

# The Pilgrimage of Grace of Grace, October-December 1536

The Pilgrimage of Grace has often been written off as a little local difficulty.

Yet **Nick Fellows** is impressed by the power which Robert Aske and the other leaders could muster, by the shock they dealt to Henry VIII's government and by their success.

**D**espite being the most heavily documented of all the Tudor disturbances, the Pilgrimage of Grace had attracted relatively little study since the publication, by Ruth and Madeline Dodds, in 1915 of their work on the rising. Their narrative account was such that it appeared as if there was little more that could be said about the actual events, even if their analysis of the causes has been challenged. The Pilgrimage was dismissed as a failure and its significance and impact were seen as minimal. The rebels were defeated at Carlisle in February 1537, and the severe repression and executions that followed were a warning to other would-be rebels not to risk the wrath of their monarch. According to these accounts, the pilgrims had failed to achieve what appear to have been their prime goals of restoring the monasteries and removing the king's chief minister, Thomas Cromwell.

The publication of Michael Bush's *The Pilgrimage of Grace* in 1996, however, challenged many of these assumptions,

Henry VIII had initially wanted to crush the Pilgrimage of Grace with the maximum of force. The strength of the rebels, however, led him to accept a tactical withdrawal. Yet Aske, Darcy and others were executed for treason in 1537.



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and in this article I want to suggest that the Pilgrimage represented not only a serious challenge to Henry, but nearly resulted in his replacement by his daughter Mary. The pilgrimage, far from being a failure, was a success and achieved many of its aims.

### Defining the Pilgrimage

In order to understand why it is time to revise our understanding of the Pilgrimage it is essential that we are clear about the events with which we are dealing. The Pilgrimage of Grace refers only to those events that took place north of the River Trent between October and December 1536, culminating in a royal pardon issued in December. It does not include the Lincolnshire Rising, which was easily dispersed and was over within two weeks in early October; and nor does it include the Cumberland Rising that met its bloody end at Carlisle in February 1537, with rumours of 800 deaths on the field of battle and many more hanged in their own villages as a warning that further resistance was pointless. Although both these other risings were related to the main Pilgrimage and often had the same causes, they were separate revolts. The Lincolnshire rising was more violent, lacked the support of peers and did not restore the monastic houses, whereas the risings in 1537 were led not by a catholic, whose aim was to restore the old religion, but a supporter of the new learning, Sir Francis Bigod. Robert Aske, the leader of the Pilgrimage proper, was not involved in the Cumberland fiasco: he was engaged in telling the northern gentry of the promises he had received in London from the king.

### The Purposes of the Pilgrimage

We must also be very clear about the aims of the pilgrimage, for only then can we judge the achievements of the movement. Firstly, it was not a military rising designed to overthrow the king, and must not be seen as such. It was, as its name suggests, a pilgrimage that was to be peaceful and whose aim was to put pressure on the king to change his ways. This was shown clearly in the oath the

pilgrims swore: 'You shall not enter into this our Pilgrimage of Grace for the Commonwealth, but only for the love that ye do bear unto Almighty God his faith, and the Holy Church militant and the maintenance thereof, to the preservation of the King's person and his issue'. The oath continued to stress the sort of behaviour that was expected from the participants: they were not to use it to make profit, nor to harm others, but simply to take 'the Cross of Christ'.

What was it that attracted in excess of 40,000 men to its cause? Historians have been quick to see the rising in terms of religion, a response to economic difficulties, local issues or the reaction of a defeated court faction. Yet these mono-causal explanations do not do justice to the complexity of the rising. These grievances did not move the pilgrims as a whole and we need to look at the interaction and relationship between the causes. The strength of the rising, and the reasons for its success, lay in the existence of a common denominator to the grievances – bad government. Cromwell had misused the power and trust Henry had given him and subverted the laws of God and the realm. He had subjected the nation to too much unwanted change, and the rebellion was people's only way of making their views heard. They were, as John Fines said, barking a warning. They felt that their views were being ignored.

The size of the rising reflects the scale of the discontent. As a consequence of the amount of change in recent years, the rebels were able to draw on all groups within society. However, it also possible to identify specific grievances that would have motivated particular groups. The clergy and monks are the easiest to explain: the religious changes had destroyed, or were threatening, their way of life. The nobles and gentry disliked the king's use of base-born councillors and the Statute of Uses, whilst the peasants were dissatisfied with rising entry fines (or 'gressomes'), paid when a new tenant took over a piece of land, new taxes and rumours of more to follow, as well as with the attack on their beliefs. Although

it is also true that there were local grievances – the most obvious being the agrarian complaints of Westmorland and Cumberland – they did not affect all areas. We must also be careful not to become obsessed with categorising the complaints. After all, some of the 'secular' complaints about taxation may have had a religious element as the rumours of taxes on births, marriages and deaths would take on a spiritual nature if people were unable to pay them. Therefore it is important to see the movement as a whole: it was designed to show that things were out of joint and that the commonwealth needed to be safeguarded. It was a pilgrimage, but in name only. Joyce Youings was certainly nearer the truth when she stated 'The dissolution of the majority of smaller monasteries was only a minor cause of the rebellion of 1536'. It was an attack upon the turning upside down of the commonwealth, and therefore it is best described as a conservative reaction that hoped to return to some past golden age, a not unusual demand in Tudor rebellions.

### The Power of the Rebels

The first great achievement of the rebels was the size of the force they were able to raise. According to Bush's recent study, the rebel army at Doncaster was some 28-35,000 strong. Yet this was not the full rebel force. There was a force of 15,000 active in Cumberland, two armies defending Sawley Abbey and a force of some 12-20,000 besieging Skipton Castle. These were much larger than the royal force of some 8,000. Bush makes the point that 'the secret of success for the pilgrims had lain in their mobilisation of a large force'. It is worth comparing the size of the rebel hosts with those of other Tudor rebellions as once again this demonstrates the scale of their achievement. Wyatt, who it is often believed came closest to toppling a Tudor ruler, had only a force of 4,000, whilst the Northern Rising of 1569 consisted of some 5,500 men. Against these figures the Pilgrimage was exceptional and deserves to be seen as such.

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Just as importantly they were no rabble; many were well-armed and harnessed. Moreover they were experienced warriors, from fighting against the Scots. Should they have desired to have given battle, it is highly likely that they would have defeated the royal army and been able to launch a quick ride on London. Bush's work has also revealed that a royal muster for the area of the pilgrimage would have raised roughly the same size force as the rebels. It is surely reasonable to assume that those who would have responded to the royal summons to muster were the same men who now responded to the local call to protest against the changes. This reveals two very important achievements. Firstly, it shows the rebels' organisational skills and advance planning, obviously necessary for so many to be raised so quickly. Secondly, the numbers involved suggest that they were responding to calls from their social superiors: they turned out because they had been instructed to do so by their betters and believed that it was their duty to respond. The society of orders, which they perceived the king and his ministers were overturning, was still something worth preserving. In some instances it was undoubtedly the commons who persuaded, or forced, the gentry to rise, but this also shows concern for hierarchy. The commons looked to their superiors for leadership and, when it was not provided voluntarily, they went and procured it. What better demonstration of unity could there be than a large-scale peaceful protest?

The size and quality of the force meant that they could challenge the crown in battle, but as we suggested this was not their aim. They wanted to negotiate, but to support this with the



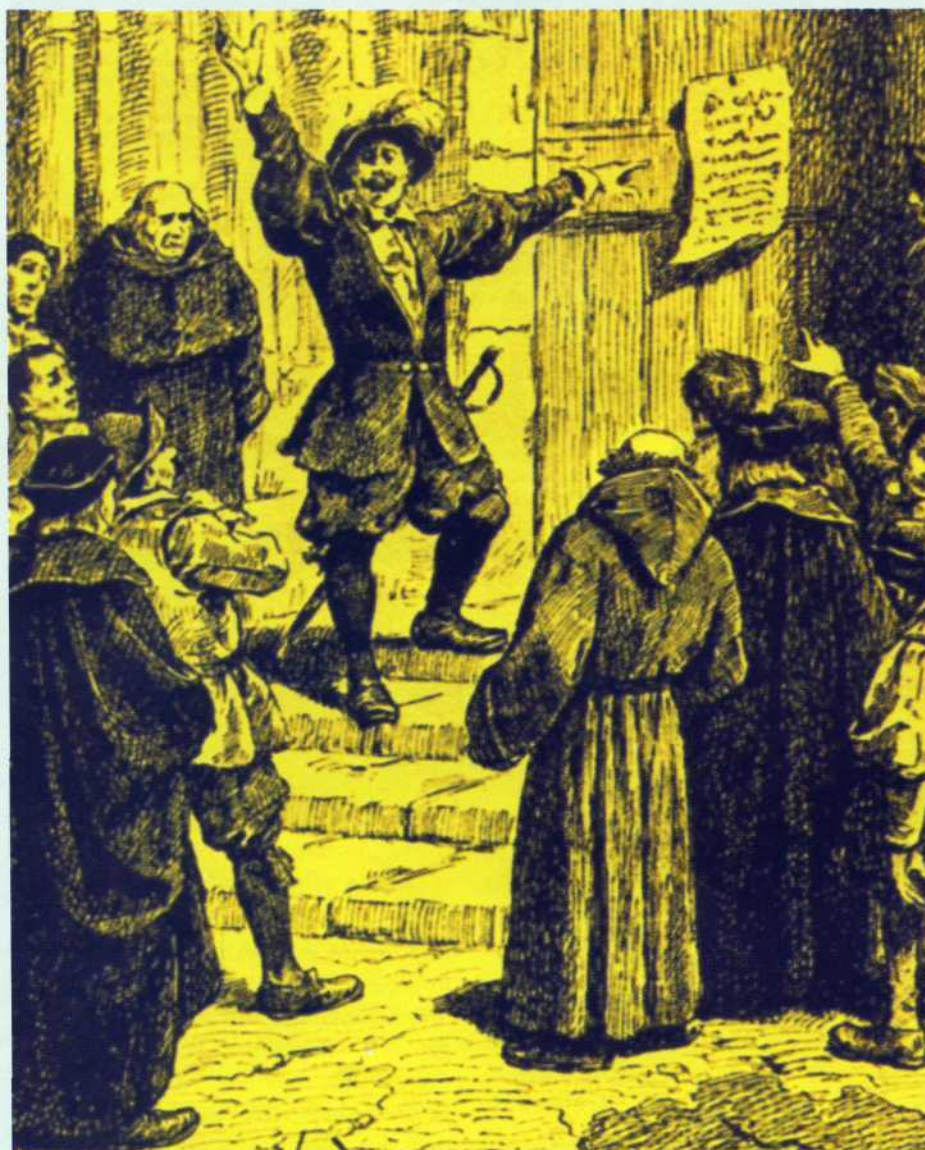
**Thomas Cromwell (c.1485-1540), who was considered by Robert Aske and other Pilgrims to be an evil low-born counsellor leading his monarch astray. Was Cromwell's fall hastened by the Pilgrimage of Grace?**

potential threat that their numbers gave them. It was the only way to make Henry listen. This was shown clearly at the River Don. Whilst negotiations took place the rebel army was visible to all sides, 'the whole host standing in perfect array'. The numbers must have made a frightening sight. They had secured Pontefract Castle and seemed to possess every advantage. Royal forces were outnumbered by three or four to one and there was little chance of further royal troops being made available in quick time, certainly not sufficient to stop the pilgrims' advance.

The rebels were in a position to move south; they had secured the gateway to the north and it was their decision to wait. It was the pilgrims who chose to reach a negotiated settlement with the Duke of Norfolk at Doncaster

Bridge on 27 October. They did not want to cause damage by fighting, but more importantly they wanted the opportunity to present their grievances to the king as they believed that this was the best way to get evil councillors, such as Thomas Cromwell, removed. This was not because they were naïve, but because their aims had always been peaceful and they had respect for the society of orders. On the other hand, an armed rising against the king would have shown disrespect for the monarch and exposed the rebels as no better than the men they were complaining about. This concern for law, order and peace is also seen in the behaviour of the pilgrims. Only one person was killed during the rising, and that was an accident. A band of pilgrims had mistaken one of their own men – wearing a jerkin emblazoned with the cross of St George (the emblem of the king's troops) – for an opponent. There are no stories of gentry being threatened and forced to run the gauntlet, as happened during Ket's supposedly well disciplined rising. Nor did the pilgrims try to establish an alternative system of

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This 19th-century engraving depicts Robert Aske pinning a list of grievances to the door of York Minster. Aske occupied York on October 1536; he was executed there the following July.

government. They supported the established order, but wanted it to function as they believed it should.

### Rebels Victorious

When agreement was reached on 6 December 1536 with the Duke of Norfolk, at Doncaster, it appeared as if the rebels had achieved their aims. There is certainly a great deal to support this view of events. The pilgrims agreed to disperse peacefully: surely this would not have happened if they did not believe they had secured their goals? The pilgrims' trust in the king must not be seen as naïve, for this would also fail to do them justice. Aske certainly believed in Henry VIII's good faith, and he was no ignorant

peasant but an educated lawyer. He then travelled to London, where he was sumptuously entertained and treated with considerable respect.

What happened to the specific aims of the pilgrims? The government certainly made concessions. It is because of these concessions, and as a gesture of respect towards the king, that the rebels chose to accept the truce. As a result, the government stopped the collection of the (1534) subsidy and suspended the new act for the regulation of the cloth industry. They were also quick to announce that the news concerning extra taxes and the demolition of parish churches consisted of false rumours.

More importantly, we should examine

the second appointment the rebels had with royal representatives in December. Firstly, we need to remember that the initiative for this meeting came from the government because their policy had failed. The king was worried about raising a force in the south to meet the rebels as he feared that they might go over to the pilgrims. This offer represented a massive climb-down. The government allowed a free and general pardon absolving all participants. This was certainly not their initial wish, since they had wanted a pardon with exceptions, so that they could apprehend the ring-leaders of the rising. Nor should we see the rebels as naïve in accepting the pardon that followed. Indeed they insisted upon confirmation of the pardon, and it was only when this came that they agreed to disperse. According to Bush, 'the king was left in a state of fury because none had been reserved for punishment', a clear sign of the weakness of the royal position.

The pilgrims had also secured the promise of a parliament to be held by free election in York to consider their complaints. It was also agreed that until parliament had met nothing would be done to implement the policies to which the rebels objected. This meant that the collection of taxes was suspended and the lesser monasteries that had been restored by the pilgrims were allowed to stand. Once again this did not fit in with the wishes of Henry, as, according to Bush, 'with the restored abbeys left standing, the way was now open for a permanent undoing of the Dissolution'. If that is true, the pilgrims had come a long way. This appears possible as further changes in the government's religious policies did follow. The most obvious sign of change was the appearance of the Bishops' Book in 1537. This restored many conservative practices, recognising the four lost sacraments that had not been mentioned

in the Ten Articles of 1536. The pilgrims were also given further hope of better things to come by a letter from the king to Cranmer. This letter was shown to the pilgrim leadership and, although it urged the enforcement of the Ten Articles, it also called for an attack on radical preaching and clerical marriage. In light of these developments Lord Thomas Darcy, the defender of Pontefract who subsequently defected to the rebels, commented that 'all true catholics may joy'. There was the real prospect of a conservative religious reaction. Major planks of the Henrician reformation had been challenged and it is possible to argue that, as a consequence, any intended religious revolution was postponed until the reign of his son, Edward VI. The story of England's reformation would become more complex, complicated and drawn out, allowing it to become England's reformations.

It was not just in religious policy that the rebellion had an impact. The protest against fiscal change was largely successful. They had stopped the collection of the subsidy, but they also made it clear that further financial innovation would be unacceptable and probably unsuccessful. If there ever was such a thing as a Tudor Revolution in government the pilgrimage of grace

destroyed the financial element of it. It is also important not to forget the original target of the rebellion, the king's chief minister, Thomas Cromwell. Although he did not fall immediately following the pilgrimage, he had gone by 1540. It was not the rising that was ultimately responsible for his downfall, but it is surely possible to suggest that it weakened his position and his hold over Henry. Many of the policies with which he was associated had been abandoned, or at least modified, and the radical religious changes that he supported had come to a halt. But if we are to be objective this must be qualified by remembering that the closure of the monasteries would continue, so not all that he stood for had failed.

Finally we must not forget that in Westmorland and Cumberland the rebels had agrarian grievances. In particular they were concerned about rights of tenure and entry fines. These were certainly resolved in favour of the commons. The sixteenth century saw the consolidation of customary rights of tenure, which forced the landlords to abandon the manorial system and to try to replace customary tenure with demesne leaseholds. When the rising occurred the peasants were subjected to arbitrary entry fines, but by the end of the century these had been fixed – as the pilgrims had demanded in the articles that had been submitted to the government. In addition the customary rate, of twice the rent, was the same amount as mentioned in the December petition.

### Conclusion

The government had been pressured into accepting the demands of the pilgrims by the existence of nine separate hosts, creating a huge force and the fear that if the negotiations failed the rebels, under compulsion from the commons, would rehost, march on London and – as in 1381 and 1450 – achieve their goals by military force. The overall conclusion is perhaps best left to Michael Bush, whose work certainly caused me to rethink my views about the Pilgrimage of Grace. 'In these respects, then, the formation of the

## timeLINE

1536

(2 Oct) Start of Lincolnshire rising.

(13 Oct) Rising in South Yorkshire; Aske becomes leader and speaks of a 'Pilgrimage'.

(16 Oct) The rebels take York and there are risings in other areas of the north: Northumberland, Durham, North Yorkshire and Cumberland.

(21 Oct) Pontefract Castle is surrendered to Aske by Lord Darcy.

(27 Oct) The Pilgrim army of 30,000 confronts the Royal army of 8,000 at Doncaster. This leads to a meeting between the royal commander, Norfolk, and the Pilgrim leaders on Doncaster bridge. As a result, two pilgrims take a petition to Henry VIII.

(21 Nov) Pilgrims return from meeting with Henry and report to the Pilgrims' Council.

(4 Dec) Pilgrims issue detailed Articles.

(6 Dec) A second meeting between Norfolk and the Pilgrim leaders. Norfolk agrees to grant the pilgrims a pardon and the calling of a parliament to redress their grievances. Pilgrims are persuaded by Aske to accept the terms and disperse.

1537

(10 Feb) Rising in Cumberland fails to take Carlisle and is crushed.

(June) Darcy was executed in London.

(July) Aske was executed in York.

### Further Reading

M.L. Bush, *The Pilgrimage of Grace* (Manchester University Press, 1996)

A. Fletcher and D. MacCulloch, *Tudor Rebellions* (Longman, 4th edition, 1997)

C.S.L. Davies, 'Popular Religion: the Pilgrimage of Grace' in A. Fletcher and J. Stevenson (eds), *Order and Disorder in Early Modern England* (CUP, 1985)

C. Haigh, *Reformation and Resistance in Tudor Lancashire* (CUP, 1975)

K. Randell, *Henry VIII and the Government of England* (Hodder & Stoughton, 1993) – a good introduction

G.R. Elton, *Reform and Reformation* (CUP, 1997) – puts the rising in context.

pilgrim armies in October 1536 has to be appreciated not only as a spectacular achievement in itself but also as a major influence upon religious, political, fiscal and agrarian changes of the time'.

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