of promoting the common weal.<sup>51</sup> The city was considered a civic commonwealth, as opposed to what was considered a fractured polity of multiple guilds, the church, commoners, landowners and the corporation.

To implement the new policy, 10 men (one from each ward) had responsibility for the leases and collecting the rents.<sup>52</sup> Multiple keys for the money box were

<sup>47</sup>Tittler, *The Reformation and the Towns*, 9; Withington, *Politics of Commonwealth*, 10.

<sup>48</sup>*Letters and Papers of Henry VIII*, vol. XIII:1, 254.

<sup>49</sup>*Leet Book*, 729–38.

<sup>50</sup>P. Slack, *From Reformation to Improvement: Public Welfare in Early Modern England* (Oxford, 1999), 7.

<sup>51</sup>Essentially, this is a core theme in *ibid.*; Tittler, *The Reformation and the Towns*; Withington, *Politics of Commonwealth*.

<sup>52</sup>The common box and 10 overseers first occurs in 1502 with the obligation to collect gifts and apprentices' fees, *Leet Book*, 600. The 10 were first assigned to oversee leased commons in 1522 during the dearth,

divided among the 10 overseers and the mayor and council. Some commons were still available to the freemen of the city as stints were set, and a strict ban of ploughing on the remaining commons was emplaced. However, about 50 fields, closes, meadows and crofts were listed for leasing. Since the names of only nine of those correspond with the 1423 list, it is possible some of the fields were from the groups of unnamed fields mentioned in 1423, then left out by Gregory in 1530 as they were under plough until 1534. However, many of them could be the same fields as listed in 1423 and repeated in 1530, but with newer names used by the present property holders. Regardless, it is clear a lot of common fields were leased out. Overall, the corporation considered the commons a resource best used as property to lease to individuals to farm to the mutual profit of corporation and lessee. In 1534, the council had maintained that ploughing the commons was selfish and harmed the common wealth; in 1538, the city leaders argued that commoning was less profitable and useful, and that renting the land out to plough was the most beneficial policy. The shift in just four years was partly from opportunism, coinciding with the dissolution, but also reveals a possible shift in leadership. Coventry had experienced decades of division over enclosures, and was likely still somewhat divided in rather the same manner as Westminster. The argument for efficiency had already appeared in the sixteenth century, even though such arguments are generally assumed to have been rarely made before the later seventeenth century.<sup>53</sup> In the sixteenth century, however, the arguments were embedded within the idea of the common weal, as opposed to the later focus on improvement.

The policy of enclosing and leasing out commons expanded in 1541. The council announced more commons were to be enclosed and leased to bring more income to the city.<sup>54</sup> This was supposedly done at the request of the commoners themselves. An additional 40 fields, closes, meadows and crofts were listed, with only five names corresponding to fields mentioned in 1423. The council did stipulate that those leasing them could not use other commons, and the 10 overseers could not lease to strangers. The 10 overseers would regularly collect a respectable rental income from pastures of around £30 per annum, plus another £3 to £4 yearly from renting ploughed lands.<sup>55</sup> Over the previous four years, a considerable amount of the commons had been enclosed by the city and leased out. Unlike earlier in the century, no resistance is found to have occurred.<sup>56</sup> Since this time support for, and initiation of, dissolution and privatization came from the crown, obedience was more readily given. Plus, in this time of great upheaval and change, obedience to the crown held a very high political premium.

The sought-after former church properties began to fall into corporation hands shortly afterwards. Coventry was able to secure control of property swiftly because

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but the role seems to have been eliminated in 1525 when all leased commons were supposedly returned to open commons, *Leet Book*, 679–80.

<sup>53</sup>J.M. Neeson, *Commoners: Common Right, Enclosure and Social Change in England, 1700–1820* (Cambridge, 1993), 15–52; Beresford, *Lost Villages*, 178; Thirsk, ‘Tudor enclosures’, 124.

<sup>54</sup>*Leet Book*, 760–4.

<sup>55</sup>*Bailiffs’ Accounts* (CA BA/G/1/25/1), 23, 25, 32, 33, 36; *Leet Book*, 732 and 761.

<sup>56</sup>The extensive conflicts before 1530 in which citizens fought hard for liberties are well covered in C. Liddy, *Contesting the City: The Politics of Citizenship in English Towns* (Oxford, 2017). For conflicts over enclosures of space within the city, see 57–66, for conflicts over commons enclosures, see 73–9.

it was already an incorporated town. It was only one of about three dozen to have received a charter of incorporation before 1500.<sup>57</sup> Incorporation allowed a city government to acquire and hold assets such as land. After 1540, there was a burst of incorporations as towns strove to obtain and hold former monastic lands, with some 130 towns incorporated by the end of the sixteenth century.<sup>58</sup> However, Coventry, already incorporated 200 years previously, was ready to begin considering acquisitions immediately. Between 1542 and 1545, the mass of dissolved church properties were sold either to the city of Coventry or into private hands. Such expensive costs were enabled by provision of £1,500 by Thomas White, a London merchant who helped a number of towns buy up church lands.<sup>59</sup> Several of the city leaders who had helped with the original dissolutions were instrumental in making the purchases using White's money. For example, Henry Over, who had previously been especially helpful, appears as a feoffee on a number of major acquisitions.<sup>60</sup>

Greyfriars was sold to the city in 1542, and all but the spire of the church was demolished and then the land leased out as pasture and orchards.<sup>61</sup> Charterhouse was sold to Henry Over of Coventry by 1544.<sup>62</sup> Many of the holdings of St Mary's went to the city using a significant fraction of Thomas White's money. Meanwhile, by 1545, both St Mary's priory and Whitefriars (as well as St John's Hospital) came into the hands of John Hales of London.<sup>63</sup> Hales, of gentry background, made the best of good connections and obtained lucrative positions in the royal administration. He served as clerk of the First Fruits and Tenths from 1537 to 1540, and then clerk of the Hanaper from 1541 to 1549, and also MP for Preston in 1548–49. His connections linked him to the powerful duke of Somerset, lord protector, and his wealth enabled him to purchase considerable properties after the dissolution, becoming the largest private property holder in Coventry.<sup>64</sup> From the corporation's viewpoint, Hales was an influential outsider who was now the largest landholder in the city. This would spur the corporation to greater efforts to control all the properties which became available after the Chantry Acts of 1545 and 1547.<sup>65</sup> Similar skirmishes between corporations and private individuals over dissolved properties occurred in towns throughout England.<sup>66</sup> Coventry and other towns strove to ensure they controlled the majority of urban properties rather than powerful individuals, especially outsiders.

<sup>57</sup>Tittler, *The Reformation and the Towns*, 89–90; Withington, *Politics of Commonwealth*, 18–19.

<sup>58</sup>Tittler, *The Reformation and the Towns*, 90–1; Withington, *Politics of Commonwealth*, 28.

<sup>59</sup>Financial activity involving Thomas White first appears in the city accounts beginning at the time of his donation in 1542, *Bailiffs' Accounts* (CA BA/G/1/25/1), 10–13. Mentions of accounting with his money reoccur in multiple documents for many years afterwards.

<sup>60</sup>*Letters and Papers of Henry VIII*, vol. XVII, 556(21), vol. XXI:1, 1383(89).

<sup>61</sup>*Ibid.*, vol. XVII, 556(21). For an example of renting Greyfriars, see *Bailiffs' Accounts* (CA BA/G/1/25/1), 34 (23s 4d income for a year's rental of the property in 1546).

<sup>62</sup>*Letters and Papers of Henry VIII*, vol. XIX:2, 164(61).

<sup>63</sup>*Ibid.*, vol. XIX:2, 690(28), 800(36), vol. XX:1, 1335(51).

<sup>64</sup>S.T. Bindoff, *The House of Commons, 1509–1558*, vol. I (London, 1982), 176.

<sup>65</sup>A brief summary of Hale's acquisitions is in Tittler, *The Reformation and the Towns*, 117–18.

<sup>66</sup>For example, see R. Tittler, 'Browne, towne, and crown: John Browne and the quest for town lands in Boston', in R. Tittler, *Townspeople and Nation: English Urban Experiences, 1540–1640* (Stanford, CA, 2001).

John Hales proceeded to strip St Mary's of stone and other materials over the next 30 years, leaving the place a steadily shrinking ruin with accumulating piles of rubbish.<sup>67</sup> However, Hales did rent out the priory's dyehouse and mill to operate as ongoing business ventures.<sup>68</sup> Hales' other major property, Whitefriars, was converted to his private home via demolition, or remodelling of the original monastic buildings. At this time, the Lady of the Tower shrine at Whitefriars was removed. In fact, the city painted over the shrine and put two locks on the door of the tower.<sup>69</sup> The fate of Coventry's friaries mirrored that of other places, including London. London's five priories were likewise dissolved in 1538 with no fuss, the plate and jewels and other moveable assets stripped and sold, and then during the 1540s, the buildings sold and demolished or appropriated for other uses.<sup>70</sup> All across England, much of the monastic *spolia* were repurposed for rebuilding of the finer merchant homes.<sup>71</sup>

The loss of sacred spaces and the enclosures of commons had developed rapidly and on a large scale. In Coventry, the same city leaders were engaged in both enclosing and leasing out commons, and buying and renting out former church properties. They were also benefiting from the availability of properties on the market to build up their own estates. For example, Thomas Gregory and Henry Over both began purchasing manors in 1539, with Gregory obtaining Stivichall, and Over the Charterhouse and lands in Coundon and Keresley.<sup>72</sup> They also invested heavily in properties in Coventry previously belonging to the priory. Henry Over even rented property in the Priory Close itself.<sup>73</sup>

Rental incomes from both enclosed commons and former monastic properties were proving so profitable to the corporation that when the 1545 and 1547 Chantry Acts dissolved religious fraternities, hospitals and chapels, the corporation fought hard in parliament to obtain their ample properties.<sup>74</sup> Also, the corporation did not wish either John Hales or another outsider to obtain too many properties in the city as had happened after 1538. So they aggressively lobbied for all the properties to be granted together to the city. They would come into the city's hands by 1552.<sup>75</sup> These additional properties not only helped greatly to improve general revenues, but allowed the city to take charge of the now bereft hospitals, schools and almshouses.<sup>76</sup> Most of the properties, including the drapery market, belonged to the

<sup>67</sup>M. Rylatt and P. Mason (eds.), *The Archeology of the Medieval Cathedral and Priory of St Mary, Coventry* (Coventry, 2003), 25–8.

<sup>68</sup>CA PA56/99/1 and 2.

<sup>69</sup>*Chamberlains' Accounts* (CA BA/A/1/1/26/1), 168, 171, 177.

<sup>70</sup>Holder, *Friaries of London*, 307–9.

<sup>71</sup>King, 'Interpretation of urban buildings', 480; Perring, 'Reformation of the English cathedral landscape', 192–7.

<sup>72</sup>R. Bearman, *The Gregorys of Stivichall in the Sixteenth Century* (Coventry and Warwickshire Historical Pamphlets: No. 8), 15–17.

<sup>73</sup>For Gregory, see SBT D10/409–417. For Over, see CA PA14/1/21, and *Letters and Papers of Henry VIII*, vol. XVII, 443(39) and vol. XIX:2, 164(61).

<sup>74</sup>*Acts of the Privy Council of England*, vol. II, 193–5; *Calendar of Patent Rolls, Edward VI*, vol. IV, 337–43. It is these groups of properties from both 1538 and 1547 which form the basis for the large collection of corporation deeds in the Coventry Archive. They receive the accession number BA.

<sup>75</sup>CA BA/A/A79/61c.

<sup>76</sup>This process happening in Coventry and elsewhere is discussed in Tittler, *The Reformation and the Towns*, 82–118.

Holy Trinity Guild, the elite merchant guild from whose membership came the city's mayors and council members, and whose guild master was always the former mayor.<sup>77</sup> Now the considerable rental income of £120 went to the corporation rather than to the suppressed religious fraternity.<sup>78</sup> This income was a significant addition to the £30 obtained from leasing the commons, though with it came the high additional costs of running schools and charities.

Significant changes to education and charity in Coventry from the Chantry Acts involved the suppression of the chantry chapels in both large parish churches, and the privatization of both St John's Hospital and St John's College (informally called St John's Bablake). The hospital, hosting 20 almsmen, was the largest of the handful of such institutions in the city.<sup>79</sup> That function was now gone. The collegiate church had housed between 9 and 12 priests, plus 2 singing clerks.<sup>80</sup> Its closure led to the disappearance of the most important generators of Coventry's musical culture. John Hales had obtained St John's Hospital with the agreement it would become a grammar school (Henry VIII school), but he did not supply consistent funding for a number of years. The corporation purchased St John Bablake also with the intent of creating a school (Bablake school), but it similarly had insufficient funding at first. Therefore, both would stand empty for a decade until they finally became active schools in 1557–58.<sup>81</sup> Meanwhile, the loss of the guild chapels on top of the suppression of monasteries meant around a hundred priests and monks had been removed during the dissolution process.<sup>82</sup> With these gone, Coventry suffered a tremendous loss of educated clergy (for example, at any given time as many as four of the monks from St Mary's were typically away at university), and, since chantry priests normally supplemented their meagre income through teaching, the city lost a considerable portion of its educated teachers.<sup>83</sup> The responsibility for education and charity had clearly passed to the corporation.

### Creating a Godly commonwealth

Not only did the city control schools and charitable institutions, but was now through them also expected to enforce moral order and Godly rule. The guilds had essentially been de-sacralized through the loss of their fraternal religious functions and chapels, while the local church was essentially reduced to parish priests

<sup>77</sup>G. Templeman (ed.), *The Records of the Guild of Holy Trinity, St. Mary, St. John the Baptist, and St. Katherine of Coventry* (London, 1935), xviii–xx.

<sup>78</sup>*Ibid.*, 81 (Holy Trinity Rental 1485–86), 93 (Holy Trinity Rental 1528–29). The drapery and its shops and stalls are listed on 135–6.

<sup>79</sup>Soden, *Coventry*, 118.

<sup>80</sup>*Ibid.*, 109–12.

<sup>81</sup>For St John's Hospital, *Letters and Papers of Henry VIII*, vol. XX:1, 1535(38, 39); for St John's College, *Calendar of Patent Rolls, Edward VI*, vol. II, 81. The Henry VIII school was initially founded in 1545 with the expectation it would be located in Whitefriars. However, sufficient funding was not made available until it was relocated to St John's, see CA PA12/1.

<sup>82</sup>From Holy Trinity 13 chantry priests, from St Michael's 26, from St Mary's 24 monks, and about a dozen each from Greyfriars, Whitefriars, Charterhouse and St John's College. Soden, *Coventry*, 75, 81–2; Luxford, 'The Charterhouse of St. Anne', 246; R.N. Swanson, 'The priory in the late Middle Ages', in Demidowicz (ed.), *First Cathedral*, 140.

<sup>83</sup>N. Orme, *Medieval Schools* (New Haven, 2006), 312–24.

who were increasingly under the financial control of the corporation. The push for civic enforcement of church reform is revealed in a letter sent to Coventry, and other towns, in the name of Henry VIII in 1538.<sup>84</sup> This letter was written around the time the Second Henrician Injunctions were introduced, but before the Six Articles. It is staunchly anti-papal and is clear in demanding that the city council enforce Godly order and good rule. It introduces several of the tenets of the Henrician Injunctions, including the claim of royal supremacy over the English church, and the requirement for the corporation to register births, deaths, and marriages in the proper parish church. Henry ardently demanded punishment of evil doers, tale tellers, rumour spreaders and inventors of false news, and thoroughly condemned the 'Bishop of Rome' and his 'feigned authority'. Over time, increasing control of both property and institutions would empower the corporation to become the enforcer of moral order and religious conformity.

Not long after Henry VIII's letter and the dissolutions, the first use of the term displeases God (specifically 'whereby almighty God is highly displeased') is found in the *Leet Book*. It occurs in 1544 during the mayoralty of Henry Over, friend of the dissolution.<sup>85</sup> As towns across England enforced Godly order, the rhetoric of Godly replaced goodly in civic language, wherein a Godly community sought to please God.<sup>86</sup> Part of ensuring a Godly community required very strict control of ale houses. The council claimed there were too many ale brewers and tipsters in business, leading to idleness and vice throughout the city. So in 1544, 1546 and again in 1547, the council required licensing of inns and alehouses, and enacted strict monitoring to locate and disallow unlicensed and suspect houses.<sup>87</sup> The council was taking enforcement of moral order seriously. Violating a civic ordinance now also risked displeasing God. What had been a medieval balance among the corporation, the church and the free citizens was tilting strongly to the city and those elites supporting the Reformed Church.

Even the free citizens' rights to protect the commons through civic participation was hindered. A council order in 1547 placed strict restrictions on the chamberlains to prevent supposedly unreasonable fines and impoundments on any cattle which had negligently wandered onto the commons.<sup>88</sup> This seemingly innocuous act, which on surface reading could protect citizens from overzealous policing by the chamberlains, actually harkens back to the 1480s when Laurence Saunders, serving as a chamberlain, championed the freemen by impounding hundreds of sheep illegally grazing the common. The sheep belonged to several elite merchants and the prior of St Mary's, which made Saunders some very powerful enemies.<sup>89</sup> Considerable conflict and trouble arose during the following 15 years until Saunders' final imprisonment. This new act forestalled any renewal of such trouble from craftsmen serving in lower civic positions.

Yet friends could be found in unlikely places. In 1548, John Hales, owner of St Mary's, Whitefriars and many other former church properties, was placed on the

<sup>84</sup>CA BA/H/17/A79/29.

<sup>85</sup>*Leet Book*, 771.

<sup>86</sup>Slack, *From Reformation to Improvement*, 11.

<sup>87</sup>*Leet Book*, 771–2, 781, 785.

<sup>88</sup>*Ibid.*, 786–7.

<sup>89</sup>*Ibid.*, 432–6.

king's Enclosures Commission.<sup>90</sup> Such commissions had been held intermittently by the crown since the first Depopulation Act of 1489 to reverse excessive commons enclosures.<sup>91</sup> Parliament, as noted above, was increasingly divided over the issue of enclosure, though a majority still opposed it, but their influence was increasingly limited by the growing weight of grazier interest in its favour.<sup>92</sup> Since John Hales held some influence in Westminster, the corporation desired to keep his patronage and support, but in this case he was actively questioning and opposing enclosures.<sup>93</sup> It was perhaps for this reason that in the same year the council announced that all leased lands on the commons were to be returned to common land, and the stint put at the previous level.<sup>94</sup> Just as had happened in 1525, the situation seemed resolved again in favour of the commoners. However, within a year, Hales, a supporter of Somerset, fell victim to the latter's fatal fall from royal grace and was himself imprisoned in October 1549. Upon his release the next year, he prepared to go into exile in Europe, and proceeded to grant many of his properties in Coventry to friends and family for safekeeping.<sup>95</sup> For the time being, the city leaders did not have to worry about Hales.

Immediately following Hales' fall, the town clerk, Thomas Gregory, drafted a remarkable homily and list of commons.<sup>96</sup> This document provides a strong contrast to his 1530 list of lands which were commons, or ought to be commons. It is unusual for a standard civic document of this period because instead of sticking to the essential material at hand it begins with a four-page homily setting up a theologically based argument that enclosing and leasing commons would benefit the common wealth. As Withington has argued, the language of common wealth increasingly dominated civic discourse as more and more towns incorporated. City councils then sought to promote the common weal of their citizens through market regulations and maintaining order.<sup>97</sup> Thus, by Elizabeth's reign, a very strong bloc in parliament represented civic common wealths which promoted the civic virtue of good citizenship at the national level.<sup>98</sup> Gregory had used the exact language in 1534 when asserting that ploughing the commons put private profit over the common wealth. He had turned the language around in 1538 arguing that corporation enclosures benefited the common good. Now in 1550, he would flesh out the argument of enclosures benefiting the civic common wealth.

Gregory argued that God and the country are the two highest objects of duty. Therefore, 'good and natural citizens' should further the honour and glory of God, and improve the wealth of the country. Gregory was using the terminology

<sup>90</sup>Bindoff, *House of Commons*, 176–7.

<sup>91</sup>Leadam, *Domesday of Inclosures, 1517–1518*, 5–12; Beresford, *Lost Villages*, 102–33. Acts against enclosures were enacted in 1489, 1515 and 1536. Commissions of inquiry were sent out to the counties in 1517–18 and in 1548.

<sup>92</sup>Beresford, *Lost Villages*, 118.

<sup>93</sup>Hales submitted several bills to parliament in 1548 and 1549 to place restrictions on sheep farming, limit regrating and provide protections from enclosures. All three failed in a divided parliament. Coventry enacted its ordinance returning the land to commons while the bills were in progress.

<sup>94</sup>*Leet Book*, 788–9. The stint is the limit on the number of animals allowed on a common.

<sup>95</sup>Bindoff, *House of Commons*, 277.

<sup>96</sup>SBT DR10/1858.

<sup>97</sup>Withington, *Politics of Commonwealth*, 26–33.

<sup>98</sup>*Ibid.*, 54–6.

of natural law according to which all men were subjects of the king according to nature.<sup>99</sup> He argued that part of the natural order is Godliness and improving the commonwealth. Gregory went on to place his argument metaphorically, saying that God was our father, and the country our mother. For the mother 'brings them up in this frail life. For as the mother tenderly nourishes the child and lovingly permits those things whereby he may prosper, and carefully opposes those ills that may bring hurt or damage to him.' Then, in a nice elision, he juxtaposed the city with the country in that they both protect and nourish the citizens. He followed by claiming that it is an uncaring and 'unnatural child that nothing regards the good will of his natural mother', so there is 'no citizen in deed that would not hold to increase the wealth and commodity of his own city'. Therefore, private gain should be set aside to help advance God's honour and likewise increase the wealth of the city, and 'also to abolish all such things as other vainly charge or else do corrupt and hurt the [city]'. He then argued that since the city's famous mystery pageants were so vain and expensive they should be cancelled.

Gregory described the relationship of citizen to city as son to mother, with the citizen having an obligation to support and help in return for protection and support. In addition, with the citizen also needing to honour, or please, God the father then the two demands were unified. Thus, Gregory followed a Protestant concept of paired civic and religious authority. His reflection of the pageants as 'vain' could also reflect Protestant leanings.<sup>100</sup> If in 1530 Gregory was a Catholic like almost everyone else, it appears that by 1550 he had adopted Protestantism. Certainly his sons had become firm Protestants, with no splits evident in the family.<sup>101</sup>

Gregory suggested a better use for the money spent on the pageants. For 'those toiling in God's honour', some land should be ploughed and sowed and divided between St Michael's and Holy Trinity, and also the parishes should receive payments from the guilds instead of the money going to the pageants.<sup>102</sup> The land would be under the custody of the 10 overseers we have seen before. With the proceeds from the land, and the donations by the guilds which added up to over £15 yearly, a respectable amount of money could support the two parish priests. At this point, there is no evidence that this part of Gregory's proposal was adopted. The pageants remained popular for a number of years yet. In fact, they lasted until 1579.<sup>103</sup> However, Gregory's assault on the pageants and attempt to reroute resources to Protestant preaching is an early attempt at a policy which would be much more successful in the 1560s and 1570s when Protestantism had reached a dominant position.

<sup>99</sup>*Ibid.*, 51.

<sup>100</sup>If the book, *A Discourse of the Commonwealth of this Realm of England*, is correctly attributed to John Hales, then it is of interest to note that he complains about merchants wasting their money on frivolities despite Edward VI's restrictions. See E. Lamont (ed.), *A Discourse of the Commonwealth of this Realm of England* (Cambridge, 1893), 16.

<sup>101</sup>Arthur is recorded as owning a Geneva Bible, while Christopher went on to a successful career in the Anglican church. Bearman, *Gregorys of Stivichall*, 23 and 41.

<sup>102</sup>He also included Whitefriars as for a number of years the corporation tried unsuccessfully to convert the part in which Hales did not reside into either a third parish church or a school. For example, see *Bailiffs' Accounts* (BA/G/1/25/1), 18, 26, 41, 72. Also CA BA/B/13/3/1 and /2.

<sup>103</sup>R.W. Ingram, *Records of Early English Drama: Coventry* (Toronto, 1981), xix.



Gregory more successfully argued that, 'for the advancement of the common wealth and relief of the poor and of the city's treasury', the arable portion of Cheylesmore Park should be ploughed and sowed or leased out. The former royal park at Cheylesmore which lay immediately below the southern edge of the city had been granted to the corporation in 1549 by the earl of Warwick.<sup>104</sup> Warwick had previously made complaints that John Hales' enclosure commission of 1548 was causing unrest and hedge breaking, and encouraged people to plough his land.<sup>105</sup> Warwick was also an enemy of Somerset, and so was happily instrumental in Hales' downfall in 1549 after Somerset's removal and replacement by himself. It would appear from his prior complaints that Warwick was not an enemy of enclosure, and so the city could proceed to enclose parts of Cheylesmore. In his homily, Gregory reversed the anti-enclosure sentiments which John Hales expressed in his 1548 commission. Hales had told his jurors, 'God, King, and Commonwealth will defend you against the Devil, the World, and Private Profit.'<sup>106</sup> Gregory, cleverly, turned the expression on its head and stated that corporate enclosure of the commons benefited the commonwealth, while he claimed commoning provided private gain for only a few. Gregory went on to suggest that the enclosed park lands would be under the custody of the aforementioned 10 overseers. The proceeds from selling the crops and leasing land would go to the poor and to the city. Gregory went into further detail about the 10. His instructions were the same as originally given in 1538 in that they were also responsible for leasing out various common fields enclosed by the corporation. He concluded with a very short list of the open commons at the bottom of the fifth page. It is unclear if any pages are missing listing the commons, or if he simply stopped working on his draft at that point. It is a very short list and cannot be complete. Notably missing from the proposal are any references to the pastureland at Cheylesmore which had to remain common land, as opposed to the arable which Gregory had quickly seized upon for potential enclosing. However, the retention of common pasture at Cheylesmore only partially ameliorated the losses of other commons to enclosure and leasing.

Although the *Leet Book* is silent on any deliberations or outcomes of Thomas Gregory's proposals, it is clear from other documents that the 10 overseers were in business, and common lands both inside and outside Cheylesmore were enclosed and leased, thus reversing, or ignoring, the 1548 announcement returning the leased lands to the common. The council book records the 10 overseers collecting income through the 1550s and 1560s from both land rents and Cheylesmore park rents, as well as the distributions to the poor. These transactions are also found in the payments-in book (which begins in 1561) with incomes from land rents and for 'ground ploughed in the park'.<sup>107</sup> Gregory's draft was either quietly accepted or was a draft outlining a process already decided. Although the pageants were not cancelled at that time, commons were certainly enclosed and leased.

<sup>104</sup>CA PA17/66/1 is the 1568 Letter Patent confirming and extending the 1549 grant from the earl of Warwick.

<sup>105</sup>Lamont (ed.), *Discourse*, xli.

<sup>106</sup>Beresford, *Lost Villages*, 118.

<sup>107</sup>*Council Book* (CA BA/H/3/17/1), 12r, 12v, 15v, 16r, 24r and 48r; *Payments-In Book* (CA BH/H/3/20/1), 11–13. They continue into the *Second Leet Book, 1588–1834* (CA BA/E/6/37/2), in the 1590s, see 17–19.

## Conclusion

By the 1550s, the corporation owned much of the property in and around the city. It also enclosed and leased out much of the commons. Individuals of the gentry and merchant classes dominated ownership of the remaining properties, including that of dissolved monastic institutions. The city used its enlarged income towards its expanded civic obligations. These included supporting secularized civic ceremonies, and paying for public works. The latter included control of the parish churches to enforce Protestant Godly order, provision for the poor and supporting schools. The freemen of the city had lost their separate church, its preachers, its system of charity and its communal festivals. They had lost access to a variety of sacred spaces used by the community, and they had lost access to most of the land, especially to much of the commons. The precocious enclosure of the commons by Coventry was to be a precursor of what would later take place across the country. The corporation supported its enclosures through the rhetoric of commonwealth. They positioned themselves as acting for the public benefit, rather like John Hale, as Paul Slack points out, 'preaching Christian commonwealth and founding a grammar school...while building himself a mansion in the remains of Whitefriars'.<sup>108</sup> Finally, the political and economic domination by the great medieval cloth merchant elites was long past. It is clear that after 1550 Coventry had lost its medieval institutions and structures. Even its fundamental property arrangements were significantly realigned. Medieval Coventry was no more.

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<sup>108</sup>Slack, *From Reformation to Improvement*, 23.